



Assessing Human Needs Theory: An Approach to Conflict Resolution

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ABSTRACT

John Burton's Human Needs Theory has been a cornerstone for conflict resolution, emphasizing that there are vital needs that all human beings have in common and if desecrated, may result in conflict. Indeed, unfulfilled needs are the root cause of a conflict hence; if human needs are denied or obstructed then conflict is inevitable. John Burton's Human Needs Theory may not present a comprehensive conflict resolution mechanism rather it focuses to provide basic understanding and identification of factors that are likely to cause conflict. Burton's work may be regarded as baseline study of theory of conflict formation aimed at identifying causation of factors and levels contributing to conflict rather resolution specifically. However, in his subsequent writings Burton attempted to bridge the gap between Humans needs theory and conflict resolution by describing framework to resolve a conflict. Nonetheless, besides offering so much, assertion of Burton's theory may be further argued and analyzed in the current milieu of international affairs. This paper seeks to understand the causes of conflict at the societal or state level through the prism of human needs theory.

1. Introduction

Since the end of Cold war between the United States and former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the world has witnessed transformation in terms of experiencing new concepts of democracy, globalization, security coalition, increased economic interdependency etc. However, despite having such trends, the present world could not divorce itself from undergoing conflicts and crises. Indeed, despite of increased global connectivity and inter-dependence, the world continues to experience varying patterns of conflicts within and outside States.

Due to competing interests of states or social groups conflicts emerge. Different scholars and experts have attributed different reasons to causation of a conflict ranging from unsatisfied basic human needs to clash of individual interests. Nevertheless, many societal and ethno-political conflicts may be traced back to obstruction of human needs. American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, provided the hierarchy of human needs [1] and thus provided the structure to assess human needs in relation to conflict. Maslow outlined the importance of social and personal human needs in relation to formation and development of people and societies. Through the theory of human motivation, Maslow emphasized on the very role of satisfying human needs ranging from basic ones such as hunger, thirst to ego and self-actualization. The same provided basis to other scholars to further augment the research and present their version of human needs theory. The Human Needs Theory has been argued and debated by many scholars and theorists namely ranging from Abraham Maslow to John Burton have presented variants of needs theory. Indeed, theorists in the realm of conflict resolution discipline, tries to unfold the root causes of the conflict, as to determine what factor hampers the process and results into a conflict situation.

2. Concept of Conflict Resolution

Conflict is undeniably a recurring reality of international relations; however, in parallel efforts have been made to prevent or resolve the conflict, largely this phenomenon is called as conflict resolution. Thus, states or coalitions employ various techniques in order to prevent and mitigate the conflict like situation between states from escalating into uncontrolled armed conflict. As part of it, states practices rounds of diplomacy, negotiation, if required, coercive diplomacy that includes imposing economic sanction, withdrawing financial aid etc. on other states to dissuade from escalating the situation. Under the domain of diplomacy, negation and mediation holds an important place wherein states are encouraged to balance the competing interests by finding common grounds of understanding.

Notion of relations between States and societies indicate a continuous struggle for freedom, sovereignty, identity, recognition, protection of self-interests and cultural values. Nevertheless, the continuous struggle may invite clash of interests and approach thus leading to conflict between individuals and societies. Conflict may be termed as an all pervasive phenomenon and thus can be found at all levels of human societies. Sources, nature and dynamics of a conflict may vary from person to person and society to society; however, conflict resolution theorists underline a list of sources ranging from unmet personal needs to divergent interests.

Thus, conflicts in human societies seem inevitable and classical suggestion for resolution entails a challenge that is to resolve it according to the mutual satisfaction of parties concerned. John Burton defines conflict resolution as process of facilitation in order to evaluate the root cause of the conflict, whereby options are explored to meet the

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needs of parties [2]. Therefore, an epistemological inquiry into underlying causes is a prerequisite to recommend options for the conflict resolution. Human Needs Theorist finds the causes in unmet fundamental human needs while other theorist and practitioners may assess the conflict in the sphere of power struggle and realism.

3. Analyzing Human Needs, Values and Interests

Mainstay of Burton's theory is on human needs, interests and values. Although the theory does not categorically provide a comprehensive list of 'human needs' but it is largely agreed that it refers to ontological needs ranging from biological and physical needs to identity and recognition. Nevertheless, in contrast to other human needs theorists, Burton does not provide an explicit list and prioritization of needs. Burton contended that human needs are sought simultaneously and does not necessarily follow a hierarchical order [3].

Burton termed these 'needs' as non-negotiable. Undeniably, obstruction or denial of 'needs' may become a cause of revolt; the issue of Kashmir and Palestine are best cases in point. Furthermore, the long civil war of Sri Lanka presents the best case study of ethnic conflict stemming from basic human needs issues where an ethnic group "Tamils" - the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) stood against the Government of Sri Lanka and witnessed years' long armed conflict. Endorsing what Burton said, the denial and hindrance of basic human needs not only sparked senses of insecurity and discrimination among the Tamil minority but the delay and denial to 'needs' also ignited the conflict.

Likewise, if a group feels its collective 'values', acquired through the community, are being oppressed this may cause unrest. For example, Uyghurs- a Muslim minority in Xinjiang, China – is an eminent case study in this regard, where the Muslim minority of Uyghurs is in direct clash with the central authorities to keep their ethnic identity and values intact rather than forced merger of cultures.

Further, the example of Hazara Division in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan is pertinent as with the announcement of 18th Amendment of the constitution – empowering the Provincial government – the people of Hazara's province feared that the label of KPK would marginalized the minority of Hazara's in the province as KPK refers to or represents majority of Pushto speaking people who are ethnically, culturally and linguistically entirely different from Hazara's. Thus, the need of individual identity, cultural and ethnic preservation people of Hazara division demonstrated agitation for having a separate province named as "Hazara province" instead of merging within KPK. India, being hub of multi-cultural country, faces a number of ethnic conflicts; in Punjab with *Sikh* community and in the North East region with the ethnic groups of *Kukis* and *Nagas*. The conflict remains on

ethnic grounds, entailing survival of the individual identity, rights, culture, language and race etc. [4]. These groups continue to clash with the central authorities against efforts endangering their communal rights, values and culture.

Nonetheless, preservation of values become a reason for defensive or offensive behavior, if left unattended, leads to full scale conflict. Unquestionably, wars have been fought under the pretext of preserving cultural values. 'Interests' may refer to work-related, social, political and economic aspiration of an individual or group, relating to satisfaction of material gains.

To Burton, in contrast to 'interests', 'needs' take the precedence in terms of importance and thus cannot be negotiated [3]. This approach may be questioned as conflicts may equally entail both elements of needs and interests and thus cannot be seen in isolation, Kashmir issue could be a case in point. Though Burton distinguishes human needs from interest and values; however, it may be argued if a holistic approach is considered, all three elements are interrelated be it a struggle at international politics or at an individual level. Needs and interests often overlap. Burton claims that 'needs' are non-negotiable while the rest, interests and values are negotiable.

The claim can be further questioned, if interests are negotiable, that may imply a deal of compromise. If Kashmir is to be discussed in this frame, it presents a principal case of overlapping between needs and interests. Wherein Kashmiri's standpoint is based on 'human needs' (i.e., identity, recognition and freedom) while in case of India, motivations can be found in political and strategic 'interests'. It is therefore, clash of interest and approach to the conflict shrinks the chances of compromise and thus leaves the conflict unresolved. Additionally, Syrian crisis may also present a case study of competing 'needs' and 'interests'. The Syrian crisis started with difference between the Government and masses at the internal level based upon unfulfilled basic needs of the social groups among the masses in Syria which later involved major international players such as the United States, Russia and Turkey for their own interests. It happened when Syrian government led by Bashar al-Assad attempted to suppress the pro-democratic demonstrations by social groups. Due to suppression of human rights the uprising converted into an international theater of power politics. This remains to be seen how the crisis evolves further. However, seeing the pattern of suppressing public concerns and requirement, it is hard to anticipate contesting parties finding a common ground to amicably resolve this crisis.

According to Burton "conflicts were not generated primarily due to scarcity of material goods or by claims to territory rather there were fundamental issues on personal and group security, identity, and recognition". Indeed, with regard to conflict resolution, Burton maintains that "the power of human needs was a greater power than military

might” [5]. In history one may find the example of Vietnam War, where relatively small power defeated the military might, the United States. This remains debatable if human power or the military strategy led Vietnam to the victory. There is no denying the fact in human power, however, Burton seems undermining the power of military might in prevailing times where the world is witnessing two major unresolved conflicts; Kashmir and Palestine where human power is being continuously subjugated by the military might.

Contrary to traditional thinking that conflict is about relative gain, Burton argues that since human needs; security, identity and developments are universal in nature thus need-based conflict are likely to meet a win-win outcome [2]. This optimistic view can be endorsed partially as unfolding of history suggests otherwise and explains that in a conflict each party prefers to safeguard its own interest with little regard for the opponent. Generally, parties in conflict perceive that inching back from the respective position may provide the other party/individual with more gains and ability to dominate the former and thus the conflict continues.

To Burton, need-based conflicts are likely to meet a win-win outcome. For instance, world witnessed the application of Burton’s thesis during Egypt–Israel conflict over the issue of Sinai, though appeared to be insolvable, however, through Camp David negotiation both parties worked out a peace treaty and found a win-win outcome. Whereby Egypt kept the Sinai and Israel was allowed to place troops there. This signifies to focus on the nature of ‘needs’ of both sides in order to identify the compatibility to resolve. However, the same model cannot be applied to Israel-Palestine conflict where incompatibility of ‘needs’ and ‘interests’ hamper any development.

Furthermore, Burton emphasized “societies have always been in potential conflict because some sections drive toward change to fulfill their human needs, while others fear change and its threat to their interests” [2]. This signifies the very nature of clash of interests as to one change is instrumental to meet needs while for others the change jeopardizes their interests. If Burton’s explanation is observed on the above mentioned possibility of win-win outcome, this again encompasses a challenge to ensure absolute gains as against the instinct of relative gains.

4. An Assessment of Basic Assumptions of the Burton’s Needs Theory

Human Needs Theory in relation to conflict resolution has widely been referred and debated equally by theorist and scholars. To some, the theory only gives an understanding of a conflict rather providing a solution; while some challenged and identified loopholes in the theory and explained it further by providing alternative arguments. If Burton’s theory is viewed under the frame of understanding a conflict, undeniably, it does take attention

to the basic levels that if left unattended may cause conflict however, on account of resolution, it may be argued on various dimensions.

Burton’s thesis on *Needs theory*, however, gathered mixed responses. To some, needs theory failed to find its place and acceptability among international relations theorists not because of any ‘intellectual inflexibility’ rather the theory was not amply developed on theoretical and empirical grounds [6].

If Burtons’ assumption is borrowed that human needs are universal, it is contended that societies differ in their cultural patterns, structure, organization and approach to satisfy their needs and thus differs in their responsiveness to basic human needs [7]. This contrast makes Burton’s view little conservative and limited.

Richard E. Rubenstein – an author and University Professor of Conflict Resolution at George Mason University, USA – raised a rudimentary question with regard to dilemma associated with identifying the causes of a social conflict by arguing that “how can the basic needs unsatisfied, generate destructive social conflict be identified”?, he further described needs theory as “great promise” and problematic [8]. However, with regard to lacunas in the human needs theory, another professor of philosophy, Lauren Park in her article identified two problems: the first is to understand the ‘existence’ of needs and the other is related to the ‘value’ of needs; for instance, their relation to the good and bad, right and wrong etc. [9].

Burton and his like-minded theorists, seems positive in attributing unmet ‘needs’ as the source to conflict. For instance, undeniably, the need for security is prime, universal and natural; however, conflict analysis and resolution scholar, Christopher Mitchell argued that the need for security may convert into need for dominance [10]. Though there is a difference in “security” and “dominance” but can be controlled through regulating and limiting the needs, however this entails a thin line to differentiate between the two and avoid the element of dominance in pursuit of security-

Ramashray Roy – a political philosopher – criticizes the contradiction between “an individual with needs and a society with values”, which have no innate relation with each other. Therefore, he asks a pertinent question with regard to usability of needs theory in conflict resolution that “if there is no direct relationship between the satisfaction of needs and the development of moral sense, how can needs theories be of help either in conflict elimination or conflict resolution?” [11].

5. Human Needs Theory and the Strategic Environment

Since the cold war, the world has witnessed another dimension to international politics, the nuclear factor. The element of nuclear weapons still validates some previous

conflict resolution techniques. Wherein, in times of crisis and conflict like situation, nuclear weapons states prefer negotiations and diplomatic engagements with their counterparts in order to prevent situation turning into a full fledged catastrophic war. Nuclear weapons are largely viewed as one of the tools of power politics of recent times.

From the perspective of conflict resolution, the catastrophic effects of nuclear war, encourages states to prevent if not resolve the bone of contention between states. It is due to the unaffordable cost of nuclear war; nuclear weapon states understand the associated risks and remain mindful not to cross the threshold. Indeed, nuclear weapons represent key contour of deterrence. Pakistan and India may present a case study where both states have had a history of crises and conflict-like situations; however, owing to nuclearization, no such situation actually escalated into full scale war.

Further, nuclear weapons in relation to conflict resolution theory may provide another explanation. As discussed earlier, the human needs theory propounds that if basic human needs of individuals or states remain denied or suppressed that is likely to originate a conflictual situation. Among those basic needs, security, survival and sovereignty hold a significant place. In the context of international politics, all three elements; survival, security and sovereignty are inevitably central to any country. This may be read as primary interest of any state. Under this backdrop, nuclear weapons may be analyzed as to why states go for nuclear weapons. Pakistan could be a case in point, where for the basic requirement of self-defense, security and survival, Pakistan opted for nuclear weapons to satisfy its national interests.

6. Conclusion

Nonetheless, Burton work has essentially provided the basic framework to assess the causes and reasons of conflict starting from the level of human needs. With regard to conflict resolution, contributions of John Burton are significant. However, this is not to deny or challenge the generally regarded as a universal finding that dissatisfaction of human needs drives societies into conflict. But this maybe conservative to box the analysis to one dimension of the causation and totally agree what has been argued by Burton. Indeed, the needs theory cannot be seen divorced from challenges and criticism attached to it.

The general suggestion posit by conflict resolution theorist is that "resolution" over the "conflict" should be given the chance. The resolution certainly entails compromise. Owing to more normative than practical in nature, the theory may be referred as a theory of conflict formation; identifying causation of factors and levels contributing to conflict rather resolution specifically. In terms of theory, it does provide a framework to identify and understand the conflict formation; however practical terms appear to gain much less. For instance, Kashmir and

Palestinian issues on grounds of unmet basic human needs are being endorsed and debated for decades. Yet despite the existence of United Nations and identification of the sources attached to these conflicts, the power politics continues to take resolution of these conflicts far away from realization. Thus, indicating that, in the debate of needs and interests, power politics is insuperable.

This is not to quibble with the fundamental thesis of Burton but his theory seems less concerned with dynamics of power and politics in determining conflicts. Such an approach, if not totally divorced from considering the influence of power politics appears to be distant from realist spectrum. As in case of interstate socio-ethnic this remains a challenge as to what extent one state can be responsive to the needs and interests of other state or its individual.

Further, the distinction between 'need' and 'want' may require an examination at length. As Mitchell argued, need of security may be transformed into need of dominance [10], likewise needs may not categorically be quantified thus be converted into insatiable wants. The distinction to be made between two encapsulate a quandary as how to determine that how much would be enough? Can that be limited or quantified? For instance, food is a basic human needs, the conventional wisdom suggests eating food helps one to satisfy the hunger. But if it is explained in the context of want, one may not be satisfied with simple or provided food rather would 'want something else or more'. Should that be termed as unsatisfied state calling for a conflict? Another dilemma attached to needs is twofold, one how to limit needs? And the act of limitation in some cases may be regarded as acceptable while in other cases it may be termed as 'suppression'.

Moreover, in the realm of international politics, it may not always be the oppression of "needs" that leads to conflict rather it may encompass 'interests' of some factions of the society or abroad in igniting a conflict under the pretext of unsatisfied needs. Moreover, as the history suggests, the pursuit of need may take precedence over the sense of limiting the need for regulating right and wrong over an individual's interest.

To conclude on a potentially pragmatic note, based on the historical experiences, realism with its variant shades still prevails in international politics and thus cannot be regarded as an obsolete framework to understand nature of relations. Nevertheless, Burton provides us with a perspective to understand conflict while focusing on underlying issue pertaining to human needs and urged the win-win outcome.

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