Special Issue: Change in armed conflict

Change in armed conflict: An introduction

International Political Science Review
2024, Vol. 45(1) 3–14

DOI: 10.1177/01925121231177368
journals.sagepub.com/home/ips


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Abstract

How can we understand change in armed conflict, both in terms of the phenomenon as a whole, as well as within individual conflicts? This Special Issue sets a new agenda on the theme of change in armed conflict. Studying conflict as a dynamic social phenomenon requires embracing interdisciplinarity and methodological pluralism, which this Special Issue facilitates through a shared conceptual framework on five dimensions of change as a 'lingua franca' across diverse approaches and perspectives. It advances debates through three contributions: by critically assessing pre-existing categories and labels; by accounting for perceptions and experiences; and by scaling analyses across varying units and levels of analysis.

Keywords

Change, armed conflict, methodology, security, violence, epistemology, interdisciplinarity

In August 2021, the Taliban took over Afghanistan's government after the US withdrawal following two decades of war. This event seemed to confirm a trend of armed conflict since at least the end of the Cold War: that intra-state conflicts and low-intensity violence became the most relevant security threats, with violent non-state actors achieving results through asymmetric warfare. Security concerns were around safe havens for terrorists who wreaked havoc through attacks 'à la 9/11'. Indeed, a heightened threat soon emanated from the 'Islamic State Khorasan Province', another non-state actor that gained strength in Afghanistan (Jadoon and Mines, 2023). These changes in the conflict's internal dynamics puzzled analysts who tried to grasp how the Taliban were able to resist two decades of US-led war but were then threatened by another non-state actor. Yet in February 2022, Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine put conventional interstate warfare back on top of security agendas, triggering commentary on the comeback – or continuation – of geopolitics in world affairs. Analysts shifted attention to the macro level, seeking to make sense of the return of state-led military aggression in the heart of Europe. These two developments thus

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raise questions about how we can understand change in armed conflict both within individual conflicts and at the level of the phenomenon as such.

This Special Issue sets a new agenda on change in armed conflict:[1] to study armed conflict as a dynamic process rather than as a static social equilibrium by embracing interdisciplinarity and methodological pluralism in a shared conceptual framework. Using five dimensions of change – actors, methods, resources, environments and impact – as a lingua franca across approaches and perspectives, the issue makes three contributions: it demonstrates the utility of critically assessing pre-existing categories and labels; of accounting for perceptions and experiences; and of scaling analyses across varying units and levels of analysis. Changes in armed conflict, or war, concern its character at the macro level that comprises conflicts globally and over the duration of decades, centuries or longer (Strachan and Scheipers, 2011), shaped by long-term transformations in the social and technological foundations for warfare (Parker, 1988). Scholars have elucidated such changes through data-driven trend analyses of conflict (e.g. Themnér and Wallensteen, 2014), or linked changes in the understanding of norms, such as sovereignty, with the decline of interstate violence (Gill-Tiney, 2022). Scholarship on trends from international to internal war (Berdal and Malone, 2000), on old versus new wars (Kaldor, 2006) and on shifts in the interaction of security privatization versus challenges to the state's monopoly on violence (Kapferer, 2005) added to these debates the changing roles of state and non-state actors in conflicts. Other work focuses on changes from peace to war and vice versa. Such debates have centred on the causes of conflict, conflict onset and factors that facilitate organized violence, including actors' motives to engage in conflict, such as identity, ideas and ideology (Gurr, 2015; Smith, 2015; Vogt et al., 2021), and on the effectiveness of interventions to end conflict.

Armed conflict is hard both to prevent and to end, hence so many protracted conflicts that evolve in myriad ways exist. Often, we pay attention to who is involved in them, what the conflict is about and where it occurs, yet there is no consensus on how such change could be studied systematically. Scholars have only begun to elucidate how the overall changing character of armed conflict links with changes within single conflicts; for example, to what extent technological advances globally trickle down to fighting in individual conflicts – or how developments in conflict theatres, such as the deployment of new weapons, influence how wars are fought generally.

Yet we do know that these (unexpected) changes in conflicts contribute to their lethality. They impede individuals from protecting themselves and obstruct civilian safeguarding by external actors. Consequently, pertinent theories to study, and address, such changes are a pressing concern for scholars and practitioners alike. Conflicts located in regions comprising countries such as Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo or Syria have triggered overwhelming emergencies. In 2023, about 15.3 million Syrians needed humanitarian assistance – even before the deadly earthquake struck the region on 6 February 2023 (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, 2023).

Change in conflicts' internal dynamics contributes to their protractedness. There has been an upward trend in the duration of conflicts since 1971 (United Nations and World Bank, 2018), with conflicts that 'mutate' over time seen as the most intractable ones (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 2016: 10). Yet it is unclear whether, and how, conflicts have become more dynamic and whether novel conceptualizations or data collection approaches may also yield longer, mutating conflicts.

Better understanding changes in armed conflicts is key to effective interventions to stop them. The international community has failed to do so in places such as Afghanistan, Nigeria and Syria (see Idler and Tkacova, 2023; Nogales and Oldiges, 2023). Although discussions on how to adapt responses to conflict are not new (Crocker et al., 2007), reactive approaches to changes rather than anticipatory ones continue to shape security policies. In Haiti, United Nations peacekeeping operations applied a civil

war approach even though criminal violence fuelled insecurity considerably. In Afghanistan and Iraq, interventions followed counterinsurgency principles that underestimated changes in the means used by individuals and groups to sustain their fighting; for example, how resources such as the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan or oil smuggling in Iraq gained importance over time (Idler, 2021b). In Colombia, the government's strategy after the peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) focused on the rebels' demobilization, neglecting the armed groups' reshuffling (Idler, 2019).

Theoretical, conceptual and analytical tools to comprehend change in armed conflict can aid in anticipating future changes and bolster prevention and early warning efforts. Such efforts can help mitigate the impacts arising from such changes by either steering them towards a less detrimental path or by implementing suitable measures to alleviate human suffering. To this end, I present a conceptual framework on change in armed conflict along and across five dimensions. By engaging with this framework, the articles in this Special Issue collectively demonstrate how political scientists and scholars from other disciplinary backgrounds can benefit from integrating insights from epistemologies and methodologies that may lie outside the standard approaches of the discipline.

This Special Issue begins with Dursun-Özkanca (2023)'s study on how evolving conflict responses influence conflict dynamics. She demonstrates how adding new actors, including states and regional alliances, into conflict enlarges its scope in terms of the territory occupied by actors with a stake in it. Idler and Tkacova (2023) take forward the spatial analysis of changing scopes yet more narrowly defined in terms of the territory affected by conflict-related violence. They adopt a mixed-methods approach that integrates spatial and network analysis with process tracing based on fieldwork data collected in two war-torn regions in Colombia and in Iraq. The authors theorize the causal mechanism that leads to shifts in 'conflict shapes', including across borders, as a low-risk/high-opportunity attraction. Nogales and Oldiges (2023) continue the theme of spatial shifts, but across subnational borders, and scrutinize how these relate to socioeconomic factors, especially poverty as experienced by communities exposed to conflict. This focus on experiences is central to Rugo (2023)'s article that follows. He shows that art practice and research can contribute to an understanding of layered narratives used by various actors in conflict that resist political science approaches because arts unpacks the subtleties of experiences and perceptions. Finally, speaking to Rugo (2023)'s emphasis on the personal and the affective, Alderdice (2023) reminds the reader to take emotions seriously since conflict is about human relationships – or their breakdown. Alderdice (2023)'s analysis extends to the next generation: today's conflicts trigger tomorrow's traumas. Ergo, understanding conflict dynamics in the past and present serves to prevent, or alleviate, human suffering in the future.

A conceptual framework: Five dimensions of change in armed conflict

The conceptual framework of change is applicable to armed conflict in a broad sense, conceptualized as a setting of organized intergroup violence whereby a significant portion of this violence is lethal, in line with Goldstein (2001: 3) who defines war as 'lethal intergroup violence'. Such groups can be diverse: according to Goldstein (2001: 3), 'if members of a small gathering-hunting society go out in an organized group to kill members of another community, [this is] war'. This conceptualization encompasses conflict from organized violence in pre-state system societies to turf wars between Mexican cartels. Following North et al. (2009: 13), 'violence can be expressed in physical actions or through coercive threats of physical action. Both violent acts and coercion are elements of violence'. The referent object of security and of conflict's impact are political entities and

people. People have different perspectives on, and perceptions of, conflict, depending on their role in society locally and globally.

By change in armed conflict, I refer to a dynamic process. Just as social order 'is a dynamic of change, not a dynamic of progress' (North et al., 2009: 12), armed conflict cannot be understood teleologically. Change can have multiple directions rather than constituting progress or deterioration only; hence evolving conflict dynamics are often seen as ambiguous. Referring to war, Strachan and Scheipers (2011: 16) note that change 'can also take the form of a pendulum swinging back and forth'. This perspective challenges views on conflict that rely on linear conceptions of time and see conflict or its impact as progressing in one direction (e.g. victory of one conflict party, or by becoming more or less violent). Conflict resolution research (see e.g. Kriesberg and Neu, 2018) typically identifies distinct phases, often to determine when a conflict may be 'ripe' for resolution, or to detect violence escalation mechanisms (Zartman, 2000). Studying change in armed conflict across and along the five dimensions that I next discuss permits examining how change can be non-linear, evolutionary, dialectical, regressive or transformational, and include ruptures in each dimension.

Five dimensions of change

I establish a common vocabulary across epistemologies and methodologies that can capture dynamism in armed conflict, drawing on analytical categories that are universal and not time-bound and that are applicable across the social sciences, humanities and arts: agency, places, forms, means and consequences. These categories aim to be as value-free as possible; they are not specific to 'war' and 'armed conflict', which are concepts that are often defined in a state-centric, and hence value-laden, manner (see e.g. Reno, 2011). Using these categories in the context of armed conflict broadly defined, conflict changes along five dimensions: (a) the *actors* involved (agency); (b) the *environments* where conflict occurs (places); (c) the *methods* used (forms); (d) the *resources* that fuel conflict (means); and (e) the *impact* conflict has on people and societies (consequences). The last dimension is contingent on the first four.

In preparing this Special Issue, the authors came together in workshops centred around the five dimensions of change framework. All start from viewing armed conflict broadly defined as outlined above and speak to one or several of the dimensions. Here I provide examples for illustrative purposes; each article engages with the dimensions and their interrelations in multifaceted ways.

Change can concern, first, the groups or (a) *actors* involved who have agency in the conflict because they fight over a contested issue, the incompatibility between them. These actors can be formal, informal or external authorities; that is, they claim legitimacy to hold power using force. This can mean that the group sees their use of power as valid for achieving their goals or that others acknowledge their right to have this power. Authority can coincide with sovereignty: the group has the authority to govern some polity. Yet authority does not necessarily coincide with territoriality. Multiple authorities can exert power in the same territory, with some of them (e.g. states) holding externally granted legitimacy, and others (e.g. rebels) perceived to be legitimate authorities by the population living there. Idler and Tkacova (2023) demonstrate how a population's support for certain conflict actors influences a conflict's territorial dynamics – newly emerging dominant actors are likely to 'nudge' conflict to territory where they are supported locally.

Most contemporary armed conflicts comprise more than two conflict actors. Multiple armed state and non-state actors fight and cooperate with each other in constantly evolving relationships. In some cases, conflict actors proliferate because existing groups fragment, such as in Chechnya, Darfur or Sri Lanka (Bakke et al., 2012); in other cases, they homogenize (e.g. when Colombian paramilitary groups organized into the Colombian Self-Defence Forces). Often, how relevant state or non-state actors are in a conflict evolves, and even these categories become muddied, as in the case of the Taliban in Afghanistan. With new actors becoming involved and new territories

penetrated by conflict-related violence, the original contested issue often changes too. These processes mutate existing conflicts and trigger new ones.

Attributing agency in a conflict is challenging. The lines between civilians and combatants are often blurred. People may influence conflict dynamics through civil resistance (Kaplan, 2017), by becoming informants or messengers for combatants, by switching between daytime civilian jobs and night-time militia positions or by immersing themselves in and out of armed struggle over time. Strict categorization would be counterproductive to understanding the nuances of conflict dynamics. Rather, examining armed conflict through the lens of changing actors, or agency, helps increase awareness of the fluid boundaries between those with and without agency.

Second, change concerns the forms in which organized violence is carried out, that is, the (b) *methods* groups use to achieve their goals. The methods are guided by the logic of direct or indirect coercion, or serve to mobilize people, and can be supported by instruments of war, such as military equipment. Alderdice (2023) in this Special Issue demonstrates how this dimension connects with actors: conflict dynamics can change to favour weaker actors if they successfully employ methods such as guerrilla tactics that military capabilities cannot outpower. Conflict actors frequently invent new methods. They benefit from globalization that has expanded communication technologies and infrastructures, allowing actors such as al-Shabaab or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria to recruit fighters from afar using social media. Novel technologies have ushered in an era where ideas, resources and people can seamlessly traverse conflict-ridden regions, spreading propaganda or misinformation and enhancing conflicts' interdependence. Among these technologies, lethal autonomous weapons have changed battlefield dynamics, including non-state actors' harnessing of open-source artificial intelligence to turn civil devices such as photography drones into deadly weapons (Russell, 2022, 2023). The rapid pace at which these changes occur and information is shared internationally complicates the analysis of changing methods. Certainly, humanity continually introduces increasingly advanced technologies in warfare. These advancements range from combining the telegraph, the railway and the rifle in the mid-19th century, to allowing mass movements of troops, to stealth technology developed in the 1950s and to nanotechnology in warfare (Cohen, 2018). Still, Russia's invasion of Ukraine that began in 2022 shows that the forms in which organized violence is implemented do not change linearly; for example, from using heavy weaponry with 'boots on the ground' to solely relying on lethal autonomous weapons.

Third, change pertains to the means through which the groups sustain violence: the (c) *resources* used to fight. These are typically tangible assets used to pay agents of violence and procure technologies of violence, including those obtained through extraction from people (e.g. taxes), from other sources (e.g. the illicit economy) and through external sponsorship (e.g. foreign state funding). Conflict actors' changing ability to access means influences conflict methods and environments. In Colombia, for example (see Idler and Tkacova, 2023), the Cold War's end stopped the FARC rebels from accessing Soviet funds, so the illicit drug economy became a more important income source. Dursun-Özkancan (2023) in this Special Issue demonstrates how alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) can facilitate resources, as also shown by NATO's support to Ukraine in its fight against Russia. Changes in the membership of such institutions influence access to the means of violence.

Fourth, change can concern the place where the threats or use of violence is acute because fighting can shift across different (d) *environments*, including densely populated spaces (cities), sparsely populated spaces (rural areas, sea) and non-physical spaces (cyberspace). Conflicts thus seldomly coincide with international borders; they can affect transnational regions, and, often, several conflicts form instability hubs; for example, in the Horn of Africa, the Middle East or Africa's Great Lakes region. Given the technological advances outlined above, conflicts are also increasingly territorially connected across regions and continents. The environments affected comprise the area where violent events are observed or threats of violence influence people's behaviour and perception of security.

Just as war and territorial conquest have historically drawn state borders (Atzili, 2012: 12–13), conflict dynamics constantly redraw conflict boundaries, not least because conflict actors are often mobile and change their operating location (Beardsley et al., 2015). In this Special Issue, Nogales and Oldiges (2023) analyse changes across environments in relation to poverty, and Idler and Tkacova (2023) show how changes in actor constellations facilitate shifts of violent events to sparsely populated spaces if these environments offer the conflict actors opportunities. Cyberspace has become another conflict theatre, even if the capacity for human destruction in this space is still lower than often assumed.

Change in these four dimensions can influence change in the consequences that conflict has for people and societies, its (e) *impact*. Consequences can be positive and negative, depending on the perspective assumed, and hence one needs to be mindful of normative charges. Still, it is uncontroversial to state that one way conflict impacts people is through harm, including physical, non-physical and long-term harm. Regarding physical harm, scholars focusing on absolute levels of change have found a trend from higher to lower levels of violence that suggest humanity is progressing towards more civilized interaction forms (Pinker, 2011). However, the significance of these trends requires examination over short and long periods, while rethinking existing categories. Between 2005 and 2016, for example, battle-related deaths increased 10 times (United Nations and World Bank, 2018). However, between 2016 and 2020, death resulting from interpersonal violence (not just from battles) decreased substantially (Hideg and Boo, 2022).

Harm can also be non-physical. Indirect coercion, mobilization or the potentiality of direct coercion are examples of such harm. It includes perceptions of insecurity that trigger fear, the psychological effects of organized violence, and uncertainty in the absence of appropriate behavioural rules. Rugo (2023) in this Special Issue studies such experienced and perceived harm, which exists at the level of individuals and of societies since it damages their social fabric. Finally, as Alderdice (2023) highlights in this Special Issue, both physical and non-physical harm can induce long-term harm to a society's structure, resulting from conflict's 'cumulative impact' (ICRC, 2016: 10). Dursun-Özkanca (2023) in this Special Issue captures such changing impact in a frozen conflict, where harm persists even if weapons are silenced. Other examples include trauma and societal divides when parts of a society feel misrepresented in their historical memories. Thus, just as positive peace is more than the absence of violence (Goertz et al., 2016) – it also requires justice, the respect for human rights, and human security – armed conflict is more than the presence of violence. Societies exposed to such impacts require longer to be productive and promote wellbeing (Collier, 2009). Whether and how these less tangible consequences of armed conflict change over time is still mostly unknown, not least because it is difficult to trace them in detail (Goldstein, 2012: 236).

Theoretical contribution

This Special Issue demonstrates the utility of bringing together diverse perspectives to understand armed conflict's dynamism in two ways. First, diverse perspectives concern going beyond one's own disciplinary, methodological or epistemological approach. Armed conflicts are dynamic social phenomena that shape and are shaped by experiences, perceptions and emotionally driven behaviours as much as by observable and rational action. Different methodologies and epistemologies have distinct 'comparative advantages' to elucidate these aspects. Integrating them facilitates a more holistic view that goes beyond static, snapshot or unidirectional representations of change while foregrounding their general application. Placing the articles into dialogue with each other shows that adding psychology (Alderdice, 2023) and the arts (Rugo, 2023) to political science approaches illuminates the role perceptions and experiences of conflict dynamism have in a way that positivist approaches do not capture (Della Porta and Keating, 2008). Likewise, contrasting, for instance,

Nogales and Oldiges (2023)' quantitatively oriented research on Nigeria's conflict dynamics with Dursun-Özkanca (2023)'s qualitative work on Cyprus's conflict reveals how both add to our understanding of territorial changes. While Nogales and Oldiges (2023) contextualize 'spillovers' with subnational areas' socioeconomic characteristics, Dursun-Özkanca (2023) emphasizes the Cyprus conflict's embedment in the Mediterranean region's changing security dynamics. Thanks to the availability of quantitative data at the national and subnational level, Nogales and Oldiges (2023) can trace Nigeria's conflict dynamics through statistical analysis. Against this, Dursun-Özkanca (2023)'s analysis benefits from qualitative insights into decision-makers' strategic considerations.

Second, diverse perspectives concern positionality. The authors are from diverse countries (six different nationalities), academic contexts, genders and seniority level. As Hurrell (2016: 151) states in the context of global international relations: 'even if the language is shared, the real meaning may be very different'. Elucidating change in conflict out of varied regions and in cases across the Global North (Dursun-Özkanca on Cyprus; Alderdice on Northern Ireland) and Global South (Nogales and Oldiges on Nigeria; Idler and Tkacova on Syria/Iraq, Afghanistan/Pakistan and Colombia) helps approximate such a shared meaning by demonstrating patterns across all five dimensions of change that hold across contexts. Uniting distinct positionalities in 'the global' thus enhances generalizability. The authors' positionality also refers to their proximity to conflicts: immersion into conflict dynamics – for example, as filmmaker (Rugo) or as conflict mediator (Alderdice) – adds nuance to the conflict dynamics' meaning as ambiguity that may be less relevant for the outside observer.

Three common contributions to theorizing change in armed conflict emerge through this dialogue among disciplines, methodologies and epistemologies. While each article focuses on a different subtopic within the theme of change in armed conflict or a distinct region, these contributions all refer to *how* we study change in armed conflict.

Questioning externally imposed categories

All articles emphasize the need to challenge – or relax the rigidness of – externally imposed categories and labels related to 'armed conflict', even if only to start the analysis and then re-introduce these categories later. Understanding armed conflict as organized intergroup violence holds across time; it avoids time-bound concepts such as 'states'. This understanding applies to pre-state system organized violence and a potential future in which states may cease to be protagonists of international order. It holds across space locally, regionally, nationally and transnationally, avoiding labels that describe states as territories in 'armed conflict' or 'peace'. This perspective is reflected in: Rugo (2023)'s call for embracing grey zones and complexity; Dursun-Özkanca (2023)'s use of a 'frozen conflict' concept to emphasize that battle deaths absence does not imply a conflict's end;[2] Idler and Tkacova (2023)'s dynamic analytical unit, 'conflict shape' that ignores state borders; Nogales and Oldiges (2023)' embracing of non-lethal conflict events such as protests; and Alderdice (2023)'s discussion of a conflict's impact on people distant from and after the conflict.

Taking perceptions seriously

The second contribution concerns perceptions and experiences' relevance for understanding conflict dynamics. Rugo (2023) demonstrates how the arts embrace the affective and the emotional that shape people's perceptions and experiences which influence behaviour in conflict. These include perceptions of what Alderdice (2023) terms 'devoted actors', to whom sacred values rather than material gains are at stake. Perceptions and experiences matter to understand change in the dimension of the individual or the group (actors), and of the locales of conflict (environments).

Nogales and Oldiges (2023) demonstrate how incorporating multidimensional poverty that encompasses people's experiences into conflict analysis reveals spatial patterns of change. Dursun-Özkanca (2023) moves from people to states: threat perceptions can influence even at the alliance level such as NATO and its potential members, which can affect conflict responses and draw in more actors, leading to an expansion of the conflict. Idler and Tkacova (2023)'s visualizations of spatially changing conflict shapes illustrate not only that perceptions influence how conflict evolves by informing behaviour, but also that capturing the dynamism of conflict can influence perceptions. Once conflict actors engage in violence across borders from one country to another, they may be perceived to be less threatening to powerholders in the former, but more so in the latter, even if the overall level of violence stays the same.

Studying change across different scales

Third, the articles demonstrate how scaling analyses helps grasp change in armed conflict. Three insights stand out. First, scaling concerns the level of change. Alderdice (2023), for example, integrates reflections on conflicts' evolving character over decades with analysing conflict dynamics in countries including Iraq and Northern Ireland. This interplay between the macro and micro levels of change highlights that they are mutually reinforcing. Second, scaling analysis concerns conflict actors. Alderdice (2023) further discusses how motivations to fight, or to change methods in fighting, derive from complex interdependencies between the individual and large group levels. By only studying individuals as rational actors, one misses how 'fusion' into large groups can drive those who may be considered the weaker actors. By only studying groups, one misses why 'devoted actors' join them. Similarly, Rugo (2023) highlights how the collective and the personal interact: armed conflict is a collective reality, but people affected by it perceive it differently. As experiences of conflict change over time, perceptions change too. These perceptions inform behaviour that feeds into conflict dynamics. Finally, scaling concerns conflict-affected places, or environments. Adjusting analytical lenses across neighbourhoods, cities, states and cross-border regions – that is, 'glocally' (Idler, 2021a) – facilitates accounting for spatial change missed otherwise. Dursun-Özkanca (2023) moves between analysing the levels of states, the Mediterranean region and the territory covered by the European Union and NATO. This allows her to show how the Cyprus conflict's scope evolves, with different actors drawn into it. Contrastingly, Nogales and Oldiges (2023) scale their analysis down from the state level. They vary their focus between Nigeria at state, regional and administrative levels in the country. Idler and Tkacova (2023) break with fixed geographical levels of analysis altogether and employ a methodology that builds on a dynamic unit of analysis, 'conflict shape', to trace how conflict events move to varying localities within and across state borders.

Conclusion

In an era when advanced communication and information technologies have accelerated the pace of evolving world affairs, we must pay heightened attention to changing conflict dynamics and their continuities. Political science methodological and epistemological toolkits provide only a limited understanding of the nuanced changes that affect the actors involved, the methods employed, the resources utilized, the environments where conflict occurs and the impact conflict has on people and political entities. This Special Issue demonstrates how embracing dialogue across disciplines, methodologies and epistemologies can enrich our understanding of this dynamic social phenomenon. Rather than prescribing *what* scholars should study, it advocates for a new agenda on *how* to study changing conflict dynamics through pluralistic approaches that

critically reassess pre-existing categories, incorporate perceptions and experiences; and scale analysis across different units and levels of analysis.

This Special Issue opens avenues of future research that relate to both the conceptual framework on the five dimensions of change and the overarching contributions to the study of conflict. These avenues include applying the framework on the five dimensions of change to debates related to the *actors* that may not engage directly in conflict but influence its dynamics from abroad (e.g. Koinova and Tsourapas, 2018), or to various forms of *impact* of conflict; for instance, displacement (Psaltis et al., 2020), challenges to reconciliation (Little and Maddison, 2017) and its role for the aftermath of conflict and sustainable peace (Aalen and Muriaas, 2017; Choi and Noll, 2021). Building on the Special Issue's wider contributions, future research could cross-fertilize and advance debates on the need to account for perceptions and experiences of specific societal groups affected by conflict dynamics, such as women. Adopting a gender-sensitive lens when engaging with the framework may therefore be productive (e.g. George and Shepherd, 2016). This Special Issue also provides an opportunity to evaluate how embracing epistemological and methodological pluralism yields results in the context of other dynamic social phenomena besides armed conflict. The phenomena '(transboundary) crisis' (Brecher, 1996; Stockemer and Reidy, 2021) and 'interdependence' (Yamakage, 1982), for instance, are likewise characterized by dynamism that does not fit neat, pre-conceived categories and conceptualizations. Furthermore, these phenomena are also influenced by, and influence, perceptions and experiences; and they occur across varying analytical units and levels.

Overall, in this Special Issue we hope to catalyse fresh thinking on some of the most pressing, rapidly changing challenges we face today – ranging from the armed conflicts affecting Ukraine and Afghanistan, to transboundary crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Innovative solutions to mitigate the harmful impact of such quickly evolving challenges must be preceded by innovative approaches to study them. Together, the conceptual framework of five dimensions of change and the overarching contributions in this Special Issue serve as a preliminary step towards achieving this goal.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the helpful comments by Alison Brysk, Katerina Tkacova and Laurence Whitehead. I would also like to thank Daniel Stockemer and Theresa Reidy for their generous support as well as all Special Issue contributors for the engaging discussions on the content of this Special Issue.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council and the Economic & Social Research Council through the Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research: 'The Changing Character of Conflict Platform: Understanding, Tracing, and Forecasting Change across Time, Space, and Cultures' (grant number AH/P005446/1).

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Notes

1. This Special Issue originates in the research project 'The Changing Character of Conflict: Tracing, Understanding, and Forecasting Change across Time, Space, and Cultures' (www.conflictplatform.ox.ac.uk) that began on 1 January 2017, funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council and the Economic & Social Research Council. Through this research project we established an inclusive knowledge-based

platform for academics, practitioners, policymakers, and the wider public to enhance understanding of change in conflict across time, space, and cultures.

2. The conflict has resulted in deaths in the past, and hence falls under the concept of armed conflict in its broad sense.

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