

Resolving Third World Conflict

Challenges for a New Era

Sheryl J. Brown
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editors



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Preface

In early October 1990, the United States Institute of Peace convened a major, three-day conference in Washington, D.C., to investigate the nature of conflict and the prospects for its peaceful resolution in the post-Cold War Third World. The conference was occasioned by long-standing concerns regarding the Third World and more immediate reactions to the end of the Cold War.

From the beginning of its existence in 1986, the Institute has placed the problems of the Third World high on its agenda. In our eyes, the international community too often subordinated the problems of the Third World to those of the First and Second Worlds and was therefore frequently distracted from seeing the complexities of those problems and the opportunities for addressing them in their own right. Of course, the First and Second Worlds had a way of making their problems Third World problems as well. As events unfolded in Central and Eastern Europe during 1989, it became apparent to the Institute that the world might be on the verge of a new era, one in which the reality of Third World tension and conflict could be addressed more fully and, with the distraction of East-West tensions moving out of the way, in new and more creative ways.

While holding this hope and preparing for its realization, the Institute nonetheless feared that changing East-West dynamics might produce new disruptions in the Third World. Lack of the usual support to client states from the superpowers would surely destabilize some Third World states. With the decline in superpower competition around the globe, declining interest in the management of regional conflicts for the sake of that competition would surely play some part in upsetting balances and otherwise change the rules of the game. That the Cold War seemed to be ending in the Third as well as the First and Second Worlds—the “South” as well as the “North”—was seen by the Institute, therefore, as both an opportunity and a concern: an opportunity for the international community to focus more—and more acute—attention on the part of the world

that is most victimized by international violence; a concern because of new sources of instability and the possibility of new sources and forms of violence.

With these hopes and fears in mind, the Institute began the process of identifying new sources of conflict in the Third World and considering how they would relate to the ones long extant, while at the same time considering what new and traditional means might be employed in limiting Third World violence. To address the complicated questions of sources and means, the Institute decided to bring together the many scholars and policy analysts who had been working on Third World issues under Institute grants, fellowships, and research projects. From the beginning, the Institute had supported numerous creative efforts to grapple with Third World problems. The time had come to weld these efforts into a more coherent and concentrated whole. In its customary fashion, the Institute asked its scholars and analysts to combine their wisdom according to their own lights. The result was a "dialogue" conference during which issues were thoroughly aired by more than three hundred participants and throughout which many lines of analysis were debated.

The conference began with a panel discussion that raised many of the issues that would be examined in the next three days. We summarize that discussion here, for its themes resonate throughout the rest of this book. The panel's first task was to try to define the concept of the Third World. W. Scott Thompson, moderator of the panel and professor of international politics at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, opened the discussion by asking, "What can give meaning and substance to a term that includes Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Burundi, and Central America?" The founder and codirector of the Institute for Policy Studies, Richard Barnett, characterized the Third World as "a group of very different countries held together by a few common elements—hot weather, colonial history, and dashed hopes." Not unexpectedly, no exact definition emerged of where or what the Third World is. In fact, many panelists thought the concept itself—"Third" as opposed to "First" or "Second" World—is flawed or anachronistic; certainly, its basic components are indefinite.

The attempt to identify what challenges the changing international system would pose to the Third World offered no firmer ground for discussion. Robert Rothstein, director of the International Relations Program at Colgate University, identified the first difficulty as trying to understand "the complex events unfolding around us, . . . when no accurate, effective, consensual theory of change exists." The

panelists set about describing the parameters of the historical change between the Cold War and the post-Cold War future in an attempt to foresee the effect on Third World conflict. Two conditions were determinative: colonies and colonizers had all but disappeared, and the superpower competition and its projection in many Third World conflicts no longer applied. "Improved superpower relations will not necessarily lead to less conflict," speculated Claude Ake, board member of the International Institute for Labor Studies in Geneva. Whereas during the Cold War the superpowers had focused on each other in the ideological conflicts they played out in the Third World, today they are perceiving threats from all regions of the world.

Ake considered the conditions surrounding the dissolution of the East-West bipolarity as leading to the subsequent development of a new, but not necessarily better, bipolarity. The new bipolarity would be characterized by profound inequalities between the First, Second, and Third Worlds, beginning with the inverse ratio between population and production. The rapid scientific and technological development in the First and Second Worlds, he observed, had in effect delinked the Third World from the world system. The end of the Cold War had completed that process of delinkage by shutting down old solidarities and leaving many states abandoned ideologically, morally, and economically.

Richard Feinberg, executive vice-president and director of studies at the Overseas Development Council, disagreed with Ake's North-South characterization, saying that although delinkage is occurring in certain areas in Africa, it is a misleading generalization for much of the Third World. He offered the Gulf crisis as an example. "There was a common interest throughout the Third World vis-à-vis Saddam Hussein and this common interest was national sovereignty and the sacredness of borders, which every government shares." Moreover, he believed that the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe had depolarized economic thought, helping to narrow the gap between statists and free marketeers in many developing countries. As a result, "prospects for more stable and prosperous economic policies were made brighter in many developing countries."

Carl Gershman, president of the National Endowment for Democracy, asserted that in fact prospects for burgeoning democracies in the Third World had never been better. First, the collapse of the "last global antidemocratic totalitarian ideology" had left democracy as the only legitimating form of government—Eastern Europe had been a model and an inspiration for people throughout the Third World. Second, the end of the ideological conflict removed the justification

for supporting dictators for strategic reasons, thereby denying them safe haven. And third, the end of the Cold War made arms reduction a real possibility.

Less optimistic and more exhortative, Michael Ledeen, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, warned of democracy's fragility. "It is all too easy as we watch events today to believe that democratization is inevitable and that history is on our side. It is not. It remains to us to further democracy." Rothstein warned of the dangers of expecting too much from democracy. In his view, undue enthusiasm for the assumption that democratization is the solution to Third World problems launches us into a "misleading and dangerous discussion by setting us down a path (as it did in the 1960s) leading to misestimates of what is occurring and going to occur in the world." Conflict is not necessarily precluded or avoided by any variety of governances calling themselves democracies.

Despite the spread of democracy and the end of Cold War alliances in the Third World, conflict continues to grow. Why? Thompson listed four types of Third World conflicts: intraethnic, interstate ethnic, ideological and religious, and superpower projection. When one also considers militant regional tendencies and the ever-growing proliferation of arms among Third World countries, the outlook is not encouraging. "If it is not self-evident that increasing arsenals predispose to war," Thompson noted, "it does seem apparent that more and better arms make for deadlier wars." Large arms producers must not only constrain their activities but must also persuade small producers not to sell their wares in the Third World. Barnett concurred that an arms-control regime is essential and that it should be offered as part of a global package that would take advantage of "this most favorable moment" for the major powers to move together on controlling weapons of mass destruction. Such a concerted action would be difficult to maintain, however, unless international law made a general prohibition of arms sales globally enforceable.

The panelists identified a number of other critical issues that, having been overlooked in the international community's fixation on the Cold War, had worsened. Disease, environmental degradation, and the psychological disposition of the Third World, posited Ledeen, deter discussion because of their "ugly" nature. Disease is a prime example: malaria in East Africa and cholera in West Africa have made travel and business risky for foreigners, and AIDS is now the top killer of adults throughout Africa. Africa is not alone in suffering from these epidemics. Rothstein regarded such communal and environmental deterioration as a fundamental obstacle to good

government because the gravity of these problems undermines the possibility of effective government by any type of regime—democratic, authoritarian, or totalitarian—in the Third World.

The psychological dimension of the Third World could be characterized, according to Rothstein, by a perversion of the theory of rational expectations; namely, it is rational for Third World citizens to assume that their governments are going to fail, because they so often do. Until political systems with moderate expectations are established, he warned, political stability in the Third World cannot exist. He noted that Third World states with traditional democratic regimes have succeeded. However badly such countries as India, Costa Rica, and Jamaica have performed, their citizens have a more realistic sense of what to expect from their governments than most citizens in transitional and authoritarian regimes. Ake emphasized the need for greater political as well as economic modernization in the Third World. He believed that further global democratization would accomplish that end.

Development assistance to meet some of these pressing needs in the Third World has itself been a two-edged sword for the beneficiaries. Barnett characterized U.S. policies for assistance to Third World countries during the Cold War as having been driven chiefly by two concerns: one, the U.S. attempt to hold its own in an ideological balance of power; and two, the U.S. pursuit of its strategic interests in terms of real estate and access to raw materials. Neither of these motivations carries much weight today. Nor do Third World labor markets continue to have an edge when pitted against expanded technological development. New assistance policies will have to assume directions that reflect a shift in global, not to mention American, concerns, namely, protecting the environment—an effort that enjoys strong U.S. domestic support—and backing only democratic regimes, which will have the indirect effect of spurring other regimes to reconsider their political orientation.

Ledeen urged U.S. policymakers to encourage moves toward democracy wherever and whenever they could. He was not convinced, however, that interest in this effort was felt keenly and broadly enough to keep policymakers laboring toward this end: "The debate here is whether the end of the Cold War is going to produce a studied systematic American engagement on the side of democracy and the advancement of democratic revolution throughout the world, or whether it is going to produce its opposite—an American withdrawal into boredom and indifference to the fate of the rest of mankind."

Gershman saw three points of view emerging from the new debates about how U.S. policy should respond to a changing international system. The first was an isolationist withdrawal from world engagement; the second adopted a world federalist, rule-of-law position; and the third expressed a determination to press ahead, extending democracy through U.S. policies wherever possible. He believed that the first two would have an influence on policy but that the third would become the predominant policy position. In the past fifteen years, a number of U.S. policy instruments have been established (Gershman mentioned human rights reports, conditional aid, and such institutions as the National Endowment for Democracy) that have helped to shape a more mature policy that recognizes the necessity of developing democracy by establishing democratic institutions and not depending on rhetorical positions.

The world federalist view is best represented by cooperative activity among members of the United Nations. The most pressing question is how best to use the organization's tools to make international collective security more reliable. Ake described collective security during the Cold War as an attempt to "contain the whole world." He believed that arriving at an objective basis for a meaningful conception of collective security is far more difficult today than ever before. The difficulty is in the discontinuities and delinking between the Third World and everywhere else: "We cannot have collective security without collective interests. When we try to push collective security under these circumstances, we constitute the idea of collective security as simply containment of certain parts of the world. That too is a danger to world peace."

Other options for collective security centered on methods of conflict resolution through third-party mediation and as part of development aid packages. Feinberg suggested establishing a standing multilateral international fund for Third World reconstruction, which "would be prepared with experts and money to move in quickly to help solidify the politics of peace, using economics." Because conflict was so pervasive in the Third World, Thompson countered that perhaps only those conflicts most susceptible to resolution should merit the First World's attention. Even so, large conflicts, which entail more emotional investment and are the hardest to control by virtue of their size, are also the most in need of attention or supervision by the international community.

The panel members concluded that the challenges faced by the Third World in this new era are many and complicated. They recognized the importance of identifying and analyzing these challenges, but they were also aware that the time to begin working for

answers is upon us. Ake returned to what he considered the underlying problem: the growing separation between North and South. He admonished his colleagues and the audience for their unfounded optimism regarding the end of the Cold War: "There is too much optimism about what is happening in the world. The important point is to try to understand the implications for a common humanity and to deal with them right now."

About This Book

Based on the conference convened by the United States Institute of Peace in October 1990, this volume presents revised and updated versions of many of the papers presented at that gathering together with some of the discussion that animated the conference. As we have already seen, the first panel set the major themes for the substantive outcome of both the conference and, ultimately, this volume. Many of the issues raised there have been examined in detail in the chapters in this volume. Thompson, whose vision helped shape the conference, provides the reader with an introductory essay that lays out many of the issues facing the Third World and some of the possible means of resolving them.

The subsequent nine chapters are divided into two sections, the first dealing with fundamental sources of conflict in the Third World, the second with the prevention and resolution of such conflict. The various authors offer different perspectives and approaches, as reflected in the varying themes and styles of their chapters. With the world in such a state of flux, both at the time of the conference and since, some chapters have necessarily required revision to reflect recent events and changed circumstances. Most notably, references to the Soviet Union are obviously anachronistic, but in a number of cases, from an editorial point of view, impossible to avoid. The editors wish only to alert readers to the difficulty of revising descriptions of the international system when the international system is itself undergoing rapid and dramatic revision. The editors remain confident that each of the chapters is, in terms of its argument and analysis, of undiminished pertinence and value.

The volume concludes with a synopsis of a second panel discussion that focuses on alternative U.S. policy approaches to Third World conflicts. In this chapter, the panel members consider viable options for the United States in reconsidering its policies toward the Third World. The formulations that emerge are informative and responsive but they do not pretend to be definitive. The aim of the conclusion

is, rather, to encourage and suggest possible guidelines for further discussion.

The Institute is confident that the perspectives presented in this book will stimulate further thought among readers about the special challenges posed by Third World conflict in the post–Cold War era. The Institute’s hopes and concerns, spawned by the changed East–West dynamic, are shared by many scholars and observers of the Third World and, most clearly, by contributors to this volume. The Institute is proud to be associated with the men and women without whom the success of the conference and this book would not be possible. Their expertise is manifestly demonstrated in the quality of the pages that follow.

Samuel W. Lewis
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