

## **Notes and Reflections**

### **INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, HISTORY AND STRATEGY: CONFLICT AS EXPLANATORY DYNAMICS**

**Luís Alves de Fraga**

Ph.D. in History from Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa (UAL).  
Holder of Master Degree in Strategy from ISCSP-UTL. Holder of *Licenciatura* (Hons)  
Degree in Political and Social Sciences from ISCSP-UTL. Portuguese Air Force Colonel  
(Retired). Lecturer in the Department of International Relations at Universidade  
Autónoma de Lisboa (UAL)

Understanding relationships between states has always been essential for the exercise of their foreign policy. Knowing how to better defend their own interests to avoid exposing vulnerabilities to the greed and desire of others has been decisive, over time, for those in charge of negotiations to successfully conclude them with the least possible damage. The decision was itself surrounded by caution, after the decision maker had taken counsel from his most prudent and informed advisers. These were experienced and skilful men, in terms of the knowledge they possessed and in the way they manoeuvred the web of intrigue surrounding the business in question or the interest at stake. Experience and skills were acquired from practice or from the study of history. The latter stimulated plots, invoked reasons, and predicted consequences. In short, either due to experience or in-depth study, negotiating was an art that required finding out about other people's intentions and concealing own interests. It has always been so and will remain so.

However, the twentieth century brought us something new: the study of international relations gained scientific status and entered the universities. Consequently, attempts were made to find in it explanatory systems for the motives and behaviours of the actors involved in the international arena.

In an attempt to advance an academic explanation of what is meant by international relations, Jacques Huntzinger stated that they "[...] are concerned with the scientific study of international life"<sup>1</sup>. However, due to the extreme complexity of the latter, he adds that "*international relations is the science of internationalized social facts*"<sup>2</sup>.

This last statement allows us to include other entities, rather than just states, as important players in international life, as the former can limit the action and

---

<sup>1</sup> Huntzinger, Jacques (1991) *Introduction to International Relations*, (Portuguese translation by Carlos Aboim de Brito), Lisbon: PE – Edições: 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid, op. cit.* 11.



movements of the latter. This is because the poles of international relations' dynamics expand beyond the traditionally closed scope of foreign ministries, and act in fields that are quite different from merely diplomatic ones. In this light, and especially since the second half of the twentieth century, the international centres of decision and power have multiplied.

This increase has also led to an obvious expansion of the potential for conflict in international relations. Therefore, to be able to meet Huntzinger's first proposition (scientific study of international life), and as a result of the increase in the number of internationally relevant players, we need to be more scientifically rigorous, because the decision-making centres are dispersed and interests are more intertwined, the same applying to potential conflict situations. I believe it is important to consider that the international relationship – as in all relationships, can include both cooperation and latent or openly acknowledged conflict.

Further to this, I would stress that conflict is the primary framework in which international relations take place. This is because relationships disguises interest, and interest, by opposing the other party, generates the potential conflict that the sides involved will try to avoid in order to agree on a cooperation plan. Consequently, we can conclude that the main goal of the scientific study of international relations is, ultimately, to understand and explain the power relations which are dynamically and dialectically established between international players.

Marcel Merle draws our attention to the way historians and political scientists look at international relations, and he leaves us this clear message: "[...] the role [of historians] is to restore the past and not to explain the present. Political science is [...] more ambitious about its goals and more limited as to its means, since it proposes to accurately report the things of the past and the present alike, despite lacking the distance and the documentary sources which historians benefit from"<sup>3</sup>. In other words, according to this international relations theorist, there is a barrier between past and present which is not usually overcome by historians, leading to compartmentalized fields of analysis and knowledge.

However, Merle touches on a fundamental point, which is the difficulty encountered by political scientists in accessing sources. This difficulty increases as international life becomes more complex, due to the existence of numerous decision-making clusters scattered over several decision-making centres. Thus, it is easier to write history than do carry out scientific studies on international relations, because, in the case of the former, one has advanced knowledge of the players and results, i.e., and knows - or is able to know through a dynamic and interactive study of the historical actors - the web of conflict and cooperation that took place at a certain time and provoked a known reaction.

This ability allows us to conclude that historical knowledge is more reliable - because it is based on the dissection of an inert and far gone *corpus* – than the scientific knowledge of international relations, since the latter results from a current analysis, and lacks the guaranteed genuine sources which come from all the decision-making centres.

---

<sup>3</sup> Merle, Marcel (1981). *The Sociology of International Relations*, (Brazilian translation by Ivone Jean), Brasília: Editora Universidade de Brasília: 40.



Of course, while carrying out their work, historians will always ask themselves: do we have all the information that determined an event? Has time or man taken away the information that would have given us a different understanding of the past? That is the question that historians can only overcome by advancing possible hypotheses supported by the documentation available to them. It must be pointed out that this uncertainty has its methodological parallel in the problem international relations researchers have to face, for they need to work with hypotheses too, as they do not have access to all sources and decision-making centres. As a result of the multiplication of decision-making centres in the international arena, these hypotheses will be more fallible and less consistent than those used by historians. There is a fluidity in international relations that does not exist in history. For this reason, looking at history and international relations as scientific ways of understanding and explaining the past and the present, we realize that the former is an excellent aid to the latter, because the present is somehow anchored on the understandings or misunderstanding of the past.

Facts taking place currently will hardly be detached from a set of former events. Thus, if scientific work in international relations is to be perfectly understood, this requires us to take into account the work of historians. However, the latter cannot merely give an account of the facts; they must go further in justifying and explaining the event.

As we have seen, the social relationship, whether it is limited to a small group or global in nature - thus entering the field of international relations - is, due to the interests at stake, always prone to becoming confrontational. Therefore, to understand the relationship is to understand the dialectics that dictated it, and this fact limits, at any given point, the stages that can lead to cooperation or to rupture of peaceful relations.

The scientific work of historians and political scientists who focus on international relations should be underpinned by a science that has moved recently from the realm of military academies to universities as it became much better understood, the same applying to its use: strategy. General Beaufre, one of the many authors considered to be a classic, proposed the following concept while trying to escape the strict definition of military strategy and confine it to the political level: "[...] the art of the dialectic of wills that employ force to resolve their conflict"<sup>4</sup>. As easily perceived from the above definition, understanding the strategy is understanding the conflict first, and, secondly, the dialectic of wills. This is because, for the purpose of our goal, we put aside the use of force, since it may eventually follow paths other than military or physical, as conflict can present itself in distinct forms<sup>5</sup>. Accordingly, I believe I am in a position to propose a more general and more comprehensive definition: *strategy is the art of the dialectics of confronting wills to resolve the conflict that opposes them*<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, studying strategy means studying the dialectics of conflicting wills<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> Beaufre, General (1980). *Introduction to Strategy*, (Castilian translation by Cármen Martín de la Escalera and Luis García Árias), Madrid: Ediciones Ejercito: 49.

<sup>5</sup> It must be stressed that nowadays, the most common form of conflict is of an economic nature. On this, General Gil Fiévet wrote a remarkable comparative study titled *From Military Strategy to Business Strategy*, published in Portugal in 1993 by Editorial Inquérito and translated by Isabel St. Aubyn.

<sup>6</sup> In the past, I have advanced the following definition: *strategy is the science that studies the distinct aspects of human social conflicts and the ways to solve or limit them* (*A Estratégia, a História e as Relações Internacionais. Revista Militar*. No. 7/8 (July /August 1992): 495. The fact that strategy is, above all, a science that aims to solve conflicts, is underlined here..

<sup>7</sup> Although I have no doubts about this approach, I believe it should be complemented by the statement made by Ana Paula Garcês and Guilherme d'Oliveira Martins (*Os grandes Mestres da Estratégia: Estudos*



To complete our discussion about the importance of the articulation between history and strategy in the scientific study of international relations, we just need to realize that the convergence point of all analysis - historical, strategic and political - must be conflict, bearing in mind that, until it becomes clear, it goes from the state of cooperation - where it is absent - to that of war - where it gets all the characteristics that define it as being fundamentally dialectical. By taking conflict or pre-conflict as an element of analysis, and resorting to it in their study of the dialectics that are intrinsic to it, both historians and political scientists will be able to explain the dynamics of past and present.

This idea has already been put forward in my master's thesis in Strategy<sup>8</sup>, and, in a more abridged version, in the research conducted for my PhD thesis<sup>9</sup>. In both works, my attention focused on the various internal and external conflict scenarios in order to understand and explain how Portugal's national interest, in its internal and external aspects, has benefited or been harmed.

This required an investigation of all kinds of conflict affecting the Portuguese society between 1914 and 1918 to explain internal and external political behaviours.

## References

- Beaufre, General (1980). *An Introduction to Strategy*, (Castilian translation by Cármen Martín de la Escalera and Luis García Árias), Madrid: Ediciones Ejercito.
- Fiévet, Gil (1993). *From Military Strategy to Business Strategy*, (Portuguese translation by Isabel St. Aubyn), Mem Martins: Editorial Inquérito.
- Fraga, Luís Alves de (1992). *A Estratégia, a História e as Relações Internacionais*. *Revista Militar*. No. 7/8 (July/August): 475-496.
- Fraga, Luís Alves de (2001). *O Fim da Ambiguidade: A Estratégia Nacional Portuguesa de 1914-1918*, Lisbon: Universitária Editora.
- Fraga, Luís Alves de (2010). *Do Intervencionismo ao Sidonismo. Os Dois Segmentos da Política de Guerra: 1916-1918*, Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra.

---

*Sobre o Poder da Guerra e da Paz*): «An intelligence game for some, or a pragmatic exercise for others, an ongoing trial on right-wrong or a system of makeshifts, [...]. What is undeniable is that the person to codify the laws of war, Sun Wu, [...], emphasized that excellence in war is to win conflicts without needing to resort to strength » (p. 22). I stress the importance of this idea advanced by this Chinese general who lived in the 5th century BC because it sums up my own thoughts.

<sup>8</sup> Fraga, Luís Alves de (2001). *O Fim da Ambiguidade: A Estratégia Nacional Portuguesa de 1914-1918*, Lisboa: Universitária Editora. The title of the thesis submitted in 1990 to *Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Política da Universidade Técnica de Lisboa* (Higher Institute for Social Sciences and Politics of the Technical University of Lisbon) was *Portugal e a Primeira Grande Guerra: Os objectivos Políticos e Estratégia Nacional: 1914-1916 (Portugal and World War I: Political Objectives and National Strategy)* and is kept at Biblioteca Nacional (National Library) in Lisbon. This is a pioneering study carried out in Portugal and abroad that examined existing conflicts and demonstrated that Portugal's involvement in World War I resulted from internal and external reasons determining the convenience for active military action as part of the worldwide conflict.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid (2010). *Do Intervencionismo ao Sidonismo. Os Dois Segmentos da Política de Guerra: 1916-1918 (From Interventionism to Sidonism. The Two Segments of War Policy)*, Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra (University of Coimbra Press). It is a two-fold study. One aspect described the military effort in participating in the Great War; the other addressed the scenarios of the internal and external conflicts that contributed to the reduced importance of the political and military involvement of Portugal in World War 1.



Garcês, Ana Paula; Martins, Guilherme d'Oliveira, edit. (2009). *Os grandes Mestres da Estratégia: Estudos Sobre o Poder da Guerra e da Paz*, Coimbra: Almedina.

Huntzinger, Jacques (1991). *Introduction to International Relations* (Portuguese translation by Carlos Aboim de Brito), Lisbon: PE – Edições.

Merle, Marcel (1981). *Sociology of International Relations*, (Brazilian translation by Ivone Jean), Brasília: Editora Universidade de Brasília.

#### **How to cite this Note**

Fraga, Luís Alves de (2011) "International Relations, History and Strategy: Conflict as explanatory dynamics". *Notes and Reflections, JANUS.NET e-journal of International Relations*, Vol. 2, N.º 1, Spring 2011. Consulted [online] on date of last visit, [observare.ual.pt/janus.net/en\\_vol2\\_n1\\_not1](http://observare.ual.pt/janus.net/en_vol2_n1_not1).