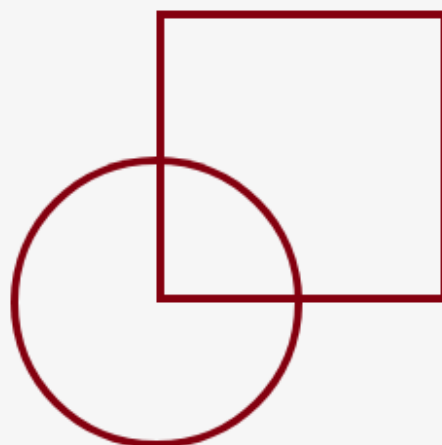


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Frozen conflicts: stability without peace

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Introduction

The expression "frozen conflict" has become part of the common vocabulary of international relations. It generally refers to a situation in which large-scale fighting has ceased without a peace treaty or political settlement having ended the dispute. A ceasefire line separates the parties; a de facto entity exercises its authority over a portion of the territory; the internationally recognized state maintains its claim to sovereignty; An external power or an international mission contributes, in varying ways, to preserving the existing balance.

The formula is convenient, but it is intellectually weak. A conflict is not "frozen" like an object that is removed from time. It continues to produce institutions, dependencies, population displacements, economic transformations and political identities. De facto borders are consolidated, separatist authorities are taking root, trade networks are being reoriented and relations between societies are being weakened. Even when military violence remains contained, the conflict continues its work.

International organizations are more willing to speak of "protracted" conflicts than frozen conflicts. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe considers them a persistent threat to regional stability and places their treatment in a cycle combining prevention, crisis management, mediation and settlement¹. This terminology is more accurate: what characterizes these configurations is not their immobility, but their duration.

The analytical problem is therefore not to understand why peace is slow to be concluded, as if the prolongation of the conflict was only the result of diplomatic inadequacy. We must examine the interests that make this extension possible, and sometimes desirable. An unresolved conflict is not only a failure of the settlement. It can become a sustainable way of exercising power.

I. Institutionalized negative peace

So-called frozen conflicts are based on a classic distinction between cessation of violence and political resolution. The ceasefire produces what could be called a negative peace: clashes diminish, but the causes of the conflict remain intact. The actors do not agree on the sovereignty of the territory, nor on the security guarantees, nor on the conditions for the return of displaced populations, nor on the future distribution of power. This lack of agreement does not prevent the formation of an order.

Over time, the dividing line becomes a de facto administrative border. The separatist authorities are developing institutions, bureaucracy, security forces and school systems. They issue documents, collect revenue and organize their own political life. The State whose territory is disputed retains international recognition and legal claim, but loses the day-to-day exercise of sovereignty. This results in a dissociation between legality and effectiveness.

International law generally continues to recognize the territorial integrity of the State concerned. On the ground, another authority administers the population and controls access. This superimposition is not a temporary anomaly. It becomes the very structure of the conflict. Cyprus offers one of the oldest examples of this. The United Nations Peacekeeping Force has been monitoring the ceasefire lines and buffer zone there since 1964. Its presence reduces the risk of an immediate resumption of clashes, but it has not been able to overcome the

¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. (2014, October 6). *Mediation in the OSCE area*. <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/125136>

fundamental political disagreement over the organization of the island². The international system prevented a return to war without producing a common order.

This distinction is essential. The operational stability of a ceasefire is not necessarily a step towards peace. On the contrary, it can make bearable a situation which, without a stabilization mechanism, would force the parties to choose between confrontation and compromise.

The duration then increases the cost of the settlement. The more societies live separately, the more the administrations diverge, the more material interests crystallize and the more complex reunification or reintegration becomes. Time does not work spontaneously in favor of peace; it can institutionalize separation.

II. Unfinished sovereignty as an instrument of constraint

The permanence of frozen conflicts is largely explained by their strategic usefulness. They allow an external power to limit the autonomy of a state without necessarily having to occupy or annex it.

Direct control of a territory is costly. It imposes administrative, financial and military responsibility. Support for a separatist entity sometimes offers a higher return: military presence, political influence, the ability to exert pressure and the indirect right to oversee the strategic orientations of the territorial state.

Unfinished sovereignty then becomes an instrument of constraint. A state that does not control all of its territory must devote part of its resources to defence, to the support of displaced populations and to diplomatic mobilization. It must integrate into each of its decisions the risk of a resumption of hostilities. Its possibilities of joining a military alliance may be reduced, since the other members are reluctant to extend a collective guarantee to a territory that is already disputed.

The strategic value of the conflict thus goes far beyond the separatist region. The latter acts on the foreign policy of the State as a whole. The Georgian cases are particularly revealing. After the wars of the 1990s, Abkhazia and South Ossetia escaped Tbilisi's control. The Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 demonstrated that these conflicts were by no means stabilized in the political sense of the term. According to the European Union observation mission, the accumulated tensions and military incidents have led to a new open war³.

Since then, the European Union has denounced Russia's military presence in both regions and their gradual integration into Russia's regulatory, economic and security spaces. It also notes the continuation of "borderisation", i.e. the gradual installation of fences, bollards and control devices along administrative lines⁴.

These practices show that the conflict does not stand still between two episodes of war. The control is deepened in stages. Roads, administrative documents, economic networks and security infrastructures are gradually bringing the separatist territories closer to their protector. The legal status quo masks a material transformation.

² United Nations Security Council. (2023, May 4). *Security Council, 78th year: 9316th meeting, Thursday, 4 May 2023, New York* (S/PV.9316). United Nations. <https://docs.un.org/en/S/PV.9316>

³ European External Action Service. (2020, November 30). *EUMM Georgia: The European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia—Civilian mission*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eumm-georgia/eumm-georgia-european-union-monitoring-mission-georgia-civilian-mission_en

⁴ European External Action Service. (2025, November 27). *EU statement on the 65th round of the Geneva International Discussions*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/vienna-international-organisations/eu-statement-65th-round-geneva-international-discussions_en

The frozen conflict can therefore produce the effects of a partial annexation without necessarily adopting the official form. It reduces the sovereignty of the territorial state while maintaining an ambiguity from which the protector can take advantage.

III. Freezing as a balance of interests

The prolongation of a conflict is never due to a single actor. It is the result of a set of interests which, without being identical, converge towards the preservation of indeterminacy. For external powers, the conflict can serve as a regional lever. For the separatist authorities, it provides an existential justification: the threat of reintegration or external domination is the basis of the legitimacy of the state apparatus, military effort, and political control. For the central government, any concession on status can be seen as a renunciation of territorial integrity. Finally, certain economic or political groups benefit from the informal circuits, opaque borders and dependencies produced by the conflict.

The status quo is therefore not necessarily satisfactory; it may simply be less expensive than each of the available solutions. This situation explains the frequent failure of negotiations based on the search for an institutional compromise. Ombudsmen propose special statuses, federal systems, enhanced autonomy or international guarantees. But the difficulty is not only to find the right legal architecture. It is due to the inability of the parties to believe that this architecture will protect them in the long term.

A separatist entity may fear that its reintegration will result in the loss of its institutions, security or political identity. The territorial state may fear that an autonomous status would allow an external power to retain a right of veto over its national policy. The guarantees offered to one of the parties are then interpreted as vulnerabilities by the other.

The heart of the conflict is no longer just territorial. It becomes institutional and temporal: no party knows whether the negotiated guarantees will survive a political change, a change in the balance of power or the withdrawal of a protector.

The Transnistrian case illustrates this logic. The OSCE Mission to Moldova has been seeking a settlement since 1993 that would preserve Moldovan sovereignty and territorial integrity while granting a special status to Transnistria⁵. Despite long periods of calm, the essential parameters remain difficult to reconcile: Russian military presence, Moldova's European orientation, the security of the Transnistrian elites and the economic integration of the region. The conflict persists not because no formula has ever been devised, but because none has succeeded in redistributing risks in a politically acceptable way.

IV. Time does not neutralize violence

The most serious weakness of the concept of frozen conflict lies in its tendency to confuse low military intensity with the absence of violence. In these territories, the constraint often takes an administrative and daily form. Crossing points are closed or opened at their discretion. Residents can be arrested for crossing a poorly marked line. Properties become inaccessible. Languages of instruction, identity documents and citizenship regimes are gradually being transformed.

⁵ OSCE Mission to Moldova. (n.d.). *The frozen conflict in Transdniestria*. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. <https://moldova.osce.org/moldova/66269>

In Georgia, the European Union continues to denounce restrictions on freedom of movement, detentions and the lack of full access to the separatist territories by international mechanisms⁶. The European observer mission patrols permanently along administrative lines, but has never been granted access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, despite a mandate theoretically covering the whole of Georgian territory⁷.

This situation reveals the limits of peacekeeping when the mission can only observe one side of the dividing line. It can reduce the risk of incidents, facilitate communications and document certain facts, but it cannot fully verify the political, military and humanitarian developments of territories outside its access. The violence of the conflict then shifts from the battlefield to the organization of social space.

It is less spectacular, but it can produce irreversible effects. When people leave, economic relations disappear and new generations grow up without contact with the other side, the possibilities of a future settlement are reduced.

The massive displacement of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh after the Azerbaijani offensive of September 2023 is the most brutal case of this dynamic. For nearly three decades, the conflict had often been presented as frozen despite regular incidents and a major war in 2020. The change in the balance of power has finally allowed Azerbaijan to impose a new territorial reality by force.

This case dispelled the idea that the duration of the ceasefire would necessarily consolidate peace. Above all, it had allowed the actors to prepare differently for the next phase of the conflict.

V. Stability depends on a balance of power, not on the ceasefire itself

A conflict remains frozen as long as the parties consider that a resumption of war would cost them more than it would bring them. Its stability is therefore fundamentally strategic.

It depends on the survivability of the forces, the presence of a guarantor, external support, the ability to mobilise and the perception that each actor has of the international reaction. When these variables change, the calculation can change quickly. The 2008 Russian-Georgian war had already shown that a protracted conflict could return to high intensity. Nagorno-Karabakh has confirmed that the rearmament of one party and the relative weakening of the protector of the other could make possible a military solution that has long been considered too risky.

The freeze therefore does not constitute an autonomous state of the conflict. It is the temporary product of an often imperfect deterrence. This observation forces us to distinguish between two forms of stability. The first is the result of an accepted political agreement, mutual guarantees and common institutions. The second is based on the balance of fear and the absence of a favorable military opportunity.

Frozen conflicts generally fall into the second category. Their apparent calm can therefore be deceptive. It does not mean that the demands have weakened, but that they cannot be imposed for the time being. A technological evolution, a change of alliance or a crisis affecting the external guarantor may be enough to change this balance.

⁶ European External Action Service. (2025, March 13). *OSCE Permanent Council No. 1512, Vienna, 13 March 2025*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/vienna-international-organisations/osce-permanent-council-no-1512-vienna-13-march-2025-0_en

⁷ European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia. (2024, March 20). *About the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM)*. European External Action Service. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eumm-georgia/about-european-union-monitoring-mission-georgia-eumm_en

Prevention cannot therefore be limited to monitoring incidents. It must measure the slow transformations of the balance of power.

VI. The paradox of international mechanisms

International missions play a role that is difficult to dispute. They prevent incidents, organize communication mechanisms, support negotiations and provide an outside presence in environments where mistrust is extreme.

However, there is a paradox to their success.

When they effectively reduce violence, they also diminish the political urgency of the settlement. External governments are satisfied with relative calm; the parties adapt their institutions to the status quo; Negotiations become ritual. The stabilization mechanism then risks becoming an international administration of non-solution.

This does not mean that missions should be abolished. On the contrary, their withdrawal could remove one of the few obstacles to further escalation. But their mandate and the evaluation of their action must clearly distinguish between military prevention and political progress. A mission can succeed in preventing war while failing to bring peace closer.

One of the difficulties is the asymmetry between the means devoted to supervision and those available to modify the interests of the parties. International organizations can observe a line, organize a meeting, or facilitate a prisoner exchange. They rarely have the economic, military and political levers necessary to force actors to accept a sustainable redistribution of power.

They also depend on the consent of States and the parties concerned. The OSCE, a cooperative security organization, does not have a general mechanism of enforcement and must deal with the consensus of its participating States. This architecture facilitates mediation when the powers cooperate; It becomes much more restrictive when a power involved in the conflict can block decisions. Peacekeeping should therefore not be confused with a sovereign capacity for settlement.

VII. Should we still talk about frozen conflicts?

The category retains a certain usefulness. It identifies situations in which mainstream military violence has decreased, while the status issue remains unresolved and competing authorities exercise distinct forms of sovereignty.

But it must not be transformed into a general concept applicable to any lasting war.

Cyprus, Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Western Sahara or the Korean peninsula are not subject to the same historical conditions, the same power relations or the same legal mechanisms. The notion cannot be used as an explanation. It even becomes dangerous when it produces three confusions.

The first is to consider that the conflict no longer changes. The second is to believe that the ceasefire is an imperfect but lasting form of settlement. The third leads to underestimating the interests that voluntarily maintain the situation. It would be more accurate to speak of conflicts protracted under duress: prolonged because no political solution has been accepted; under duress because the resumption of the war remains contained by a military balance, an external presence or a calculation of costs. This terminology forces us to look at the dynamics rather than the label.

The first policy mistake is to make incident reduction the primary criterion for success. Calm is necessary, but it says nothing about the profound evolution of the conflict. A real assessment must include militarization, demographic displacement, legal transformations, the economic integration of separatist territories and freedom of movement.

The second mistake is to wait until a status negotiation is enough to produce peace. Status cannot be isolated from security guarantees, control mechanisms, property rights, the return of displaced persons and the presence of external powers.

The third mistake consists in isolating the disputed territories to avoid their normalization. Non-recognition may be legally necessary without justifying the abandonment of populations. Economic, administrative and educational isolation may increase their dependence on the external protector and reduce the links that could support future settlement.

The fourth mistake is to treat the conflict as a purely local issue. When an external power uses territory as leverage, settlement cannot be separated from the regional order, alliances and relations between great powers.

The relevant policy must therefore simultaneously pursue four objectives: to prevent the resumption of hostilities, to preserve ties with separated populations, to limit the unilateral integration of the territory with an external power and to gradually change the incentives that make the status quo profitable. It is not enough to retain the legal possibility of a settlement. The strategic usefulness of its absence must be reduced.

Conclusion

Frozen conflicts are not wars interrupted by time. They are political orders built on incompleteness. The ceasefire contains violence, but leaves the competing sovereignties, asymmetric guarantees and interests that made the conflict possible. Over the years, the provisional became institutionalized. The dividing lines become de facto borders; separatist administrations are consolidating; the populations are moving away; Outside powers transform their presence into lasting influence. This stability can be real. It should not be confused with peace.

It depends on a balance of power, and not on an agreement on the political order. It lasts as long as the war seems too costly and the compromise seems even more dangerous. When one of these perceptions changes, the conflict can reopen with a speed that several decades of apparent calm had not allowed us to anticipate. The decisive question is therefore not how to "unfreeze" these conflicts. A resumption of the war is also a form of thaw.

The challenge is to transform a balance imposed by coercion into an order in which the non-resumption of hostilities no longer depends on fear, the presence of a protector or international indecision. As long as this transformation does not take place, the conflict is not resolved, it is only administered.