

TRACK-TWO DIPLOMACY AS A RESOLUTION APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL AND INTER-SOCIETAL CONFLICTS

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ABSTRACT

This work provides a descriptive discussion for one of the new conflict resolution approaches, track-two diplomacy. The study discusses both strengths and weaknesses of the approach in detail, concluding that as a part of broader conflict resolution efforts, track-two diplomacy may be very useful, despite its practical shortcomings, to overcome psychological barriers between the parties, to make them understand their issue mutually, to produce new insights for resolution, and to create a psychological maturity for a negotiated agreement. Thus, it is stressed that track-two diplomacy should be utilized to complement formal negotiation process in resolving international and inter-societal conflicts.

Keywords: Track-Two Diplomacy, Conflict, Resolution, Reconciliation, Peace.

1. Introduction

Constructing a road to durable peace has been a major “engineering” challenge for policy-makers and scholars alike since the catastrophic experience of World War II. To the widely-common view, this is not simply a matter of agreeing to a cease-fire and separating military forces, although such steps may be necessary elements of the process. It is also a matter of identifying the sources of conflict and motivating the right people to act as peace builders. It is the challenge of establishing and nurturing, once peace is achieved, those elements of reconciliation – political, social, cultural – that allow peace to take root and flourish. The literature has been alive with appropriate images, such as charting-paths, using stepping

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stones, laying foundations, paving the way, and building bridges (Solomon, 1996). Even negotiations have been characterized by the transportation metaphor, with “track-one” referring to the official public process and “track-two” to the nonofficial, private one.

Formal negotiation, track-one, is an area that has been explored very well. Much has been written on constructive negotiations as a vehicle to cope with social and international conflicts, as well as to create durable peace agreements (e.g., Fisher and Ury, 1981; Cohen, 1991; Rose, 2002). Overall, despite practical shortcomings or imperfect application, research on official negotiation made great contributions to the process of ending or resolving conflicts peacefully in the post-World War era.

Track-two negotiation, on the other hand, has failed to receive the attention it deserved and hence, largely remained in its infancy. In terms both of research and of application, the strategy had limited utility for the same reason. Even not counting certain academics and conflict specialists, few are aware of the term or processes of track-two diplomacy.

Therefore, possessing a descriptive purpose, the aim of this article is to draw a general picture of track-two diplomacy and to discuss its strength and weaknesses. Starting with defining the concept, the study will elaborate on the application procedure in which expected utilities and probable defects are evaluated in detail.

2. What is Track-Two Diplomacy?

One of the pioneers of track-two diplomacy, both as a theorist and as a practitioner, Joseph Montville, defines the term as “an unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations aiming to develop strategies, influence public opinion, and organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict” (Montville, 1990: 162). The approach is derived from the seminal work of John Burton and Herbert Kelman (Burton, 1969, 1979, 1984; Kelman, 1972), and is rooted in many social-psychological assumptions or expectations that will be mentioned below.

3. How Does the Process Work?

The paradigmatic application of track-two diplomacy is represented by problem-solving workshops. Problem-solving workshops are intensive, private, and non-binding meetings between politically influential (but unofficial) representatives of conflicting parties (i.e., Greek and Turkish Cypriots or Israelis and Palestinians) drawn from the mainstream of their respective communities. For instance, in the work of Herbert Kelman, who has arranged several workshops between the Israelis and Palestinians, participants included parliamentarians, leading figures in political parties or movements, former military officers or government officials, journalists or editors specializing in the Middle East, and academic scholars who are major analysts of the conflict for their societies and some of whom have served in advisory, official, or diplomatic position (Kelman, 1979, 1986).

At times, the ordinary or the young may be the participants of workshops as well. In the US, for example, John Wallach's "Seeds of Peace" program considers bringing youths together from war-torn societies in neutral settings to invest for the future by targeting the young. Yet such examples are not very common.

The number of participants varies, but in general, a typical workshop includes three to six members of each party, as well as a third party. The third party is usually a conflict specialist or an academic who is well aware of the conflict and who possesses third party skills. The third party's communication ability, impartiality, and sensitivity to the needs of the parties serve as the basis of its credibility. Hence, the success of problem-solving workshops also depends, among other factors, on the selection of an appropriate third party. The third party normally does not offer solutions, but assumes a strictly facilitative role.

Meanwhile, recruiting participants is one of the most challenging tasks for the third party. Effective recruitment requires intimate familiarity with the two sides of the conflict and their political elites, establishing links to various network within the communities, and maintaining both parties' trust. Many potential workshop participants may consider approval from their political leadership but recruitment is generally done on an individual basis and participants are invited to come as individuals, rather than as formal representatives.

The composition of the workshop is crucial to its success. Ideally, great care must be taken to choose participants who, on the one hand, have the interest and ability to engage in the kind of learning process that workshops provide and, on the other hand, have the positions and credibility within their own communities that enable them to influence the thinking of political leaders, political constituencies, the media, or local leaders. As mentioned above, the third party's role during workshops is strictly facilitative. The critical task of generating ideas and infusing them into the political process should be done by the participants themselves.

As for timing, conflict resolution literature generally does not offer any specific time for the beginning of the recruitment process. But some research reveals that negotiations in conflict settings, both formal and informal, would be more successful when conflict becomes "ripe". The term ripeness, as used here, refers to the condition of mutually hurting stalemates. A mutually hurting stalemate starts when one side realizes that it is unable to achieve its aims, resolve the problem, or win the conflict by itself. It is completed when the other side reaches the same or similar conclusion. Then each party starts to feel uncomfortable in the costly dead end it has reached and becomes ready for negotiations (Zartman, 1989, 1995).

The recruitment process is completed through snowball method. That is, as a start, one key person on each side is selected. Then consulting with that person, the rest of the team is chosen. An essential part of the recruitment process is a personal discussion with each participant of the purposes, procedures, and ground rules of the workshop before obtaining his or her final commitment to the enterprise (Kelman, 1996; 506).

A typical workshop consists of a preliminary session of four to five hours for each of the parties and joint meetings for several days. The workshops often take place in an academic setting, for universities have the advantage of providing an unofficial, non-binding context, with its own set of norms to support a type of interaction that departs from the norms that generally govern interactions between conflicting parties.

The discussions in problem-solving workshops are completely private and confidential. Hence, there should be no publicity, no record, and even no audience. These features of workshops are designed to enable and encourage workshop

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participants to engage in a type of communication that is usually not available to parties involved in an intense conflict relationship. The third party creates a constructive atmosphere, establishes norms, and makes occasional interventions to ensure the smooth continuation of workshops. Participants are made engage in an open and free discussion in which they address each other, rather than the third party or their constituencies, and in which they listen to each other so as to understand their differing views about their conflict. Overall, the parties are encouraged by the third party to deal with the conflict analytically rather than polemically. This analytic discussion helps them penetrate each other's perspectives and understand each other's concerns, needs, fears, priorities, and constraints.

Once both sets of concerns are on the table and have been acknowledged, the parties are encouraged to engage in a process of joint problem solving. In this respect, they are asked to work together in developing new ideas for resolving their conflicts in ways that would satisfy the fundamental needs and allay the existential fears of both parties. Afterwards, they are asked to explore the political and psychological constraints that have prevented the parties from moving to the negotiation table. A central feature of this process is the identification of the steps of mutual reassurance through displaying a collaborative effort- a non-threatening, de-escalatory language and a shared vision of a common future.

4. Evaluation

4.1. The Strengths of Track-Two Diplomacy: Expected Utilities

First of all, although war and social conflict are societal and inter-societal phenomena which cannot be reduced to the individual level, there are, nevertheless many aspects of international conflict for which the individual represents the most proper unit of analysis. The satisfaction of individual human needs is the ultimate criterion for a mutually satisfactory resolution of any conflict (Burton, 1990). Unfulfilled needs, especially identity and security, breed the conflict, creating barriers to its resolution as well.

By probing beneath the parties' incompatible positions and exploring the identity and security concerns, it may become possible to develop a mutually satisfactory solution. Problem-solving workshops, in this respect, provide a setting in which brainstorming and idea-exchanges can occur. To be more specific,

informal discussions provide an opportunity for the parties to examine the root causes of their conflict, to explore possible solutions out of public view, to identify obstacles to better relationships, and to look at the issues not yet on the official agenda (Diamond and McDonald, 1996: 26). What is more, changes at the level of individuals in the form of new insights and ideas, resulting from the micro-level process of the workshop, can then be fed back into the political debate and the decision-making in the two communities, hence becoming vehicles for change at the macro level.

Second, international conflicts should not be seen merely as an inter-governmental or inter-state phenomenon, but also as an inter-societal phenomenon. Insofar as the conflict is between two societies, it becomes necessary to make peace at the societal level, between ordinary people as well. Peace agreements signed merely at the official level, without considering inter-societal relations, are unlikely to be durable, since ultimate legitimacy is the support and cooperation of the public itself. In that sense, by allowing face-to-face communication, problem-solving workshops may help antagonists arrest the dehumanization process, overcome psychological barriers, and focus on relation building. These points are particularly important, since in almost all inter-societal conflicts, the parties develop a distrust of one another in the form of negative images which, in turn, inhibit the search for a peaceful solution. Hence, re-establishing trust between the parties often emerges as an important pre-requisite for a constructive dialogue.

Third, as mentioned above, track-two diplomacy is not an official negotiation and it is not intended either to simulate or to substitute for official negotiations. However, problem-solving workshops are closely linked to formal negotiations and do play a significant complementary role at all stages of the negotiation process. In the pre-negotiation stage, for instance, such workshops may help create a political climate conducive to movement to the table. In the active negotiation phase, on the other hand, they may help to overcome obstacles to productive negotiations and to frame issues not yet on the table. In the post-negotiation phase, finally, they may contribute to the implementation of the negotiated agreement. In short, it is precisely the non-binding feature of workshops which allows their unique contribution to the larger negotiation process. That is, they create an opportunity for sharing perspectives and exploring options, an

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opportunity not often readily available at the official negotiation table (Kelman, 1996: 501-502).

Indeed, the broader understanding of international conflict as an inter-societal phenomenon requires a broader view of diplomacy, as a complex mix of formal and informal peace efforts. Likewise, conflict resolution requires a wide range of influence processes than those typically employed in international conflict relationships. It is usually necessary to move beyond the influence strategies based on power-supported diplomacy and to expand and refine strategies based on mutual understandings or positive incentives.

Fourth, having and working on the common goal of resolving conflict would enhance bonds among the participants in a number of ways. One is by reducing the salience of group boundaries. That is, people who are working toward common goals are in some sense members of the same group and therefore are not so likely to be antagonistic toward one another. Another is by a reinforcement mechanism. As people work together, each rewards the other and produces a sense of gratitude and warmth in the other. Pursuing a common goal also means that the party sees itself as working on behalf of the other, a view that is likely to foster positive attitudes (Pruitt and Rubin, 1994: 136-137).

Finally, people-to-people interactions also offer an opportunity for conflicting parties to acknowledge and diminish their cultural differences, often seem to be at the heart of the conflict and frustrate the parties' efforts to communicate. As people interact with each other for a reasonably long time, a common language may develop and local variations may equally decrease.

4.2. Practical Applications

As a matter of fact, the practical applications of track-two diplomacy, though the examples are quantitatively limited to reach general conclusions, confirm that the approach possesses a great utility in conflict resolution process. For instance, Herbert Kelman, who conducted many problem-solving workshops between the Israelis and Palestinians throughout the 1970s and 1980s, observed that the workshops allowed the participants to gain insights into the perspectives of the other party, to create a new climate of trust, and to develop greater awareness of how the other party may have changed (Kelman, 1990).

Similarly, Edward E. Azar, who also organized several workshop exercises around the Lebanese and Sri Lankan conflicts in the 1980s, claimed that the workshops allowed the parties to discover their common needs and values, to establish informal networks, and to widen their agendas towards a mutually acceptable solution (Azar, 1990).

The utility of track-two diplomacy was also observed by “The Center for Multi-Track Diplomacy”, a Washington D.C.-based non-governmental organization working for inter-group conflicts as an intermediary, in re-humanizing the relationship between the parties, in analyzing the problem in a freer way, and in generating a wide range of alternatives for resolution (Diamond and McDonald, 1996).

4.3. The Shortcomings of Track-Two Diplomacy

Aside from its strengths, track-two diplomacy has many weaknesses as well, as with any other social-political strategy. The general argument that inter-group interactions push people to revise their negative attitudes can be criticized from many different angles, summarized as follows:

First, there is much research to suggest that informal meetings can only change negative attitudes if certain conditions are met and in the absence of them, interactions between conflicting party members may even exacerbate the existing tension. For instance, according to the research by Miles Hewstone and Rupert Brown, five conditions are particularly important: (1) The contact should be between persons of equal status. (2) The general climate should favor such interaction. (3) The contact should be intimate, not causal. (4) The workshops should be pleasant and rewarding. (5) There should be important common goals (Hewstone and Brown, 1986).

Obviously, in the practical application of track-two diplomacy, these conditions are rarely met. Problems may especially be experienced regarding the issue of finding participants of equal status. In most conflict situations, the power disparity between the parties itself would be a source of inequality as members of the more powerful side tend to view their counterparts as lower-status people, even if there is no great dissimilarity among them in terms of class. Similarly, intimacy appears to be another big issue. In order for problem-solving workshops to be

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effective, they should be a continuing process that requires a reasonably long time. In reality, however, regardless of goodwill, most workshops are arranged on a causal basis because of the limitations of time and other resources.

The second problem is the questionable assumption that conflict is a mistake due to misperceptions, misunderstanding, or ignorance. This might be the case at times and in such cases, problem-solving workshops may produce great successes. But on the other hand, the conflict may also arise out of real, rather than perceived, clash of interests. In these cases, cognitive changes or changes in perceptions may have limited utility to create a resolution unless a successful formula is found to cope with substantive issues that are at the heart of the problem.

Third, it is a fact that the end of the Cold War and the fundamental changes taking place in international relations have changed the character of conflict. The dangers to global peace today do not come from major-state confrontations any more, but from another source: internal conflicts. Internal conflicts involve ethnic, religious, and cultural rivalries, as well as power struggle for dominance and governance. In such conflicts, the heart of the issue is as much about social identity as it is about personal identity. Particularly in a deeply divided social structure, characterized by a long history of conflict, social identity penetrates the personal sphere to such an extent that inter-personal contact per se, even under the most favorable conditions, may have rather limited utility to alter substantially established social relations.

Fourth, embedded enemy images and the psychological tendency for "hypothesis confirmation" may cause individuals to see what they want to see and ignore what they wish to ignore. That is to say, contradictory information may be re-interpreted to confirm negative images about the other side. At best, individual change may occur. After workshops, participants may actually alter their negative attitudes to one another, but the general image of groups may remain unchanged.

Finally, even if everything goes well, what happens to individuals who change their negative images about the other side? How will they be treated when they return to their own communities? If they allow group pressures to overpower their personal experiences, then the meetings will have no practical value. If, on the other hand, they refuse to conform, they are likely to be marginalized and pushed out of their society.

5. Conclusion

As the above discussions attest, track-two diplomacy, as a conflict resolution approach, has both strengths and weaknesses. The weaknesses obviously limit the utility of the approach. But its strengths still provide hope in the name of peace and social harmony.

It has been argued that the greatest value that track-two diplomacy can create is to help the parties in conflict to keep alive a sense of possibility- the belief that a negotiated solution remains within the parties' reach. Also, a continuing workshop sustained and facilitated by a third party can make a great contribution to the larger peace process. It may, step by step, enable conflicting parties to re-humanize the relationship, distill their differences, and come to terms with each other's essential needs.

Likewise, a continuing workshop may push the process of conflict analysis further, allowing for an interactive and cumulative process, based on feedback and correction. The participants may have an opportunity to strengthen, expand, or modify the ideas developed in the course of a workshop through gathering the reactions of their own communities. Further, an ongoing workshop may contribute to the development of shared visions of a desirable future, helping the participants to generate ideas about the shape of a solution that meets the basic needs of both parties, as well as ideas how to get there. Above all, the symbolic nature of workshops is also important, for it represents a voluntary effort to initiate the process of transforming the relationship between former enemies and the hope that one day a new language of dialogue can replace the language of conflict.

It has also been stressed that overall, problem-solving workshops have a dual goal. First, they are designed to create changes in the participants themselves. Individual changes, however, are not ends in themselves but vehicles for fostering change at the policy level. Hence, a second goal of workshops has been argued to maximize the likelihood that the new insights, ideas, and proposals developed in the course of the workshop are fed back into the political decision-making process within each community in conflict.

Overall, the problem we are dealing with, social and international conflicts, is many sided and obviously there is no single, magic formula. The wisest thing to

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do, therefore, is to attack from many directions and to use every single opportunity. Small and informal efforts may not have immediate dramatic effects on the resolution process of a conflict, but they may produce cumulative results over time. In that respect, track two diplomacy has its own utility, despite practical shortcomings, to complement formal negotiations and to be a part of broader peace-building efforts.

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, yeni bir uyuşmazlık çözüm yöntemi olan toplumlar arası diplomasiye ilişkin betimleyici ve analitik bir tartışma ortaya koymaktadır. Toplumlar arası diplomasinin güçlü ve zayıf yönlerini ayrıntılı bir biçimde ortaya koyan makale, uygulamadaki eksikliklere rağmen bu yaklaşımın uyuşmazlık sürecindeki partilerin aralarındaki psikolojik bariyerleri aşmalarına, sorunu karşılıklı olarak idrak etmelerine, çözüm için yeni düşüneler üretmelerine ve psikojik açıdan anlaşmaya hazır bir hale gelmelerine yardımcı olan oldukça yararlı bir yaklaşım olduğu sonucuna varmaktadır. Bu nedenle uluslar arası ve toplumlar arası uyuşmazlıkların çözümünde, toplumlar arası diplomasinin resmi görüşme sürecini tamamlaması gerektiği vurgulanmaktadır.

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