Review of The Difficult Politics of Peace
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Christopher Clary has written a very important book that contributes to the literature on the sources of war and peace in international relations, as well as the longstanding empirical debates on South Asian history and security. The book develops a theory of conciliation and conflict between rival states. The core insight of his theory is that within a rivalry, the policy of pursuing peace towards a rival state is a function of strategic incentives and the concentration of executive authority in the hands of one or more leaders. Clary uses this insight to examine the India-Pakistan rivalry over a period of nearly 70 years. Specifically, he explores when and why leaders in both India and Pakistan have attempted peace-making. He shows that, by and large, South Asian leaders have been responsive to strategic incentives for peace-making: When threats are high, resources are tight, or perhaps both, leaders have attempted peace. However, success has been contingent on leaders' domestic political authority to push peace-making initiatives; when they have held authority, they have had more success; when there have been fractures in authority, peace-making has struggled. The implication of this argument for ending conflicts—what is sometimes referred to as conflict resolution—is that there must be powerful strategic incentives for both rivals, combined with very significant domestic political authority vested in the leaders on both sides simultaneously, to achieve peace. This is a sobering conclusion, given the low likelihood that India and Pakistan will have leaders with strategic incentives and sufficient domestic political authority for peace concurrently.

Contributions:

As a work of IR, the book is remarkable. For one, IR theorists have struggled with nuanced conceptions of war and peace. The major theoretical focus has centered around binary dependent variables such as the incidence of war. More granular dependent variables have turned to militarized inter-state disputes. Some scholarship has shifted towards scales of escalation. These approaches are commendable but fall short in providing a nuanced political conception of the sources of different levels of conflict and cooperation among rivals. The scale of conflictual behavior is marked much less by discrete incidents of violence and more by non-violent conflictual activities – what commentators, analysts, and journalists refer to as “tensions” in the relationship. Similarly, in terms of cooperation, grand conciliatory events like the Saadat going to Jerusalem or Camp David accords, comprehensive arms control and other forms of peace treaties are the extremes of what conciliation can be. While they do occur, they are infrequent. More commonly, cooperation among rivals involves moderate conciliatory initiatives, trade, people-to-people contact, backchannels, and so on. Clary captures this reality of conflict and cooperation among rivals. Drawing on his deep understanding of the IR of South Asia, Clary illuminates these granular dimensions of war and peace, making the case that scholars should not only focus on war and peace, but also on *war-making* and *peace-making*. This, in turn, captures significant political action that occurs on the spectrum of conflict and cooperation among inter-state rivals.

Clary's other major contribution is he shows persuasively gaps in power-centric theories to account for outcomes of war and peace. I have turned to relative power theories when trying to predict whether we should expect a thaw, an effort at a bank channel, a bold meeting of rivals at a summit. And given my own work in civil war and political violence literatures, I have been especially drawn to the notion of a mutually hurting stalemate as the prerequisite for conciliation and peace processes in amid civil wars and inter-state rivalries. Clary shows such relative power considerations are important but ultimately insufficient without understanding the politics around the leader.

Clary also persuasively shows the importance of domestic political factors in enabling and undermining peace-making--while convincingly challenging the view that regime type determines conflict and cooperation. Clary shows how the domestic politics of both democracies and authoritarian regimes can be similarly challenging on questions of conciliation or conflict and that "veto players" can be challenging to deal with in non-democratic contexts as well. This adds to the body of work showing that domestic political accountability is not limited to constraints imposed by audiences in democracies. This view also helps account for why Pakistan's military strongmen have attempted peace-making with India, despite holding strong ideas of hostility with India, and why they have ultimately fallen short.

Commentary:

I have three sets of observations and questions on the theory and empirics. I also have questions related to contemporary events, which are of interest to me and also relevant to policy debates.

First, Clary's starting premise that the preferences for conflict or cooperation in a rivalry are a function of strategic incentives, which are principally geo-strategic threats and resource availability, is somewhat provocative. There is, in his telling, a balance sheet of such incentives in the minds of leaders. When strategic circumstances dictate a lowering of temperature and conciliation, we should see efforts at conciliation. This is a 'rationalist' assumption and, as a matter of theory development, it makes sense as a starting point. But should the baseline be so rationalist? Is it too 'rationalist' given where the literature in IR on the causes of war is at? Even Fearon's exposition on the causes of war, disagreement on costs of war due to mutual optimism — which is irrational — is a trigger of war. Such optimism may be based on motivated reasoning about the adversary, e.g. adversary is weak, paper tiger, lacks the will to fight, which in turn can bear on how leaders process their incentives. For Clary, this is important to consider because many South Asia security analysts argue that Pakistan's calculation of strategic incentives with respect to India has rarely been based on objective indicators but has been more political, in fact ideological. This is not to challenge the utility of strategic incentives as an explanatory variable, but is there a way to conceive and operationalize the strategic incentives variable with non-material dimensions as well?

A second issue is on the role of leaders in the theory and the falsification of leader type explanations. Despite the theory being focused on leaders and their ability to push through conciliation, the theory discounts the preferences of leaders for peace and conciliation. In the opening chapter, for example, Clary says “The key is whether leaders have control of their foreign policy apparatus, not what type of leader they are” (page 24). But the preferences of leaders appear to be an important even if partial explanation for some conciliatory initiatives. For example, I wanted to see the leader type/preferences explanation falsified in the case of the Simla summit after the 1971 war. Specifically, why did Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi not force a Kashmir settlement on a defeated Pakistan? Some of the evidence in the book on the Indian policy debate on forcing a settlement on Kashmir points suggests the role of leader preferences on the right way to deal with a defeated adversary: “You must not forget the Versailles Treaty…You don't trample a man who is down and out” (page 186). This tentatively suggests the importance of ideas on the part of the Indian leadership more than strategic incentives in shaping the mode of conciliation.

Similarly for Vajpayee's decision to travel to Lahore in 1999, I wanted to see a leader type explanation falsified. There were strategic incentives in play – Western sanctions after the 1998 nuclear tests against both countries as well as an economic downturn – but there are echoes in the evidence of the then Prime Minister of India Atal Vajpayee believing that something bold and reassuring was essential to stop what had become an unending conflict. Which was more important? Clary argues (suggests?) that the Pakistani decision to invite Vajpayee was to persuade western powers to not block the IMF program but that needed more detail. And if we put any stock in the idea that then Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was even nominally aware of what his generals were doing in Kargil that makes it all the more unlikely he agreed to the summit due to debilitating strategic constraints — because clearly his generals thought they had options other than peace-making to bring the conflict to a close.

Third, the theory promises an explanation for higher rungs of conflict — that is, the path to war — but despite an excellent discussion of how veto players push towards conflict (pages 34-35) the mechanisms of conflict are not well specified enough. Based on the theory and empirical discussion, I saw two main mechanisms. First, there can be times when strategic incentives imply lower costs of war than the status quo — and because veto players prefer conflict over cooperation, there are no barriers; players vested in conflict can affect information flows or engage in risky behaviors because of moral hazard to foster conflict, which pushes rivals towards war. This would be the story of the 1965 war, which the book, in a novel contribution, describes as a case of preventive war by the Pakistanis in the face of a closing power differential. The other mechanism seems to be: veto players, alarmed by bold efforts of their leaders, spoil peace effort, step in, and steer the rivalry towards higher rungs of conflict. This is generally the story of the Kargil war in 1999 and India Prime Minister Narendra Modi's engagement with Nawaz from 2014 to 2015. Two other conflictual episodes/periods I wanted the theory to shed light on: First, Pakistan's support for the insurgency in Kashmir, especially in the early to mid-1990s. Second, the Modi government's coercive strategy towards Pakistan since 2016. An assessment of these two episodes/periods against leadership primacy theory account will be a useful contribution.

Finally, I wanted to assess the recent state of India-Pakistan ties through Clary's theoretical model. Clary is on the record (in podcasts and other venues) that the prospects of India-Pak rapprochement today are bad because of leadership authority fracture in Pakistan. In line with that, we heard about now former Pakistani army chief General Qamar Bajwa wanting a grand conciliation by inviting Indian Prime Minister Modi to Pakistan, but Imran Khan seems to have not been on board. If we consider Army chief Bajwa as the main leader on Pakistan's India policy, his failure to obtain Khan's support seems very consistent with the theoretical view of how fracture in leadership authority can stymie peace-making. But what about under the government of Pakistan's last Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in 2022 when Bajwa was still the army chief? My tentative view is that concerns of electoral accountability despite compelling strategic incentives may have dissuaded Sharif from unilateral measures that Bajwa may have been keen on. Was that also a case of leadership authority fracture? In general, how should we think about the domestic politics of the period and Pakistan's India policy under Bajwa? On the other side of the rivalry, what about Modi's calculus on Pakistan amid intensifying India-China tensions along the Line of Actual Control? In my read, Clary's theory suggests that Prime Minister Modi should want to sue for peace-making. Is that why the ceasefire along the Line of Control between India and Pakistan was restored in 2021 and endures and backchannel talks have continued? These are questions that policymakers and policy analysts are grappling with, and Clary's work provides a more dynamic framework to assess ongoing India-Pakistan dynamics.

Christopher Clary's The Difficult Politics of Peace is a very important contribution that deserves to be widely read. Scholars of IR and analysts of South Asia security will benefit from it and cite it for a long time.