



# Between war and peace: a dynamic reconceptualization of “frozen conflicts”

Michal Smetana<sup>1</sup> · Jan Ludvík<sup>1,2</sup>

Published online: 1 August 2018

© Springer-Verlag GmbH Germany, part of Springer Nature 2018

## Abstract

Frozen conflicts, situations in which war ended yet stable peace did not materialize, trouble both Asia and Europe. Despite the clear policy relevance of this problem, the notion of frozen conflicts remains surprisingly blurred in peace and conflict studies literature. In this paper, we seek to provide a rigorous conceptualization of frozen conflicts. We situate frozen conflicts into a broader debate about enduring rivalries in international politics and demonstrate the theoretical relevance of the term vis-à-vis existing concepts. Furthermore, we outline a theoretical model of frozen conflict dynamics, which portrays frozen conflicts as dynamic configurations undergoing a periodical “thawing” in relations between the opposing sides: either toward diplomatic negotiations (“peaceful thawing”) or re-escalation toward use of armed force (“violent thawing”). We illustrate the usefulness of our model with empirical observations from other articles in this special issue and conclude with possible avenues for further research.

## Introduction

In the 1990s, the term “frozen conflict” entered the vocabulary of international politics. The label “frozen” was supposed to highlight the fact that although the full-scale fighting had already stopped in the particular case, the conflict was not fully resolved, and the situation could easily slip back into violence. Today, both Asia and Europe are troubled with such spots that stand in between peace and war, from the Korean peninsula to the Indian subcontinent to the South Caucasus to Ukraine.

The danger of violent re-escalation has been a permanent feature of life in frozen conflict territories, with potential consequences that transcend regional boundaries.

---

✉ Michal Smetana  
michal.smetana@fsv.cuni.cz

<sup>1</sup> Center for Security Policy / Peace Research Center Prague, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

<sup>2</sup> Department of Security Studies, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

Whereas policy makers seem to be increasingly interested in this particular problem, academic research into frozen conflicts appears to be “frozen” itself—struggling to even agree on what frozen conflicts are and what distinguishes them from other types of conflictual situations in international politics.

To address this gap in scholarly literature, this special issue of the *Asia Europe Journal* unpacks the notion of frozen conflict and situates the concept into the broader research agenda of peace and conflict studies. We move beyond the widespread understanding of frozen conflicts as a strictly post-Soviet phenomenon and provide a new rigorous conceptualization that is neither spatially nor temporally specific. Furthermore, while the notion of “frozenness” may imply that the conflicts remain static, our conceptual delimitation highlights the dynamic nature of frozen conflicts, oscillating between attempts to negotiate a stable peace and escalation toward renewed violence.

In this article, our aim is to conceptually unpack the notion of frozen conflict as a protracted, post-war conflict process, characterized by the absence of stable peace between the opposing sides. We also develop an analytical framework for a more systematic study of frozen conflicts. The remaining articles in this special issue then draw on this framework to study the dynamics of several frozen conflicts in Europe and Asia. The individual empirical case studies are on East European “de facto states” (Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Chechnya), as well as on the Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina), South Asia (India and Pakistan), and East Asia (the Korean peninsula).

In the article, we proceed as follows. First, we critically review some of the existing pools of academic literature on frozen conflicts. Second, we propose a new definition and (re-)conceptualization of the phenomenon of frozen conflicts. Third, we situate the concept of frozen conflicts in the wider discipline of peace and conflict studies. Fourth, we introduce a typology distinguishing among three logics of frozen conflict dynamics: peaceful thawing, violent thawing, and withering. Fifth, we discuss some empirical findings from individual case studies with respect to our dynamic reconceptualization of frozen conflict. In conclusion, we summarize our findings and suggest avenues for further research in this field.

## State of the art

The emergence of the notion of frozen conflict is closely related to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the birth of several successive states in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. Since then, frozen conflicts have been regularly referred to by decision-makers and policy professionals (Ferrero-Waldner 2006; Kerry 2013; Obama 2016), as well as the media (The New York Times 2012; CNN 2014; BBC 2014; The Economist 2016; The Japan Times 2017; The Moscow Times 2017). In most of these accounts, the notion of frozen conflict is used directly in connection with protracted ethno-political conflicts in the post-Soviet space, in particular the ones in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia—and recently also eastern Ukraine (Burridge 2016; Blank 2016).

Among scholars interested in international politics, the term frozen conflict(s) is also regularly invoked to address the aforementioned “no war, no peace” situations (Lynch

2004; Blank 2008; Wolff 2011; Broers 2015; Tudoroiu 2016; Cornell 2017b). Despite its relatively common usage, however, the notion of frozen conflict itself remains surprisingly blurred in academic literature. Most scholars uncritically accept the policy makers’ understanding of the term and do not conceptualize frozen conflicts as a specific subset of international conflicts. In the existing accounts, it is seldom clear on what ground should the given conflict be labeled “frozen”—particular conflicts are mostly referred to this category for historical reasons rather than because they have explicit common features.

One of the rare attempts to draw a general definition of frozen conflicts was put forward by Perry (2009), who characterized them as situations in which “the violence stopped, but the underlying interests of the formerly warring parties have neither been abated nor addressed.” As such, in frozen conflicts, “the war, without a military victor or vanquished, continues to play out in peacetime politics” (Perry 2009; Aggestam and Björkdahl 2011). Such explicit definitions are, however, scarce, and they are not widely shared among scholars interested in exploration of these conflicts.

Arguably, this lack of attempts to delimit and properly conceptualize frozen conflicts often contributes to the occasional semantic critique of the adjective “frozen.” Lynch (2005), for example, argues that “the metaphor is misleading — the conflicts are not frozen... events have developed dynamically, and the situation on the ground today is very different from the context that gave rise to these conflicts in the late 1980s” (Lynch 2005, 192). Morar (2010) notes in a similar fashion that “the term frozen conflicts is deceiving; it erroneously suggests that a conflict could be put on hold” (Morar 2010, 11). Elsewhere, Cornell (2017a) claims that “the concept of frozenness falsely connotes a lack of dynamism, as if the politics of the conflict are frozen in time and space” (Cornell 2017a, 2). According to Broers (2015), the description of conflicts as frozen and therefore static, shared by academics and policy makers alike, leads to a (politically) convenient perception that they are de facto stable and therefore essentially irrelevant. While this critique is intuitively sound, we argue in the next sections that it is rather unwarranted and present a conceptualization that accounts for the dynamics inherent in the continuous existence of frozen conflicts.

Besides the lack of definitions and delimitations of the frozen conflict concept, the existing body of scholarly literature also exhibits certain analytical biases. Most importantly, the label frozen conflict has been applied almost exclusively to a limited number of conflicts in contemporary post-Soviet space. Only a handful of scholars use this notion for structurally comparable conflicts in Africa (Fregoso and Zivkovic 2012), Asia (Felician 2011), the Middle East (Aggestam and Björkdahl 2011), or the Balkans (Perry 2009). This bias in temporality and regional outreach prevents scholars from drawing adequate lessons from the dynamics of comparable frozen conflicts in other historical periods and/or other parts of the globe.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the existing body of literature on frozen conflicts is generally biased toward the (otherwise noble) goal of contributing to peaceful (diplomatic) conflict resolution, from a position of a deeper empirical understanding of unique features of a singular conflict (Welt 2010; Fregoso and Zivkovic 2012; Broers 2015). As we argue in this

<sup>1</sup> Notably, Dembinska and Campana (2017) employ a theoretical perspective grounded in political sociology to examine internal processes of frozen conflicts in the context of “de facto states,” mentioning a number of empirical examples that spatially extend beyond the post-Soviet space.

article, the dynamics of frozen conflicts usually oscillates between attempts to negotiate stable peace and escalation of the conflict toward renewed violence. However, analyses of the escalation of frozen conflicts are comparably much rarer and often oriented strictly toward an idiosyncratic study of individual cases (Welt 2010). Arguably, more complex accounts of frozen conflicts as a general phenomenon in international politics are still a blind spot in contemporary scholarly literature.

## **(Re-)conceptualizing frozen conflicts**

As noted in the introduction, we aspire to overcome the prevalent understanding of frozen conflicts as a contemporary phenomenon in the post-Soviet space. As such, we aim to develop a broader concept that is neither regional nor temporal specific. We introduce frozen conflicts as a specific subtype of international conflicts. We believe frozen conflicts bear certain unique characteristics which set them apart from other international conflicts. We define frozen conflict as a protracted, post-war conflict process, characterized by the absence of stable peace between the opposing sides. In frozen conflicts, core issues between the opposing sides remain unresolved, the dispute is in the forefront of mutual relations, and there is a looming threat of the renewal of violence. The conflict also remains highly salient in the domestic discourses of both policy makers and the general population. Systemizing this depiction of frozen conflicts brings with it four criteria that any frozen conflict must meet: it must be (a) international and (b) protracted post-war, it must have (c) core unresolved issues, and it (d) lacks stable peace. Several of these criteria deserve further elaboration.

First, in our scope, frozen conflicts are a subset of international conflicts. Consequently, the opposing sides in frozen conflicts are states or state-like entities. Two important reasons call for treating state-like entities like states, and thereby relevant actors in international frozen conflicts. First, deductively, *de facto* states resemble states much more than anything else. *De facto* states behave like internationally recognized states and not like non-state actors. They maintain state-like bureaucratic structures and conventional armed forces, bearing an ability to restart a war which was at the origin of the frozen conflict. Second, inductively, most “prototypical” frozen conflicts in the political discourse and scholarly literature like Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and Transnistria cannot be explained without considering the independent agency of *de facto* states (Dembinska and Campana 2017).

Second, frozen conflicts are protracted and post-war. In fact, a more precise term for the phenomenon under study would probably be “frozen violent conflict.” Our conceptualization requires, in accordance with the prevalent understanding of frozen conflicts, that a frozen conflict starts with a war.<sup>2</sup> The formative experience of war sets frozen conflicts apart from other protracted conflicts. While the major violence had eventually stopped, the conflict did not undergo a proper transformation. Instead, the conflict became frozen as a situation somewhere between war and peace, with its own dynamics and potential for renewed escalation toward the use of armed force. As such,

---

<sup>2</sup> In our own dataset (forthcoming), we operationalize this frozen conflict starting point using the Correlates of War (COW) threshold of 1000 battle-related deaths per 12 months.

frozen conflicts represent a specific category of international protracted conflicts, i.e., “hostile interactions which extend over long periods of time with sporadic outbreaks of open warfare fluctuating in frequency and intensity” (Azar et al. 1978, 50; cf. Azar 1985).

Third, as long as the particular rivalry deserves the designation of frozen conflict, the core issues between the opposing sides should remain unresolved. Typically, disagreements over territorial issues, minority rights, and the autonomy/independence of ethnic groups constitute the core issues. These issues continue to be salient in domestic discourses and are frequently referred to by the media, as well as by ordinary people, as commonplace topics. The identity of one party in the conflict is often constructed in relation to differences with the other party, which plays the role of the “other.” The depiction of the opposing side in national discourses frequently uses strongly negative images and stereotypes. New issues that arise between the opposing sides regularly undergo securitization dynamics and become entangled in the web of outstanding problems that hinder a just and peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Fourth, frozen conflicts lack stable peace. The notion of stable peace goes far beyond the common perception of peace as the absence of war. Boulding (1978) suggests that in stable peace, “the probability of war is so small that it does not really enter into the calculations of any of the people involved” (Boulding 1978, 13; cf. Kacowicz et al. 2000, 22; Müller 2005). Such situation requires a political learning process and an eventual development of compatible self-images among the actors involved (Boulding 1991). In contrast to stable peace, the prevailing absence of full-scale war in many frozen conflicts mostly corresponds to the notion of “precarious peace” (George 2006, 54), in which both general and immediate deterrence play a key role in preventing the actual use of armed force (see Morgan 1977 for the distinction between the two). While possibly no incidents of violence occur for relatively long periods, both sides consider war a possibility. The armed forces of both sides typically train and equip themselves for a war with the other side and have contingency plans for such war.

## Frozen conflicts meet peace and conflict studies

The academic discipline of peace and conflict studies has, at least from the 1990s, consciously studied several phenomena similar to our understanding of frozen conflicts. Three distinct concepts have been important in particular: (enduring) rivalries, strategic rivalries, and protracted conflicts. These concepts have largely evolved from impressive empirical work on three different conflict datasets. All three of them describe conflicting environments, where conflicts are linked and spatially consistent. Yet, whereas spatial consistency and conflict linkage is compatible with our understanding of frozen conflicts, in important nuances, enduring rivalries, strategic rivalries, and protracted conflicts differ from our conceptualization.

Diehl and Goertz (2000) used Correlates of War data to develop and subsequently refine a dataset of rivalries—dyads between states which are characterized by militarized competition over a common issue with a certain time density. Diehl and Goertz originally distinguished among three types of conflicts: isolated conflicts, proto-rivalries, and enduring rivalries; the latter type (and the one most similar to frozen conflicts) refers to

“severe and repeated conflicts between the same states over an extended period of time” (Diehl and Goertz 2000). Diehl and Goertz identified enduring rivalries assuming that “an enduring rivalry is defined as a competition between states that involves six or more militarized disputes between the same two states over a period of 20 years” (Hensel et al. 2000, 1177). In later work, they abandoned the concepts of proto-rivalry and enduring rivalry. Thus, their new dataset distinguishes only between rivalries and isolated conflicts and uses a more qualitative approach to identify whether a series of militarized interstate disputes between the same states can be labeled as a rivalry (Klein et al. 2006). The original concept of enduring rivalry, however, remains salient in peace and conflict studies literature.

Another common concept which needs to be distinguished from frozen conflicts is strategic rivalry. A strategic rivalry is comprised of two states which “must regard each other as (a) competitors, (b) the source of actual or latent threats that pose some possibility of becoming militarized, (c) enemies” (Thompson 2001). Two differences set strategic and enduring rivalries apart. Since Thompson identifies strategic rivalries from mutual perceptions rather than from the actual number of military clashes, strategic rivalries might include dyads that have not experienced violence. Furthermore, Thompson’s strategic rivalries indicate severe competition, while enduring rivalries can be equally long in duration, but over much lesser issues (Klein et al. 2006).

Third, a concept similar to yet distinct from frozen conflicts is protracted conflict. The notion of protracted conflict is profoundly connected with the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) Project. The ICB’s protracted conflicts are long lasting, experience sporadic outbreaks of violence, are over high-stake issues, involve whole societies, and have no distinguishable point of termination (Brecher 1993, 5). The dataset of protracted conflicts includes both state-to-state dyads and multiple-state conundrums. Protracted conflicts differ from enduring rivalries by the requirement of high-stake issues and from strategic rivalries by the requirement of experienced outbreaks of open warfare (Colaresi and Thompson 2002).

The differences between frozen conflicts on one side and (enduring) rivalries, strategic rivalries, and protracted conflicts on the other are operational and, even more importantly, conceptual. Conceptually, we see frozen conflicts as specific post-war situations. A frozen conflict starts with a war. In contrast, strategic rivalries need not experience any direct warfare throughout the lifespan of a rivalry. Both (enduring) rivalries and protracted conflicts expect some experience with warfare during the lifespan of the conflict, but warfare need not happen at the outset of a rivalry and can be limited to a lesser incident. War can, of course, happen in any of the three alternative types of conflicts. In this respect, frozen conflicts would overlap in a larger population of strategic rivalries, enduring rivalries, or protracted conflicts.

At least in one important aspect, however, frozen conflicts comprise a category broader than strategic rivalries, enduring rivalries, and protracted conflicts. Operationally, all three alternative categories work with internationally recognized states as actors in conflicts. This is heuristically unsuitable for the study of frozen conflicts, where an influential role is often played by *de facto* states such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, or the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. While these *de facto* states often depend on their patrons (see Kolsto 2006, 733–734; Caspersen 2009, 47–53), we believe it is desirable to account for the independent agency of *de facto* states. As Dembinska and Campana (2017) argue,

de facto states are autonomous political entities that have acquired a certain sovereignty, however imperfect and constrained it might be.

The conceptual and operational differences between frozen conflicts, (enduring) rivalries, strategic rivalries, and protracted conflicts are reflected in respective empirical datasets. Differences in the respective coding of three prototypical frozen conflicts Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia-South Ossetia, and Transnistria are illustrative enough. Thompson’s dataset of strategic rivalries lists the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as an Armenia-Azerbaijan rivalry, but mentions neither the conflicts in Abkhazia-South Ossetia nor Transnistria (Thompson 2001). The ICB database recognizes protracted conflicts between Russia and Georgia. On the other hand, the ICB considers the crisis over Nagorno-Karabakh not to be a part of any protracted conflict. Furthermore, the ICB does not list any crisis involving Transnistria. Klein, Goertz, and Diehl’s (Klein et al. 2006) rivalry dataset lists the three aforementioned prototypical frozen conflicts as an Armenia-Azerbaijan rivalry, a Russia-Georgia rivalry, and a Russia-Moldova rivalry. Yet, the early 1990s breakaway wars, which were formative for these conflicts, are not included as a part of respective rivalry, since they are considered intra-state wars.

Hence, while sharing many characteristics with the existing concepts, frozen conflicts cannot be simply subsumed under one of the alternative concepts (see Table 1). Instead, it is valuable to study frozen conflicts as an independent category with possibly unique internal logic established by a formative experience of war and specific domestic politics especially when de facto states play a role.

## Unpacking the dynamics of frozen conflicts

Concerning the occasional scholarly critique of stasis that is implied by the label “frozen,” it is important to note that hardly any academic account of any frozen conflict treats the situation on the ground as static. Instead, most scholars explicitly or implicitly assume that the development within the conflict is dynamic and constantly shifting. Fregoso and Zivkovic (2012, 140), for example, propose that the adjective “frozen” does not mean that the conflict is paused, but merely that it does not transform; movement is inherent in each of these conflicts. Japaridze and Rondeli (2004, 45)

**Table 1** Key distinctions between concepts

	Enduring rivalries (Diehl and Goertz 2000)	Strategic rivalries (Thompson 2001)	Protracted conflicts (Brecher 1993)	Frozen conflicts
Actors	2 states	2 states	At least 1 state	2 states or de facto states
Violence in conflict life span	At least 6 MIDs	Not necessary	At least sporadic outbreaks	War as a starting point
Main issues in the conflict	Any issues	Implicitly severe	High stakes and highly salient	Highly salient
Conflict life span	At least 20 years	No minimum duration	Long periods of time	No minimum duration



similarly note that these conflicts are “alive” and “brewing.” Faber provides a teleological view, arguing that frozen conflicts move through three consecutive periods: freeze, thaw, and defreeze (Faber 2000).<sup>3</sup>

Our own conceptualization assumes a cyclical understanding of frozen conflict dynamics. As a consequence of various internal and external factors, a frozen conflict undergoes a periodical “thawing” in mutual relations between the opposing sides: either toward diplomatic negotiations (“peaceful thawing”) or re-escalation toward use of armed force (“violent thawing”). Typically, peaceful thawing is manifested in non-violent initiatives that aim to solve the underlying causes of the conflict through dialogue, often with the involvement of third parties such as regional and global powers, international organizations, NGOs, and highly respected individuals. Violent thawing typically takes the form of an armed action that aims to alter the course of the conflict through the use of force.

In principle, both peaceful and violent thawing have the potential to transform a frozen conflict toward stable peace (cf. Wallensteen 1991; Rupesinghe 1995).<sup>4</sup> In conflict-resolution literature, peaceful thawing represents the “best case scenario” of conflict transformation (Wallensteen 2002, 7–8), with diplomatic negotiations successfully resolving the key conflicting issues by agreeing on a mutually acceptable compromise. An illustrative example of such development may be the case of the frozen conflict between Israel and Egypt, periodically slipping into violence since the 1940s but eventually transformed through diplomatic negotiations in the late 1970s (Cohen and Azar 1981; Kelman 1985).

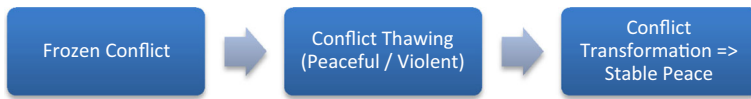
Through violent thawing, on the other hand, previously unresolved key issues are decided militarily to the satisfaction of the victorious party; the other party suffers such a defeat that it is no longer interested in continuing the conflict and accepts a solution that brings stability to mutual relations (cf. Luttwak 1999, 36). A case in point may be the military defeat of Iraq by the USA in 2003, qualitatively transforming the conflictual relationship between these two countries that had its roots in the 1990–1991 Gulf War. If any of the aforementioned dynamics are successful, the frozen conflict loses its definitional attributes and can be considered terminated (see Fig. 1).

However, in the case of frozen conflicts, these thawing dynamics usually stop short of conflict transformation. Instead, after reaching the peak of the thawing process, the conflict slips back to “frozenness” (see Fig. 2). Some aspects of the frozen conflict may be subject to change as in the wake of the thawing process; if we apply the iceberg metaphor, then the “ice that thaws does not always freeze back in its previous shape” (Grzelczyk, this issue). Nevertheless, despite particular alterations, the conflict generally maintains its frozen quality—hence the idea that conflicts can remain frozen despite the fact that the situation on the ground keeps dynamically shifting over time. As a consequence, frozen conflicts remain inherently unstable in the long term and seldom static throughout their day-to-day development.

<sup>3</sup> As a part of our research project “Early Warning Indicators of Escalating Frozen Conflicts,” we conducted several interviews with senior-level diplomats between 2015 and 2017. The interviews demonstrated that policy makers are not only generally interested in these conflicts but also interested in them particularly because they see them as dynamic, fearing that the development on the ground could eventually lead to the resurgence of major violence and regional destabilization.

<sup>4</sup> For a review of conflict transformation literature and its relationship to the concept of conflict resolution, see, for example, Botes (2003), Mitchell (2002), or Reimann (2004).





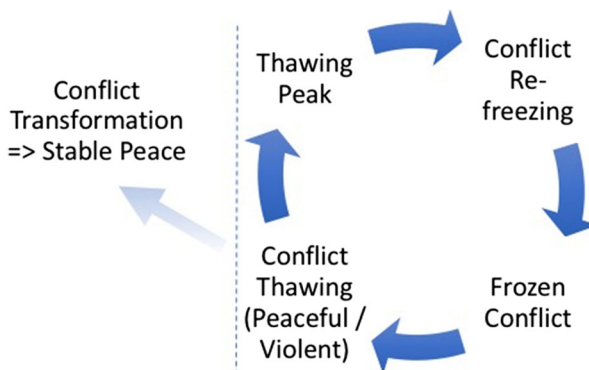
**Fig. 1** The possibility of frozen conflict transformation

Finally, we distinguish a third type of dynamic that takes place in relation to frozen conflicts: conflict withering. Unlike peaceful and violent thawing that take place explicitly as a part of the given conflict, conflict withering is, in principle, an external dynamic that nevertheless changes the importance of the issues at stake. In contrast to both types of thawing, withering lacks the original intention to transform the conflict; instead, withering is an unintentional by-product of some other development. As a consequence of such development, previously salient issues are no longer central to the mutual relationship. The conflict can wither slowly: for example, ethnic groups can gradually reconstruct their originally incompatible identities, or previously precious natural resources become less important or scarce. However, conflict withering can also happen relatively quickly, as a result of an external shock like systemic wars that alter the landscape of international politics. A typical example may be the two world wars that redrew the borders of Europe and made some earlier frozen conflicts over territory irrelevant.

## Empirical observations

Our reconceptualization of frozen conflicts provides ground for a systematic empirical inquiry into their dynamics. From our perspective, there are three primary questions that ought to be addressed in the course of such research. First, what makes frozen conflicts thaw in the first place? Second, what happens at the critical junction, when the thawing can potentially lead to conflict transformation but instead the process reaches its peak and the conflict re-freezes? Third, are there observable dynamics that contribute to the gradual withering of the conflict?

Empirical accounts of individual frozen conflicts in this special issue provide us with some intriguing preliminary insights into these matters. A particularly salient theme has been the involvement of powerful third parties in the dynamics of the conflict, resulting



**Fig. 2** The cyclical nature of frozen conflict dynamics

in the creation of “many layers of ice over time” (Grzelczyk, this issue). Often, the third-party involvement manifests itself in complex patron-client relations—as the case of Transnistria demonstrates, external backing and support is sometimes indispensable to the very survivability of the actors involved (Dembinska and Merand, this issue). The interests of major third parties are frequently among the key roadblocks preventing successful transformation of the frozen conflict at hand; for example, Blahova (this issue) highlights the role of Moscow in the status quo management of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, preventing both peaceful and violent thawing from proceeding to the transformation phase. In Georgia, Russia even eventually shifted its position in the conflict assemblage from a supporting patron to a direct participant in the conflict (Ditrych, this issue).

Frozen conflicts are also frequently externalized through the practices of an international conflict resolution apparatus, with local actors being treated as *objects* of external intervention (Ditrych, this issue). However, as the cases of South Asia (Ganguly et al., this issue) and the South Caucasus (Blahova, this issue) demonstrate, peaceful thawing spurred by the initiative of third parties often fails to address the interests of local actors and thereby falls short of achieving a full transformation of the conflict.

As we already discussed in the conceptual section of this article, the (in-)stability of frozen conflicts is also underpinned by the logic of deterrence and its effect on the behavior of participating actors. Two cases examined in this special issue—South Asia and the Korean peninsula—highlight the role of nuclear weapons on frozen conflicts and the impact of their acquisition on the complexity of deterrence relationships. In the case of India, the circular logic of violent thawing is further reinforced by the stability-instability paradox, in which nuclear weapons function as a “great stabilizer” on the level of all-out war, while simultaneously allowing instability on the lower levels of violence (see also Ganguly 1995; Mistry 2009; Ganguly and Hagerty 2012; Kapur 2005). In the case of the Korean peninsula, Pyongyang’s nuclear acquisition arguably lowers the prospects for a near-term successful transformation of conflict, while at the same time makes the possibility of individual instances of conflict thawing more likely—primarily through emboldening the North Korean leadership and putting further pressure on the USA to act in the face of acute nuclear non-proliferation challenges (cf. Anderson 2017; Roehrig 2016; Choi and Bae 2016; Davis et al. 2016).

The authors of the articles in this special issue also aimed at opening the “black box” of unitary states and examined the domestic sources of frozen conflict dynamics. For example, the case of Georgia demonstrates how domestic political changes—in this case the establishment of the Saakashvili regime after the Revolution of Roses—were the main drivers behind violent thawing of the conflict. Domestic factors can be also seen as obstacles to frozen conflict transformation, as seen in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, where the lack of domestic support for any diplomatic concessions makes the possibility for transformation through peaceful thawing unlikely. Often, there are multiple domestic actors with parochial economic and political interests in keeping the conflict frozen, thereby actively participating in the specific “frozen conflict economy”—a development that we can clearly observe in the de facto states of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia (King 2001).

In practically all of the frozen conflicts examined in this special issue, their persistent frozenness is sustained and (re-)produced by the discursive practices of othering and adversarial labeling. In many cases, the discursive dynamics following the use of armed

force reaches the level of “evilization” (Müller 2014) of the adversary, making violent thawing the only imaginable option for conflict transformation. The logic of politicized ethnicity in frozen conflicts is usually reinforced by the elite discourse: the political leadership, in order to strengthen its grip to power, participates in the (re-)production of nationalist mobilization narratives that exclude the “other” from any meaningful idea of mutual reconciliation (see Souleimanov 2013, and Ditych and Blahova in this issue). The case of Chechnya also highlights the role of emotions and complex in-group/out-group dynamics that can potentially contribute to the violent thawing of the frozen conflict, while making the transformation through peaceful thawing implausible (Souleimanov, Abbasov, and Siroky, this issue).

Finally, articles in this special issue also examine the potential for conflict withering. In the case of Transnistria, its logic is based on the “dual engagement” of the local elites with Russia and the EU; as proposed by Dembinska and Mérand (this issue), “[t]ensions and ‘frozen’ settlement notwithstanding, this pragmatic cooperation and burgeoning trade with Europe, flanked by continued dependence on Russia, account for the withering of the Transnistrian conflict.” Perry (this issue), on the other hand, highlights demographic change as a potential avenue for conflict withering in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## Conclusion

The term frozen conflict has a widespread use in the discourse of international politics, but thus far, it has served more as a catchy label for unresolved conflicts in post-Soviet space than as a useful analytical category. This article provides a novel conceptual analysis of “frozen conflict.” It overcomes special and temporal limits of the common understanding of the term and defines it as a specific subtype of international conflict. Our conceptual analysis also outlines three general avenues of frozen conflict dynamics and transformation: peaceful thawing based on diplomatic negotiations between the conflicting parties, violent thawing based on violent (re-)escalation, and conflict withering, in which an unintentional development substantively modifies the relative importance of unresolved issues.

We argue that our conceptual analysis opens up important space for new and more systematic empirical research of frozen conflicts. If a frozen conflict is understood as a general phenomenon rather than something limited by a time and a space, there is a need for a new dataset of historical frozen conflicts. Such dataset would allow a deeper understanding of frozen conflicts through comparative research and large-N statistical studies.

Moreover, we highlighted three interesting scholarly avenues based on our understanding of frozen conflict dynamics. First, what makes frozen conflicts thaw, whether peacefully or violently? Second, what happens at the point when the thawing can potentially lead to conflict transformation but instead the process reaches its peak and the conflict re-freezes? Third, are there observable dynamics that contribute to frozen conflict withering? Systematic empirical research based on these three questions can contribute new findings to the discipline of peace and conflict studies and provide policy makers with much-needed insight into a number of the prominent unresolved conflicts of our times.

**Acknowledgements** We would like to thank the reviewers and our colleagues, Harald Müller, Vojtech Bahensky, Kamil Klosek, Pavlina Blahova, and Marie Nemeckova, for their constructive comments and recommendations. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2017 International Studies Association (ISA) Annual Convention in Baltimore and the 2017 ISSS-ISAC Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. We are grateful to the chairs, discussants, and participants in individual panel sessions for their insightful remarks and ideas.

**Funding** We acknowledge funding by the Charles University Research Centre program UNCE/HUM/028 (Peace Research Center Prague/Faculty of Social Sciences) and by the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, grant project VI20152019011.

## References

- Aggestam K, Björkdahl A (2011) Just peace postponed: unending peace processes and frozen conflicts. Available at: <https://lup.lub.lu.se/search/publication/0aecca3dc-a3d1-46c7-82a7-44258cf35baf>
- Anderson ND (2017) America's North Korean nuclear dilemma. *Wash Q* 40(4):153–164
- Azar EE (1985) Protracted international conflicts: ten propositions. *Int Interact* 12(1):59–70
- Azar EE, Jureidini P, McLaurin R (1978) Protracted social conflict: theory and practice in the Middle East. *J Palest Stud* 8(1):41–60
- BBC (2014) Ukraine crisis: “frozen conflicts” and the Kremlin. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29078541>. Accessed 23 Oct 2017
- Blank S (2008) Russia and the Black Sea's frozen conflicts in strategic perspective. *Mediterr Q* 19(3):23–54
- Blank S (2016) Putin cannot afford the frozen conflict in Ukraine. *Newsweek*. Available at: <http://www.newsweek.com/putin-cannot-afford-frozen-conflict-ukraine-421083>
- Botes J (2003) Conflict transformation: a debate over semantics or a crucial shift in the theory and practice of peace and conflict studies? *International Journal of Peace Studies* 8(2):1–27
- Boulding KE (1978) *Stable peace*. University of Texas Press, Austin
- Boulding KE (1991) *Stable peace among nations: a learning process*. In: Boulding E, Brigagao C, Clements K (eds) *Peace culture and society: transnational research and dialogue*. Westview Press, Boulder, pp 108–114
- Brecher M (1993) *Crises in world politics: theory and reality*. Pergamon Press, Oxford
- Broers L (2015) From “frozen conflict” to enduring rivalry: reassessing the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. *Nationalities Papers* 43(4):556–576
- Burridge T (2016) Ukraine conflict: daily reality of east's “frozen war” BBC News. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35990401>. Accessed 23 Oct 2017
- Caspersen N (2009) Playing the recognition game: external actors and de facto states. *The International Spectator* 44(4):47–60
- Choi JK, Bae JY (2016) Security implications of a nuclear North Korea: crisis stability and imperatives for engagement. *Korea Obs* 47(4):807–827
- CNN (2014) Will Ukraine's Crimea region be Europe's next “frozen” conflict?. CNN Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/27/opinion/ukraine-crimea-russia/>
- Cohen SP, Azar EE (1981) From war to peace: the transition between Egypt and Israel. *J Confl Resolut* 25(1): 87–114
- Colaresi M, Thompson WR (2002) Strategic rivalries, protracted conflict, and crisis escalation. *J Peace Res* 39(3):263–287
- Cornell SE (2017a) The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and European security. In: Cornell SE (ed) *The international politics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict: the original “frozen conflict” and European security*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp 1–21
- Cornell SE (ed) (2017b) *The international politics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict: the original “frozen conflict” and European security*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York
- Davis PK et al (2016) Deterrence and stability for the Korean peninsula. *Korean J Def Anal* 28(1):1–23
- Dembinska M, Campana A (2017) Frozen conflicts and internal dynamics of de facto states: perspectives and directions for research. *Int Stud Rev* 19(1):1–25

- Diehl P, Goertz G (2000) War and peace in international rivalry. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor
- Faber MJ (2000) Cold wars and frozen conflicts: the European experience. In: Kaldor M (ed) *Global insecurity*. Bloomsbury Academic, London, pp 53–94
- Felician S (2011) North and South Korea: a frozen conflict on the verge of unfreezing? IAI Working Papers 11/24
- Ferrero-Waldner B (2006) "Frozen conflicts": Transnistria, South-Ossetia, and the Russian-Georgian dispute. European Parliament Plenary. Available at: <http://eu-un.europa.eu/frozen-conflicts-transnistria-south-ossetia-and-the-russian-georgian-dispute-speech-by-eu-commissioner-ferrero-waldner/>
- Fregoso CC, Zivkovic N (2012) Western Sahara: a frozen conflict. *Journal of Regional Security* 7(2):139–150
- Ganguly S (1995) Indo-Pakistani nuclear issues and the stability/instability paradox. *Stud Confl Terror* 18(4): 325–334
- Ganguly S, Hagerty DT (2012) *Fearful symmetry: India-Pakistan crises in the shadow of nuclear weapons*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- George AL (2006) *On foreign policy: unfinished business*. Routledge, London
- Hensel PR, Goertz G, Diehl PF (2000) The democratic peace and rivalries. *J Polit* 62(4):1173–1188
- Japaridze T, Rondeli A (2004) Europe is on Georgia's mind. In: Asmus RD, Dimitrov K, Forbrig J (eds) *A new Euro-Atlantic strategy for the Black Sea region*. German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington, D.C., pp 40–47
- Kacowicz AM et al (2000) *Stable peace among nations*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham
- Kapur SP (2005) India and Pakistan's unstable peace. *Int Secur* 30(2):127–152
- Kelman HC (1985) Overcoming the psychological barrier: an analysis of the Egyptian-Israeli peace process. *Negot J* 1(3):213–234
- Kerry J (2013) Remarks with Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov before their meeting. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/06/210214.htm>
- King C (2001) The benefits of ethnic war: understanding Eurasia's unrecognized states. *World Polit* 53(4): 524–552
- Klein JP, Goertz G, Diehl PF (2006) The new rivalry dataset: procedures and patterns. *J Peace Res* 43(3):331–348
- Kolsto P (2006) The sustainability and future of unrecognized quasi-states. *J Peace Res* 43(6):723–740
- Luttwak EN (1999) Give war a chance. *Foreign Aff* 78(4):36–44
- Lynch D (2004) *Engaging Eurasia's separatist states: unresolved conflicts and de facto states*. United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington, D.C.
- Lynch D (2005) New thinking about "frozen" conflicts. *Hels Monit* 16(3):192–195
- Mistry D (2009) Complexity of deterrence among new nuclear states: the India-Pakistan case. In: Paul TV, Morgan PM, Wirtz JJ (eds) *Complex deterrence: strategy in the global age*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p 345
- Mitchell C (2002) Beyond resolution: what does conflict transformation actually transform? *Peace and Conflict Studies* 9(1). Available at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol9/iss1/1>
- Morar F (2010) The myth of "frozen conflict": transcending illusive dilemmas. *Concordiam: Journal of European Security and Defence Issues* 1(2):10–17
- Morgan PM (1977) *Deterrence: a conceptual analysis*. Sage, Beverly Hills
- Müller H (2005) Theories of peace. In: Evangelista M (ed) *Peace studies: critical concepts in political science*. Routledge, Oxon, pp 53–87
- Müller H (2014) Evilization in liberal discourse: from Kant's "unjust enemy" to today's "rogue state". *Int Politics* 51(4):475–491
- Obama B (2016) Press conference of President Obama and Prime Minister Renzi of the Republic of Italy. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/10/18/press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-renzi-republic-italy>
- Perry V (2009) At cross purposes? Democratization and peace implementation strategies in Bosnia and Herzegovina's frozen conflict. *Hum Rights Rev* 10(1):35–54
- Reimann C (2004) Assessing the state-of-the-art in conflict transformation. In: Austin A, Fischer M, Ropers N (eds) *Transforming ethno-political conflict*. Springer, Wiesbaden, pp 41–66
- Roehrig T (2016) North Korea, nuclear weapons, and the stability-instability paradox. *Korean J Def Anal* 28(2):181–198
- Rupesinghe K (ed) (1995) *Conflict transformation*. St. Martin's Press, New York
- Souleimanov E (2013) *Understanding ethno-political conflict: Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia wars reconsidered*. Palgrave Macmillan, London

- The Economist (2016) A frozen conflict explodes. *Economist* 53–54. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21696563-after-facing-decades-armenia-and-azerbaijan-start-shooting-frozen-conflict-explodes>
- The Japan Times (2017) Moldova's "frozen conflict" over breakaway Transnistria has lessons for east Ukraine. Available at: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/05/28/world/moldovas-frozen-conflict-breakaway-transnistria-lessons-east-ukraine/#.We2tcxOCw9U>
- The Moscow Times (2017) Corruption thrives on Russia's frozen conflicts. Available at: <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/corruption-thrives-on-russias-frozen-conflicts-39610>
- The New York Times (2012) A "frozen conflict" that could boil over. *The New York Times* Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/09/opinion/a-frozen-conflict-that-could-boil-over.html>
- Thompson WWR (2001) Identifying rivals and rivalries in world politics. *Int Stud Q* 45(4):557–586
- Tudoroiu T (2016) Unfreezing failed frozen conflicts: a post-Soviet case study. *J Contemp Eur Stud* 24(3): 375–396
- Wallensteen P (1991) The resolution and transformation of international conflicts: a structural perspective. In: Väyrynen R (ed) *New directions in conflict theory: conflict resolution and conflict transformation*. Sage, London, pp 129–152
- Wallensteen P (2002) *Understanding conflict resolution: war, peace and the global system*. Sage, London
- Welt C (2010) The thawing of a frozen conflict: the internal security dilemma and the 2004 prelude to the Russo-Georgian War. *Eur Asia Stud* 62(1):63–97
- Wolff S (2011) A resolvable frozen conflict? Designing a settlement for Transnistria. *Nationalities Papers* 39(6):863–870