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Transforming Intractable Conflicts

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TRANSFORMING INTRACTABLE CONFLICTS

Colombia has been the locus of dreadful violence and many interlocked intractable conflicts. Members of other societies also have suffered from severely destructive conflicts for many years and yet many of those conflicts have been significantly transformed. Protracted destructive conflicts in South Africa, Guatemala, Cambodia, and Northern Ireland illustrate various paths that conflict transformations can take.

Major social conflicts do not wholly end, but they can become less destructive. How they do so, and indeed become more constructive is the subject of this article. Perhaps, reflecting on such developments will suggest to various groups in Colombia and other countries beset by destructive conflicts how they can act to help transform the devastating conflicts afflicting their countries (Roa and Torrijos 1998). Such reflection may also improve the effectiveness of external actors' attempts to help transform protracted destructive conflicts.

Conflict Trajectories

Conflicts escalate and de-escalate, the parties engaged in a conflict expand and contract, and the methods of struggle vary in intensity over time. These changes differ in the degree to which they are unilaterally imposed

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or mutually constructed. Notably also, mutually acceptable accommodations sometimes are achieved and endure without major violent eruptions.

Conflict transitions occur as each adversary undergoes internal changes, as their relationship to each other evolves, and as their surroundings shift (Kriesberg 2003). Changes in these three different arenas may converge to bring about fundamental conflict transformations. Analyzing these changes can help devise policies that contribute to the transformation of the most intractable conflicts.

Internal changes are inevitable as a conflict goes on partly because no side in a fight is a clearly demarked and monolithic entity. Diverse subgroups exist within each adversary camp; for example, groups vary in the costs and benefits they derive from the way the struggle is being waged. Groups that profit may develop a vested interest in the perpetuation and even escalation of the conflict. Members of other groups, suffering losses of earnings and even injuries or deaths of family members may think the ostensible goals of the conflict do not justify the sacrifices they are making. They may support persons who articulate new goals, in opposition to the goals espoused by the dominant leaders of the collectivity. This may indicate a readiness to de-esca-

late a conflict if groups in the adversary camp indicate a readiness to de-escalate as well.

Relations between adversaries may shift as economic, demographic, ideological, or organizational capabilities arise such that the relative standing between the adversaries appears to be changing. The confrontation between adversaries may come to be seen as stalemated, with neither side able to compel the other to accept the terms it seeks to settle the conflict. If persisting in the stalemate is hurtful and a better option seems possible, a de-escalating move is often attempted (Touval and Zartman 1985; Zartman 1991).

In South Africa, in the 1980s, the proportion of the population that was non-white was increasing, as was their relative economic role. Many leaders of the governing National Party came to believe that if an accommodation were to be reached with the black Africans, the terms would be worse as time went on. At the same time, Nelson Mandela and other leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) assured the whites that when apartheid ended and the blacks gained political power, they would not take away the wealth the whites had.

The larger political, economic, and normative worlds within which a conflict is waged also changes and that influences a

conflict's trajectory. For example, in the years of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Asia were perpetuated as proxy wars. If the Soviets supported one side, the Americans supported its opponents, and the other way around; each provided military assistance to the party its adversary was attacking. This greatly contributed to the destructiveness of the fighting and the institutionalization of animosities in several countries.

The end of the Cold War helped transform many conflicts around the world, including protracted conflicts in Central America and Africa. For example, in South Africa, the Apartheid government's specter of the ANC being Communist lost credibility and the U.S. acted more energetically to encourage a mutually agreed upon settlement.

The war on terrorism launched by the U.S., after the September 11, 2001 attacks, has severe repercussions for many conflicts throughout the world. Many governments are more likely to charge groups with which they are in conflict as terrorists, hoping to gain U.S. support and to isolate and deny any legitimacy to the adversary. Branding a group as terrorist reduces the likelihood of dealing with it or the issues about which it pur-

ports to be concerned. On the other hand, many governmental and nongovernmental groups may avoid conduct that others might convincingly charge was terrorist and such restraint can lessen the likelihood of escalating or perpetuating a conflict.

Changing Conflict components

Four components must be present to a minimal degree for a large-scale social conflict to occur. First, members of at least one entity must have a sense of collective identity, seeing themselves as distinct from others. Second, they and/or their representatives have a grievance, feeling dissatisfied due to circumstances they attribute to another group of people. Third, they have a goal such that a change in another entity would reduce their grievance. Finally, they believe they can bring about at least some of the desired change in the other.

The character of each component affects the others' characteristics. For example, what members of a group believe they can get another group to do affects what they want from that other group. Furthermore, and most relevantly here, some features of each the components contribute to making a conflict destructive while other features contribute

to the conflict being waged constructively. As these features change, a conflict escalates destructively, or becomes transformed, or is settled.

Collective self-identities and self-conceptions as well as conceptions of the adversary gravely affect the nature a conflict's trajectory.[1] Thus, identities that exclude the opponent rather than include them contribute a conflict's destructiveness. Also, when members of a group believe themselves superior to the inherently inferior or perhaps sub-human others, they tend to engage them in destructive conflicts. Intellectuals, religious leaders, and other cultural innovators often greatly affect how people in each large-scale entity view their own group and see opposing groups. They revive and revise past events into periods of great glory and domination of others or into terrible traumas inflicted upon them by terrible others.

Grievances vary in ways that affect a conflict's destructiveness. For example, insofar as the grievance incorporates group members feeling that their continued existence is at risk, they are likely to conduct a more destructive conflict. Also, insofar as there is agreement within each side that the other is responsible for the grievance it experiences, and not in any way a joint responsibility, the conflict is likely to be destructive.

Goals are formulated on the basis of an analysis of what is wrong and what changes are to be sought to correct the wrong. Insofar as the goal constitutes an existential threat from the other party's point of view, the conflict tends to be destructive, since the goal will be rejected most vigorously. Goals that are couched in zero-sum ways, so that the gains for one side must be at the expense of the other side, also tend to be more difficult to settle than when cooperation might be seen to yield some mutual benefits.

Finally, methods of struggle also vary greatly in ways that determine a conflict's destructiveness. Obviously, opponents who use nonviolent rules of engagement that they regard as legitimate, such as adhering to the laws governing electoral politics are likely to be conducting their conflict constructively. On the other hand, reliance on intimidation and violence is likely to be

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[1] Camilo Azcarate quotes Colombians he interviewed in 1998. An army official said, "The guerrillas are a bunch of bandits and narco-traffickers. You cannot trust them. They are not interested in peace." A guerrilla said, "The Oligarchs of Colombia only understand the reason of force. They are not really interested in peace." Azcarate, Camilo. 2003. "Why did the Colombia Peace Process Fail?" *OJPCR: The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution* 5, 1:57-65.

experienced by those who are hurt as a cause for resistance, retaliation, and revenge. Even violence can vary in its destructive consequences, depending on how precise and limited is the way it is executed.

Policies to Transform Destructive Intractable Conflicts

Many policies to transform conflicts and to achieve a just and enduring peace directly and indirectly change identities, grievances, goals, and methods of fighting. These polices are formulated and carried out not only by high-ranking governmental and nongovernmental officials, but also from sub-elite and grass roots strata (Lederach 1997).

Conceptions of Self and Other

Policies to affect a collectivity's conception of itself or of its adversary have their source within each entity, in the relations between them, and from external actors. Changes in ways members of a group think about themselves can arise from internal developments and contribute to conflict transformation. For example, many South African Afrikaners began to change their conception about what that meant when, in 1986, leaders of the Dutch Reformed church (to which they belonged) declared that the forced separation of peoples cannot be considered a biblical imperative.

Large-scale social movements are another source of internal change that can help transform seemingly intractable conflicts. Thus, in the American Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century, whites joined blacks in raising the centrality of particular elements of American identity: striving for freedom, justice, and equality. Thus, too, in Colombia at the turn of this century, millions marched for peace, demonstrating a shared sense of purpose and civic organization that contributed to a new sense of what it meant to be Columbian.[2] And they spurred a major effort to stop the widespread violence in Colombia.

Relations between adversaries greatly affect their conceptions of each other and of their own selves as well. Thus, various acts

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[2] As Camilo Gonzalez, a coordinator of a peace movement organization, the Citizens' Mandate for Peace, said at the time, "After the marches we can say to ourselves that we're a peace-loving country, as opposed to our usual, self-flagellating, 'we're a nation of violent, cheating crooks.'" p. 32 in Guillermoprieto, Alma. 2000. "Colombia: Violence Without End?" *The New York Review of Books* April 27:31-32, 38-39.

of reconciliation, which occur as an accommodation is mutually agreed upon or largely unilaterally imposed, can contribute to transforming the way former enemies see the other and themselves as well. For example, the various truth commissions that have followed peace agreements contribute to the durability of the peace (Long 2003).

Various changes in the external environment can affect self-identities as well as conceptions of adversaries. One way this occurs is that the increased salience of a new enemy can be used to make an ally out of a former adversary. For example, the high salience of the Vietnam War helped induce U.S. President Richard M. Nixon to de-escalate the U.S. conflict with the People's Republic of China, in order to isolate North Vietnam. This modified the idea of many Americans that anti-Communism was an essential part of being American.

Widespread ideological conventions change and alter the thinking of people in many countries, for example, about racism, multiculturalism, Marxism, and democracy. Notably, too, new regional institutional developments can contribute to heightening the salience of broader identities, as is notably the case with the growth of a European identity, overlaying national identities.

Grievances

People feeling economically deprived, physically threatened, or unjustly treated and believing that some group is responsible for their condition is central to many intractable conflicts. Changes in the conditions generating those feelings and beliefs are critical in conflict transformation. Improved economic conditions and the prospect of further improvements can reduce grievances about economic well-being, and also facilitate implementing policies that reduce ethnic and other communal injustices. Some internal shifts in ways of thinking also modify attributions of responsibility for certain dissatisfactions. The development of ideologies about the power of the market place and of individual ability and hard work may tend to deflect attributing responsibility to particular other social groups.

The way groups interact obviously greatly affects the likelihood that members of those groups will feel aggrieved. Changing the patterns of conduct by one group toward another whose members regard the conduct as discriminatory, demeaning, or destructive will obviously help transform many conflicts. Indeed, policies fostering non-discrimination, mutual respect, and cultural autonomy

have alleviated protracted conflicts in Spain, Canada, Malaysia, the United States, and many other countries.

External actors can and do contribute to the alleviation of grievances. They may provide food and medical assistance in crises; provide refuge for displaced persons, and security for groups who are at risk of attacks. These external actors include other governments and international governmental organizations, such as the UN and its specialized agencies and also regional organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). They also include international nongovernmental organizations such as the Peace Brigades International (PBI). Members of PBI, often from countries in the North, serve as a group in a few countries, typically in the South; they accompany persons under physical threat in their country and so open some space for nonviolent political action. They have done such work in Guatemala, Sri Lanka, and Colombia (http://www.peacebrigades.org).

Goals

Whatever the grievance against another group may be, formulating what is desired from the group is crucial in a conflict's intractability. Goals making for

intractability can be modified so that a conflict becomes more tractable, as when a form of cultural or regional autonomy rather for secession and political independence becomes the goal. This may result from internal shifts in ideology or as a result of changes in the relative strength of sub groups within a community that had sought secession.

Certainly, adversaries in a conflict influence each other's formulation of their goals. Undertaking confidence-building measures can provide reassurances such that goals that had seemed unacceptable with high levels of mistrust appear feasible.

External actors also can influence the goals adversaries set for themselves. They influence the standards people use in establishing their goals. They may suggest optional goals that had neglected previously and they may add resources to attractive goals that would be unrealistic without the proffered resources contributing to security and development.

External actors can help redefine the nature of a conflict and so reconfigure adversaries' goals. A particular conflict is often redefined when viewed in the context of of other related conflicts; in that larger context more trade-offs are possible and new solutions become available. Thus, in

the 1980s, each of the interconnected conflicts in the countries of Central America was extremely difficult to transform by itself. When officials in these and neighboring countries developed peace plans for the Central America countries together, great progress was made. Oscar Arias, then President of Costa Rica, played a major role in leading this development, recognized in his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987.

Methods

Changing the way a conflict is waged is clearly a fundamental part of conflict transformation. Relying on nonviolent means of struggle, particularly ways that adhere to legitimate institutionalized procedures, would characterize "normal" conflicts. They are likely to be relatively constructive.

Internally, civic organizations can foster new as well as traditional constructive approaches. Thus, the rapid growth of organizations in the United States during the 1980s, which developed and fostered problem-solving conflict resolution methods, contributed to the diffusion of those methods. For example, they have come to be adopted and utilized in public policy conflicts related to environmental issues and to persistent inter-ethnic conflicts.

Religious and many other kinds of organizations, in societies around the world, have advocated and have trained their members for the use of nonviolent methods of struggle. Such methods can limit the destructive escalation of conflicts and ease the way to mutually agreed-upon accommodations. In Colombia, La Ruta Pacifica de la Mujer, founded in 1996, has worked to diminish the consequences of war on women and at times organized actions to protect women (Team 2003).

At times, major political office holders initiate de-escalating efforts, using a variety of strategies involving persuasion and benefits rather than coercive threats (Kriesberg 1992; Mitchell 2000). Such figures include Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union, Anwar Al-Sadat of Egypt, and Guillermo Gaviria of Colombia (Paige 2003). Sometimes these bold de-escalating efforts are effective in bringing about a fundamental conflict transformation.

Adversaries interact in ways that profoundly affect each other's methods of struggle. Resorting to strategies of large-scale and relatively indiscriminate intimidation is often counter-productive generating fierce and bloody resistance and fostering an escalating cycle of violence. Coercion that is limited and precise and has legitimacy is more likely

to be effective and make a future mutual accommodation more likely.

External intervention is especially important in influencing the conflict strategies adversaries adopt. Too often this has meant providing a great variety of lethal weapons. Consequently, stopping and preventing arms deliveries can limit a conflict's destructiveness. The U.S. contributed greatly to the ferocity and deadliness of the wars in Central America during the 1980s. Interestingly, some NGOs based in the United States, working in solidarity with people in Central America contributed to the pressures that altered U.S. policy, for example by providing sanctuary to refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s (Nepstad 1997). Some groups, such as Witness for Peace, are trying to reduce the military character of current U.S. assistance to Colombia (www.witnessforpeace.org).

In some cases, outside organizations have provided knowledge and training about nonviolent means of struggle, dialogue circles, problem solving negotiations, and methods of mediation (Pagnucco 1997). External organizations also provide some protection and visibility to civic organizations in societies suffering from destructive conflicts. Such civic organizations can usefully seek out allies from INGOs working in areas such as human

rights, refugee assistance, and economic development. Domestic organizations can also dramatize their plight and efforts to improve their condition in the larger media world. The internet has become another vehicle for mobilizing external support. This was most remarkably effective for the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico (Ronfeldt 1998).

Finally, a major way in which external actors can help transform intractable conflicts is by providing mediating and other intermediary services. Such services include: providing a safe place for representatives of adversary sides to meet, transmitting information between antagonists who do not communicate well or not at all directly, help arrange which parties will be represented at a meeting, help structure agendas and procedures for meetings, suggest new options, legitimate agreement for adversaries, help monitor and implement agreements, and many other tasks.

The persons and groups providing some of these services range widely. They include representatives of the United States or other major governments or of the United Nations or other international organizations, which control resources that can be used to help win acceptance of a peace agreement. They also may be officials of relatively small countries such as Norway, which can provide non-threaten-

ing facilitation, or officials of neighboring countries with long standard interests in the country beset with an intractable conflict. Non-governmental persons and groups also provide significant mediating services, in what has come to be called Track II diplomacy (Davies 2002).

In domestic conflicts between the government and organizations engaged in violent challenges, mediation by external governments or international organizations is often problematic. Often, the challenged government rejects official mediation because it refuses to accept the equivalent legitimacy, which would seem to be accorded the challengers by such mediation. Non-official go-betweens sometimes are acceptable in such circumstances. Furthermore, the non-official agents may operate with some official engagement that is not highly visible. This is exemplified by the effective 1989-1992 mediation ending the civil war in Mozambique (Hume 1994). The Community of Sant'Egido, a Catholic lay order based in Rome, in the course of its missionary and humanitarian work in Mozambique had developed ties with the government of Mozambique and insurgent Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) forces. It had the credibility and links to be accepted as a mediator by both sides and to act effectively in the long peace process.

Conclusions

The transformation of large scale social conflicts is not an event, but a process that occurs over extended periods of time. It is the result of many people carrying out a variety of actions that change the character of the conflict. Many of those actions are in accord with policies intended to make the conflict less intractable and more constructive. Different policies are needed at different phases of conflict transformation: stopping violence, developing new options, negotiating agreements, and also implementing and sustaining agreed-upon steps toward a stable and just accommodation.

For a fundamental transformation to occur, many actors must participate in the process, engaging in diverse but complementary policies. The process cannot proceed smoothly, since some unforeseen external events are likely to endanger the process and some persons and groups have their reasons to obstruct progress and reverse it. The engagement of many people at many social levels who are pursuing different policies of their choosing gives resilience and strength to the transformation process. The multiplicity of policies provides flexibility to counter inevitable challenges.

It should be noted, that many recent social conflicts are charac-

terized by the large role played by small brigand forces, fighting (often with each other) to exploit local resources and enrich themselves. Such activity might well be addressed by an effective government and disciplined police action (Mueller 2003). However, the problem is especially difficult when a country's government is itself dominated by such gangs. Furthermore, the leaders of such groups often mobilize supporters by ethnic, religious, or ideological rhetoric. Therefore, even in such dire circumstances, many of the ways discussed here to transform conflicts could help isolate and marginalize such violent gangs.

At present, in Colombia, many elements of conflict transformation are underway; but many elements that tend to sustain the destructive conflicts are also present. To make progress in transforming the destructive and intractable ongoing conflicts, more people in and out of Colombia must become engaged in policies that alter the conditions sustaining them. The analysis and the range of policies presented in this article may suggest additional actions that many people can undertake.

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