Stealth Conflicts: Unpacking the Causes of Underreported and Invisible Wars

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Abstract: This study aims to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions that contribute to categorizing certain conflicts as "stealth," meaning significant yet underreported or overlooked, as opposed to conflicts well-covered by the media. Focusing on cases in Asia and Africa from 2014 to 2024, the research employs qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to assess six conditions for the conflict to be recognized as a stealth conflict derived from Hawkins' theory which explains that conflicts are overlooked when key actors (policy makers, media, the public, and academia) are not engaged due to factors such as national/political interest, geographic proximity and access, ability to identify with conflict participants, ability to sympathize with victims, simplicity (how easy it is to understand a conflict) and sensationalism (involves events that are dramatic and attention-grabbing). Our findings suggest that a lack of simplicity and limited sensationalism are key factors in hindering the visibility of conflicts, especially in regions like West Papua and Balochistan. The analysis reveals that there are two necessary conditions and three sufficient conditions that influence the visibility of conflicts.

Keywords: armed conflict, conditions, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), stealth conflict, violence

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, civil wars and armed conflicts have emerged as crucial area of study within security studies, drawing increasing attention from scholars and policymakers alike (Newman and DeRouen 2014). While occasionally overlooking specific armed conflicts, researchers in conflict and security studies have frequently revisited certain civil wars and their enduring impacts. Among the most extensively analyzed are the wars in the former Yugoslavia, which shattered the Balkan region, the brutal conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, such as those in Sierra Leone and Rwanda, and the enduring turmoil in the Middle East, including the protracted Israel/Palestine conflict and the recent devastating civil war in Syria (Hawkins 2016; Johansson 2016; Engelhardt 2020; Brenner and Han 2022). These conflicts not only underscore the complexity of modern warfare but

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also illuminate the persistent challenges of achieving lasting peace and stability in post-conflict societies. The international community's attention to various armed conflicts varies significantly, and this disparity is mirrored in media coverage. The selection of conflicts that receive media attention is influenced by numerous factors, including the availability of information, audience demand, the interests of media owners, and the level of democracy in the affected region (Zhukov and Baum 2016, 2–6). Arafat, Khan and Qadri (2021) emphasize that proximity, whether cultural, political, or economic, plays a crucial role in determining media interest in a conflict. On a global scale, however, the coverage of conflicts is highly selective. Not all high-intensity conflicts receive equal media attention or are covered adequately. In fact, the studies have shown that there is only a limited correlation between the severity of armed conflicts and their coverage in Western news media (Jakobsen 2000; Hawkins 2011). This selective attention underscores the complex dynamics of media coverage and its influence on public perception and international response to armed conflicts around the world. In this context, Wasserman (2021) advocates for a shift in how conflict is perceived by the media, particularly in societies undergoing democratic transitions. Rather than framing conflict as something to be avoided, he suggests it should be recognized as an integral part of the democratization process. He argues that the media has a critical role in shaping public understanding of such conflicts, promoting a more ethical approach to reporting that prioritizes collaboration, listening, and the inclusion of marginalized voices. Wasserman's perspective challenges the tendency for sensationalized and divisive reporting, urging journalists to engage more deeply with the democratic processes at stake in conflict regions (Wasserman 2021, 1–21).

Several authors argue that African armed conflicts are among the most neglected globally. Hawkins (2016) asserts that key actors such as the media, academia, and policymakers largely ignore these conflicts, despite the staggering statistic that up to 88% of all conflict victims are from Africa (Hawkins 2016, 44).[1] The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) echoes this sentiment, frequently highlighting African conflicts in its annual reports as some of the most overlooked crises. The NRC particularly emphasizes the dire situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which remains a textbook example of international neglect (NRC 2022). An intriguing aspect of this discussion is the research conducted by Brenner and Han (2022), who offer a contrasting perspective by stating that conflicts in Southeast Asia are among the least covered in scientific literature from 1990 to 2018. Despite the region having fewer conflicts compared to Africa or the Middle East, the academic coverage is disproportionately low. Brenner and Han highlight that the number of scientific articles on Southeast Asian conflicts is significantly lower than those on conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, America, Eastern Europe, or South Asia (Brenner and Han 2022, 6). That these armed conflicts are often neglected was also demonstrated by Hensengerth (2011).

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1   In this context, the term "victims" refers to individuals who are affected by armed conflicts, which can include those who have been killed, injured, displaced, or otherwise harmed.

A significant body of research into neglected and stealth conflicts focuses on analyzing media coverage to determine which conflicts receive more attention than others (Aday, Livingston, and Hebert 2005; Griffin 2010; Yousaf 2019). These studies often identify conflicts that are highlighted prominently and those that are overlooked. Hawkins (2016) identifies key conflicts such as those in Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine, Lebanon, Yugoslavia, and East Timor as receiving substantial media attention, which, in turn, crowds out coverage of other, less-publicized conflicts. This skewed attention leads to a disparity where the media focus on a few conflicts diminishes the visibility of numerous other crises. While some research addresses the reasons behind the lack of media coverage for specific conflicts in Western media (Brenner and Han 2022; Robie 2013; Zhukov and Baum 2016), there is a notable scarcity of studies exploring why particular conflicts are extensively neglected not just by the media, but also by academia, policymakers, and the public. This multifaceted issue is explored in the works of Darcy and Hofmann (2003), Hawkins (2016), and Johansson (2016). Hawkins (2016) presents a nuanced theory involving six distinct factors that contribute to neglecting some conflicts while others receive significant attention. His theory highlights the interplay of various elements, including geopolitical interests, or public engagement, that shape the differential attention given to global conflicts. This article aims to advance the scholarly discourse on conflict coverage by examining why specific conflicts remain obscure while others garner extensive academic, political, and media attention. Although several case studies have been explored to study this issue, a comprehensive analysis involving a broader range of conflicts is missing from the literature. This study aims to identify the necessary or sufficient conditions for a conflict to be categorized as a "stealth conflict," using Hawkins' (2016) theory, which will also serve to test the applicability of the theory itself. The research focuses on determining whether a conflict is considered "stealth" due to inadequate coverage or whether it receives significant media and academic attention, thus being classified as "chosen." The research focuses on conflicts from the past decade, spanning 2014 to 2024, to uncover the reasons behind the selective neglect of some conflicts. Understanding these dynamics not only enriches our knowledge of media and academic biases but also has practical implications for policymakers and humanitarian organizations, helping to address gaps in conflict response and international support.

Theoretical Framework

Over the years, many authors have discussed how armed conflicts should be defined and classified. In the broadest terms, a conflict can be understood as a state of competition between two or more actors with incompatible interests. However, not every dispute or tense situation qualifies as a conflict. A political conflict, specifically, has distinct characteristics. According to Holsti (1991), an armed conflict must involve actors, with at least one being a state actor; it must also have a clearly defined area of contention, tensions, and actions, which include measures and steps taken by the parties involved. Armed conflict is often defined as a political conflict (within political science) in which at least one party has used armed force (Waisova 2005, 36). Armed conflicts can be categorized in various

ways, most commonly based on their causes (to greed and grievance conflicts), intensity (low, medium and high), or the actors and territories involved (UCDP 2024). For instance, armed conflicts between two state actors are termed interstate conflicts, those between state and non-state actors are called intrastate conflicts, and conflicts involving non-state actors are referred to as non-state or sub-state conflicts (UCDP 2024). This research will focus on interstate, intrastate, and substate armed conflicts, aiming to cover the broadest possible range of conflict types. However, it is necessary to point out that the research focuses on investigating violent conflicts that have resulted in human casualties, regardless of whether these conflicts are of low, medium, or high intensity (UCDP 2024).

Different terms are used for armed conflicts that are insufficiently covered by the media. This mostly means conflicts that remain "unseen" or unrecognized by a wide audience. The terms forgotten, third-class, orphan, silent, ignored, hidden and neglected are very often used (Johansson 2016, 10–15). According to Hawkins (2016), while all these terms attempt to capture the issue of underreported armed conflicts, the term 'stealth' is more apt as it better conveys the essence of these unrecognized and ongoing conflicts. Unlike 'forgotten conflicts,' which often refer to past conflicts, 'stealth conflicts' denote those currently ongoing but fail to receive the conscious attention or response they merit.

Media Images of Conflict

The NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence identifies three key roles of the media during conflicts: vigilant observers, oppositional journalists, and an additional front in the conflict (Szwed 2016, 15). The relationship between media and warfare has grown closer with the rise of mass media, each significantly influencing the other. The Vietnam War exemplifies this, as media coverage of bombings and casualties fueled public outrage and opposition in the U.S. (Griffin 2010, 7–10). Media also serve as propaganda tools, depicting victims and dehumanizing enemies to garner support, a tactic seen since the American Civil War. During the 2003 Iraq invasion, CNN avoided showing casualties to maintain morale, while Al Jazeera highlighted them to undermine American troops (Youssef 2009, 4–10). Aday, Livingston, and Hebert (2005) found that Al Jazeera and American networks, except Fox News, were mostly neutral, but cultural biases influenced their coverage: Al Jazeera was critical, while American networks were supportive (Aday, Livingston, and Hebert 2005, 3–6). Yousaf (2019) noted that media framing is shaped by national interests, with American newspapers linking the Tiananmen incident to pro-democracy protests, whereas Chinese media focused on the incident itself (Yousaf 2019, 129–131). Ritzova and Panayotova (2021) found that media framing in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shapes public perceptions, with Al Jazeera depicting Palestinians as victims, the BBC offering balance, and CNN emphasizing Israel's defense (Ritzova and Panayotova 2021, 72–77). Fong, Ponnan, and de Rycker (2020) observed that Malaysian media provided diverse views on the South China Sea disputes, while Chinese media consistently supported China (Fong, Ponnan, and de Rycker 2020, 52–55). These studies

highlight how conflict portrayal varies across media outlets, reflecting cultural biases and national interests.

Another body of scholarly work focuses on the extent and disparity of media coverage for different conflicts. Brenner and Han (2022) analyze the inadequate media coverage of conflicts in Southeast Asia, while Zhukov and Baum (2016) investigate reporting bias, its variations, and the lack of coverage for certain conflicts. Entman (2007) discusses selection bias in media, explaining how the choice of which conflicts to report and what details to highlight can shape perceptions, making some conflicts seem more important or deserving of attention than others. This selective coverage can lead to a perception that some human lives are valued more than others. Entman (2007) emphasizes the portrayal of well-covered conflicts rather than the neglected ones. Additionally, several researchers examine the CNN effect, which describes how real-time, emotionally charged news coverage by networks like CNN can influence public opinion and pressure government policies, particularly during humanitarian crises and conflicts (Franks 2015; Palloshi 2015; Tomja 2023).

In discussing "media coverage," it is important to clarify that traditionally, the term has referred to information disseminated by established outlets such as television networks like BBC and CNN, as well as newspapers and radio. These traditional media sources have long been instrumental in shaping public perception and framing global events (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, 21–46). In contemporary research, media coverage is often divided into two categories: traditional media (such as print newspapers, television, and radio) and new media (including digital platforms like social media). This distinction is crucial for understanding how conflicts are represented in different contexts. This study focuses specifically on the coverage provided by traditional media outlets such as BBC and CNN. Furthermore, the rise of new media has transformed how information is disseminated, as these platforms allow for more interactive and real-time engagement with audiences, offering a different dynamic in the way conflicts are reported (Lievrouw 2011, 28–35).

Academic Research of Armed Conflicts

The academic exploration of conflicts in regions like Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa remains significantly limited despite the high frequency and intensity of violence in these areas. As pointed out by Brenner and Han (2022), the number of scholarly articles addressing conflicts in Southeast Asia is far lower compared to other regions, such as Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. This is even though Southeast Asia has experienced numerous significant conflicts over recent decades (Brenner and Han 2022, 6). Hensengerth (2011) further underscores this trend, arguing that Southeast Asian conflicts often fail to receive the academic attention they deserve. In contrast, Engelhardt (2020) notes that Africa, despite being home to a greater number of ongoing conflicts, also faces a gap in scholarly coverage. Many of the continent's long-standing and violent conflicts, including those in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Bu-

rundi, and Egypt, are often neglected in the academic sphere (Engelhardt 2020). Perhaps most notably, the African continent is significantly marginalized in Western academic discourse, receiving limited attention and often being portrayed through narrow or stereotypical lenses that overlook the region's diversity and complexity (Golan 2008; Franks 2010). This marginalization in Western scholarly research not only affects the visibility of African issues on the global stage but also contributes to a gap in understanding the continent's unique socio-political dynamics, economic challenges, and cultural richness. This discrepancy in academic attention reflects a broader issue of selective focus, influenced by global political dynamics and media representation, which tend to prioritize certain regions over others in both public discourse and scholarly research.

This lack of academic coverage, especially in less politically prominent regions, can be further understood through the lens of resource nationalism, as discussed by Wheeler and Hussein. Resource nationalism, particularly in relation to water conflicts, plays a crucial role in driving state policies and international relations. This concept helps to explain why certain conflicts, particularly those over valuable natural resources, receive more attention while others are overshadowed (Wheeler and Hussein 2021, 1216–1218). Allouche (2020) elaborates on how states use the discourse of nationalism to justify policies aimed at maximizing national benefits from natural resources, which can fuel both local and international conflicts. Additionally, the Media Dependency Theory offers valuable insights into the interplay between media narratives and academic research on conflict. The theory posits that by selectively covering specific conflicts, the media shapes public perception and academic priorities. When media coverage is sparse or biased in certain regions, the academic interest in those conflicts diminishes accordingly, reinforcing the neglect of critical issues. Kim (2020) emphasizes that the media's framing of conflicts, whether through omission or distortion, directly impacts the research agenda, perpetuating the cycle of selective academic focus.

Stealth Conflicts

Some scholars refer to neglected conflicts as 'forgotten conflicts.' However, this term is somewhat misleading, as it is often used for modern conflicts that have ended in some form, whether through ceasefires, peace agreements, or outright victories, and are no longer remembered or actively discussed. In fact, even local populations often fail to recall these conflicts (Konecna 2023, 75–79). Darcy and Hofmann (2003) use the term "forgotten conflicts" to describe those the international community has ignored or gradually neglected over time. Generally, these conflicts fail to receive adequate attention from the media or significant international organizations, such as the World Bank (Nielson 2002). This concept aligns with what Hawkins (2016) terms "stealth conflict." There are various reasons why some conflicts become neglected, forgotten, or stealth. Nielson (2002) suggests that the length of a conflict and limited media interest contribute to this neglect. Conflicts that are either too prolonged or very brief tend to lose public interest. Media interest, even during periods of intense conflict, is shaped by reader interest. Sustaining

public interest in prolonged crises in distant locations is challenging. Nielson (2002) notes that many Western press organizations have closed foreign offices and cut non-Western news coverage by 75%. Consequently, attention is primarily given to conflicts near the EU and the US or those connected to 9/11 and terrorism. Tisdall (2019) shares a similar perspective, highlighting the neglect of African conflicts. Narang (2016) identifies additional reasons, emphasizing the political-strategic interests of the UN Security Council's permanent members (P5—Russia, USA, China, UK, and France). Conflicts in states that are not former colonies of the P5 or lack oil fields receive little attention from international organizations. Geographical distance from the P5 also plays a role; conflicts occurring more than 400 miles away are less likely to attract the interest of these key states. Ciobanu (2004) examines the impact of the "Russian factor" on forgotten conflicts in post-Soviet states, suggesting that the spread of misinformation can influence Western media interest and shape how these conflicts are portrayed. Wolfsfeld (2004, 15–23) identified four main factors that significantly affect the level of attention given to conflict events: immediacy, drama, simplicity, and ethnocentrism. His analysis, however, focused specifically on media situated within the conflict zone rather than on external outlets reporting from a distance.

Hawkins (2016) developed the most comprehensive theory of stealth conflict, explaining that the four key actors in his study—policy makers, media, the public, and academia—directly influence each other's agendas and are interconnected and interdependent. If these four actors do not focus on a conflict, it can be categorized as stealth. The actors include policy makers (regional and international organizations, state governments), media, the public, and academia (Hawkins 2016,15–25). According to Hawkins, six primary factors determine whether these actors respond to a foreign conflict. The first factor is national/political interest, which encompasses strategic, military, and economic concerns and is the most crucial in deciding whether to pay attention to a foreign conflict. The second factor is geographic proximity and access; conflicts in neighbouring countries are more likely to affect one's own country and thus attract attention from all four actors. The third factor is the ability to identify, which depends on whether the conflict participants share cultural, historical, religious, or ethnic similarities with Western states. The fourth factor is the ability to sympathize with the conflict victims, particularly if one side is perceived as particularly evil and the other as good, innocent, and helpless. The fifth factor is simplicity; the more straightforward a conflict is to understand, the more likely it is to maintain the actors' attention. Finally, sensationalism plays a role, with dramatic and sensational conflicts, such as explosions, hijackings, and unexpected attacks in peaceful areas, being more likely to capture the outside world's attention (Hawkins 2016, 267–275).

Taylor (2010) criticizes Hawkins' theory of "stealth conflicts" for oversimplifying the dynamics between key actors, such as policymakers, the media, NGOs, and the public, without fully addressing the tensions and complexities in their interactions. He argues that Hawkins underestimates efforts by NGOs and journalists to raise awareness of neglected conflicts like the DRC, suggesting that these attempts to highlight such issues are not sufficiently acknowledged. Additionally, Taylor points out that Hawkins fails to explore

the divisions among actors in "chosen" conflicts, such as those seen in the Gaza conflict, where policymakers, media, and public opinion are often split, complicating the way these issues are framed and reported (Taylor 2010, 201–203). Féron and Voytiv (2022) acknowledge that the factors identified by Hawkins, such as geographic proximity, are important in explaining why certain conflicts attract global attention. However, they argue that other elements, such as the narrative appeal of a conflict and the strategic interests of external actors, also play a significant role in determining its global prominence. These factors extend beyond Hawkins' focus on national/political interests by emphasizing how conflicts are framed and interpreted for global audiences. In this view, even conflicts with no direct political or military relevance to external actors can gain prominence due to how they are strategically presented to resonate with various global actors' agendas, shaping their perceptions and actions regardless of actual involvement in the conflict itself (Féron and Voytiv 2022, 1088–1089). Jangard (2016) critiques Hawkins' theory, particularly its applicability to the role of media in conflict. She argues that Hawkins' framework, which asserts that media coverage directly influences the intensity of conflicts, overlooks several key factors. One such factor is the growing influence of social and digital media, which increasingly shape public perceptions of conflicts. Jangard also highlights the limited scope of Hawkins' theory, which focuses on traditional media outlets while neglecting the impact of celebrity diplomacy in international relations (Jangard 2016, 3–10).

Despite critiques, Hawkins' (2016) theory remains the most developed and modern framework for understanding stealth conflicts. His comprehensive analysis of the dynamics between key actors offers a structured approach to understanding why certain conflicts are neglected on the global stage. While scholars like Féron and Voytiv (2022) emphasize additional factors such as narrative appeal and strategic interests, Hawkins' theory provides a nuanced perspective that directly connects the behaviour of these actors to specific factors like national/political interests, geographic proximity, and the ability to sympathize with conflict victims. These six primary factors offer clear conditions that can be empirically tested and applied, which is why Hawkins' framework is particularly suited for this research. By using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), this study examines how these factors interact and contribute to the neglect of certain conflicts. Hawkins' theory offers a robust starting point for identifying conditions under which conflicts become "stealth," making it an ideal framework for testing the underlying conditions in my research. Moreover, its ability to account for both external and internal dynamics among key actors allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how and why some conflicts fall below the global radar.

Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to explore the conditions, which allow for conflicts in Asia and Africa between 2014 and 2024 be characterized as stealth conflicts. The central research question is: "*What conditions are necessary and sufficient so that a conflict could be referred to as stealth conflict?*" The study aims to evaluate

six factors derived from Hawkins' (2016) theory to determine if any can be deemed necessary or sufficient conditions. For this analysis, the fsQCA software is employed.[2] This investigation is crucial not only because it enhances our understanding of stealth conflicts and potentially guides policymakers in identifying and mitigating these hidden threats, but also because, to date, no comprehensive test of Hawkins' theory has been conducted. Previous studies have only examined individual cases without systematically testing these factors. QCA was chosen for its ability to conduct objective analysis, especially effective for examining a moderate number of cases (20–50) influenced by multiple variables. This method facilitates a detailed exploration of complex relationships and configurations among variables, revealing insights into both necessary and sufficient conditions for phenomena such as water conflicts. Its systematic approach enhances the study's rigor and comprehensiveness, offering a robust framework to identify key factors and their interactions in a structured manner (Ragin 2008, 7–17).

For the QCA analysis, an initial list of potential stealth and non-stealth conflicts was created based on the UCDP (Uppsala Conflict Data Program) database. Drawing on the existing scholarly literature (Hawkins 2016; Johansson 2016; Engelhardt 2020; Brenner and Han 2022; European Commission 2021; NRC 2023), twelve conflicts classified as potential stealth conflicts and twelve as non-stealth conflicts were then selected for further analysis to determine the necessary and sufficient conditions for stealth conflicts. Each stealth conflict had to meet several criteria: it had minimal coverage in scholarly literature, as assessed through Google Scholar; limited visibility in Western media, determined by reviewing online archives from BBC and CNN; and insufficient reflection in policy discussions (which includes the UN archives). To assess policy attention, a thorough document analysis was conducted, reviewing policy reports, official statements, and records from international bodies, including United Nations Security Council (UNSC) archives and resolutions. The occurrence of the conflict was examined within the defined time period of 2014–2024. Conflicts were classified as stealth conflicts if they were mentioned fewer than 30 times in the online archives of Western media outlets, such as BBC and CNN. In contrast, non-stealth conflicts were defined by extensive coverage, with hundreds or even thousands of articles devoted to them, although no strict threshold was applied to this category. In academic literature, the boundary for minimal visibility was set at ten mentions in scholarly databases such as Google Scholar. To assess policy attention, a thorough document analysis was conducted, with a primary focus on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) archives (UN 2024), supplemented by policy reports, official statements, and records from other international bodies. To classify a conflict as stealth, minimal or no mention was required in UNSC records, with a proposed threshold of fewer than five references deemed appropriate for this analysis. Each stealth conflict thus exhibited minimal coverage in scholarly literature, limited visibility in Western media, and insufficient reflection in policy discussions. In contrast, the twelve non-stealth conflicts were

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2   fsQCA is a software tool used for conducting Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). It allows researchers to systematically analyze complex causal relationships by examining combinations of conditions that lead to particular outcomes.

characterized by frequent and extensive coverage across these dimensions. They were prominently featured in scholarly research, widely reported by Western media outlets, and regularly addressed in policy documents and international forums. This distinction underscores the comparative obscurity of stealth conflicts relative to their more widely acknowledged counterparts.

In the study, conflicts are categorized into "stealth" and "non-stealth" based on their visibility and attention in scholarly literature, media, and policy discussions. Stealth conflicts are those that receive relatively little attention and coverage. These include the West Papua Conflict (Indonesia), the Patani Conflict (Thailand), the Cabinda Conflict (Angola), the Ambazonia Conflict (Cameroon), the Darfur Conflict (Sudan), the Nagaland Insurgency (India), the Casamance Conflict (Senegal), the Hmong Conflict (Laos), the Western Sahara Conflict (Western Sahara), the Insurgency in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan), the Kivu Conflict (Democratic Republic of the Congo), and the Insurgency in Balochistan (Pakistan). These armed conflicts are often underreported and less frequently addressed in global discourse. In contrast, non-stealth conflicts are those that attract substantial international attention and coverage. This group comprises the Syrian Civil War (Syria), the Myanmar Civil War (Myanmar), the Israel-Palestine Conflict (Israel/Palestine), the Tigray Conflict (Ethiopia), the Libyan Civil War (Libya), the Boko Haram Insurgency (Nigeria), the Afghan Conflict (Afghanistan), the Kashmir Conflict (India/Pakistan), the Mali Conflict (Mali), the Somali Civil War and Al-Shabaab (Somalia), the Nagorno-Karabakh War (Armenia/Azerbaijan), and the Mozambique Insurgency (Mozambique). These conflicts are extensively covered in scholarly research, media outlets, and policy reports, reflecting their high visibility and significant impact on global affairs (BBC 2024; CNN 2024; UCDP 2024; UN 2024). The remaining conflicts that were not included in the research were excluded for several reasons. They either took place outside Asia or Africa, occurred before 2014 or after 2024, or did not demonstrate even low intensity of violence. Furthermore, some of these conflicts were situated at the intersection of significant scientific, political, or media coverage, indicating that they received more extensive attention compared to the chosen stealth conflicts. Consequently, these conflicts did not meet the specific criteria required for inclusion as stealth conflicts, which necessitates minimal coverage across scholarly, media, and policy channels.

Drawing from the theoretical frameworks outlined in earlier sections, six conditions were identified based on Hawkins' theory (2016). These conditions include national/political interest, geographic proximity and access, ability to identify, ability to sympathize, simplicity, and sensationalism. Detailed descriptions of these conditions can be found in Table 1, titled 'Potential Conditions.' These conditions are operationalized according to theoretical frameworks that suggest their presence might contribute to the emergence of stealth conflicts, albeit in diverse ways. Each case is evaluated for these conditions, with a value of 1 assigned if the condition is present and a value of 0 if it is not. This method allows for a systematic assessment of how each condition potentially influences the dynamics of stealth conflicts. The conditions such as geographic proximity and national political interest are evaluated from the perspective of the Western world, which includes

nations in Australasia, Western Europe, and Northern America (Stearns 2008, 9–19). This Western-centric viewpoint influences how these conditions are rated, as it reflects the priorities and geopolitical considerations predominant in these regions. Geographic proximity, for example, is assessed based on its relevance to Western interests and strategic concerns, while national political interest is evaluated through the lens of Western political dynamics and alliances. Consequently, the application of these conditions may vary when viewed from non-Western perspectives, potentially affecting the assessment of what constitutes a stealth conflict.

Condition	Operationalization
IN – national/political interest	This condition is met (value = 1) if the conflict does not involve a region or issue of significant strategic, economic, or political importance to Western countries, such as critical resources or strategic alliances. Conflicts impacting Western national security policies or trade interests receive a lower rating.
GE – geographic proximity and access	This condition is met (value = 1) if the conflict does not occur in a region geographically close to Western nations or involves areas with strategic military or economic access. Conflicts in regions without direct geopolitical relevance to the West are assigned this value.
ID – ability to identify	This condition is met (value = 1) if the conflict participants do not share significant cultural, historical, religious, or ethnic similarities with Western states, making it easier for Western entities to recognize and relate to the conflict.
SY – ability to sympathize	This condition is met (value = 1) if the conflict is one where Western audiences or policymakers cannot readily empathize with the victims or cause; the opposite is true for conflicts involving humanitarian crises or clear human rights violations. Higher ratings are given when the conflict does not evoke strong emotional responses or is not framed in terms of universal human rights.
SI – simplicity	This condition is met (value = 1) if the conflict is not portrayed in Western sources as having a straightforward and easily understandable narrative, with clear causes and consequences.
SE – sensationalism	This condition is met (value = 1) if the conflict is not frequently depicted dramatically or sensationally in Western media, including exaggerated headlines or vivid imagery.

Table 1: Potential Conditions. Source: Author

Once the cases and conditions were established, the analysis progressed through several critical stages. The initial step involved identifying the essential conditions that had to be consistently present across all sufficient outcome scenarios. This stage involved evaluating both the consistency and coverage of these conditions. Consistency was measured by how often the outcome was a subset of the necessary conditions, ideally approaching a value of 1 but usually above thresholds such as 0.9 or 0.8. Coverage, on the other hand, assessed the importance of each condition by measuring the frequency of the outcome in the presence of the condition compared to its absence. Conditions that met the consistency threshold were deemed to have substantial coverage; otherwise, they were considered less significant, indicating that the set of conditions might be too broad compared to the output

set. Following this, a truth table was created using the analysis software. The next phase involved examining sufficient conditions, with those meeting a consistency threshold of 0.75 being classified as sufficient (Benes and Drulak 2016, 77–85). The approach focused on deriving a parsimonious solution, utilizing logical residues and automated minimization techniques within the software to produce more precise results. This methodological choice was in line with current scientific practices, as highlighted by Toshkov (2020), who argued that only parsimonious solutions can yield reliable causal insights from QCA data due to the inherent monotony in necessity and sufficiency relations. Schneider and Wagemann (2012) support this by noting that parsimonious solutions offer clearer and more accurate causal explanations, thus enhancing the validity and reliability of empirical research. By prioritizing parsimony, researchers can derive more robust and generalizable conclusions across different contexts, contributing significantly to comparative analysis.[3]

QCA Analysis

In the analysis of the 24 conflicts using the crisp set coding approach[4], each case was assigned a value of 1 if it fully met the specified condition, and a value of 0 if it did not meet the condition or only partially met it. The fsQCA 3.0 software was utilized to evaluate the necessary and sufficient conditions, incorporating all six conditions with consideration for both their presence and absence. A condition was deemed necessary if its consistency threshold exceeded 0.9. Additionally, the analysis emphasized the importance of the coverage value, which needed to be relatively high to ensure robust results. The findings revealed that two conditions—Simplicity (SI) and Sensationalism (SE)—can be considered necessary for a conflict to be recognized as stealth. Both conditions exhibited a consistency value of 0.916667, and their coverage values were also notably high, at 0.785714 for Simplicity and 0.846154 for Sensationalism. This indicates that conflicts with low levels of both simplicity and sensationalism tend to be neglected by international actors, rendering them 'stealth' conflicts. Consequently, the presence of these conditions is crucial for the visibility and recognition of conflicts on the global stage. The first necessary condition, Simplicity (SI), was present in all stealth conflicts except for one: Western Sahara. Unlike the other stealth conflicts, which often involve multiple state and non-state actors—sometimes dozens of non-state actors, adding layers of complexity—Western Sahara presents a more straightforward scenario. This conflict is primarily characterized by the opposition between two clear actors: Morocco and the Polisario Front (Besenyő 2017, 23). The rela-

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3   Baumgartner and Thiem (2020) further critiqued alternative solution types, revealing that intermediate and complex solutions often led to causal inaccuracies. Their detailed analysis across multiple inverse search tests demonstrated error rates between 12% and 82%, undermining the accuracy of these solutions (Baumgartner and Thiem 2020, 283–291). Consequently, this research opted for a parsimonious approach to ensure that the findings from the QCA analysis were both reliable and insightful.

4   The crisp-set coding approach for QCA (Qualitative Comparative Analysis) assigns cases to a condition or outcome based on a binary categorization, where each case is either fully in (1) or fully out (0) of a set, with no intermediate values.

tive simplicity of the Western Sahara conflict, with its distinct opposing parties, contrasts sharply with the intricate and multifaceted nature of many other stealth conflicts, where the involvement of numerous actors obscures the transparency and understanding of the conflict. The second necessary condition, Sensationalism (SE), was present in all stealth conflicts except for the Darfur conflict. Darfur stands out because it has been portrayed in Western media with high levels of sensationalism, often highlighting severe human rights abuses, such as widespread rape and violence against children, which contrasts sharply with the generally lower levels of sensationalism typical of other stealth conflicts (BBC 2023). The condition of Geographic Proximity and Access (GE) demonstrated a relatively high consistency value of 0.833333, though it did not meet the necessary threshold of 0.9. This condition was present in most stealth conflicts, indicating that geographic proximity and strategic relevance often contribute to the visibility of conflicts. However, exceptions include West Papua and Western Sahara, where despite their significant geopolitical implications, the conflicts do not fully align with this condition. These cases highlight that while geographic proximity can enhance the salience of conflicts, it is not always a decisive factor in their categorization as stealth conflicts. Detailed results of the necessary conditions analysis can be found in Table 2: Necessary Conditions.

Condition	Consistency	Coverage
IN[5]	0.750000	0.818182
~IN	0.250000	0.230769
GE[6]	0.833333	0.588235
~GE	0.166667	0.285714
ID[7]	0.750000	0.529412
~ID	0.250000	0.428571
SY[8]	0.500000	0.857143
~SY	0.500000	0.352941
SI[9]	0.916667	0.785714
~SI	0.083333	0.100000
SE[10]	0.916667	0.846154
~SE	0.083333	0.090909

Table 2: *Necessary Conditions. Source: Author*

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5   National/political interest.
6   Geographic proximity and access.
7   Ability to identify.
8   Ability to sympathize.
9   Simplicity.
10   Sensationalism.

The analysis of sufficient conditions revealed three distinct configurations that can lead to the emergence of stealth conflicts. Each of these configurations includes at least one of the identified necessary conditions, underscoring their critical role in the development of stealth conflicts. Notably, all three configurations exhibit a solution coverage and consistency score of 1, which is highly significant. Solution coverage measures how well these configurations account for the actual occurrences of stealth conflicts, indicating that they comprehensively encompass all observed cases. Meanwhile, solution consistency reflects the accuracy and dependability of these configurations in predicting the occurrence of stealth conflicts, with a score of 1 denoting perfect predictive power. This implies that the identified configurations not only effectively capture the conditions that lead to stealth conflicts but also provide a reliable framework for anticipating their emergence. The findings highlight the robustness of these configurations in understanding and predicting stealth conflicts, demonstrating their essential role in the broader analysis of conflict dynamics. The results are available in Table 3: Sufficient Conditions.

Configuration	Raw Coverage	Unique Coverage	Consistency
IN*SI	0.666667	0.0833333	1
SI*SE	0.833333	0.25	1
IN*~SY*SE	0.25	0.0833333	1
Solution coverage: 1			
Consistency coverage: 1			

Table 3: *Sufficient Conditions. Source: Author*

The analysis identified three sufficient configurations that elucidate the emergence of stealth conflicts. The first configuration, IN*SI, highlights that low simplicity (characterized by complexity and obscurity) combined with minimal national or political interest from the West leads to some conflicts becoming recognized as stealth. This configuration accounts for eight stealth conflicts in total, though most of these can also be explained by other configurations. Notably, the Darfur conflict is uniquely explained by this configuration alone, illustrating its specific relevance to conflicts with significant complexity and limited Western interest. The second configuration, SI*SE, incorporates both necessary conditions of low simplicity and low sensationalism. This combination results in conflicts being categorized as stealth due to their complexity and lack of dramatic media coverage. This configuration explains the largest number of stealth conflicts—ten in total—and is particularly significant as it includes cases like West Papua, Cabinda, and Balochistan that are not explained by other configurations. The high coverage and perfect consistency score of 1 underscores the importance of this configuration, as it effectively captures the essence of conflicts that are both complex and understated in media representation. The third configuration, IN*~SY*SE, features the negation of the ability to sympathize (SY), which appears somewhat counterintuitive theoretically. Practically, this configuration suggests that a high ability to sympathize, coupled with a low national interest (IN) and

low sensationalism (SE), might lead to a conflict being categorized as stealth. The inclusion of the negation was intended to differentiate some stealth conflicts from non-stealth conflicts, but its practical impact seems minimal. It is likely that another unexamined factor plays a more significant role. This configuration explains only three stealth conflicts, with Western Sahara being the sole case uniquely attributed to it, indicating that other factors not captured in the analysis may also influence the stealth nature of conflicts.

The findings of this analysis are crucial for understanding and addressing the dynamics of stealth conflicts—those that are underreported or overlooked despite their significance. By identifying and validating the necessary and sufficient conditions for these conflicts, the analysis provides a framework for recognizing patterns that lead to the stealth categorization. This understanding is essential for policymakers, international organizations, and humanitarian agencies, as it helps them to better prioritize and respond to conflicts that might otherwise remain neglected. The clarity provided by configurations such as SI*SE, which highlights the role of complexity and low sensationalism, enables stakeholders to anticipate which conflicts might be underreported and to develop strategies to address them more effectively. Moreover, recognizing the unique factors associated with each configuration, such as the low level of sensationalism in Darfur, can guide media and advocacy efforts to increase awareness and prompt action. Additionally, the analysis underscores that not all factors from Hawkins' theory (2016) hold equal significance in predicting stealth conflicts. The varying importance of factors such as Simplicity and Sensationalism reveals that some conditions, like Sensationalism, play a more critical role than others. This differential importance indicates that a nuanced approach is needed when assessing conflicts, as not every factor contributes equally to their stealth nature. Understanding these variations allows for a more targeted and effective approach to conflict identification and management, ensuring that resources and attention are directed towards the most impactful factors in mitigating stealth conflicts.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study of stealth conflicts is a vital area of inquiry within conflict and security studies, as it addresses the discrepancies in global awareness and response to different crises. Focusing on why some conflicts remain underreported or unnoticed is essential because it challenges the status quo of selective attention in international media and policy (Hyun and Kim 2015, 766–768). Media coverage often drives public perception and governmental action, meaning that conflicts lacking visibility may not receive the necessary humanitarian aid, diplomatic interventions, or international pressure required to resolve them (Olson and Journiette 2007, 3–9). Furthermore, understanding the underlying reasons why some conflicts are stealth helps reveal deeper issues of geopolitical interests, media biases, and the prioritization of certain narratives over others. By bringing attention to these neglected conflicts, researchers can advocate for a more balanced and fair approach to global crisis management, ensuring that all affected populations receive the support they need, regardless of the conflict's media profile or geopolitical significance.

The analysis conducted in this study identified two necessary conditions for classifying conflicts as stealth: sensationalism and simplicity. Sensationalism, in particular, underscores the media's role in shaping the visibility of conflicts. It highlights the tendency of media outlets to prioritize dramatic information, including exaggerated headlines or vivid imagery. This focus not only influences public perception but also impacts researchers and policymakers, as the framing of conflicts often drives academic and policy agendas. Media Dependency Theory provides a valuable perspective for understanding this dynamic. According to the theory, media narratives significantly shape academic research priorities and public discourse on conflicts. When conflicts lack sensational framing, they often receive limited attention, which perpetuates cycles of neglect in research and policy. As Kim (2020) emphasizes, the selective framing by the media, whether through omission or distortion, reinforces biases in academic and policy approaches, ultimately leaving certain conflicts marginalized in both scholarship and global responses. Moreover, this phenomenon extends beyond individual researchers' selection of topics; academic journals, too, may prioritize topics that align with mainstream media narratives, thus reinforcing biases in the academic publishing process. As Chomsky and Herman (2008) note, the concentration of media power can narrow intellectual inquiry, favouring conflicts that fit within dominant geopolitical or ideological frameworks, further limiting the diversity of scholarly discourse.

This research provides a thorough analysis of the conditions that determine whether a conflict becomes recognized as a stealth conflict. The study identifies low simplicity and low sensationalism as the essential necessary conditions for a conflict to remain obscure. This means that conflicts perceived as complex, with multifaceted causes and consequences, or lacking in dramatic, emotionally compelling elements, are less likely to attract attention not only from the media but also from policymakers and the academic community. Beyond these necessary conditions, the study uncovers three sufficient condition configurations: the absence of national or political interest, combined with either low simplicity or low sensationalism, and low simplicity combined with low sensationalism. The identification of these configurations highlights the multifactorial nature of stealth conflicts, showing that it is not merely one condition but a combination of factors that renders a conflict underreported and underexplored. The study's findings are robust, with perfect consistency and coverage scores, indicating that the identified conditions accurately account for all examined cases. This comprehensive approach ensures that the study's conclusions are well-supported and applicable across various conflict scenarios, providing valuable insights for media professionals, policymakers, and academic researchers alike.

This study reveals that not all of the factors identified in Hawkins' theory are essential for determining whether a conflict becomes referred to as stealth. Specifically, factors such as the ability to identify with the conflict and the ability to sympathize seem to have limited relevance, challenging the applicability of Hawkins' framework in certain contexts. In the case of Western Sahara, which is the only conflict requiring explanation through the negation condition, it becomes evident that other factors not addressed by Hawkins may be influential. This finding resonates with the critique by Taylor (2010), who argues that

Hawkins oversimplifies the dynamics between key actors and neglects the complexity of their interactions. Moreover, it aligns with Féron and Voytiv's (2022) argument that strategic narrative framing and media representation play a significant role in determining the visibility of a conflict, even in the absence of direct political or military interest. These insights suggest that while Hawkins' theory provides a solid foundation for understanding stealth conflicts, its limitations become apparent when applied to certain cases. This highlights the need for a redefinition or expansion of the theory to incorporate additional factors that better capture the complex relationship between media, politics, and public perception.

The implications of this study's findings are significant for several areas within the fields of conflict studies, media studies, and international relations. Firstly, the identification of key conditions that render conflicts stealth—namely, low simplicity, low sensationalism, and the lack of national or political interest—sheds light on the biases inherent in global conflict reporting and policy prioritization. This awareness is critical for addressing the inequities in international responses, as it highlights how complex and less sensational conflicts are systematically marginalized, even when they involve severe humanitarian crises (NRC 2023, 4). Such understanding prompts a re-evaluation of how international aid and diplomatic interventions are allocated, suggesting that more nuanced criteria, beyond immediate geopolitical interests, should guide these decisions. Moreover, the study challenges academia and the media to broaden their scope and address underrepresented conflicts. The findings underscore the need for scholars to critically examine the forces shaping their research agendas, potentially leading to more inclusive and representative scholarship. This could involve diversifying the methodologies used in conflict studies, incorporating voices from marginalized regions, and challenging the dominant narratives that often focus on a narrow range of conflicts. Additionally, media outlets, driven by sensationalism and simplicity, might reconsider their editorial priorities to include a more comprehensive array of global conflicts, particularly those that do not naturally align with the conventional frameworks of newsworthiness (Boukes, Jones and Vliegenthart 2022, 99–101). The research also has implications for international policy and humanitarian strategies. By understanding the factors that contribute to the invisibility of certain conflicts, policymakers can develop more equitable and proactive approaches to international intervention. This could involve creating mechanisms for ensuring that less publicized conflicts receive adequate attention in international forums, such as the United Nations, and that aid organizations are aware of and prepared to address crises that may not make headlines. Furthermore, the study encourages a reevaluation of diplomatic and strategic priorities, advocating for a global governance approach that is more attuned to the complexities and subtleties of conflicts worldwide, rather than one narrowly focused on immediate national interests or media-driven agendas.

Future research can expand upon these findings by exploring additional dimensions of stealth conflicts. One promising area is the impact of digital media and social platforms on conflict visibility. As the media landscape evolves, new forms of storytelling and information dissemination could alter which conflicts gain attention. Researchers could ex-

amine how digital activism, citizen journalism, and social media campaigns influence the visibility of conflicts that traditional media might overlook. Another important avenue for investigation could be the role of conflict intensity and duration in determining whether a conflict is considered stealth. While the current study primarily focused on factors such as media and policy attention, the severity and longevity of a conflict could also be critical in shaping its visibility. Conflicts of low intensity or those that persist over long periods without resolution may be more likely to fade into the background, despite having significant humanitarian impacts. Additionally, comparative studies across different regions and cultures could provide insights into how local media landscapes and cultural factors influence the reporting and perception of conflicts. Such studies could reveal whether certain regions are more prone to producing stealth conflicts due to cultural biases or media infrastructure limitations. Furthermore, investigating the role of local versus international media in shaping perceptions of conflict could offer valuable perspectives on how narratives are constructed and disseminated globally. Longitudinal studies could also be beneficial in understanding how changes in global political dynamics, such as shifts in power or changes in international alliances, affect the status of conflicts as stealth or chosen. Over time, the international community's focus can shift, reclassifying conflicts in the public and political arenas. Exploring these shifts can provide a deeper understanding of the temporal dynamics of conflict visibility and the factors that precipitate them. By continuing to explore these areas, scholars can deepen our understanding of the complexities surrounding conflict visibility and contribute to more informed and equitable global policy-making. Through such multifaceted investigations, the academic community can better inform international responses and advocate for more comprehensive attention to all conflicts, regardless of their prominence in the global media or political agenda.

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