

# Has Globalization Exacerbated Ethnic Conflicts?

Written by Keunwon Song

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KEUNWON SONG, OCT 22 2013

With the advent of industrialization and modernization, the world has, in words of Friedman, become 'flat' bridging the gap between Giddens's 'time' and 'space.' The vast population of the world has come to share a 'collective consciousness' by means of transporting and communicative technologies. A world – anticipated by the early modernization theory – that breaks down people's localised ethnic identities and replaces them with loyalties to larger communities had arrived (Alison 2012). What had been less anticipated, however, was the surge or re-vitalization or the persistence of conflicts on local, national, and international fronts against the convergence of cultures and identities. Ethnic conflicts, for one, have ceaselessly troubled the world in the Balkans, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Indonesia, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland, and countless other locations becoming possibly the most important source of conflict in the new and old wars of today (Caselli and Coleman II 2002).

Is globalization merely spotlighting the pre-existent yet heretofore unreported ethnic conflicts or could it be possibly contributing to perennial or even sparking heretofore non-existent new conflicts? Certainly, narrow examination of ethnic conflicts poses its own shortcomings since conflicts tend to be an enmeshment of numerous factors. Moreover, a conclusive 'yes' or 'no' is unlikely to be established because cases of both exacerbated and alleviated ethnic conflicts exist.

Nonetheless, given the complexity of ethnic conflicts, the essay will principally investigate the role of globalization in relation to ethnic conflicts by firstly reviewing literature on globalization; secondly reviewing literature on ethnic conflicts; thirdly assessing three theories concerning the link between of globalization and ethnic conflicts; finally ending with a conclusion. The general conclusion is that globalization, despite a few alleviative cases and still fewer success cases, has a tendency to accelerate ethnic conflicts on economic and cultural fronts on top of pre-existent perennial ancient hatreds.

### Globalization

Globalization hovers over vast fields yet remains an elusive subject because it is not unidirectional or monolithic in effect across fields. Giddens defines globalization as "The intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens 1990: 63-64). Held qualifies this 'intensification' through more tangible dimensions such as extensity, intensity, velocity and impact. (Held 1999: 14-15) Steger widens the scope yet further by encompassing vast fields affected by globalization such as economic, political, cultural, ecological, and ideological (Steger 2009: 11). The challenge in the study of globalization, however, is posed by the fact that globalization is not necessarily unidirectional or monolithic in effect across these dimensions and fields. Giddens observes, "Consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalized and universalized than before" (Giddens 1990: 3). He implies that globalization is becoming radicalized and universalized congruently but there are also plenty of instances when these two forces are observed to collide against each another. Kaldor rightly points out that "The term globalization conceals a complex process which actually involves globalization and localization, integration and fragmentation, homogenization and differentiation" (Kaldor 2001: 71). The Convergence Theory and the Global Chaos Theory highlight this dichotomy. Convergence Theory asserts that with globalization, distinct systems will tend to become more alike, while Global Chaos Theory asserts that globalization imposes a convergence of values, even an imposition of Western values, which the 'rest' of world retaliates against (Dutceac 2004).

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The Convergence Theory emphasizes the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy as the homogenizing agents. The Convergence theorists would argue that local and ethnic identities are weakening in favor of larger national, regional, or universal identities. Culturally-speaking, Ritzer (1983) views globalization as 'globalization of nothing' that destroys cultures to create cultureless consumerism of 'Big Macs' and homogenization of societies through global corporations, most of which are Western such as the McDonald's. Politically-speaking, Fukuyama's proposes a rather optimistic picture under which we have come to a monumental point in time – "End point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government"(Fukuyama 1989: 4). He essentially has stirred great controversy by implying that the rest of the world governments will sooner or later conform to the Western liberal democracy.

Resistances against the aforementioned homogenizing forces highlight the Global Chaos Theory. Proponents of this camp would most likely concede that globalization is exacerbating ethnic conflicts. Politically-speaking, Khor maintains that globalization is what the Third World referred for several centuries as colonization (Alison 2012). Economically speaking, Gill criticizes globalization for the "Intensification of alienation, exploitation and commodification of human life and nature" (Alison 2012). Both Khor and Gill point to the fact that globalization is an instrument steered by the Western hegemony to spread capitalistic and democratic ideology.

## Ethnic Conflict

To understand ethnic conflicts, we ought to first understand the predominant definitions of ethnicity. The primordialist school and instrumentalist/constructivist school are among two most widely accepted views. Harff and Gurr see constructivism as a third position. The primordialist school views ethnicity as a type of "kinship that makes it possible for ethnic groups to think in terms of family resemblances" (Horowitz 1985: 57). These identities – based on common language, collective memory, history, and culture – are immutable and fixed and inevitably result in 'natural' divisions between various groups (Wolff 2006: 33). These divisions, either from within or against the 'other,' often digress into ancient hatreds, too. In this context, Huntington's prediction of a clash of civilizations is sound:

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural... Differences among civilizations are too basic... the interactions across the world are increasing, and they intensify civilization consciousness and awareness of differences between civilizations and commonalities within civilizations (Huntington 1993: 22).

Instrumentalists and constructivists, on the other camp, share a very different view of ethnicity. Robertson summarizes their view like this: "Ethnicity is simply a way of aggregating individuals for collective ends which is seized and used by politicians for political advantage" (Robertson, 1997: 269). In this way, ethnicity, for them, is but an 'instrument' or 'construct' used to mobilize a group of people for often economic or political interests (e.g. security, resources, or status). It is simply a matter of how long these constructions or instruments last. For instrumentalists, ethnicity is more of a short-run fluid idea, while with constructivism, ethnicity is more long-run enduring idea once created (Viotti 2007). For this camp, the concern with globalization is that ethnic or national identities are being eroded as globalization brings people to more intense interaction.

Notwithstanding the gloomy pictures from the Middle East, Darfur, Iraq, elsewhere, there is some good news according to Wolff. "Over the past two decades, since the end of the Cold War, there has been an overall decline in the number of civil wars. Since the high in the early 1990s, with about 50 such civil wars ongoing, we now have 30 percent fewer such conflicts today" (Wolff 2010). So, by some measurements, we have fewer conflicts today in which fewer people get killed.

Kaldor, however, points to 'new wars' – characterized by genocide, ethnic cleansing, terrorism, and other low intensity conflicts – that arise in retaliation against globalization and convergence of values. The idea is that wars no longer primarily between state-to-state actors, but transnational actors that act outside of states (Kaldor 2001: 2). Perhaps this is why Wolff's measurements show lesser conflicts. Duffield concedes with Kaldor and points, in congruence with instrumentalist/constructivist views, that unlike traditional national liberation struggles, warring

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parties today are often pursuing sectarian economic or ethnic interests rather than universalistic political motives (Duffield 2001: 118). Although the 'old wars' might not have faded forever, they have become very rare in comparison to 'new wars' since the Second World War because everyone has come to grips with the atrocities of modern warfare, epitomized by nuclear warheads (Kaldor 2009).

Even aside from the two schools, however, we ought to recognize that ethnic conflicts are merely one of many types of conflicts that plague the world. Some scholars largely distinguish conflicts into six categories (Viotti 2007): i). territorial border disputes ii). Control over national governments iii). Economic conflicts iv). Ethnic v). religious vi). Ideological. Yet conflicts do not follow a strict categorization because they are not mutually exclusive but rather tend to be an enmeshment of a number of categories. That is, economic activities of the globalized world can be just as easily a contributor to ethnic conflicts as traditional disagreements may be. For this reason, ethnic conflicts necessitate a careful case-by-case examination, especially in the rapidly globalizing context.

## Three Scenarios

Based on the literature reviews for globalization and ethnic conflict, let us attempt to understand three prevailing views of ethnic conflicts identified by Ishiyama: first, globalization and economic integration agitates ethno-political forces; second, globalization has intensified conflicts as a result of a backlash against encroachment of identity; thirdly, the link between globalization and ethnic conflict is overstated (Ishiyama 2004).

The first view is that globalization and economic integration agitate ethno-political forces. MacManus considers economic interdependence – increased trade and financial flows – as a provocateur of political and cultural backlashes that were the seeds of serious conflict (Ishiyama 2004). These proponents would most likely adhere to the global chaos theory, highlighting resistance around the world against the convergences. Note that this view argues that it is non-ethnic factor, namely, economic factor that leads to ethnic conflicts. Primordialists may state that encroachment upon their identity stems from the economic globalization. Meanwhile, instrumentalists may argue that economic globalization generates inequalities which further lead to poverty and crimes breeding an environment conducive for leaders to mobilize masses by appealing to ethnic bonds. Often, politicians provoke hatred of a minority group to strengthen their position; in worst cases these propagandas end in ethnic cleansing or genocide. The minority groups either demand secession or equal rights; in worst cases, these propagandas end in civil wars or terrorisms.

In many cases, actually, economic globalization can be directly traced as an exacerbating factor of ethnic conflicts in the South. One of such issues has been the 'blood diamonds' defined by the UN as:

Diamonds that originate from areas controlled by forces or factions opposed to legitimate and internationally recognized governments, and are used to fund military action in opposition to those governments, or in contravention of the decisions of the Security Council (Izhakoff).

In Liberia, for instance, plagued with Civil War in 1989 to 2003, the Liberian president Charles Taylor had been charged in 2001 by the UN for supporting the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) insurgency in Sierra Leone with weapons and training in exchange for diamonds (Bornstein 2012). These conflict diamonds represent 4 to 15 percent of the total trade in rough diamonds which in 2001 had a market value of \$7.9 billion (McNamara 2009). And as the South becomes further exploited and excluded from world economy, the struggle for resources continues to create ethnic tensions that lead to violence. Kaplan's work has been influential in understanding the ethnic conflicts in Africa as well as the Balkans.

Kaplan interprets the violence and political turmoil in West Africa as an unfocused and instinctive response, rooted in nature, to mounting external pressures. Further, this response is taken as a harbinger of trends in other marginal areas of the globe. Environmental and economic collapse, rising birth rates and soaring crimes have created an explosive situation (Duffield 2001: 113).

Since the Washington Consensus, international institutions and multinational corporations have spearheaded the

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cosmopolitanism. But as Stiglitz had admitted, IMF and most other institutions have failed to help the South in any concrete way and have actually left some countries worse off (Stiglitz 2002). The current globalization has actually been strengthening the trade within the North, leaving much of the South continuously underdeveloped and some cases entirely excluded from global economy (Hoogvelt 2001). These are all consequences of Malthusian resource pressures exacerbated by environmental and economic collapse. Unfortunately, this is a vicious cycle. As Duffield points out, ethnic conflicts along with other internal conflicts tend to only exacerbate social cohesiveness further.

The intense destabilization of society through the war, the movement of people away from their ancestral villages through internal displacement, urbanization and modernization, ethnic inter-marriage, the introduction of cash crop economy in traditional communities, has resulted in much less homogeneity within one ethnic group (Duffield 2001: 124).

The second view is that globalization intensifies conflicts as a result of a backlash against encroachment of identity. Appadurai states that "Cultural clashes are more likely when groups share common characteristics... arguing that violence between social intimates is a means of trying to fix or stabilize ethnic identity amid the uncertainties of globalization" (Ishiyama 2004: 4). Primordialists would reject this 'fluid' definition of ethnicity but instrumentalists/constructivists could well adhere to this view. If ethnic identities are really non-static, they can be either converging or diverging. Conflicts are destined to arise within the ethnic groups as they struggle to redefine themselves in the rapidly globalizing world.

Kaldor believes that "Globalization is breaking up the cultural and socio-economic divisions that defined the patterns of politics which characterized the modern period" (Kaldor 2001: 70). As cultural and socio-economic identities are propagated, indigenous and ethnic groups of the South feel threatened and encroached upon. And a new kind of nationalism, referred to as the 'new nationalism,' is observed in the South as they exclude others of different identities to resist convergence (Kaldor 2007). Insofar, the reciprocity or the two-way vulnerability as witnessed in the 9/11 tragedy (Held 2000). And a less anticipated phenomenon in the North became salient. Duffield observes a similar phenomenon in the North – a 'new barbarism' as he refers that emphasizes the notion of a primordial, innate and irrational cultural and ethnic identity (Duffield 2001: 110). These notions are usually manifest in racial and xenophobic tendencies (Duffield 2001: 113). In effect, they are countering this threat propagating cultural homogeneity both large (i.e. Hindu nationalism or global Islam or anti-immigrationism in Europe) and small (i.e. Croats, Abkhazians, Chechens).

The Rwandan genocide can be considered as a conflict that resulted as a backlash against encroachment of identity. Primordialists have asserted that the Rwandan genocide was between the Hutu and Tutsi who developed entirely separate cultures and inevitably came into conflict with one another. They maintain that these conflicts resulted from irreconcilable differences in cultural gaps (Sambanis 2001). They also argue, less empirically, that though ethnicity may not be primordial but ethnic groups experience it primordially (Horowitz 2002). Even Jefremovas admitted that "hard to define in Rwanda, these labels are recognized by people and have power" (Vilia 1995: 28). Nevertheless, Jefremovas argues that the two groups shared more similarities than differences. 'Tutsi and Hutu live in the same places, speak the same language, and practice the same religions' and an 'enormous overlap in physical characteristics between the groups' is evident" (Vilia 1995: 28).

In short, based on cultural and physical similarities, the irreconcilable differences were largely absent. If the resemblances are there, then, there must have been an occasion that divided these groups. And surprisingly, instrumentalists trace back the Rwanda's Tutsi/Hutu distinction to the Belgian colonizers in the 1930s that codified groups on the basis of cattle ownership, physical measurements and church records; and these identity cards later played a key role in the genocide of 1994 (Mamdani 2001). In that sense, the Rwandan genocide was not a result of ancient hatreds or internal feuds alone, if at all. During colonialism, these two groups, either willingly or unwillingly, had been given different identities. Therefore, we can conclude that if the two groups had been at conflict primordially, globalization manifested in the form of globalization, as Khor stated previously, has further exacerbated the ancient hatreds.

Third view is that the link between globalization and ethnic conflict is overstated. Sadowski states, "Global chaos

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theorists oversimplify the complex relationships between globalization and ethnic conflict and miss the importance of domestic factors, political, economic, and social” (Ishiyama 2004: 4). Because of vastness of globalization, it has turned into a buzzword that has been overused and misused. Perhaps analyzing ethnic conflicts too narrowly without proper consideration of globalization or too broadly without proper consideration of domestic variables pose two extremes that can lead to false interpretations. Moreover, Crawford states that “Globalization may be a ‘trigger’ for ethnic conflict but its effects are mitigated by other factors, such as the role of state institutions. Democratization and openness helps to prevent the consistent denial of representation to important minorities” (Ishiyama 2004: 5). For Crawford, globalization is an overall balanced phenomenon that both exacerbates and alleviates ethnic conflicts, resulting in neutralization. As a matter of fact, proponents of this view credit complex interdependence – erected by means of liberal democracy and capitalism – for making a world less likely to engage in wars and making a world more peaceful with the help of international institutions. Keohane and Nye observe that:

The politics of complex interdependence is the one in which levels of economic, environmental, and social globalism are high and military globalism is low. Intercontinental interdependence widened after the fall of the communist bloc and with construction of postwar international institutions such as NATO and IMF, which protected and supported complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye 2000: 115).

As the Convergence theory has propagated, adherents to cosmopolitanism as a catalyst replaces national and indigenous identities with larger ones. Wolff gives as an example the international institutions that mediated Liberia’s long-lasting civil war in 2003, along with prevention of full-scale civil war in Macedonia in 2001 and a successful ending of the conflict in Aceh in Indonesia in 2005 (Wolff 2010). Among many of such international institutions, the European Union is perhaps one of most representative example of regionalism. Dutceac states, “European Union (EU) is a regional project similar to the phenomena described as globalization at the world scale, affecting ethnic conflicts in Europe... EU can promote a redefinition of identities so that ethnic or religious affiliations will become more pluralistic...” (Dutceac 2004: 20). Brubaker states similarly that “EU promotes a value system based on democracy and tolerance, which are conducive to ethnic coexistence...” (Dutceac 2004: 26).

One of rare success stories in such mediation is its handling of the Macedonian ethnic conflict. Macedonia has an ethnic Albanian minority (25%), ethnic Macedonian majority (75%) and because these groups are geographically concentrated, the region was conducive to secessionist movements (Poulton 2000). Since the early 1990s, the European Union provided the incentives for inter-ethnic cooperation and these dialogues led to the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) in 2001 that ended fighting between the two ethnic groups. This was possible because the idea of joining the EU provided an appealing incentive to both of them. “Macedonians fear most violent conflict and economic crises; Albanians want to eliminate discrimination and also have a better living standard (Dutceac 2004: 31).”

Unfortunately, this sort of success stories is a rarity. As a matter of fact, even the Macedonian case remains incomplete. Marking the 10 years of the OFA, the International Crisis Group published an alarming analysis that tensions between the Albanians and Macedonians has been resurging.

While this part of the Balkans looks to eventual EU membership to secure stability, it remains fragile, and worrying trends – rising ethnic Macedonian nationalism, state capture by the prime minister and his party, decline in media and judicial independence, increased segregation in schools and slow decentralisation – risk undermining the multi-ethnic civil state Macedonia can become (Crisis Group 2011).

This is the sad reality of ethnic conflicts or any conflicts for that matter. They are so easy to spread but so difficult to mediate and calm. After 6 million Jews were exterminated by the Nazi Germans, the world leaders pledged to “never again” permit such horrific genocide (Viotti 2007). However, genocide in the 1990s in Bosnia and Rwanda and more recently in Sudan has proven that the most pessimistic intellectuals were right after all. The global community stayed mostly passive and ignorant of the genocides that happened even in the twentieth century. Clinton administration, for instance, allegedly were dissuaded from intervening in the Bosnia conflict accepting that innate and inbred hatreds were causing the tensions, or that genocide of Rwanda should be left alone to sort it out on their own (Duffield 2001: 111). In this case, primordialist views seem to have been adopted as a scapegoat or an excuse.

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With the advent of globalization, nation-states have been undermined of their power in many ways as the Giddens remarks "In circumstances of accelerating globalization, the nation-state has become 'too small for the big problems of life, and too big for the small problems of life'" (Alison 2012). Paradoxically, as Meyer et al write "Globalization certainly poses new problems for states, but it also strengthens principle that nation-states are the primary actors charged with identifying and managing those problems on behalf of their societies" (Guillén 2001: 250). It is true that nation-states, some united under ethnic bonds or long-shared history and culture, are more likely to be mindful of maintaining order and peace within its boundaries than multinational corporations or international institutions, but it is also true that these two entities have become influential in our globalizing world. Aside from globalization and ethnic conflicts link being overstated or not, so far, it is clear that there is scanty evidence of the new global actors alleviating ethnic conflicts in the global world today.

## Conclusion

What has become clear is that both globalization and ethnic conflict cover vast fields that are interlinked and overlapping to countless variables. Even worse, as discussed, globalization has resulted in a peculiar phenomenon where we have both homogenization and heterogenization. In other words, we are becoming more alike and at the same time becoming more aware of our differences; we are more cooperative in some areas and more conflicting on others. Perhaps, the question of whether or not globalization exacerbates ethnic conflict was not the right question to begin with since the answers vary so much case-by-case. Perhaps analyzing ethnic conflict in relation to economic globalization alone would have been more appropriate. That way, more conclusive results would have been possible if ethnic conflicts had been examined through more concrete entities such as the European Union or De Beers Diamond Company.

But dwelling on complexities and variances is unproductive, and issue at hand, namely, globalization and ethnic conflicts loom. As Gramsci once said, what we need is pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. The most direct answer is obvious that with intensified interactions, ethnic conflicts are going to be more exacerbated and more alleviated. And of course, between the two, news and reality are more characterized by exacerbation than alleviation.

Moving forward, in a rapidly globalizing world, however, underdevelopment and instability in the South pose new threats to the North in forms of terrorism and extremism. Duffield observes a new pattern among Northern policy-makers that put new emphasis on the underdevelopment in the South "fomenting international instability through conflict, criminal activity and terrorism" (Duffield 2011). For this reason, cooperation at large will be required among governments, NGOs, military establishments and private companies to preserve peace and prevent exacerbation of ethnic conflicts (Duffield 2011). Riggs agrees that ethnic groups, nations and international institutions need to rethink their strategies in adapting to this converging world, as either groups will endlessly clash or have to learn to thrive in diversity by emphasizing commonalities rather than differences:

All populations have become increasingly diverse, and the citizens of all states are more diasporized, living or visiting outside their own countries... They need to be accommodated politically both within the evolving global network of international organizations and in the design of democratic states... All democracies need to make fundamental constitutional innovations that enable dispersed minorities, both at home and abroad to be better represented (Riggs 2002: 46).

Experiences in the Western Europe have shown that education may hold keys to ceasing or at least alleviating historical ethnic animosities between traditionally hostile nations, such as France and Germany. After World War II, the two governments rewrote their textbook for a new generation by giving a more objective and fair rendition in place of propagandistic glorifications of success and downplays of misdeeds, while Japan still insists on glossing over its crimes in World War II by which it has failed to reconcile with its neighboring Korea and China. Wolff hopes that someday people will shift loyalties by developing a global identity as humans first and members of states and ethnic groups second (Wolff 2010). This is quite unlikely, in my opinion, given the tendencies of people to dispute all along history. Nevertheless, it is clear globalization both homogenizes and heterogenizes the world. In this world, disputes can escalate quicker and bear much more disastrous outcomes than ever before. Therefore, it seems that people will need to learn to tolerate differences in order to coexist.

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