Chapter 7

A Cognitive Basis of International Conflicts

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The study of intergroup conflict has always been an important topic of interest for social scientists (see reviews by Duke, 1976; Haas, 1974; Mack and Snyder, 1957; McNeil, 1965; Nicholson, 1970; Schellenberg, 1982). But relatively few attempts have been made to analyze its cognitive bases. The analysis of the cognitive basis of intergroup conflict makes it possible to understand some of the sources of misunderstandings and hostilities that often characterize them.

The present paper will highlight cognitive-epistemological processes underlying the dynamics of international or intergroup conflicts. Specifically, it will describe the relationship between beliefs, the cognitive units of the analysis, and international conflicts. Secondly, it will discuss the epistemological approach that serves as a framework for the present analysis and its implications for the understanding of international conflicts. Finally, it will delineate the possible contribution that the framework presented can make to conflict resolution.

Beliefs and International Conflict

Nature of Beliefs

A belief is the central term for the cognitive-epistemological approach adopted in this paper. It is a cognitive element defined as a proposition with a minimal degree of confidence ascribed to it that individuals store in their cognitive system. The stored beliefs constitute the individuals' total knowledge. Similar definitions were proposed by Berger and Luckman (1971) who defined knowledge as "the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics" (p. 13), and by Miller, Galanter & Pribram (1960) who defined the belief system as "all the accumulated organized knowledge that the organism has about itself and the world" (p. 16). Thus, beliefs can concern any subject that human beings can think about. The content of beliefs is infinite in scope. But while some beliefs are unique to specific individuals, others are common to members of a group or even to a number of groups. For example, an individual may believe that he can be a successful politician or that a group or groups may believe that the world has malevolent intentions in regard to its existence. (A case of the latter belief has been analyzed by Bar-Tal, in press.)

Beliefs can be characterized in different ways. Thus, for example, individuals hold their beliefs with various degrees of confidence. At the lower levels of confidence are beliefs that individuals consider to be hypotheses. At the other end of the dimension are beliefs in which individuals have so much confidence that they consider them to be facts. In situations of international conflict the opposing nations often hold their beliefs about the causes and the course of the conflict as facts. They have a great deal of confidence in their own descriptions and arguments concerning the conflict and believe that they are the "truth." The beliefs also differ with regard to their centrality at a given time and in a given situation. Some beliefs may be central, while others are not. The degree of centrality of a belief is reflected both in the frequency of its availability in the cognitive system and the extent to which it is relevant for a wide range of decisions that the individual takes. That is, central beliefs are often available in the cognitive system (i.e., we often think about them) and they are often taken into consideration when individuals evaluate other issues including decisions to carry out various behaviors (for example, see Bar-Tal, in press, and Bar-Tal, 1985). In some cases of international conflict, beliefs pertaining to the conflict are central within the cognitive system of the opposing groups. In such cases, group members often think about them and their decisions are often influenced by their existence. The U.S.-U.S.S.R. and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts are examples of such cases. With regard to centrality of beliefs two points should be noted. First, there are admittedly individual differences. For some group members, the beliefs related to the conflict may play a central role in their lives, while others may lay less stress on them or even ignore them. Secondly; sometimes beliefs related to conflicts receive much attention and become central in the life of the group in certain periods, while at other times they are de-emphasized. That is, when the conflict continues for a long period of time, the centrality of beliefs may be unstable as time passes, or situations change.

The main characteristic of beliefs as proposed in the present paper is the conception that beliefs are subjective in nature. This position that our knowledge is conjectural and uncertain is maintained by the influential nonjustificationist philosophers of knowledge such as Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, and Paul Feyerabend. The history of science provides much evidence for this position. Many of the laws once considered proven beyond the shadow of a doubt were found to be false and replaced by more believable alternatives. Even observed events considered to be facts do not necessarily spring from objective reality. They may be selectively observed and even subjectively interpreted—the outcomes of the perception process dependent on the cognitive repertoire, cognitive capacity, and motivations of the perceivers (Geva, Bar-Tal & Raviv, 1983). But, as Schutz (1962) pointed out:

The world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that is familiar to thought and actions and is maintained as real by these. (p. 33)

Individuals and/or groups accept certain beliefs as absolute truth even when they are based on inferences. This suggests that people believe that their inferences regarding intentions, expectations, or causal attributions of their rivals are objectively determined and
The assumption that the understanding of the dynamics of international conflicts is dependent on the understanding of the beliefs of the parties in conflict has been adopted by a number of international conflict investigators (e.g., Bonham and Shapiro, 1977; Cohen, 1979; Eldridge, 1979; Gamson, 1964; Hoagland and Walker, 1979; Holsti, 1960, 1976; Jervis, 1976; Rapoport, 1964; Snyder and Dings, 1977; Zinnes, 1968). In this vein, for example, Holsti (1962) noted that: “the relationship of national images to international conflict is clear: decision makers act upon their definition of the situation and their images of states—others as well as their own” (p. 243).

The first requirement for the emergence of a conflict is the formation of a belief that there is a conflict. There is no conflict as long as it is not believed that one exists. The core structure of a “conflict belief” is that the goals, intentions, and/or actions of the other group are incompatible with one’s own. The psychological state of incompatibility implies in most of the cases a perception that there is a logical contradiction of the A, not-A type between the belief sets of the nations involved in the conflict. As both A and not-A cannot be true at the same time, an incompatibility exists. Then, the conflict becomes a reality for the group members. In situations of international conflict each group may supplement the “core conflict belief” with various sets of beliefs that explain and justify the background and causes of the conflict, describe its course and/or concern other contents. These supplementary sets of beliefs or some of them may also be incompatible with the beliefs held by the rival nation(s) in the conflict. They may therefore augment the beliefs in the existence of conflict. In general, when a set of beliefs of one group is incompatible with a set of beliefs of the other group, the resultant situation is called a cognitive discrepancy. In situations of international conflicts, cognitive discrepancy includes incompatibility of beliefs of the rival nations related to goals, intentions, or actions and may include also incompatibility of their supplementary beliefs. Cognitive discrepancy in situations of international conflict can be shown in a number of cases.

Examples of Cognitive Discrepancy

The first example of cognitive discrepancy concerns the explanations of two superpowers regarding the conflict between them.

In a statement published on October 5, 1964, in the Department of State Bulletin, Secretary of State Dean Rusk viewed the U.S. conflict with the U.S.S.R. as follows:

Let us begin by recognizing, very simply and very clearly, the nature of communist and the problem it poses for us. During and after World War II, the governments of the world sat down to construct a tolerable world order. They had been shaped by World War II, and all of us were thinking long and hard about the kind of world in which we wanted to live. The result was the United Nations Charter, ratified by our Senate by a vote of 89 to 2.

Unfortunately, we could not, in the words of the GI, that “we had it made.” For Joseph Stalin had taken up the cold war, then refused to join in the serious work of the United Nations, and launched the postwar Communist world once again upon a program of world revolution. There then was posed the underlying and continuing crisis of our period of history—the struggle between those who would build a world society on the basis of the charter and those who would brush that world aside and substitute for it a world revolution of coercion. I know of no part of the Communist world which has turned away from this ultimate objective, nor part which does not believe that the triumph of communism is inevitable. Those of us who are the heirs of the great drama of freedom, which has been playing for centuries, have no doubt about the outcome of the conflict between freedom and coercion, as long as free men remember that freedom is not free but requires continuing dedication, effort, and sacrifice.


After the end of the great battle and the rout of the enemy, the chief participants in the anti-Hitler coalition did not set out on the common road of building a lasting peace but took divergent paths.

Another example of cognitive discrepancy can be found in the conflict over the Falkland Islands between Argentina and the United Kingdom that culminated in the 1982 war. These islands, which geographically are close to Argentina, were settled in the 1830s by the British who expelled the Argentinians from them. In this case, the cognitive discrepancy focuses on the political solution for the islands. While Argentina has maintained that it has a historical right to the islands and should be on that basis regain its national sovereignty unconditionally, the United Kingdom claims that the 1,800 inhabitants of the islands who are of British descent and wish to retain their links with the U.K. should decide whether the islands are to be returned to Argentina or remain British (New York Times, April 5, p. 4).

The conflict between Honduras and El Salvador too can serve as an example of cognitive discrepancy. The conflict focused on Salvadoran citizens who had moved to Honduras. The Honduran military regime decided to initiate
lad redistribution in areas where Salvadoran squatters were concentrated and these actions affected them adversely. The immediate cause for the eruption of the violence, known as the Football War, was the World Cup Football match on June 15, 1969, which took place in San Salvador. The Honduran government alleged that its citizens attending the match were attacked. In reaction Salvadoran sources, who denied these allegations as exaggerations, claimed that on the contrary, the Hondurans had perpetrated atrocities against Salvadorans living in Honduras. Hondurans in turn insisted that this Salvadoran story was wildly exaggerated and unreal (see Cable, 1971; White, 1973).

Cognitive discrepancy was discernible also in the Czechoslovak-Soviet conflict. During the Cierna conference in July 1968 between Brezhnev and Dubéck, the former accused the Czechoslovak leaders of losing political control in Czechoslovakia, endangering political stability in neighboring countries, flirting with Western countries and moving toward restoration of capitalism. Dubéck, on the other hand, asserted loyalty to the Warsaw Pact and Comcon and rejected all the other changes as unfounded and untruthful (see Skilling, 1976; Valenta, 1979).

Cognitive discrepancy also characterizes an incident between North Korea and the United States. On January 24, 1968, North Korean patrol boats seized the U.S. Navy intelligence ship Pueblo, accusing it of invading territorial waters in the area of Wansan. The United States denied these charges and claimed that the ship was captured while sailing in international waters.

Cognitive discrepancy does not necessarily lead to violent clashes. The incompatibility of beliefs can also be found in nonviolent economic conflicts such as that between France and Britain during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when France vetoed Britain’s application to join the EEC (e.g., Scheinman, 1971) or between the United States and Canada over American investments in Canada (e.g., Holsti, 1971; Mitchell, 1968).

Finally, numerous international conflicts focus on territorial claims. That is, one state claims that certain territories belong to it because of historical, geographical, or demographic reasons, while the rival state claims the opposite—that the territory belongs to it. To this category of conflicts belong, for example, the conflict between India and China over the Akai Chin region; the conflict between Algeria and Morocco over their border; the conflict between Nigeria and Dahomey over Lete Island located in the Niger River; the conflict between Tanzania and Malawi over Lake Nyasa; the conflict between Argentina and Uruguay over the Rio de la Plata; the conflict between Iraq and Iran over Shatt al’Arab and the islands in the Strait of Hormuz; the conflict between Belgium and the Netherlands over the two plots of land in Baerle-Duc; or the conflict between France and the United Kingdom over the Minquiers and Ecrehos islands (see Butterworth, 1976). In sum, all these examples illustrate cognitive discrepancy. That is, the beliefs of one party to the conflict are incompatible with the beliefs of the other party. These beliefs imply logical contradiction, since both sets of beliefs cannot be true at the same time.

The Nature of Cognitive Discrepancy

The international situations of cognitive discrepancy may be regarded as involving conflict between beliefs, but they do not necessarily lead to actions. The labeling of these situations as conflict depends on the definition. If the term conflict is construed as requiring the involvement of incompatible actions only (e.g., Deutsch, 1973; Rapoport, 1960), then a cognitive discrepancy is not a sufficient condition for an international conflict to break out. But if a conflict is defined as incompatibility between the preferences of goals of two or more parties (e.g., Burton, 1969; Duke, 1976), then these situations of cognitive discrepancy are considered conflicts.

It should be pointed out that usually the groups in conflict do not experience psychological incongruity (see Abelson et al., 1968; Festinger, 1957) as a consequence of cognitive discrepancy, since they usually accept one of their own set of beliefs as valid and disregard the beliefs of the other party, considering them as invalid and false. Cognitive inconsistency reflected in aversive feelings (psychological inconsistency) can only exist if the logically contradictory elements are believable to the groups in conflict (Kruglanski and Klir, 1983). The parties in international conflicts are concerned with the incompatibility of goals or actions and not necessarily with the logical inconsistency between the sets of beliefs. However, the cognitive discrepancy usually enhances the magnitude of the conflict and complicates the possibilities of resolving it.

In the situation of cognitive discrepancy each group believes that its beliefs are “true” and “objective” and the beliefs of the other group are either “incorrect,” “false” or “distorted.” This situation can be illustrated by an example of mutual accusation from the Soviet-Chinese conflict: On June 14, 1963, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued a statement that included the following passage:

Latterly, the Communist Party of China has been subjected to preposterous attacks. The attackers have raised a great hue and cry and, disregarding the facts, have fabricated many charges against us. We have published these articles and speeches attacking us in our own press. . . .

Presumably, you are referring to these articles when, towards the end of your letter of March 30, you accuse the Chinese press of making “groundless attacks” on the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union). It is turning things upside down to describe articles relating to our attackers as “attacks.” Since you describe our articles as “groundless” and as so very bad, why do you not publish all seven of these “groundless attacks” in the same way as we have published your articles, and let all the Soviet comrades and Soviet people think for themselves and judge who is right and who wrong? You are of course entitled to make a point-by-point refutation of these articles you consider “groundless attacks.”

Although you call our articles “groundless” and our arguments wrong, you do not tell the Soviet people what our arguments actually are. This practice can hardly be described as showing a serious attitude towards the discussion of problems by fraternal parties, towards the truth or towards the masses.

On September 21, 1963, the Soviet government replied to another Chinese statement as follows:

The September 1 statement of the PRC (People’s Republic of China) Government, like the entire extensive propaganda campaign recently started by the Chinese leadership, is no longer a comradely discussion between Communists but an action by people who are determined to discredit the CPSU and the Soviet Union at any cost, to split the communist movement and undermine the unity of anti-imperialist forces . . . .

Nothing could be more absurd than these contentions. The reason the nuclear test ban treaty received such world-wide support is that it meets the interests of all peace-loving peoples and is the first genuine, though limited, success in the many-years-long struggle of the broad mass of the world’s peoples against the danger of nuclear war. This success did not dull the vigilance of the peoples to the intrigues of imperialism, as is asserted by the Chinese leaders, but rather infused the fighters for peace with new power and strengthened their belief in the possibility of forcing concessions from the imperialists.

This example indicates that the cognitive discrepancy in beliefs may enhance the conflict. Therefore, in order to understand the phe-
Phenomenon of cognitive discrepancy it is necessary to examine further the epistemic process of acquiring and changing beliefs and the factors that affect this process.

The Epistemic Process and International Conflict

The Epistemic Process

Individuals can form beliefs on the basis of internal sources, associative thinking, or from numerous external sources such as other individuals in face-to-face interaction, television, newspapers, books, etc. In any case, the epistemic process by which individuals validate their beliefs is the same (Kruglanski, 1980; Kruglanski, Baldwin & Towson, in press). According to Kruglanski, the criterion by which individuals assess the validity of the acquired belief is the consistency principle. Specifically, individuals deduce from a hypothesis under validation some of its implications and test them against the evidence they possess. If the evidence is logically consistent with the implications, the individuals' confidence in the hypothesis is strengthened. If no alternative hypothesis, equally consistent with the evidence, is apparent, the individuals might accept this hypothesis as true and come to regard it as firm knowledge, a fact. But the acceptance of any hypothesis is potentially revokable. Individuals may become aware of an alternative hypothesis compatible with the original belief. Then, through the process previously described they may accept the new hypothesis as fact and reject the previously held belief. But if the individuals cannot generate cognitions inconsistent with any given belief then freezing occurs. Freezing implies closure on a given belief. In this situation individuals consider a given belief as a fact and do not generate alternative hypotheses (Kruglanski and Ajzen, 1983).

Freezing

The central question for the present analysis is whether or not the beliefs involved in a conflict are frozen. Freezing can be a consequence of an incapacity to produce alternative hypotheses, of a lack of information, of an inability to collect information, and/or of the kind of motivation. With regard to the latter factor, Kruglanski and Ajzen (1983) proposed that three epistemic motivations determine to a large extent whether individuals freeze their beliefs at certain times and/or in certain situations. The three epistemic motivations are: motivation for validity, motivation for structure, and motivation for specific content.

The motivation for validity is the desire for valid knowledge or fear of having invalid cognitions. The individuals fear to commit themselves to a possibly mistaken belief and in order to avoid doing so, are open to consider multiple alternative hypotheses before accepting any one as valid.

The motivation for structure implies closure on a given belief. The individuals commit themselves to a belief and refrain from a critical challenge of it. In this situation they prefer structure as opposed to ambiguity, confusion, and uncertainty, which occur as a result of epistemic and alternative hypotheses and collecting inconsistent information. The motivation for structure may be heightened every time a person is under pressure to form a clear opinion or reach a definite conclusion.

The motivation for specific content (conclusion) is the desire to hold a given belief as truth and refrain from entertaining rival alternative hypotheses. That is, with this motivation, the individuals avoid any relevant information that does not correspond to their particular desires and seek information consistent with the desired beliefs. Undesirable hypotheses will be rejected, while the desired one will be accepted. In this situation, individuals are sensitive to evidence and ideas consistent with the desired beliefs, and they collect it. But they disregard and/or interpret subjectively information inconsistent with them. This motivation is a result of wishes that individuals try to fulfill and/or fears that they try to avoid.

The dynamics of the three epistemic motivations can be applied to the analysis of international conflict. The three motivations may characterize the state of the parties in conflict. On the basis of the analysis presented, it is proposed that when groups in conflict are in cognitive discrepancy and at the same time have either motivation for structure or motivation for specific content their beliefs are frozen. In this situation the groups are "closed" to cognitions and information that contradict held beliefs. As a result, communication and negotiation between them is very difficult (see also Katz, 1947). That is not to say that conflicts do not exist when the two opposing groups have the motivation for validity. But, in such cases, the conflicts have better chances of resolution, since both groups are open to receive new information, consider different hypotheses and entertain various alternative ways of action even when they are inconsistent with the held beliefs.

Of special interest for the present analysis is the motivation for specific content. In situations of the motivation for structure, there is freezing, but not closure on specific beliefs. Unfreezing may open the parties to look for alternative hypotheses, to examine their own beliefs and to search for different solutions. But, when the motivation for specific content dominates the parties in conflict, then there is a closure on specific beliefs that the parties desire to uphold. These beliefs serve certain needs in the form of wishes that the party strives to fulfill and fears that it tries to avoid. This is a framework in which the work by Bronfenbrenner (1964) can be understood. He analyzed the effect of Russian fears on their perceptions of Western countries, and suggested that Russian beliefs can be understood in perception of their fears—a fear of Western attack and the threat of West Germany. Similarly, Gamson (1964), in analyzing three American positions with regard to Soviet intentions in the Cold War, showed that the belief's level of threat is a major determinant in the formation of other beliefs related to the American-Soviet conflict. Also, Bar-Tal (1983), who utilized the epistemological approach in analyzing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, discussed the wishes and fears of the two rival parties that greatly affect their motivation for specific content.

The last example concerns a study about a single decision maker. Finlay, Holst & Fagen (1967) carried out an interesting analysis of cognitive functioning of the former U.S. Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. The basis of his functioning was found in his Puritan ideology and needs. His needs were reflected in a strong wish to believe in Christian ethics and moral laws, provided by a strong fear of Soviet communism, which according to his view rejected Christian principles, practiced atheism and preached a new social order. The analysis of Dulles' publicly available statements reveals that his wishes and fears, which underlay the motivation for specific content, greatly affected his information processing and thinking. Thus, Finley et al. concluded:

Because every decision-maker is in part a prisoner of beliefs and expectations which inevitably shape his definition of reality, to judge Dulles or any individual against a standard of omniscient or total rationality is neither fair nor instructive. Decisions based on less-than-perfect knowledge are unavoidable and will continue to be a source of potential danger as long as foreign policies are formulated by human beings. The unavoidable hazards are those that arise from reducing complexities to simplicities, ruling out alternative sources of information and evaluation, and closing off to scrutiny and consideration competing views of reality. (p. 96)

From this conclusion one can infer that the motivation for specific content influences cognitive functioning. The next section, therefore,
discusses some of the cognitive consequences of this motivation.

Consequences of Freezing

The motivation for specific content characterizes most if not all international conflicts. The nations in conflict often "freeze" on certain beliefs that they wish to uphold to satisfy their needs. Such closure has a number of cognitive consequences regarding the collection of information and the willingness to entertain alternative hypotheses to the held beliefs. The following consequences are discussed: (a) biased selection of information; (b) biased interpretation; and (c) biased elaboration.

* Biased Selection of Information — The motivation for specific content affects the selection of information attended and perceived by the nations in conflict. The biased selection can be exhibited by the tendency to pay attention to the information that is consistent with the desired beliefs and to disregard information that is inconsistent with them. In addition, biased selection may be exhibited by preferring certain favored sources of information, while avoiding and neglecting other sources.

* Biased Interpretation — The motivation for specific content also predisposes the parties in conflict to ascribe to ambiguous and even inconsistent information meanings that are consistent with the desired beliefs. In this way the information is interpreted as supporting the held beliefs.

* Biased Elaboration — In addition to the selection and distortion of available information, the group in a state of conflict may augment its desired cognitions by incorporating relevant additional consistent beliefs into the cognitive system. That is, the held beliefs may be supplemented with the associations formed on their basis. These associations, which help to uphold the desired beliefs, achieve a status of beliefs themselves. As Loftus and Loftus (1976) indicated, these associations may acquire a "realistic" status. In this case, people will have difficulty distinguishing "facts" from "fiction" after the "fiction" has been generated and incorporated into the system. Interestingly, the beliefs of the parties may be reflected in actions that are regarded as information for the parties who in turn react to them. These reactions reinforce the desired beliefs. Thus, a vicious cycle can occur on the basis of these cognitions. Social scientists termed such situations "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Merton, 1948). An example of this phenomenon is the situation in which certain cognitions generate aggressive behaviors, which motivate reactive acts by the rival party, which then serve as additional justification for the hostile cognitions (see, for example, Siverson's 1969 analysis of the Israeli-Egyptian conflict).

Jervis (1976), in his well-received book Perception and Misperception in International Politics, provides numerous examples that demonstrate these three consequences of freezing under the motivation for specific content. These examples show the occurrence of biased thinking and information processing by the decision makers in international conflicts.

After discussing the cognitive basis of the international conflict within the cognitive epistemological framework, the next section will discuss some of the implications of the presented framework for the conflict resolution.

Epistemological Contribution for the Resolution of Conflicts

The cognitive-epistemological framework does not offer specific solutions for international conflicts. But it is the basis for proposals of several conditions and ways that may facilitate conflict resolution. It should be noted at the outset, however, that the present paper does not deal with coercive solutions in which one party uses power, to achieve the goals but focuses instead on the peaceful and mutually agreed upon solutions by the parties in conflict.

The proposals derived from the epistemological framework are based on the assumption that the existence of the conflict has to be in the minds of the people. People believe that there exists an incomparability between their goals, preferences, actions, and those of the other party. Moreover, the belief about incomparability is related to many other supplementary beliefs that concern strategies and tactics for the achievement of goals, the roots and course of the conflict, and possibly other contents. These beliefs are usually frozen as a consequence of motivation for specific content. That is, the party in conflict holds its own beliefs with a great degree of confidence and does not evaluate them against competing alternative and/or inconsistent bits of information.

The cognitive-epistemological approach implies that a solution of international conflict requires a change in beliefs. The change may take several different directions, not necessarily mutually exclusive. One direction of the change may concern the incompatibility itself. If the change, the parties in conflict, without modifying their original goals, intentions, or plans, begin to believe that incomparability no longer exists. It is hard to think about examples of this kind, since the nature of international conflict in many cases is of the zero sum type. Thus, an achievement of the original goal of one party has to be at the expense of the rival party. Both parties in conflict cannot achieve their incompatible goals at the same time. Nevertheless, on the cognitive level such a change is definitely possible. For example, one or both of the parties in conflict may change its beliefs regarding the incomparability of goals by starting to believe that the original goals were achieved and the conflict is over. Since the "reality" is determined by the subjective beliefs, it is not important whether the original goals were actually achieved or the parties only convinced themselves of that. What counts in this situation is that their perception of reality indicates that the conflict is over.

Most cases of peaceful resolutions of international conflicts do not occur in this way, but rather changes in beliefs regarding goals, and/or strategies, tactics, the course of the conflict, etc. These changes affect the assessment of incomparability. That is, the changes in beliefs, the parties in conflict begin to believe that the incomparability is reduced or has even disappeared. But in the event of the first change of direction as well as in the second one, the necessary condition for the resolution of the conflict is to unfreeze the frozen beliefs. The unfreezing of beliefs indicates additional cognitive processing. It may entail giving a different meaning to already stored beliefs, reorganization of the belief hierarchy, entertaining new hypotheses, or collecting new information. The important point to be emphasized in this context is that the unfreezing process implies evaluation of beliefs, hypotheses, and/or information that are inconsistent and provide competing alternatives with the desired beliefs. That is, their implications are tested against the appropriate evidence, and if the evidence is logically consistent with the implications, the confidence in the new belief, hypothesis, or information is strengthened. This epistemic process may be repeated in view of new information collected (Krulikanski, 1980). When unfreezing occurs, there is a possibility of adopting new plausible alternative beliefs inconsistent with the stored knowledge (see Krulikanski and Ajzen, 1985; Krulikanski and Klarić, 1983). The unfreezing process is determined by the ability to entertain new ideas and collect new information, the availability and saliency of new information, and the development of the motivation for validity. The first determinant, ability to entertain new ideas, depends on such factors as cognitive structure, intelligence, or creativity (see, for example, Bramford, 1979; Getzels
Recognition of the Relativism of Knowledge

The premises underlying the present paper emphasize the subjective status of knowledge. But one of the consequences of the motivation for specific content that is so dominant in conflict situations is the freezing of certain aspects of knowledge. Each of the parties involved is totally confident about the "real facts" relevant to the conflict. These "facts" are desirable and congruent with needs. Therefore there is a tendency to accept consistent information and/or entertain hypotheses consistent with the held beliefs and reject inconsistent information or beliefs. The possibility of comprehension and eventual acceptance of the belief that the "truth" of any fact is quite subjective, and that it is plausible to generate alternative truisms, may facilitate the unfreezing of beliefs in conflict situations. The realization that knowledge is subjective and that no one has a monopoly on objectivity may facilitate the acceptance of hypotheses and information that are inconsistent with the held beliefs. In particular, this realization may open the parties in conflict toward the consideration of the arguments, reports, and solutions proposed by each other. The atmosphere in such cases may facilitate the achievement of a solution, since the parties may show patience, respect, thoughtfulness, and understanding toward each other. The acceptance of the principle of relativism indicates that each side in the conflict has a case. Thus, the incompatibility may be reduced by negotiations in which the parties exhibit empathy for each other and openness for new ideas and information. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss various specific ways that might increase the recognition of the relativism of knowledge. But it should be noted that in recent years various techniques of simulation and role playing that may serve this function were developed (see Buchler and Nutini, 1969; Gibbs, 1972; Guetzkow, 1963; Luce and Raiffa, 1957; Rapoport, 1960). Such techniques enable individuals to perceive and/or empathize with alternative cognitions stemming from adopting the perspective of the other parties (see also Hoffman, 1977; Selman, 1980; Stotland, 1969).

The Institutionalization of Information Processing

A second way to facilitate unfreezing is through the enhancement of the motivation for validity by institutionalizing information collection and processing functions. These functions can be performed by governmental research institutions, advisory committees, intelligence agencies, etc. A nation that wants to be able to collect available information regardless of its consistency with its stored beliefs, and to entertain alternative plans, goals, or solutions, has to institutionalize frameworks that will perform these functions. These frameworks provide the decision makers with information and ideas that could not be produced and/or collected in their absence. The availability of the new information and alternative ideas is a primary condition for the unfreezing process. Although their availability does not ensure the unfreezing process, their saliency is often hard to disregard. Generally speaking, the development of such frameworks emerges as a consequence of a fear of making invalid decisions. Such fears become salient when nations perceive the overwhelming cost of making mistakes in a selected sequence of international decisions. Information collecting and processing frameworks are therefore established with a mandate to absorb in particular information that may be inconsistent with the predominant conception held by the policy makers. Quite often the representatives of these frameworks are called upon to play the "devil's advocate" in order to propose new interpretations, innovative alternatives, and inconsistent views.

In cases in which the decision makers do not expose themselves to inconsistent information, they will have difficulty unfreezing their beliefs. When the advisers either hold the same beliefs as the decision makers or are afraid to express beliefs inconsistent with those of their superiors, then the unfreezing process is hindered. Also, the decision makers' motivation for specific content may be so strong that they resist accepting any inconsistent information (see Jervis, 1976, for examples). In this vein, Janis (1972) described a similar tendency occurring especially among a cohesive group of decision makers. He coined this phenomenon "groupthink," defining it as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (p. 9). Janis goes on to suggest ways in which groupthink can be prevented. A leader should encourage dissidence, call on each member of the decision maker's group to be critical, and renounce those members who voice adverse criticism of a favored plan. Furthermore, a leader should not present a favored plan or recommend a solution at the outset, but should initially only describe the problem. Finally, Janis suggests that a routine procedure should be established whereby several independent groups would work on the same problem. With such a practice, he believes that a consensus arising out of motivation for specific content will develop prematurely.

In recent decades, in addition to the traditional agencies for the collection of information within the governmental and military frameworks, institutions of a new type have been established for collecting information and providing ideas. These institutions in organizational contexts, research corporations, or university research centers, of which RAND serves as a good example, use distinctive methods to analyze various international conflicts and provide the decision makers with useful knowledge (e.g., Horowitz, 1970; Lyons and Morton, 1965; Rapoport, 1967; Smith, 1966; Wilson, 1970).

Even with these institutions and methods, in some situations the motivation for specific content is especially strong due to central needs that influence the information processing and thinking. In such cases one possible way to reduce the effect of this motivation is either to satisfy or change the underlying needs.

Change of Needs

The preference for certain beliefs can be disregarded as serving various needs of the parties in conflict. These needs in the form of wishes or fears affect the epistemic process. In order to fulfill the wishes and/or to avoid the fears, the parties in conflict may freeze on the preferred beliefs and become motivated for specific content. In other words, the preferred beliefs are functional for the fulfillment of wishes.
and avoidance of fears for the parties in conflict. This position figures also in the functional theory of attitudes proposed by Katz (1960) and by Smith, Bruner & White (1956) who suggested that held attitudes may serve functions for the individual in that case the wishes and/or fears no longer fuel the motivation for specific content. For example, a conviction that the security needs of the Israelis are satisfied may open them to consideration of new alternative solutions in their conflict with the Palestinians.

In principle, even when conflicts are peacefully resolved, the solutions rarely satisfy the wishes and remove the fears completely. The solutions of the German-French conflict or the Polish-German conflict still leave unsatisfied needs. Yet it should be noted that the centrality and saliency of the wishes and fears may change from time to time. At some periods, the needs may be partially satisfied. Thus in the process of conflict resolution it is necessary to convince the parties in conflict that their needs are satisfied or deemphasize the centrality of those needs.

Finally, in some periods of time the saliency of needs may decrease as a function of the emergence of a more immediate need. The "common enemy" or "super goal" may be cases in international affairs. In the former situation a perceived new fear becomes more central and may attenuate the importance of the previous need. The wish to survive in face of a new threat may distract the group from preoccupation with the previous threat. An example of such a situation is the reconciliation between the Soviet Union and the United States during the 1960s in the face of the threat from Germany, the new powerful enemy. In such a case, the change in specific needs, as reflected in the change of the goal, fostered new information processing about the ex-rival group. The openness may include the opportunity to interpret held beliefs differently and collect new information that in turn may greatly affect the relationship between the two nations in conflict.

Epistemic Authority

It is recognized that the change of beliefs may occur without external intervention either on the basis of the flow of new information or as a result of the reevaluation of the stored beliefs. But unfreezing under these conditions is rare and often takes a long period of time. The parties in conflict have difficulty unfreezing their beliefs because of their motivation for specific content. Inconsistent information is disregarded or distorted and individuals utilize various mechanisms of denial to uphold the desired belief (Kruglanski & Klar, 1989). In order for inconsistent information to be processed it has to be either so salient and powerful that it can't be ignored or, as will be discussed later, come from an epistemic source. In the former case the mass media, especially television, may play an important role in supplying salient information. The shift in American public opinion with regard to the information brought by the mass media is an example. Holsti and Rosenuan (1979) have pointed out in this vein regarding the beliefs of American leaders that "coherent and internally consistent belief systems tend to be self-perpetuating. Because of the ambiguity and uncertainty that characterize so many important issues in international relations, leaders with competing belief systems are likely to see what they expect... It may well take some dramatic international developments—on the scale of another Pearl Harbor or Vietnam War—to bring about rapid convergence of a new set of unifying beliefs about international relations and American foreign policy" (p. 56).

In most of the cases the conflict resolution requires intervention of an epistemic authority. Epistemic authority is a source from which a given proposition or information may exert a determinative influence on the tendency to accept inconsistent information and/or entertain and generate rival alternative solutions (Kruglanski, 1980b). The ideas and information from the epistemic authority cannot be disregarded. They influence the epistemic process by "forcing" the unfreezing of the desired beliefs. In order to fulfill these functions the epistemic authority, if it does not employ coercive power, has to be perceived as credible and must be trusted. The epistemic authority may influence only one party to the conflict to change the held beliefs or it may serve as a mediator between the two parties in conflict and change the beliefs of both of them. In order to perform the latter role, the epistemic authority has to be perceived as credible and trustworthy by all the parties in conflict. The epistemic authority takes the form of the third party that tries to influence one party to conflict or mediate and intervene between the two parties. A number of theorists have conceptualized the roles of the third party as mediator in international conflicts (e.g., Burton, 1969; Doob, 1970; Druckman, 1973; Fisher, 1978; Franck, 1968; Kelman and Cohen, 1979; Rubin, 1980a; Young, 1967). For example, Burton (1969) suggested that "misunderstandings can be cleared up by a third party, the disputing parties are more inclined to listen to each other, emotional level can be reduced, the possible solutions can be better articulated, so that solutions reflect basic issues and not these relations, and alternative viewpoints can be put forward in ways that allow the parties to move away from stances that have been adopted" (p. 61).

The functions of the third party can be performed in different ways. According to Burton (1969), the third party may fulfill the following roles: (a) judicial settlement in which the power of decision is transferred to an authority that rules on the basis of a law; (b) arbitration service in which the authority settles a dispute on the basis of law and nonlegal arguments; (c) conciliation help, which includes some information and/or encourages the parties that may lead to agreement; (d) mediation intervention, which consists of presenting the cases of the parties to each other; (e) good offices service, which implies passive mediation as an observer who ensures the conduct of the negotiation; (f) supportive technique, which consists of an intervention in which the third party helps to identify the problem and provides insight to possible solutions; (g) controlled communication in which the third party plays a neutral function of establishing the conditions in which negotiation can take place; (h) negotiations, which occur when the third party merely helps to assess the goals and means of the parties in conflict in order to find a solution.

Thus, the epistemic authority can not only provide new information, reinterpret various beliefs, introduce new alternative hypotheses, change hierarchies of goals and needs, and suggest solutions, but also may help to create an atmosphere in which peaceful solutions are more likely to be sought and accepted.

The roles of epistemic authority can be filled by different agents, such as a private individual, a public figure from the mass media, a religious group, an organization, an institution, a state, or several states. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss the uses and disadvantages of each of the possible epistemic authority agents, but the literature has dealt extensively with this issue.

Modern history provides the following examples of third parties intervening as epistemic authorities that played an important role in settling international conflicts. Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in his
Shuttle diplomacy in 1974 between Egypt and Israel and between Syria and Israel, arranged the disengagement agreements to separate their military forces. The International Court of Justice in The Hague judged in 1959 the dispute between Belgium and the Netherlands over two plots of land, ruling in favor of Belgium. The United Nations in 1962 mediated successfully in a conflict between the Netherlands and Indonesia over West Iran, which was transferred to Indonesia. In 1962 the Organization of American States (OAS) mediated in the dispute between Bolivia and Chile over the construction of a dam on the Lauma River. Between 1951 and 1966 the World Bank successfully mediated the dispute over Indus canal waters between India and Pakistan. Finally, following the Sino-Indian War in 1962 a Colombo Conference involving Burma, Indonesia, Cambodia, Egypt, Ghana, and Ceylon tried unsuccessfully to establish a possible basis for bilateral negotiations by the opposing parties (see Butterworth, 1976).

In sum, the epistemic authority may increase the motivation for validity, in which case, due to the authority, new information is absorbed by the parties, new interpretations are entertained and new beliefs may be generated (regardless of their consistency with the held beliefs). The epistemic authority may also change the relative importance of the goals, intentions, and/or plans of the parties involved either by introducing new information or alternatively bringing about a perception that the relevant goals are achieved. Eventually, the epistemic authority may open the parties to new information, ideas, and solutions that may reduce the incompatibility between the groups in conflict.

Conclusion

The present paper outlines a cognitive-epistemological approach for an analysis of international conflicts. This approach assumes that the international conflict as a phenomenon exists in the minds of the individuals. They begin to believe that the conflict breaks out and then form beliefs regarding its background and its course, beliefs regarding strategies and tactics to overcome it and beliefs regarding solutions to resolve it. The development of the conflict and the possibility of resolving it depend on the knowledge acquired by the decision makers, their capacity to collect information and entertain ideas, their epistemic motivation and the availability of information. In the same way that a conflict is created in the minds of people the solution of the conflict is also a product of the epistemic process. A solution of the conflict requires changes in the beliefs of the parties involved.

It should not be inferred that conflicts are fruits of the imagination and political, economic, historical, or other factors are of minor importance. The conflicts are real for the individuals concerned who sometimes suffer immensely in consequence of them. The political, economic, historical, and other factors exist. But their meanings and effects are attributed and inferred by the individuals. The individuals' perceptions are subjective and the beliefs formed constitute “reality” for the individuals involved. Furthermore, the beliefs that the individuals form determine the actions that they take.

These propositions suggest that the psychology of the parties in international conflicts, as exhibited in the cognitive-epistemological approach, plays an important role in the understanding of the dynamics of international conflict. The acceptance of the propositions presented within the framework requires attention to the principles that are applicable to an epistemic process in any situation. Just as the conflict becomes a "reality" through the cognitive processes of the parties involved, so its resolution depends on the cognitive changes following the unfreezing process.

Notes

1. Although the analysis presented of the cognitive basis of a conflict can be applied to any intergroup relations, the present paper refers to international conflict only.
2. See for example the description of the services performed by Kissinger (e.g., Rubin, 1940b); the mass media (e.g., Davison, 1974); a controlled communication workshop (e.g., Burton, 1969); The Court of the European Communities (e.g., Feld, 1964); The International Court of Justice (e.g., George, 1971); or the United Nations (e.g., Raman, 1977).