

## Is the “frozen conflict” beginning to “thaw”?

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### Abstract

Since 2023, as the Russia-Ukraine war has become stalemated, the concept of “frozen conflicts” has re-entered the discourse of international mainstream media, with officials and think tank experts from various countries frequently invoking the term. Although the causes of “frozen conflicts” vary and the West’s degree of involvement in each conflict differs, Russia is often the target of unanimous accusations by Western officials and scholars in many contexts. In fact, the concept of “frozen conflicts” constitutes a “discourse trap” that suffers from inherent deficiencies and is currently exhibiting a trend of overgeneralization. When confronted with propositions advanced by the West—which is adept at “coining terms”—such as “frozen conflicts,” “Thucydides Trap,” and “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics,” China and other non-Western countries need not prove their innocence, but rather should maintain a clear-headed approach and constantly keep their national interests in mind.

### Full Text

#### Are Some of the “Frozen Conflicts” Beginning to “Thaw”?

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**Abstract** Since 2023, as the Russian-Ukrainian war has become stalemated, the term “frozen conflicts” has re-entered international mainstream media discourse, frequently invoked by officials and think-tank experts worldwide. Although the causes of these “frozen conflicts” vary and Western involvement differs across cases, Russia is often the target of collective blame from Western officials and scholars. In reality, the concept of “frozen conflicts” constitutes a “discourse trap” with inherent deficiencies that is currently being applied with increasing generality. Confronted with such Western-coined concepts as “frozen conflicts,” “Thucydides’ Trap,” and “the tragedy of great power politics,” non-Western

countries like China need not prove their innocence but should maintain clear-headedness and remain steadfast in prioritizing their national interests.

[**Keywords**] Frozen Conflicts; Russia-Ukraine War; Discourse Trap; International Communication; Think Tanks

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Since 2023, as the Russia-Ukraine war has become stalemated, the term “frozen conflicts” has re-entered mainstream international media discourse, frequently invoked by officials and think-tank experts worldwide. What, then, constitutes a “frozen conflict”? And are these conflicts now beginning to “thaw”? This paper attempts to address these questions.

## 1. Hot Topic: “Frozen Conflict”

In Western discourse, “frozen conflicts” generally refers to situations where active armed hostilities have ceased but no peace treaty or political framework satisfactory to the combatants has been reached. In legal terms, such conflicts may resume at any time, creating an environment of insecurity and instability. As an international relations term, “frozen conflicts” is typically applied to post-Soviet disputes but is also frequently used for other persistent, unresolved territorial conflicts. In the post-Soviet space, frozen conflicts exist in Transnistria (also known as the “Left Bank” region), Nagorno-Karabakh (abbreviated as the Nakhchivan region), Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. In Asia, the Kashmir conflict, the Korean conflict, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are considered to fit this definition. Additionally, the Cyprus and Kosovo conflicts in Europe are widely regarded as frozen conflicts.[1]

Ukraine has been associated with “frozen conflicts” since 2014, with related discussions appearing regularly in the press. Following the Crimea incident, on November 6, 2014, several experts from the Kennan Institute at the Wilson Center published an article in *The National Interest* asserting that Ukraine would face a “frozen conflict” and offering multiple policy recommendations for how Kyiv might escape this predicament.[2] After the Russia-Ukraine conflict erupted, on May 26, 2022, Mathew Burrows and Robert A. Manning from the Atlantic Council co-authored a piece arguing that Ukraine was heading toward a “frozen conflict” and outlining three possible scenarios for the coming two years with different global implications.[3] In the same month, analysts from the International Crisis Group and the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) expressed similar views in an interview with NPR.[4] As the key Ukrainian city of Bakhmut was about to fall, *Politico* reported on May 18, 2023, citing multiple anonymous sources, that the Biden administration was planning for the increasing likelihood that the war would transform into a multi-year “frozen conflict,” with discussions of interim borders already underway within the White House.[5] Simultaneously, the Ukrainian government issued a strongly worded statement declaring it would “never accept any proposals involving territorial loss or frozen conflict.”[6] Evidently, over the past decade, the term “frozen

conflicts” has become a recurring mantra among Western officials and scholars discussing Ukraine.

## 2. Cool Reflection: “Discourse Trap”

Although the causes of “frozen conflicts” vary and Western involvement differs across cases, Russia is frequently the object of collective blame from Western officials and scholars. On February 13, 2015, Christopher Walker, Vice President for Studies and Analysis at the National Endowment for Democracy, and co-authors published “Putin’s Frozen Conflicts” in *Foreign Policy*, arguing that Russia seeks to use frozen conflicts to exert influence over its neighbors and prevent them from moving closer to the West.[7] On November 14, 2022, *The Economist* “predicted” that some frozen conflicts might begin to “thaw” in 2023 due to Russia’s “weakness.”[8]

Russian experts have responded to these accusations. Following the Crimea crisis, on March 2, 2014, Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, pointed out incisively that Moscow was largely reactive in the early stages of the crisis, which represented perhaps the most dangerous moment in European history since the Cold War’s end and could fundamentally alter Russia-West relations while shifting the global balance of power.[9] On the first anniversary of the Minsk II agreement, on February 26, 2016, Sergey Karaganov, Honorary Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and founder of the Valdai International Discussion Club, stated in an interview with *Novoye Vremya* that Russia was fighting for its security and sovereignty, that war was inevitable if Western institutions expanded into Ukraine, and that the Ukrainian crisis represented one of the delayed effects of the Soviet Union’s dissolution.[10] After the high-profile Russia-U.S./NATO security dialogue concluded, on February 1, 2022, Alexander Baunov, Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, observed that Russia had behaved not like a country preparing for war but like one capable of doing so when necessary, and that its goal of blocking NATO expansion was genuine, particularly regarding Ukraine.[11]

Regarding this war of words between the West and Russia, Henry A. Kissinger—who previously served as U.S. Secretary of State and National Security Advisor—delivered a speech on U.S.-Russia relations at the Gorchakov Foundation in Moscow, later published by *The National Interest* on February 4, 2016. He noted that in both countries, the mainstream narrative places all blame on the other side, with both exhibiting a tendency to demonize the opposing nation or its leaders. The danger today lies less in the return of military confrontation than in the consolidation of “self-fulfilling prophecies” in both nations. Ukraine needs to be embedded within European and international security architecture to serve as a bridge between Russia and the West rather than an outpost for either side. In the emerging multipolar order, Russia should be regarded as an important element in any new global equilibrium rather than primarily as a threat to the United States.[12]

Some observers argue that the concept of “frozen conflicts” suffers from inherent deficiencies. In a May 2016 policy brief from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Neil Melvin and colleagues contended that the term “frozen conflicts” should be avoided, arguing that conflicts causing casualties should not be labeled “frozen” but rather “protracted.”[13] In early February 2022, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu similarly stated at an international conference that a conflict is a conflict, and that labeling the Russia-Ukraine tensions a “frozen conflict” is misleading.[14]

Currently, the concept of “frozen conflicts” shows signs of overgeneralization. On September 22, 2010, Simon Tisdall published an article in *The Guardian* titled “This dangerous new world of self-interested nations,” arguing that in a post-ideological, non-interventionist era marked by the rise of emerging “self-interested great powers,” an increasing number of intractable conflicts might be described as “frozen.” Tisdall proceeded to reference Somalia’s governance problems, Myanmar’s political system issues, and ethnic and religious problems in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Turkey, Russia, and other states. In short, for Tisdall, “frozen conflicts” became a catch-all category into which anything could be thrown. Notably, in this problematic argument, China was not only labeled a so-called “self-interested great power” but was also assigned multiple so-called “frozen conflicts.”[15]

### **3. Implications: Facing Western Accusations, Non-Western Countries Need Not “Prove Their Innocence”**

Since the advent of globalization, the West has leveraged its advantages in technology, institutions, and other domains to unscrupulously pursue hegemony and extract benefits, all while placing itself at the center. “Discourse hegemony” has served as a vanguard for realizing Western objectives. During the colonial era, Western colonizers fabricated the so-called “standard of civilization” to justify barbaric treatment and cruel plunder of colonized peoples. After the Great War of 1914-1918, the West established the discipline of international relations to help coordinate contradictions among the great powers. Since 1945, as the United States became leader of the Western world, international relations has transformed into an important tool for America and its allies to set the global agenda, with unverifiable and unfalsifiable “grand theories” such as “American exceptionalism,” “democratic peace theory,” and “hegemonic stability theory” taking center stage. Today, when facing emerging non-Western countries—the so-called “Other”—some Western scholars lament “the tragedy of great power politics” and question “Can China and the U.S. avoid the ‘Thucydides’ Trap?”

Looking back at history, what crime did colonized peoples commit other than the “crime of possessing a jade tablet” (i.e., possessing something valuable) when confronted with colonizers shamelessly promoting the “standard of civilization”? Today, when discussing concepts like “frozen conflicts,” “Thucydides’ Trap,” and “the tragedy of great power politics,” we must maintain clear-headedness and constantly remember our national interests. Particularly when facing “dis-

course traps” set by a West skilled at “coining terms,” we need not prove our innocence. Instead, we might ask where these concepts originate, whom they serve, whether they possess theoretical foundations, and whether they can withstand practical and historical testing. In fact, the “standard of civilization” has long been consigned to the dustbin of history, while theories like “American exceptionalism,” “democratic peace theory,” and “hegemonic stability theory” have faced criticism from scholars worldwide for years. Moreover, although the “theoretical” or “hypothetical” nature of the “Thucydides’ Trap” is often forgotten, its architect, Graham Allison, candidly admits in his book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* that “the purpose of my research is to explore a phenomenon, not to propose some iron law or create a dataset for statisticians.”[16] As for “the tragedy of great power politics,” American scholar Richard Ned Lebow delivered a heavy blow to its originator in *Why Nations Fight: The Past and Future of War*, unsparingly noting that “all of John J. Mearsheimer’s predictions about the post-Cold War world have been wrong.”[17]

Are frozen conflicts beginning to “thaw”? This is indeed a question. Yet as long as we remain grounded in our own soil, people, and spirit, we will surely be able to answer it well.

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