
The Evolution of International Conflict Resolution: From Cold War to Peacebuilding

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Shaped by the changing nature of international conflict, the field of international conflict resolution evolved significantly throughout the latter years of the twentieth century and continues to be redefined. The end of the Cold War created space for a major transformation of the international conflict resolution field. This transformation was marked by three trends: (1) an expansion from a focus on superpower negotiating strategies to a wider peacebuilding agenda, (2) an increase in the role of nongovernmental actors as both disputants and third parties in international conflicts, and (3) a growing concern about human security in addition to state security, creating both tensions and opportunities for collaboration between governmental and nongovernmental bodies. This article presents a brief overview of each trend, as well as some concluding questions to frame the field's further development at this important juncture.

Key words: international conflict resolution, peacebuilding, Track I diplomacy, Track II diplomacy, nongovernmental actors, human security.

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Introduction

Conflict is considered “international” in two instances: when it takes place across national borders and the primary actors are sovereign states, and when internal conflict (i.e., occurring within the borders of one state) has impacts regionally or even globally, often drawing in outside actors as mediators or as allies to the conflicting parties. The primary goals of international conflict resolution (ICR) are to use means other than violence to settle both interstate and intrastate disputes, and to transform the relationships of disputing parties such that resort to violence is less likely in the future. It incorporates negotiation as a tool but moves beyond negotiation to include education, training, improving intergroup relations, and creating intercultural awareness. War is often the cost of failure in ICR efforts, making the stakes quite high for all concerned.

The field of ICR came of age in the 1990s. Just as the wider alternative dispute resolution (ADR) movement in the United States emerged from the political reforms and social inclusion agenda of the 1960s and 1970s, so ICR blossomed after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991 and the end of the Cold War. This opened up space for three major evolutions in the field:

- an expansion from a focus on superpower negotiating strategies to a wider peacebuilding agenda,
- an increase in the role of nongovernmental actors as both disputants and third parties in international conflicts, and
- a growing concern about human security in addition to state security, which created both tensions and opportunities for collaboration between governmental and nongovernmental bodies.

This essay presents a brief overview of each trend, as well as some concluding questions to frame the field’s further development at this important juncture.

From Cold War to Peacebuilding

The first major trend in ICR over the last twenty-five years has been its shift in substantive emphasis. During the 1980s, the primary (although not exclusive) focus was on the superpower rivalry and diffusing the possibility of nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. The peace movement had, for decades, been pushing for disarmament, but in this decade, a new voice for peacemaking emerged as negotiation theory migrated from its origins in the management/labor relations field to international relations. Two seminal books dominated negotiation theory at this point: *Getting to Yes* by Roger Fisher and William Ury (1981) and *The Art and Science of Negotiation* by Howard Raiffa (1982).

From these emerged the foundations of negotiation analysis that continue to be important in the international context. The first of these foundations drew upon research in game theory and social psychology to sharpen understanding of the inherent escalation traps built into the arms race. This led, in turn, to a search for effective policies for interrupting the escalation feedback loops, resulting in such achievements as the establishment of the Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers in Washington and Moscow.¹

A second focus was on changing the nature of the negotiation encounter itself to open up possibilities for deals to be struck by exploring interests and generating options. Given the domestic political concern of governments that they could look weak to their respective publics if they pursued such integrative deal making, these new encounters took place through an ongoing series of nonofficial contacts between the Soviet Union and the West. The most notable of these was the Dartmouth Conference, which brought together prominent public figures from both countries and helped build personal relationships to rehumanize the “other” in foreign policy circles.²

Finally, during this decade, the peace movement continued to make its contribution to ICR by campaigning for nuclear disarmament. The Nuclear Freeze Movement, for example, was launched in 1980 with the aim of convincing the U.S. government to unilaterally freeze its weapons development and production. At its peak, the movement brought an estimated one million protestors to Central Park demanding disarmament, and it has claimed credit for the softening of President Ronald Reagan’s rhetoric toward the Soviets as the decade wore on (Meyer and Whittier 1994; Broad and Sanger 2009).

All of this changed dramatically in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Overnight, the superpower rivalry was over, but the hoped-for New World Order of peace and harmony was overtaken by the eruption of numerous civil wars, most dramatically in Yugoslavia. In 1992, the United Nations Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, issued the U.N. Agenda for Peace, laying out a framework for ICR that has continued to this day. The report identified four overarching tasks for the U.N. and others to undertake: preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. Although the precise definitions of these areas are still not conceptually agreed upon by all those in the ICR field, the secretary general’s report offers the most common usage (Boutros Boutros-Ghali 1992):

Conflict Prevention — Termed “preventive diplomacy” by the U.N., it is defined as “action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur.”

Peacemaking — “Action to bring hostile parties to agreement, essentially through such peaceful means as those foreseen in Chapter VI of the Charter of the United Nations.”

Peacekeeping — “Deployment of a United Nations presence in the field, hitherto with the consent of all the parties concerned, normally involving United Nations military and/or police personnel and frequently civilians as well.”

Peacebuilding — “Action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict.”

These proposed goals represented an enormous shift from the emphasis on bilateral strategic bargaining that dominated the 1980s. It opened up a large conceptual and practical agenda for ICR, extending to both latent and active conflicts and to the increasingly difficult challenge of so-called failed or failing states. During the Cold War, the superpowers vied for control of weak states, thereby propping them up even at the expense of installing authoritarian rulers. After the Cold War, such states were left to fend for themselves, often with disastrous consequences (e.g., Yugoslavia, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia). Now, with the call to prevent violence from occurring or recurring, the U.N. was saying that the international community had a responsibility to do something in these vulnerable environments, because of the possible ramifications both regionally and globally.

We are still grappling with these challenges, although some progress has been made. Early analytic efforts (circa 1994–1996) focused on the importance of international engagement in the implementation of peace agreements, especially if an agreement had been mediated. Research showed that the parties in conflict were very often unable to carry out implementation on their own without continuing oversight and assistance, calling for an ongoing commitment from international actors to make the peacebuilding efforts succeed (Hampson 1996).

Additional research focused on creating a typology of tasks to be implemented (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 1996). The daunting list included internal and external security, judicial reform and rule of law, constitution making and revamping governance structures, rebuilding the economy and financial institutions, the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and developing a functioning civil society. The results were initially faltering at best (e.g., Somalia and Bosnia), improving as the international actors gained more experience. They began to understand the need for ongoing international commitment and a sense of what should be on the list of things to do, but how to accomplish these overwhelming tasks effectively was not yet known.

The next phase of scholarship, published from about 1997 to 2002, tackled this question and came up with recommendations on sequencing (Walter 1997; Stedman 2002). A consensus emerged that internal security was the most important prerequisite for peacebuilding. Unless physical security could be reasonably well guaranteed, all other tasks were more difficult, even impossible, to achieve. As Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate, how to accomplish that goal presents an ongoing dilemma.

In parallel to the sequencing discussion, scholars and practitioners documented case studies to report what was actually happening on the ground in various peacebuilding operations. Thus, we started collecting more detail about specific tasks, trying to find successful models that could be tried and built upon elsewhere.³ In addition, comparative analyses across differing cases allowed us to push the boundaries on specific topics, asking new questions that had not been foreseen until enough data were available to illuminate them. For example, a 2002 study edited by Stephen Stedman, Donald Rothchild, and Elizabeth Cousens drew upon studies of cases in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Rwanda, Cambodia, Bosnia, Lebanon, Liberia, and Sri Lanka to examine what had been learned in several areas of peacebuilding including disarmament and demobilization, economic development, elections, human rights, refugee repatriation, and civilian security (Stedman, Rothchild, and Cousens 2002).

In addition, researchers renewed their interest in the social psychological dimensions of conflict, not as much from the 1980s perspective of the prisoner's dilemma but rather through the lens of intergroup relations. Because so many international conflicts during this period were between clashing identity groups, scholars and practitioners struggled to understand the concept of identity, whether ethnic or religious, as it affected the violence between and within such groups. The seminal research on intergroup relations informing these new studies was, in some cases, decades old, but its insights were being "discovered" for the first time by political analysts grappling with internal wars (Allport 1954; Coser 1956; White 1986; Kelman 1997; Laitin 1998; Brewer and Gaertner 2004; Mansfield and Snyder 2007).

Now, in 2009, researchers are asking whether international peacebuilding has in fact been overreaching, raising unrealistic expectations about what outsiders can do and setting all parties up for failure (Ottaway 2002). Some argue that more of the burden for recovering from internal wars needs to be managed by citizens of the state itself, not outsiders. In fact, pushing too fast and hard for democracy and political reconciliation may create more polarization and internal competition rather than the kind of minimal cooperation needed for a functioning state (Ottaway 2002; Mansfield and Snyder 2007).

From Governments to Nongovernmental Actors

States are the most significant actors in international politics, so it is no surprise that they are also the most significant actors in ICR. Track I diplomacy, as interstate negotiations are referred to, involves the heads of state and/or foreign ministries of national governments. Participants in Track I diplomacy also include intergovernmental organizations, such as the U.N. and specifically the office of the U.N. Secretary General, and regional organizations, such as the African Union and the Organization of American States. During the Cold War years, these organizations were often stymied in their efforts by the dominance of the United States and the Soviet Union. But since 1989, they have taken on a larger role in mediating both interstate and intrastate disputes (Bercovitch 1996).

A more significant evolution over the past twenty-five years has been the increasing role of nongovernmental actors, as both antagonists and intermediaries in international conflicts. In the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, new states emerged from the Soviet Union and internal challenges to these and other state governments increased (Wallenstein and Axell 1993). Consequently, subnational and transnational identity groups, usually representing such minorities as the Albanians in Serbia or the Armenians in Azerbaijan, demanded recognition and legitimacy. The state-centric apparatus of the international system could not respond adequately to these new players who were considered illegitimate, so nongovernmental conflict resolution organizations expanded to fill this need. Although the so-called “Track II” diplomacy was first named and validated by Joseph Montville and Harold Saunders (Saunders 1991; *Carnegie Reporter* 2005) in the 1980s,⁴ the 1990s saw a huge increase in the number of such organizations.

These Track II efforts include interventions by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), scholars, religious leaders, or former diplomats who are deemed “eminent persons.” They provide many advantages over the state-to-state forums of Track I:

- Discussions are often confidential and involve influential individuals rather than decision makers, which provides the opportunity for brainstorming and exploring options that official public forums lack. The theory is that such “influentials” are not constrained by the commitments of public office and can therefore explore options in ways that official representatives cannot.
- Actors who are considered illegitimate by governments can participate because the proceedings are nonofficial and the conveners are not constrained by charters or interstate agreements that preclude talking with rebel groups or those labeled as terrorists. While these conversations must be handled with care to avoid enraging government parties

or providing cover for criminality, they do open up possibilities for nonmilitary solutions to intrastate violence. Talks in Mozambique, Northern Ireland, and South Africa all provide examples of effective Track II efforts that brought previously demonized groups into negotiation processes that eventually ended in Track I peace agreements.

- In addition to being facilitators or mediators, Track II conflict resolution practitioners can provide consultation and training for disputing parties. Because power disparity often exists between governmental and nongovernmental parties in intrastate conflicts, training can give the less powerful party greater confidence to engage in negotiation and choose talks over guns. In Mozambique, for example, the mediation effort by the Community of Sant'Egidio included coaching the rebel group in the bush on how to procedurally conduct themselves in negotiations with the government (Hume 1994).

Predictably, the mixed bag of ICR actors has created tensions. Track I officials have been suspicious of the motives of their Track II counterparts, unsure of the skills of these organizations and worried about being seen as shirking their official responsibility by partnering with or deferring to the work of unauthorized and largely unaccountable nongovernmental agents. This strained relationship between Track I and Track II actors has improved somewhat in the last few years, largely because of the increasing challenges posed by weak states and the variety of interventions needed to revitalize them. But this relationship remains an uneasy one (Chataway 1998).

Nongovernmental conflict resolution actors, as part of their broader social change goals, are using the evolving international agenda discussed earlier to build their credibility with their Track I counterparts. Because no set of guidelines for how to carry out ambitious peace missions effectively has yet been agreed upon, NGOs make the argument that the core principles of conflict resolution (i.e., inclusion, empowerment, tolerance, and trust building) are *necessary* (although admittedly not sufficient) for other peace-related activities to work, and Track I actors are beginning to listen. For example, former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan called for more explicit U.N. collaboration with NGOs on conflict prevention (Annan 2000), many European governments are actively supporting NGO activities as part of their official foreign policies in conflict regions, and the U.S. State Department has recently established an Office of the Coordinator for Stabilization and Reconstruction (S/CRS), to bring together both U.S. government agencies and NGOs working on postsettlement peace-building activities.⁵

In turn, many Track II organizations have evolved from criticizing Track I efforts to seeking collaboration with their official counterparts, seeing advantages in what is now being labeled a “multitrack” approach to conflict resolution. The benefits of a multitrack strategy, they would argue,

stem from using the comparative strengths of different interveners to address different aspects of the complex disputes now extant around the world (Diamond and McDonald 1996; Ury 2000). But the best way to implement such integrated strategies is far from clear, and the question is being debated in governments, universities, and think tanks worldwide.

From State Security to Human Security

The third overarching trend has been the changing definition of security. During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union sought to preserve and expand their spheres of influence. They often did this by finding or creating government leaders as allies, often propping up dictators and tyrants who abused their own people. Since the end of the Cold War, however, that calculus has changed. With violence often stemming from states unable or unwilling to constructively manage the diversity and discontent within their borders, security now requires looking at the relationship between leaders and their societies. This is a huge challenge because of states' fierce commitment to sovereignty, and it has raised questions about the role of outsiders, both governmental and nongovernmental, in these internal disputes.

For example, Mary Anderson's (1999) seminal study, *Do No Harm*, raised questions about the extent to which development aid was unintentionally exacerbating internal conflicts and thereby undermining development objectives and actually making conditions worse in some countries. Since that study was released in 1999, the international development community has taken on a big role in ICR. The good news is that this has brought much more money and visibility to nonmilitary conflict prevention and resolution efforts, as well as a focus on building civil society-based conflict resolution mechanisms within conflict-ravaged countries.

The troubling news is that, like law firms pushing to take over the ADR agenda in the United States in the 1980s from their smaller, more community-based predecessors, the large development agencies are dominating the funding streams for ICR. This is forcing smaller ICR-based firms to partner with these agencies, with mixed results — although development agencies increasingly understand the relationship between conflict and underdevelopment, their goals are utilitarian, not transformative, and their donors require output in terms of projects, not relationships. Scholars are producing a growing body of literature exploring these concerns as well as establishing more sophisticated tools for evaluating the impacts of conflict resolution efforts undertaken by development agencies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee 2008).

The focus on human security has also brought ICR into more explicit contact with other fields concerned with this issue — notably, counterterrorism agencies, the military forces sent for peacekeeping or peace

enforcement, and the human rights community. Discussing each encounter requires more space than this essay allows, and each is testing the boundaries and core beliefs of conflict resolution in ways that will ultimately benefit the field and the peacebuilding agenda.

Reflections

These major trends in ICR reflect the significant ways in which changing political dynamics affect the scope of conflict resolution theory and practice. Although many of the Cold War-era approaches remain relevant even after 1989 (e.g., game theory, interest-based bargaining), the context radically changed the way these approaches were used. From the 1990s up to the present, the emphasis has shifted to the prevention of failed states and the expanded set of tasks this entails. This, in turn, has forced some review of the theory itself and a broadening of the conceptual base to include the social psychology of intergroup relations, on the one hand, and the institutional processes of state building, on the other hand.

This larger agenda, however, suggests questions about what the core concepts and skills of ICR should be and how these differ from and best complement those of international development, security, and human rights. This becomes crucial in two ways: how to most effectively use the strengths of these various approaches in an integrated way in field operations and how to train the next generation of scholars and practitioners who will take on these complex challenges.

This leads me to an incomplete, but hopefully provocative, list of the questions facing the ICR field in the year 2009:

- Do we negotiate with those who use terrorist acts as a weapon? Under what conditions?
- How closely can/should the ICR NGOs align themselves with government conflict management processes, especially when those efforts involve the use or threat of military force?
- To what extent can/should outsiders try to help resolve conflicts within a society that is not their own? What is the appropriate role for outsiders?
- How can we shift the focus of ICR efforts to prevention, as opposed to waiting to engage until hundreds or thousands of people have been killed? What must such a prevention agenda include to make it politically and logistically viable?
- To what extent should the international community be advocating democracy and static state borders as effective ways to contain conflict? What are the circumstances under which these prescriptions might not hold and what are the alternatives?

- How do we train future scholars and practitioners in ICR? What are the boundaries of the field and the core conceptual and practical skills required to be effective?

We have made tremendous progress since the Cold War, but there is clearly much work still to do.

NOTES

1. “The Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers (NRRCs) in Washington and Moscow were established to reduce the risk of conflict or of accidental nuclear war between the United States and Russia that might result from accidents, miscalculations, or misinterpretations. The centers are connected by a dedicated communications link, and exchange information and notifications required under existing and future arms control and confidence-building measures agreements.” See full agreement at <http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/nrrc/index.html>.

2. Launched in 1960, the meetings of the Dartmouth Conference brought together influential representatives from the United States and the Soviet Union, such as academics, policy analysts, scientists, business people, and government agents in unofficial capacity (Vorhees 2002). Less well known but also significant were efforts like the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Vienna, set up to link scientists and their research across the Iron Curtain. In 1985, Professor Howard Raiffa of Harvard University and IIASA’s first director launched a new program called Processes of International Negotiation, to bring the same East-West collaboration to bear on studying negotiation process. The PIN project, as it came to be known, is still in operation today. Information on IIASA’s PIN project is available online at: <http://www.iiasa.ac.at/>.

3. The literature on separate elements of peacebuilding is quite extensive. See Hayner (1994), Ball and Helavy (1996), and Oakley, Goldberg, and Dziedzic (2002).

4. Both Montville and Saunders had extensive and distinguished careers in the U.S. State Department before becoming convinced of the value of Track II diplomacy.

5. An introductory article on the role and functions of the S/CRS is available online at: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/43429.pdf>.

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