Track Two Diplomacy: The Way Forward

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Abstract

The articles in this issue present a wide range of findings. First, the field continues to grapple with definitional issues: different types of projects aimed at different outcomes and audiences. More care needs to be given by each dialogue to define rigorously what it is trying to do and why. Second, fundamental lessons have emerged over the past six decades, which must be learned and observed by those active in this field, even as they seek to push the boundaries of theory and practice. Third, while it is generally agreed that the field must become more inclusive, both in terms of people and interests, and also in terms of encouraging local ownership and more transformative projects, a one-size-fits-all approach will not work; each dialogue should be viewed as unique. Finally, the field is a dynamic and evolving one. What seems to be best practice today may not be so tomorrow.

Keywords

Track two diplomacy – best practices – conflict resolution – conflict transformation

The articles presented in this issue represent the thoughts of leading scholar-practitioners as to the state of the Track Two field on six key issues. As noted
in the introduction, the field is now well into its second half-century. Much has been learned since Burton's South East Asia sessions launched the idea of ongoing, facilitated, problem-solving workshops involving influential, but non-official participants seeking to develop policy inputs on conflict situations.

Burton and his colleagues called their method “controlled communication” and it set in motion a long chain of attempts to refine the idea. Numerous scholar-practitioners, from Kelman to Mitchell to Fisher to Saunders, and many others, have sought to develop rigor and clarity (Fisher 2002; Mitchell 2001; Jones 2015: chapters 1 & 2). They have succeeded and, at its best, the field is now much better understood and carefully practiced than ever before. But these authors, and many others, have also realized that each of these dialogues is a unique endeavor. Precisely because they involve people, and often people under conditions of great stress and pain, they cannot be compared exactly for academic purposes.

Moreover, our understanding of the broader field of conflict resolution, and indeed international relations itself, has evolved dramatically and continues to do so. Many widely accepted theories and approaches, such as constructivism, did not exist when Burton and his colleagues set out on the path that has led to Track Two as we now know it. But it was their sense that realism, as practiced by most international relations specialists in the mid-1960s, was seriously limited in its way of looking at deep-seated conflicts and that led them to develop their method. Issues such as the environment and gender, and their impact on the way conflicts are comprehended, were not understood in anything like the same terms as they are today. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the field has evolved significantly and continues to do so.

Our objective in pulling together this issue was to try to capture where thinking has been on the critical issues addressed in these articles and to suggest where it might be going, or even where it should be going. While the issues covered are disparate, we seek to begin extracting some overarching conclusions. It is recognized, however, that this is a preliminary exercise at best. It is our hope that these essays will spawn vigorous discussion and debate. Thematically speaking, one can discern at least four broad ideas which emerge from these contributions. In one way or another these four ideas appear in all of the articles and some show areas where the researchers are in disagreement with each other.

We Need to Be Much More Rigorous in Defining What We are Doing and Why

Even though the field has devoted much effort over the years to defining itself, there continue to be a variety of ways in which definitions remain rather loose in their application. It is still necessary, for example, to devote energy, both at the
outset of a dialogue and throughout its life, to defining whether one is engaged in a Track 1.5, a Track 2 or a Track 3 effort and what that means in practice. Çuhadar reminds us that we must examine critically our cognitive frames as we embark upon such dialogues. Allen argues that it is necessary to consider carefully the extent to which an intervention should be led by “outside” or “local” facilitators. And the question of whether we bias the management, resolution or transformation of conflicts through our work is a serious issue, as Gamaghelyan reminds us.

These may seem obvious issues with which to occupy oneself as one launches a dialogue, but they are tremendously important for practitioners to grapple with. How one answers these questions has a dramatic impact on what type of Track 2 one is running, what kind of impact one wishes to have, and how one proposes to realize that impact and why. As Çuhadar finds, too often practitioners simply embark upon a dialogue process without examining these issues. They simply operate on the basis of unspoken and unexamined assumptions. Surely, a foundation of best practice must be that those who run such dialogues must critically examine what they are doing and why. This is also the basic proposition behind the model offered by Lengel and Jones: that practitioners need to reflect on their efforts in a way which is, at the same time, both structured and flexible, but that begins with reflecting upon and outlining the basic assumptions they are taking into the exercise.

The field has been grappling with these definitional issues for many years. Its understanding of their importance has grown, as has its understanding of the various dimensions of these matters. There is a rich literature from which to draw. As a practical matter, there are few hard and fast answers to any specific case. Each Track Two is so unique that it would be difficult to apply hard and fast rules. What Jones argues is that ethical practice requires those who would undertake such dialogues to constantly examine and re-examine their practices and motivations, both at the beginning of the dialogue and as it unfolds.

**We Need to Never Lose Sight of the Basics, Even as We Strive to Update Them over Time**

We must never lose sight of the fact that what makes these kinds of dialogues different from broader academic meetings is that they have always focused on bringing together influential people from the conflict for facilitated dialogue aimed at producing actionable ideas for change. While critics are correct when they say that the field has too often biased itself towards proposals aimed at Track 1 (and which are, therefore, biased towards elites), the key to the field is that it seeks to use facilitated dialogue to help antagonists develop ideas for change and get them to places where they can actually matter.
The best practices checklist for transfer outlined by d’Estrée and Fox is thus important across a wide variety of different kinds of Track Two projects. How the different elements on their checklist might be applied to different types of Track Two projects is something that will vary across practice. It is impossible to preordain this as no two projects are the same. But having such a checklist as a tool, both at the outset of a dialogue and as it goes along, is vital.

Picking up on this idea of a checklist, Lengel and Jones outline how such a tool is essential as a starting point for any meaningful evaluation of what such a dialogue accomplished. Their model, like the checklist provided by d’Estrée and Fox, will vary in application, depending on the specifics of each dialogue, but the framework is the key. It is intended to provide a structured way of identifying and reflecting on the key issues and questions which are unique to each intervention, both at the time and over time.

We Need to Set the Stage for a Far More Inclusive Field in the Future, while Recognizing that One-size Fits All Approaches Have Never Worked and Never Will

Critics of the field are correct when they point out that it has largely promoted “…a new kind of intervention by Northern countries in Southern countries ... a case of agents from Western civil society crossing over borders, no longer to save people, but this time to teach them to make peace and reach a Western-style consensus (Hara 2003: 151; see also Jabri 2006: 5).” As Gamaghelyan points out, this has led to an overemphasis, historically at least, on certain forms of interventions but not others. Çuhadar also notes that certain cognitive frames have dominated the field, while Allen probes the issue of local ownership. All of the points made by these authors require the field to look at itself deeply and question inherent assumptions. In particular, the field needs to make sure that it is not overly reliant on certain approaches to the exclusion of others.

And yet, it is also the case, as Allen points out, that simply saying that local ownership is better is not sufficient in itself. There are ways and times when outside interventions are critical, as Allen demonstrates. On another matter, to the extent that the field has biased conflict management to the detriment of conflict transformation approaches, it must be said that there are times when management is the best one can do – even if it is not the most desirable. The alternative may be doing nothing in situations of great danger and suffering. The point at which an intervention is actually making things worse by reinforcing
certain patterns – though it may be making certain positive contributions on a limited scale – will always be, to some extent, in the eye of the beholder.

Thus, even as we engage in broader discussions over such issues as whether properly inclusive practice requires a shift towards transformative approaches rather than managerial ones, or the proper extent to which local ownership should be biased over outside interventions, we must never lose sight of the fact that all of these dialogues are fundamentally different and meant to influence events. For lack of a better way of putting it, promoting the application of a particular approach as a way of forcing the evolution of the field in certain directions, even if it cannot be shown that that approach is the best one for the case in question, is not best practice. Moreover, there is a point at which dialogues intended to promote certain outcomes stray into the territory of advocacy (either of particular approaches or outcomes), rather than facilitated dialogues intended to help those in conflict develop their own solutions to the conflict. Put simply, there is more than one way for a dialogue to seek to impose an outcome. Even as we rightly recognize that earlier interventions may be guilty of inherent biases, we should also recognize that calls today which require that certain approaches be given preference may have their biases too. Time will tell if these biases are better than the old ones.

Perhaps the way forward, as Jones explores, may be to create a concept of best practice where practitioners are constantly required to reflect on their actions against ethical standards in order to determine when their desire to “do something” is no longer justifiable. There are unlikely to be any hard and fast rules which will be applicable across all cases, as the field is too diverse. But the act of having to subject one’s basic assumptions (or cognitive frameworks) and one’s chosen methods to constant and critical scrutiny, ideally involving peers, is an end in itself.

We Need to Remember that Track Two Has Been Constantly Evolving and Will Continue to Do So

It is trite, but also true, that the only constant is change. Just as those who pioneered the field in the 1960s and 1970s might not recognize much of what has been laid out in this collection as representing best practice, our authors may not recognize much of what they have written as best practice fifty years from now – or maybe even a lot sooner than that. As I read these essays, I am struck by the overwhelming sense that temptations to proclaim universal and
enduring truths, based on today’s assumptions about what is right or wrong, must be resisted. Fifty years from now, the consensus of opinion on all of the issues will likely be quite different.

What we can do today, by both looking forward and backward, is to recognize that the parameters of the debate on the critical issues in the field have evolved and best practice requires a different discussion of these issues than was the case fifty years ago. This discussion must be informed by the work and thinking in the Track Two and international relations fields, which has led to this point, but it must also be prepared to challenge it and go beyond the status quo. And any discussions we have today on these points must be recognized as setting the stage for new ideas and arguments, which will be informed by concepts and experiences yet unknown.

If this special issue of *International Negotiation* has had any real objective, perhaps it is to make this point: experience shows that there is no final word on any of these issues. Those who practice and work on Track Two today are the custodians of a concept. They draw on the insights and work of those who came before to shape Track Two, but they do not own it and theirs is not the final word. It is the job of all in this field, either as practitioners, as scholars, or both, to contribute to this discussion of best practices, to debate their differences in a constructive way and to further develop Track Two diplomacy.

References


