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# Sustained Dialogue in Managing Intractable Conflict

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*In the war-torn new nation of Tajikistan, the author has been part of a five-stage "dialogue" for peace since 1993. The focus of the dialogue has been on transforming relationships and changing relationship dynamics so that this "intractable" conflict can be addressed positively. The author briefly describes this multilevel peace process both historically and substantively. He also discusses the continual process of evaluation of the Inter-Tajik dialogue effort, and focuses on a series of questions that apply to intractable conflicts in general.*

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**B**efore I turn to the specific analytical questions posed for us, let me begin by saying that I will be speaking mainly from three experiences:

- More distantly, I participated intensively in the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace process as an official in the 1970s and then as a citizen outside government in nonofficial dialogues in the 1980s. In the last decade, I have been less involved, except in roles such as observer of the Palestinian elections with the Carter Center and the National Democratic Institute in 1996.
- Through the 1980s, I was founding U.S. co-chair of the Dartmouth Conference Regional Conflicts Task Force with Evgeny Primakov, who later became the foreign minister and prime minister of Russia. I include that

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experience here: (a) because it gave birth to conceptualization of the process that I came to call sustained dialogue; and (b) because the Cold War should probably be counted as an intractable conflict.

- In 1993, the Dartmouth Conference Regional Conflicts Task Force invited individuals from different factions of the civil war which had broken out in the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan shortly after independence in 1991 to enter a space created by the Task Force for dialogue among them. Because the experience of the Regional Conflicts Task Force and the Inter-Tajik Dialogue stimulate the insights that I wish to highlight, I shall begin with a brief description of that experience.

### **A Five-Stage Dialogue Process**

We have conceptualized the experience in the Regional Conflicts Task Force in the 1980s and through countless hours in nonofficial Israeli-Palestinian dialogue as a five-stage process. This is not an artificial construct but rather the conceptualization of that experience, describing how interactions among the same participants in repeated dialogue sessions seem to unfold over time. In the early 1980s, Evgeny Primakov said, “We will begin the next meeting where the last meeting ended.” This made possible developing a cumulative agenda with questions sharpened and carried from one meeting to the next; building a common body of knowledge that participants could test between meetings; and learning to talk and work analytically together. By 1989, we were developing scenarios together to analyze how regional conflicts might evolve and how the superpowers might respond to avoid direct confrontation.

The five-stage framework is not intended as a rigid template but rather as an analytical and working framework to permit moderators and participants alike to understand the progression of relationships in their work together. Those stages are:

- *Stage One:* Either people on different sides of a conflict decide to reach out to each other, or a third party creates a space for dialogue and invites conflicting parties to come together there. People in conflict decide to engage in dialogue — often with great difficulty — because they feel a compelling need to build or change a relationship to resolve problems that hurt or could hurt their interests intolerably. These participants are themselves a microcosm of their communities.
- *Stage Two:* They come together to talk — to map and name the elements of those problems and the relationships responsible for creating and dealing with them. In early meetings, they vent their grievances and anger with each other in a scattershot way. This venting provides both the ingredients for an ultimate agenda and an opportunity for moderators to analyze and “map” the interactions — to understand the dynamics of the relationships. This stage ends — at least for a time — when someone says: “What we really need to focus on is. . . .”

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- *Stage Three:* In much more disciplined exchanges, participants probe the specific problem they have identified with these aims: (1) to name the most pressing problem to reflect the concerns of those affected by it; (2) to probe the dynamics of the relationships underlying that problem; (3) to lay out broadly possible ways into those relationships to change them; (4) to weigh those choices and to come to a sense of direction to guide next steps; (5) to weigh the consequences of moving in that direction against the consequences of doing nothing; and (6) to decide whether to try designing such change.
  - *Stage Four:* Together, they design a scenario of interacting steps to be taken in the political arena to change troublesome relationships and to precipitate practical steps. They ask four questions: What are the obstacles to moving in the direction we have chosen? What steps could overcome those obstacles? Who could take those steps? How could we sequence those steps so that they interact — one building on another — to generate momentum behind the plan for acting?
  - *Stage Five:* They devise ways to put that scenario into the hands of those who can act on it.

The focus is on *transforming relationships* throughout the five stages. In this process of sustained dialogue, there is always a dual focus: Participants, of course, focus on concrete grievances and issues, but always the moderators and participants are searching for the dynamics of the relationships that cause the problems and must be changed before the problems can be resolved.

In this process, the concept of relationship is essential. It is defined rigorously in terms of five components — five arenas of interaction in constantly changing combinations within and between the parties interacting: (1) *identity*, defined in human as well as in physical characteristics — the life experience that has brought a person or group to the present; (2) *interests*, both concrete and psychological — what people care about — that bring people into the same space and into a sense of their dependence on one another — interdependence — to achieve their goals; (3) *power*, defined not only as control over superior resources and the actions of others but as the capacity of citizens acting together to influence the course of events without great material resources; (4) *perceptions, misperceptions, and stereotypes*; and (5) the *patterns of interaction* — distant and close — among those involved, including respect for certain *limits on behavior* in dealing with others.

The story of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue “within the Framework of the Dartmouth Conference,” as participants came to call it, can be told as unfolding in four chapters:

- From March 1993 through March 1994, the group met six times, during which participants moved from being barely able to look at each other to playing a significant role together in paving the way for government and

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opposition decisions in early 1994 to engage in formal peace negotiations under a U.N. mediator. In March 1994, just before negotiations began, they produced their first joint memorandum, “Memorandum on the Negotiating Process of Tajikistan.”<sup>1</sup>

- From April 1994 through June 1997, three Dialogue participants served as members of the two negotiating teams in the U.N.-mediated Inter-Tajik Negotiations. One of them served throughout that period and is now the Deputy Foreign Minister of Tajikistan. Another is Minister of Industry. The third was a vice-chair of the Uzbek Association in Tajikistan, who served on the government team. This period ended with the signing of a peace agreement.
- From July 1997 through February 2000, five participants in the Dialogue served in the Commission on National Reconciliation, which was established in the peace agreement of June 1997 to oversee implementation of the provisions of that agreement. Other Commission members joined the Dialogue when the Commission’s work ended.
- From April 2000 to the present, members of the Dialogue and other Tajikistani citizens formally registered their own non-governmental organization, the Public Committee for Promoting Democratic Processes in Tajikistan. Their strategy is one of peace-building. They are working on four tracks: (1) creating a complex of dialogue groups in six regions of the country, which began by discussing how to integrate the only legal Islamic party in Central Asia into a “secular, democratic” polity; (2) holding public forums on major national issues such as drugs, education, and poverty in major regions of the country; (3) experimenting with three Economic Development Committees in towns particularly torn apart during the civil strife, where deliberative practices are being used to address economic problems in those communities — their own elaboration of building “social capital”; and (4) workshops over two and a half years in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and three professors from each of eight universities, to develop curricula, a text, teaching materials, and courses in resolving conflict and peace-building.

Early in each of these four phases, participants in the Dialogue stated and then restated their objectives, thereby establishing goals against which to judge their progress. In August 1993, they said, “What we need to work on is starting a negotiation between the government and the opposition on creating conditions so refugees can go home.” After negotiations began in April 1994, they asked themselves whether they should continue the Dialogue. Their answer was emphatic: “Yes. We helped to get negotiations started. Now we have to assure that they succeed. Our objective now is to design a political process of national reconciliation in Tajikistan.” At this point, participants assured the government of Tajikistan that the Dialogue would not interfere with the work of the negotiators but would rather think beyond the negotiations and concentrate on ways of preparing the citizens

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of Tajikistan to implement whatever agreements came from the negotiations. After the peace agreement was signed in June 1997, they stated their purpose as establishing the elements of democracy in a “united, democratic, secular, peaceful Tajikistan.” In February 2000, after the end of the formal transition period defined by the peace agreement, their further refined objective is captured in the four-track program of the Public Committee described earlier.

One additional framework has been useful for analyzing this work. Participants in the Inter-Tajik Dialogue in October 1996 coined the phrase “multilevel peace process.” In their joint memorandum following their seventeenth meeting they wrote: “It is necessary to broaden public participation in the efforts to achieve peace by developing a multilevel peace process in order to assure the widest possible involvement in achieving and implementing a peace agreement.”<sup>2</sup> They recognized the importance of the official peace process — the formal negotiations at the top of the political pyramid. They were deeply engrossed in their own “public peace process” involving members of the policy-influencing community, mostly outside government, at the upper-middle level of the body politic. But they also recognized the work in civil society where much of the fighting in the civil war took place. The key for them was the interaction among all those levels.

The formulation, “multilevel peace process,” emerged from an exchange in the Dialogue in which one participant recounted the following experience: He had served with a joint opposition-government commission to negotiate a ceasefire in a region where fighting had cut a critical east-west road. When he had finished his account of negotiations involving field commanders, municipal officials, local elders, and other community interests, another Dialogue participant said: “The reason our ceasefires rarely hold is that they have been negotiated between the president and the leader of the opposition without any reference to the people on the ground with interests at stake and with guns. What we need is a multilevel peace process that connects the local people with the top-level negotiators through working groups.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Judging “Success”: An Ongoing Self-Evaluation**

Within these frameworks — the five-stage process of sustained dialogue, the concept of relationship, and the multilevel peace process — a process of evaluation takes place. In any complex political process, the cause-and-effect relationship between one actor and any outcome in the larger political process may be unknowable with any precision. My bottom line is that building a habit of ongoing self-evaluation into the process of dialogue is far superior to the necessarily unrooted comments of an outside evaluator. There is no judgment more authentic than that of the people whose lives are at stake. Two examples underscore this point:

First, in August 1993, participants in the Dialogue’s third meeting decided to focus on how to start a negotiation between the government and

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the opposition. In the fourth meeting, they discussed in detail how that might be done. They identified as a major obstacle the fact that the opposition was physically fragmented, ideologically diffuse, and geographically dispersed. Pro-government participants asked: "Who from the opposition would join a negotiation? How would we find you to invite you?" Within a month, opposition factions met in Tehran, Iran, wrote a joint platform, and created an opposition coordinating center in Moscow. Two participants in the Dialogue signed that platform, and brought it back to the fifth meeting of the Dialogue. They submitted to two days of questioning by pro-government participants; their answers were written down. The pro-government participants left the meeting saying: "We believe the foundations for negotiation now exist. We will report to our government." A month later, the government accepted the invitation from a U.N. emissary to join U.N.-mediated peace talks.

Did the Dialogue play a role in paving the way for negotiation? Yes, certainly. At the very least, as a senior government official later made the point, it was impossible any longer to argue that talks between the government and the opposition were impossible. Can the Dialogue claim exclusive credit for starting negotiations? No, of course not. Individuals in government and in opposition circles were already struggling with the question of how to end the violence, and the U.N. emissary was pressing on behalf of the U.N. Security Council to begin negotiation. The work of the Dialogue was one factor in contributing to conditions in which a decision to negotiate was made.

Second, in June 1995, the peace negotiations were stymied over the question of how to create an institution to oversee national reconciliation. The opposition for some time had proposed a Commission on National Reconciliation to be created as a supra-governmental organization in lieu of a coalition government, which the government had rejected. The Dialogue produced a joint memorandum containing three options. In one, they suggested positioning a National Reconciliation Commission *under* the authority of the negotiations to oversee the implementation of the peace accord through four sub-commissions.<sup>4</sup> Their very first joint memorandum, "Memorandum on the Negotiating Process for Tajikistan," had recommended that the negotiating teams establish four sub-commissions to deal with such issues as returning refugees, demilitarizing armed elements, economic rehabilitation, and constitutional reform. The purpose was for the negotiators in dealing with these specific problems to begin actual work involving elements of the bureaucracy and the society. That was the pattern which the National Reconciliation Commission ultimately adopted. Can the Dialogue claim credit for designing the Commission on National Reconciliation as ultimately established by the peace agreement? No, the idea had been in the air for some time, although participants in the Dialogue feel that the idea of positioning the Commission under the authority of the negotiating teams originated in the Dialogue itself.

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Finally, evaluation depends heavily on what questions are asked. For instance, a normal evaluator's question might be: Can you demonstrate what impact your intervention had on producing a peace treaty? Our answer is that the Dialogue played a significant role but others probably played a more significant role. It is certainly possible, as one of the long-time participants has done,<sup>5</sup> to document the interplay of ideas between the Dialogue and negotiators or members of the Commission on National Reconciliation, but exactly who gets how much credit for what is unknowable. (I was at Camp David with Presidents Carter and Sadat and Prime Minister Begin in 1978; one of my roles was to produce each of 23 successive drafts of the Camp David Accords. I could not know — and I believe President Carter could not know — exactly who was responsible for each formulation and reformulation in that intense mediating process in which conversations took place around the tennis courts, over meals, and during walks in the woods, as well as around various working tables.)

Another way of posing a question can be found in the first grant proposal the U.S. team wrote to a U.S. foundation<sup>6</sup> at the beginning of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue: "We want to *see whether* a group can form from within a conflict to design a peace process for its own country." Implicit in this approach has been the notion of continuous self-evaluation — evaluation as part of an unfolding open-ended political process. Neither participants nor the moderators have waited for outside evaluation to determine how they were progressing. At each stage, participants in the Dialogue have reviewed their progress and stated a new objective for themselves. They have moved from being barely able to look at each other in the first meeting to producing 21 joint memoranda in 32 meetings. Then together without any initiative from the Russian-U.S. team, they have formed their own Public Committee for Promoting Democratic Processes in Tajikistan. They have developed their own strategy for peace-building.

There is no doubt in my mind that this group is pursuing the most coherent strategy for peace-building in the country, and is taking solid and even measurable steps it has designed for itself. The more important point is that this has been an open-ended political process with new steps being defined that could not in any way have been envisioned at the beginning of the process. Posing an objective — possibly with too narrow a definition — for evaluators' judgment could have closed the door on the opportunity for participants to make continuous mid-course corrections and move beyond premature definitions of success.

Another framework for judging the success of the Dialogue itself lies in the five-stage process laid out by the management team. In the first six meetings, the Dialogue participants clearly moved through all five stages of the dialogue as they learned to think and talk together and then actually to produce a joint memorandum together which laid out a design for the negotiations they had helped begin. After that, we learned that a well-established dialogue group will in each meeting work its way through at least the

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last two or three stages of a dialogue as the participants come together, talk about the situation in their country since the last meeting, probe one or two of the most important issues in depth, and produce a joint memorandum about it. This provides the opportunity for judging success at each meeting.

### **Intractable Conflict: Lessons from Experience**

With that long introduction, let me now turn to the questions which our moderator posed for us in preparation for this meeting:

- *In situations of intractable conflict, how do you separate crisis management from the appropriate response to deep, underlying roots of conflict?*

The social and psychological elements of conflict are particularly important in defining intractability. Most deep-rooted human conflicts are not ready for formal mediation or negotiation — central instruments of conflict management. Those conflicts can be dealt with in sustained dialogue, as described in this essay. That may be a more appropriate response to underlying causes.

There are many aspects to intractability, but I would like to surface one aspect that I believe has not received adequate attention. We usually focus our attention on differences between identity groups. For instance, for twenty years, we concentrated on dialogues between Israelis and Palestinians. I have often reflected, however, that we really should have been spending our efforts on dialogues *within* identity groups — that is, among Israelis on how they would define their state and among Palestinians on how they would define theirs.

Today, there are hundreds — probably thousands — of Israeli and Palestinian veterans of dialogue-type interactions, many of those veterans in high places. They have now produced technically viable solutions to most of the important issues in negotiation — a statement that could not have been made a decade ago. *But*, they have been overwhelmed — silenced — by a minority committed to derail the peace process because they have a vision of an outcome that may well be different from the majority within their own groups. The present violent minority might well have been marginalized or contained had they been dealt with in dialogue over the past decade.

This point is dramatically visible in the Israel-Palestine case. It is less visible beneath the surface, but no less important in the latent tensions between ethnic, racial, religious, and culturally defined groups in the cities of the world.

- *What social or psychological factors seem particularly important to intractability?*

These will differ from group to group. One can probe these underlying factors and work on them in the process of sustained dialogue.

- *How can leaders and the general public gain a clearer understanding of the society-wide conflicts that affect them, and what incremental*



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*roles might they play in attempting to mitigate such problems or prevent further outbreaks?*

I believe the process of sustained dialogue provides a space for that learning. For instance, when students at Princeton University decided to start dialogues on race relations within the student body, they rejected either pressing the University to develop more courses and programs on racial and ethnic relationships or inviting any member of the teaching faculty to moderate their dialogue groups. As one Princeton student made the point: “Faculty members will simply treat the problems of racism within their own academic disciplines. We will just get the political scientists’ slant on the problem, the sociologists’, the psychologists’, the economists’ and so on. We have a different way of knowing — we are going to learn about racism by exploring our own relationships.”

In Tajikistan, participants in the Inter-Tajik Dialogue decided to generate dialogues in regional cities to explore the relationship between Islam and democracy. The political system in Tajikistan includes the only legalized Islamic political party in Central Asia, but even Tajikistani Islamists say in the Inter-Tajik Dialogue that a debate is going on in the larger Islamic community over the relationship between Islam and democracy. The Tajiks decided to begin regional dialogues in which citizens would explore the issue, “the state, religion, and politics” to work out a healthy response to this challenge on the ground as their political system develops.

Leaders and the public both should recognize the opportunities for understanding the underlying factors in deep-rooted human conflicts suggested by these responses of turning to dialogue. Governments and academics do not normally turn to citizens to learn.

- *Is there a way military and policy can play a more constructive role in violent confrontations? When should violence be answered with more violence, and when should it be addressed otherwise?*

I am not one to argue instinctively against the use of violence. I would argue strongly for not asking the military to do what it is not constituted to do. For instance, the Israelis learned in Lebanon in 1981 and 1982 that the military could not remake the political map of Lebanon. The United States sent marines ashore, and 240 of them died in a terrorist bombing of their barracks. Or, an important difference between Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon is that Rabin concluded during the first Palestinian *intifada* that there was no military solution to the Palestinian problem; he turned to the Oslo process. Sharon, also a military man, does not seem to have come to the same realization.

- *By definition, intractable conflict is unlikely to be resolved by negotiated agreement. Within this context, what applications are there for the fields’ core resolution techniques, mediation, negotiation (or hybrids of these processes)? How do we determine what disputes, within the context of the underlying intractable conflict are ripe for resolution?*

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Deep-rooted human conflicts are usually not ready for formal mediation and negotiation. People in deep-rooted human conflict do not negotiate about their identities, fears, historic grievances, or alienation.

My vehicle for dealing with these problems is sustained dialogue. My conceptual framework is the concept of relationship. This concept is both an analytical and an operational tool. As an analytical tool, it permits determining when a conflict may be ripe for resolution. *But*, my question is not so much when a situation is ripe, but how it can be ripened. The concept of relationship is also a tool for changing intractable relationships. Again, sustained dialogue is the context for that work.

- *What should we know about the design and successful implementation of peace agreements?*

My response again is rooted in the idea of a multilevel peace process — a political process of continuous interaction in which relationships are transformed. Peace treaties do not make peace; people make peace.

Consider what happens in an internal conflict. The normal connections that permit any diverse society to function across lines of normal differences are torn apart. A peace agreement may resolve some of the material differences over which factions fought. Then mediators go home. Who assumes responsibility for stitching those boundary-spanning connections back together? A multilevel peace process provides the context for that work; it recognizes that much of this work must be done by citizens outside government.

Participants in the Inter-Tajik Dialogue recognized this when they recommended before formal U.N.-mediated negotiations began that the negotiations generate political processes through working groups. The Commission on National Reconciliation established by their peace treaty was designed in the same way. Now their Public Committee for Promoting Democratic Processes in Tajikistan is working along the same lines.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

In conclusion, let me say that we will not have a conceptual framework large enough to deal with today's conflicts until we work within a larger paradigm than has traditionally existed.

The so-called realist paradigm — the power politics model — still offers valuable insights, but it is not large enough to deal with whole human beings in whole bodies politic because it is centered around states and their governments. States will clearly remain important organizing units in international affairs. But increasingly governments confront problems that they cannot deal with alone — without cooperating with other governments or with their own citizens.

The formulation I prefer is that peacemaking and peace-building are about relationships within a cumulative, multilevel, open-ended process of continuous interaction among significant clusters of citizens in whole bodies politic across permeable borders.

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Why do I as a practitioner talk about concepts and paradigms? Having worked with five U.S. presidents and other world leaders, I am convinced that the conceptual lenses that leaders and citizens use to give meaning to events determine how they act. Only when we change our conceptual lenses will we respond to the challenges of conflict in today's world.

In conclusion, I would like publicly to offer my respect and admiration to the Hewlett Foundation for its perseverance through nine years of experiment in the Inter-Tajik Dialogue and for its continuing support in the work of the Dialogue's Public Committee for Promoting Democratic Processes in Tajikistan. This is a unique demonstration by a grant-making foundation of the conviction that peacemaking is a process — that peace is never made; it is always in the making.

### NOTES

This essay is an extension of remarks delivered at the conference of Hewlett Foundation Theory Centers at the United Nations on 22 March 2002.

1. See Chufrin, Imomov, and Saunders 1997: 83-85.

2. Chufrin et al. 1997: 98.

3. Some of the Dialogue participants had been introduced in a related series of meetings on the field of conflict resolution to John Paul Lederach's triangle describing a whole body politic with the official negotiators and governments at the top, with unofficial groups — "middle-range leadership" — in the center, and with citizens groups — "grassroots leadership" — at the bottom. For a full discussion, see Lederach (1997), Chapter 4, especially pp. 37-55 and the chart on p. 39.

4. See Chufrin et al. (1997: 86-88).

5. Abdunabi Sattorzoda, in an as yet unpublished manuscript. He cites a late 2001 book by opposition leader Said Abdullo Nuri, published in Tajiki, which also describes this interaction.

6. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has demonstrated its understanding that fundamental change requires commitment to a process sustained over time through an unprecedented series of four grants over what will be a total of eleven years. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation supported the project for six years. The Charles F. Kettering Foundation has supported the lead U.S. members of the management team, hosted international fellows and workshop participants from Tajikistan, and supported research in the context of the project throughout.

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