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Back-channel Communication in the Settlement of Conflict

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Abstract
Secret back-channel communication is often employed in severe conflict to explore the feasibility of front-channel negotiation. It can also be used as an adjunct to front-channel negotiation when talks become deadlocked or as a substitute for front-channel negotiation. Its value lies partly in the flexibility and future orientation it brings to talks. In the prenegotiation phase, it also provides political cover, is cost-effective, does not require formal recognition of the adversary, and allows communication with adversaries who do not meet preconditions for negotiation such as a cease-fire. Intermediaries and intermediary chains are sometimes used in back-channel communication. Heavy reliance on back-channel communication can produce flimsy agreements that are too narrowly based or fail to deal with major issues. But this problem can be avoided if enough time is spent assembling a broad central coalition.

Keywords
back-channel communication, negotiation, prenegotiation, conflict resolution, peace process, ripeness, spoilers, Northern Ireland, Oslo talks

Back-channel communication is secret communication between the leadership of opposing groups (including organizations and nations) that is designed to foster settlement of a conflict between them. It has been reported in such diverse settings as international conflict (Alger 1961; Iklé 1964), ethno-political conflict (Bartoli 1999; Pruitt 2005a; Wanis-St. John 2006), labor-management conflict (Douglas 1962; Peters 1955; Walton and McKersie 1965), government procurement (Pruitt 1971), and conflict between university administrators and student demonstrators (Bass and Rae 2006). Back-channel communication contrasts with front-channel communication, which (though usually not witnessed by the public) is publicly known to occur. Back-channel communication can be used in

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both prenegotiation and negotiation, and as an adjunct to front-channel negotiation in "side-bar" talks.

Back-channel communication takes two forms: direct discussion between decision makers or their official representatives, and indirect discussion through third-party intermediaries. Direct back-channel discussion sometimes occurs in deadlocked front-channel negotiations, with the chief negotiators or their designates conversing informally in out-of-the-way locations. For example, the author (Pruitt 1971: 223) was told of the following incident by a NASA procurement officer:

> A deadlock had developed. Smith (industry) said to Jones (government), "Let's you and me go out for a cup of coffee." Jones excused himself from his group and, when they got out in the hall, said "Let's go to my office." When they arrived at the office, Jones said, "It looks like we're hung up on this issue. What will it take to reach agreement?" Smith suggested that they split somewhere in between. So Jones suggested a figure and Smith said, "O.K. I think I can sell that figure to my people."

This is a case where back-channel communication was used as an adjunct to front-channel negotiation.

An example of back-channel communication through intermediaries occurred between Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), and the British government in the 1980s and 1990s (Pruitt 2005a, 2007). There were two intermediaries: John Hume, leader of SDLP (a moderate nationalist party[1] in Northern Ireland), who talked with Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein; and some government officials of the Irish Republic, who talked with British officials. Hume and the Irish officials also talked with each other, producing a fully connected communication chain, as follows:

Gerry Adams ← → John Hume ← → Irish officials ← → British officials[2]

A long series of communications across this chain culminated in the 1997–1998 Stormont negotiations that produced the Good Friday Agreement, a settlement of the Northern Ireland conflict. This is a case of back-channel prenegotiation.

Note that the public was aware of some of the conversations between members of this chain. What was secret – and allows this to qualify as back-channel communication – is that the intermediaries were passing messages from one end of the chain to the other. Note also that at least two other back-channels between Sinn Fein and the British government were active in the same time period.

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1) There are two ethnic groups in Northern Ireland: the nationalists, who are descended from the original inhabitants and are mainly Catholics, and the unionists, who are descended from British settlers and are mainly Protestants. Most of the residents of the Irish Republic are also nationalists, by this definition.

2) The chain was actually longer, with Gerry Adams talking with IRA leaders on the left end of the chain and British officials talking with leaders of the UUP (the dominant unionist party) on the right. But the main action before 1997 took place in the middle portion of the chain shown in the text.

An example of back-channel communication that switched from indirect to direct is the 1993 Oslo talks between representatives of the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). These are the talks that established the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinians were represented by PLO officials in all 12 of the talks. But the first five talks were indirect back-channel communication, because Israel used intermediaries: two university professors who were in close touch with members of the government. The last seven talks were direct back-channel communication, because the Israeli delegation was led by government officials. Delegates to these talks came to Norway by circuitous paths and met in obscure locations so as to elude detection (Pruitt, Bercovitch, and Zartman 1997). The discussions culminated in an agreement that was announced to the world on the White House lawn. This is a case where back-channels were used for both prenegotiation and negotiation. There were no front-channel talks.[3]

Intermediaries in indirect back-channels can be drawn from almost any walk of life. For example, Ashmore and Baggs (1968) report the use of newspapermen as intermediaries during the events that led to the Paris negotiations to end the Vietnam War. Mediators caucusing with disputants are also acting as intermediaries.

Why Communication?

The first question to be addressed is why adversaries communicate at all. Converging evidence (Merry and Silbey 1984; Peirce, Pruitt, and Czaja 1993; Sarat 1976) suggests that, at least in Western society, people in conflict are expected to communicate before taking heavier actions. In other words, the roots of communication are often normative. But once heavy conflict begins, communication ordinarily becomes a victim (Sherif et al. 1961). For various reasons, it is hard to communicate while fighting.

This is where readiness theory (Pruitt 1997, 2005b), an extension of ripeness theory (Zartman 1989, 2000), comes in. This theory holds that the parties to a heavy conflict are motivated to seek communication when they begin to see the combat as hopeless or too costly or risky, or when they are pressed to end the combat by powerful third parties. However, in such circumstances, they will only move toward negotiation if they also are optimistic that communication will yield an acceptable agreement. For example, Nelson Mandela, a highly prestigious imprisoned leader of the African National Congress (ANC), reports that he was motivated to seek exploratory peace talks to the South African government in 1985 for two reasons: "military victory (against this government) was a distant if

[3] The front-channel Madrid-Washington talks between Israel and moderate Palestinian leaders were going on at the same time as the Oslo talks, but they were a separate venture in which the PLO did not participate.

not impossible dream" and "it simply did not make sense for both sides to lose thousands if not millions of lives in a conflict that was unnecessary" (Mandela 1994: 525). He also had a basis for optimism in that the South African government had sent him a signal that they were interested in talking in the form of a courtesy visit from the Minister of Justice while Mandela was in the hospital for an operation.

At about the same time, the South African government began (a) to realize that they could not contain mass protest by the increasingly restless African population and (b) to experience heavy pressure for an end to apartheid from the United States and Western Europe, on whom they were heavily dependent for capital investment (Lieberfeld 1999) and other benefits. Furthermore, there was a small basis for optimism in the form of some evidence that the ANC was a relatively moderate organization led by reasonable men.[4] As a result of these developments on both sides, back-channel meetings began between Mandela and members of the government in 1986 (Mandela 1994) and between intermediaries who were in close contact with the government and representatives of the ANC leaders in exile in 1987 (Lieberfeld 1999).

Readiness is viewed as a variable that strengthens as a function of the extent of perceived hopelessness, perceived cost, perceived risk, third-party pressure, and/or optimism. Greater readiness is required for initiating front-channel as opposed to back-channel talks. In South Africa, after four years of back-channel prenegotiation, front-channel negotiation began in May 1990, at a point of increased government awareness of the hopelessness of their apartheid strategy and increased optimism on both sides about the possibility of achieving their aims through negotiation (Mandela 1994).

Zartman (2006) has found that in severe ethno-political conflicts, negotiation is usually pushed along and guided by outside third parties. The South African case is an exception to this rule. Third parties provided good offices for some early secret meetings but otherwise were excluded from the talks (Lieberfeld 2001).

Advantages of Back-channel as Opposed to Front-channel Communication

Back-channel communication has a number of advantages over front-channel communication that account for its popularity. Back-channel communication at all stages of negotiation encourages flexibility and future orientation among its participants. In addition, back-channel prenegotiation provides political cover to leaders who want to explore the adversary's readiness for genuine negotiation, is

[4] The evidence came from two sources: (a) Reports by attendees of a cordial and highly publicized track one-and-one-half meeting between white South African businessmen and the ANC leaders in exile in 1985. This meeting appears to have helped sanitize the image of the enemy on both sides (Lieberfeld 2002); and (b) Statements endorsing negotiation made by ANC leaders.

cost-effective, can be started without satisfying the parties' preconditions, and can go ahead without acknowledgment of the other side's legitimacy.

Flexibility and Future Orientation

One of the big problems with front-channel communication in conflict is its lack of flexibility. Participants have a tendency to make prepared statements and to reiterate demands and arguments. By contrast, back-channel communication encourages informality and frank discussion of motives and concerns. Needs, goals, intentions and fears about the other's proposals can be revealed more readily, along with information about which of one's demands are firm and which can be modified. As a result, the parties are more likely to discover common ground and identify the points at which there is real (as opposed to apparent) conflict. An example of the latter occurred in the back-channel prenegotiation between representatives of the South African government and the ANC. The government voiced a firm insistence on maintaining capitalism and private ownership in any future political system, and the ANC (despite controversy within its ranks) attempted to assure them that it did not oppose this crucial demand (Mandela 1994). Talking about firmness and modifiability allows the identification of possible concession exchanges. Back-channel communication also allows more brainstorming, in the sense of throwing out tentative ideas for a settlement without fear of commitment to them. This is an aid to problem-solving.

Another difficulty with front-channel communication is that participants often spend a lot of time rehashing the past and accusing each other of earlier misbehavior. This is less likely in back-channel communication (Egeland 1999), especially when it involves an intermediary, for example, a mediator caucusing with a disputant (Welton, Pruitt, and McGillicuddy 1988). Hence, the parties are more likely to discover ways to resolve the conflict.

There are four explanations for this improved flexibility and future orientation in back-channel communication: reduced audience effects, reduced number of people interacting, greater informality, and the non-binding nature of what is said.

Audience effects are often found in front-channel communication, due to insistent curiosity about what is happening on the part of stakeholders and the media. The result is "speeches to the gallery" – endless repetition of official positions and past grievances – which sound good when relayed to constituents but do not advance the negotiation. This effect is much reduced in back-channel communication because of the secrecy of these proceedings (Wanis-St. John 2006). Thus Egeland (1999: 538), in comparing the Oslo talks with some front-channel Israeli-Palestinian talks that were going on at the same time, says: "The parties in the official and public sessions in Washington appeared to spend almost 100 percent of their time blaming one another, whereas the negotiators in Norway spent at least 90 percent of their waking hours… in real negotiations."

Front-channel negotiation is ordinarily done by heterogeneous teams of people on each side of the table. Members of a team act as an audience for each other and also block many concessions. Just about any concession proposed in a team meeting is likely to be vetoed by some team member who represents a sub-group that profits from the original position on the matter. These effects are usually mitigated in back-channel communication because of the reduced *number of people*, and hence sub-group representatives, involved. Each side finds it easier to develop a hierarchy of interests, emphasizing key concerns and de-emphasizing others, which allows reciprocal concessions to be made. If a tentative agreement is reached in a back-channel, it becomes easier to sell to the remaining team members because the adversary has also made concessions and because of momentum that has built up around the proposed agreement.[5]

Reduced numbers of people and the resulting increased *informality* may also make back-channel meetings more of an interpersonal and less of an intergroup phenomenon (see: Brown 1988). In other words, the attendees may begin seeing each other as fellow human beings rather than simply as members of an opposing group. This should reduce stereotyping and increase trust, respect, positive feelings, and empathy between the participants (Bartoli 1999), eroding the sense that nothing can change because of demons on the other side (Kelman 2002). In an effort to produce such an effect, Mandela sought a secret meeting with South African President P. W. Botha in 1989. He wanted to show Botha "that we were not wild-eyed terrorists, but reasonable men" (Mandela 1994: 546). Another thing often learned in such settings is that there are shades of political opinion on the other side and, hence, that there are people on the other side with whom one can work (Rouhana 2000).

The perceptions and feelings so generated are likely to have a positive impact on back-channel meetings, diminishing harsh rhetoric, eroding rigid positions, and improving openness and problem-solving. In addition, if those in attendance are sufficiently prominent, their changed perceptions may spread to policy makers in their group, encouraging widespread optimism about the outcome of further talks and thus increasing the likelihood of a negotiated settlement.[6]

Another explanation for the flexibility of back-channel talks is that proposals made at these meetings are usually *nonbinding* and can be withdrawn if the other side shows lack of interest. Thus Iklé (1964: 134) writes that in back-channel talks, it is not necessary to adhere to the front-channel rule "that concessions must not be withdrawn." The reason for this is that it is usually understood that

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[5] Alternatively, the team member(s) involved in the back-channel talks may succeed in negotiating a "separate peace" with the other side and leave the team in favor of this agreement.

[6] Research suggests that positive perceptions of individuals in a meeting are particularly likely to be generalized to the groups from which they come if those individuals are seen as typical of their groups rather than as unusual deviants (Rothbart and John 1985).

binding decisions can only be made in front-channel meetings. This explanation does not, of course, apply to totally back-channel negotiation.

Political Cover

In intense conflict, where the parties are fighting each other militarily or otherwise, leaders may get into trouble with their constituents or allies if they openly contact the other side and try to engage in front-channel talk. They risk losing their reputations, their positions, or even their lives. The aversion to contact with the other side is partly strategic – communication implies recognition of the other side and may be seen as a sign of weakness or of readiness to sacrifice certain principles or interests. But it is also partly psychological – the other side is seen as evil and hence not worthy of human contact (Spector 2003), and maintaining a firm boundary between the two groups contributes to ingroup solidarity.

Leaders are in much less danger if they talk to the other side secretly. Thus, back-channel contacts provide political cover to leaders who want to explore the possibility of escaping the conflict by communicating with the enemy. Historical leaders who have moved well ahead of their constituents and allies through back-channel communication include Nelson Mandela of the ANC (Mandela 1994), Gerry Adams of the IRA (Moloney 2002), Anwar Sadat of Egypt (Stein 1989), and Yitzhak Rabin of Israel (Lieberfeld 1999).

Another way of looking at political cover is that back-channel communication allows leaders to manage political opponents who oppose negotiation. If and when it becomes clear that a reasonable agreement is possible, this problem will often disappear because the leader can mobilize public support around front-channel negotiation or around an agreement that settles the conflict. The leader has engineered a *fait accompli* (Iklé 1964; Mandela 1994).

Because they are secret, back-channel talks are usually *disavowable* if an outsider finds out about them. The leaders can argue that reports about these talks are faulty, that these reports concern other innocent events, or that the people engaged in these talks were not authorized to do so. Cover is also provided because leaders who authorize or engage in back-channel communication often remain unchanged in their angry public rhetoric and authorization of hostilities against the adversary. Thus during the time that Gerry Adams was secretly communicating with Britain, his public statements and those of his close colleagues continued to be full of fire, and the IRA (on whose Army Council he probably sat) continued its violent campaign (Moloney 2002).

Cost-effectiveness

Front-channel negotiations are costly in a number of ways. Planning negotiation can produce internal disunity and political conflict. Once in the field, a team of negotiators must be transported to the site of the negotiation and maintained in

security and (often) luxury for what may be a long period of time. Exiting a failed negotiation can also be painful, leading both sides to blame the other and constituents to be critical (Stein 1989). Back-channel contacts avoid most of these costs and can be used to explore whether it is worth moving to front-channel negotiation.

Lack of Preconditions

Parties in conflict often set preconditions that must be satisfied by the other side before front-channel negotiation can begin. Thus, "Reciprocal demands for disarming the Irish Republican Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary were frequently heard in discussions about peace negotiations in Northern Ireland" (Wanis-St. John 2006: 126). Back-channel communication is a way of jumping over these hurdles, and is sometimes the only way to arrange for the preconditions to be met.

Perhaps the most pervasive precondition for front-channel negotiation is a cessation of hostilities, for example, a cease-fire in an international or internal war. Most parties are unwilling to negotiate openly with a "gun at their head," because it seems to reward threats and may be seen as a sign of weakness. However, back-channel communication often moves ahead vigorously under such circumstances. A case in point is the Palestinian reaction to the Israeli deportation of 415 Hamas activists in December 1992. The Palestinians walked out of the front-channel negotiations that were going on in Washington and stayed out until April 1993. But the secret Oslo talks began in January 1993 and continued uninterrupted (Abbas 1996; Makovsky 1996). Likewise Mandela (1994: 577) reports that front-channel talks between the ANC and the government were scheduled for April 1990, shortly after his release from prison and the legalization of the ANC. But in March, police opened fire on some ANC demonstrators, causing the ANC to cancel these talks. Mandela told President F. W. de Klerk that "he could not 'talk about negotiations on the one hand and murder our people on the other.'" Nevertheless, Mandela "met privately with Mr. de Klerk in Capetown in order to keep up the momentum for negotiations."

Disputants are often unwilling to stop hostile action because they want to keep up pressure on the adversary[7] or fear that a cease-fire will demoralize or disperse their forces or will allow the enemy to regroup and rearm (Pruitt 2006). Back-channel communication provides a way to side-step this concern.

No Acknowledgment of the Other Side's Legitimacy

Front-channel negotiation is sometimes avoided because of fear that it will send the wrong signals – according recognition to the adversary or implying the valid-

[7] Zartman (2006) has argued that in internal war, concern about keeping up pressure on the adversary is often particularly strong among rebel groups, because violence is their main source of leverage over the government.

ity of its complaints and demands (Blum 2005; Spector 2003). This is especially a problem in internal war, when the rebels and government are competing for legitimacy in the eyes of the public and the world. Back-channel communication reduces the size of this problem, because the outer world does not easily learn about it, and it can be used to negotiate over recognition.

Movement toward Formal Negotiation

In intense conflict, where the parties have developed strongly negative beliefs and feelings about each other, back-channel communications are usually quite hesitant and exploratory at first. They may start with a minimal signal of interest in escaping the conflict, sent through an obscure channel or voiced subtly in an otherwise fiery speech. If the other side is similarly motivated and reciprocates this signal, optimism grows and the signal is likely to be strengthened. The result is a benevolent circle entailing a ping-pong-like series of conciliatory statements, actions, and concessions that move the parties progressively closer to negotiation and settlement. Such a progression is not inevitable, and there are usually periods of backtracking in the most hopeful of progressions – two steps forward and one step backward.

An example of such a progression took place during the Northern Ireland peace process Pruitt (2007). An alternating series of eight conciliatory statements (e.g., from a British official: "It is difficult to imagine a military defeat of the IRA") and actions (a three-day IRA ceasefire) began in 1988 and ended with the peace talks in 1997. At times, it was hard to discern these gestures of conciliation (see Mitchell 2000) through the smoke and fire of battle. But they were nevertheless highly prognostic of things to come.

Communicating through Intermediaries

Back-channels often involve intermediaries – Janis-faced individuals or small groups – who talk to both sides and try to help them reconcile their differences. For example, in the wake of the 1973 October War between Israel and Egypt, Henry Kissinger shuttled back and forth between the two sides to work out the terms for disengagement of the troops (Rubin 1981). Often there is more than one intermediary, connected in a chain that stretches from one disputant to the other, such as the chain shown earlier that stretched from Gerry Adams to the British government.

Advantages of Communicating through Intermediaries

Intermediaries are essential when the disputants cannot or will not meet each other. For example, it would have been so politically dangerous for Gerry Adams

and John Major (Prime Minister of Great Britain) to meet face-to-face with each other that neither man would have agreed to do so if it had been possible. Instead they communicated through several chains of intermediaries, which gave them more political cover – more disavowability – than they otherwise would have had. Since all the links in this chain were unremarkable, news people and other interested parties were unable to detect that messages were going back and forth between the two ends.[8]

Sometimes protocol prevents a direct meeting between two stakeholders. Thus, around 1960, when officials in the US Department of Defense wanted to talk with officials on a Caribbean island about installation of some equipment, government policies required that a long chain of intermediaries be used, stretching from the Department of Defense to the Department of State, to the British Foreign Office, to the British Colonial Office, and finally to the Caribbean government (Pruitt 1994).

Intermediaries are also useful because they facilitate communication and belief in the truthfulness of messages. Had Adams met directly with Major, they would probably have been too antagonistic to accomplish much. Misunderstandings would likely have arisen because each man knew little of the other's perspective and they lacked a common vocabulary. Trust was so low that they might not have believed what the other was saying. Effective intermediaries understand and are understood by, respect and are respected by, trust and are trusted by the parties on either side of them in a chain. Hence messages that pass along a chain are often better understood and more credible than if the two ends of the chain talked directly (Pruitt 2003).

In addition, intermediaries, like all mediators, are able to argue that the conflict is counterproductive, encourage optimism, interpret each side's moves and state of mind to the other, urge the disputants to reconceptualize the issues or make concessions, think up new ideas that elude the disputants, and so on (see Kressel and Pruitt 1989). Hence, they can help to settle seemingly intractable conflicts.

Intermediaries seldom disappear when front-channel talks materialize. They usually remain on in the background, helping the parties understand each other, throwing out new ideas, pushing the parties to agree, and the like. This happened in the Northern Ireland Stormont negotiations. When Gerry Adams talked directly with representatives of the British government, John Hume and representatives of the Irish government were often in the room to provide assistance; and the British acted as intermediaries between Sinn Fein and the UUP until the Good Friday Agreement had been reached (Pruitt 2003).

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[8] Lieberfeld (2007) argues that governments are more likely to employ intermediaries in what he calls "semi-official talks" than are rebel groups, because the political danger is greater for them and they are more concerned about according legitimacy to the adversary. He cites evidence for this proposition from the early South African peace talks and the early Oslo talks. In both cases, the government sent intermediaries to the talks while the rebels sent high ranking officials. In the case of Northern Ireland, the intermediaries (see earlier diagram of the communication chain) were not sent by either side as delegates but assumed that role because it made sense to do so.

What are the qualities of an effective back-channel intermediary? One that was mentioned earlier is that they have a knowledgeable and trusting relationship with the parties on either side of them in the chain. A second is that they have unremarkable access to those parties so that the existence of the chain is not obvious to the world. A third is that they are good at keeping secrets. An example is Father Alec Reid, a Catholic priest who persuaded Hume and Adams to talk with each other (Mallie and McKittrick 2001; Taylor 1997) and also provided a link between Adams and both the government of the Irish Republic and the British Northern Ireland Office (Moloney 2002; Taylor 1997). Priests are trained to keep secrets, and Reid was so closemouthed that he gave no interviews until well after the Good Friday Agreement had been signed and ratified (Mallie and McKittrick 2001).

Problems Associated with Communicating through Intermediaries

Although communication through intermediaries is often more effective than direct communication in severe conflicts, there is still a danger that information will become distorted as it travels along a chain. Intermediaries may misinterpret or distort what they learn, for example, by engaging in wishful thinking about the flexibility at one or both ends of the chain. For these reasons, messages that come from intermediaries may not be fully believed, even when they are accurate.

There are two solutions to the problems of distortion and suspected distortion (Pruitt 2003). One is for the principals at the ends of the chain to use a second back-channel to check the reliability of information coming over the chain. This happened in the Oslo negotiations: Israel got President Hosni Mubarek of Egypt to check whether the PLO representative at Oslo was accurately reflecting the views of Chairman Yasser Arafat of the PLO (Savir 1998). The other is for the principals to double-check what has been transmitted if and when they eventually meet face-to-face.

Having multiple communication channels has additional value besides checking messages. It ensures that the principals will stay in touch if one of the channels is compromised. This happened to a back-channel during the Northern Ireland peace process. Between 1990 and 1993, Britain was in communication with Martin McGuinness, Adams' lieutenant, through an intermediary who provided a link between McGuinness and British Intelligence. A newsman learned of this contact and exposed it in the press, forcing it to be shut down (Mallie and McKittrick 1996). Fortunately, this did not disrupt the peace process because other channels were operating at the same time, through John Hume and Father Reid.

Disadvantages of Back-Channel Communication

The points made earlier suggest that back-channel communication is useful in most intergroup conflict and is essential when conflict becomes severe. Nevertheless, there are several potential problems with back-channel communication that must be dealt with whenever it is used.

Difficulties can arise if back-channel communication is revealed to political opponents or the public. Such publicity can injure the reputation of those who authorized the communication and harm the peace process if they are the main proponents of this process (Wanis-St. John 2006). Sometimes these authorities can effectively deny that they authorized the communication or credibly claim that the communication was harmless or justified, but this is not always possible.

Several other problems result from the fact that back-channel talks usually involve a narrow set of people and hence of interests. People who are not involved in reaching an agreement may be unwilling to help with its implementation, both because they have no investment in the agreement and because the agreement does not take their views into account. Some of these people may well become *spoilers* – opponents of the agreement who work to undo it (Wanis-St. John 2006).[9] Spoilers are not a problem if an agreement is self-implementing or if those who make the agreement are able to build and maintain a large coalition of supporters (as is often the case). But spoilers are sometimes powerful enough to block implementation of an agreement or to restart the conflict. For example, spoilers on both sides eventually brought down the Oslo Agreement: Hamas and other militant groups that had not been part of the negotiation continued their violent campaign against Israel, producing retaliation and counter-retaliation between Palestinians and Israelis. Furthermore, an Israeli settler assassinated Rabin, the chief proponent of the agreement. In the end, the agreement became discredited on both sides, and heavy fighting resumed.

Another problem with narrow participation is that it can lead to failure to resolve "boulders in the road" (see Weiss 2002), issues that are so fundamental that failure to deal with them will make it difficult to sustain the agreement. An example is the Israeli settler issue, which was not solved in the Oslo agreement. Settlers continued to pour into the West Bank after the agreement was signed, producing a violent reaction from some Palestinians. This led Israel to expand the use of checkpoints in the region, which enraged more Palestinians and further strengthened the anti-Israeli movement. Had the Oslo talks included Palestinians from the West Bank in addition to expatriate Palestinians, the two sides would have been more likely to face this issue. The talks would have been harder, taken longer, and might not have been successful. But if an agreement had been reached, it would have been more viable. Again, the use of back-channels made it easier to reach an agreement, but made the agreement less durable.

Narrow participation in back-channel talks also tends to exclude civil society – nongovernmental associations such as trade unions and business associations. Elements of civil society are often included, directly or indirectly, in front-channel

[9] Stedman (2000) is the originator of the concept "spoiler."

peace talks; Wanis-St. John and Kew (2006) have found that their inclusion enhances the durability of agreements that are reached.

A related problem with back-channel talks is that secrecy may "prevent the parties from preparing constituents and internal sub-parties for an eventual agreement" (Wanis-St. John 2006: 138; the point is also made by Ben-Dor 1998). This may lead to a sense on one or both sides that too many concessions were made to the adversary, eventually undermining the agreement.

When agreements do not work and heavy conflict resumes, as may result from over-reliance on back-channels, both sides are likely to accuse the other of bad faith. This may, in turn, make it difficult to resume negotiation because one or both parties feel that they have tried negotiation and it does not work. Many Israelis have had this reaction to the failure of the Oslo Agreement.

Avoiding these Disadvantages

How can these problems be solved or at least mitigated? The publicity problem can be diminished by heavily shielding back-channel communication from discovery. For example, if the parties are in a very tense relationship, policy makers may not want to communicate face-to-face but through a chain of trusted intermediaries whose contact with the policy makers and with each other is unremarkable. Another solution to the publicity problem is to have multiple communication channels so that if one of the channels is compromised, the principals can continue to communicate through others.

The problems that result from narrow participation and secrecy can be diminished by insisting that the final agreement be reached in front-channel talks. This should broaden participation in the talks and increase the likelihood that the agreement will be widely endorsed and will speak to a broad set of interests on both sides. Furthermore, concerted efforts should be made to bring representatives of as many groups as possible into the front-channel negotiation – to create as broad a "central coalition" as is feasible (Pruitt 2005b, 2007).[10] This was the beauty of the 1997–1998 Northern Ireland negotiations and the 1979 negotiations that produced the state of Zimbabwe, both stable if not ideal solutions. Unlike the Oslo talks, which were entirely back-channel and involved a narrow set of interests, most of the groups that could overturn the agreement participated in these negotiations (Pruitt 2007; Stedman 1991). The Northern Ireland talks also included two groups with roots in civil society, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and Northern Ireland Labour (Farren and Mulvihill 2000).

The Northern Ireland talks provide an interesting twist to our analysis, because back-channel talks were actually used to put together a broad central coalition. The communication chain diagrammed in the first section of this paper involved

[10] A central coalition is the set of groups that are involved in a peace negotiation. If narrow, it contains only the doves from both sides. If broad, it contains doves, moderates and many hawks.

representatives of Britain and most of the Irish nationalist groups. Nationalist groups were also in back-channel communication with the UUP and most of the unionist paramilitary groups, reassuring them about the outcome of the negotiation and thus encouraging them to enter the talks. This suggests that back-channel talks are not at fault *per se* but rather the use of these talks to exclude significant civil, political, and military groups from the final agreement. It may be necessary to limit the range of participants in some prenegotiation discussions or in side-bar talks during the negotiation; but the final agreement should involve as broad a spectrum of interests on both sides as possible. A "minimal winning coalition" is often insufficient to ensure the success of an agreement once reached (Pruitt, 2005a).[11]

Getting many groups on board takes a lot of time and effort, because multiple issues must be addressed and solved. When issues cannot be solved, concessions have to be made, and this also takes time because most groups have to become discouraged about the success or cost of the combat before they will make concessions. In Northern Ireland, nine years of back-channel activity were needed before front-channel negotiations could commence, in contrast to the ten months that were devoted to the Oslo talks. It was worth spending the extra time.

How to mobilize the public behind an agreement? Front-channel meetings with broad participation by organized groups certainly go partway toward selling an agreement to the public. But this is not enough. Again the Northern Ireland peace process provides a useful model. This process culminated in a referendum on the Good Friday Agreement, which was endorsed by most republicans and a majority of unionists. To achieve a positive vote, the leaders of the groups who negotiated the agreement launched a vigorous campaign in its favor. By contrast, the Oslo Agreement was not effectively sold to the Israeli public, and the agreement was endorsed by only a small margin in the Israeli Knesset (Ben-Dor 1998).

Conclusions

Back-channel communication is widely used as a preliminary to front-channel intergroup negotiation. It is particularly helpful in severe or intractable conflict, where leaders need assurance that front-channel talks will work before embarking

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[11] In severe conflicts, it is seldom possible to get all groups aboard in an agreement. There are always a few extremists who want to fight on. Nevertheless, an agreement will work – in the sense of settling the conflict – if these groups are small enough to be isolated politically or if they lack the means to resume the conflict. In Northern Ireland, the "Real IRA," an armed group that splintered off from the IRA when Sinn Fein entered front-channel negotiation, was small enough for the IRA to hound its leaders into exile. On the unionist side, the ultra-conservative Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) refused to join the final negotiations and had sufficient political power to block part of the agreement a few years after it was signed. But they were not armed and the cease-fire still held. Eventually the IRA disarmed and the DUP resumed working within the framework of the agreement.

on them. Back-channel communication allows assessment of the adversary's readiness to negotiate and make concessions. It also provides the kind of flexibility and future orientation needed to locate the real issues, develop a meaningful agenda, and do enough problem solving that light can be seen at the end of the tunnel. Back-channel communication is also very useful as an adjunct to front-channel negotiation when deadlocks develop. Indeed, it can be argued that without the possibility of back-channel communication, there would be little front-channel negotiation and very few settlements of the major conflicts in the world.

There are risks involved with back-channel communication, especially the risk of excluding crucial players and failing to address critical "boulder-in-the-road" issues, which consign the agreement, if reached, to failure. These risks are particularly large when there are no front-channel negotiations and final agreement is reached entirely in back-channel talks. The danger is not with the use of back-channels *per se* but with the use of back-channels to create a quick and narrow agreement. If this danger can be kept in mind, back-channels can be used to assemble a central coalition of negotiating parties that is sufficiently broad to deal with all major issues and isolate potential spoilers.

Two historical cases can be contrasted, both of which made extensive use of back-channel communication. One produced a largely successful agreement and the other did not. The successful case is the Northern Ireland peace process between 1986 and 1998; the unsuccessful case is the Oslo talks of 1993. In the Northern Ireland case, back-channel communication was used to assemble a broad array of parties, who then reached an agreement on most of the critical issues in front-channel negotiation. In the Oslo case, the negotiation was entirely done in back-channels. This meant that several critical issues were not addressed and many groups were excluded from the final decision, including armed militants on both sides. These groups became opponents of the agreement and eventually undermined it.

An important difference between these two cases was the amount of time and effort that was spent developing a solution – ten years in the Northern Ireland case (including nine years of back-channel activity) and ten months in the Oslo case. Two things happened during the long gestation period in Northern Ireland. One was that most of the politically significant groups on both sides, including the armed militants, concluded that the conflict was counterproductive. The other was that, as a result of a great deal of back-channel activity by devoted intermediaries, these groups became convinced (a) that they would have to make deep concessions to escape the conflict, (b) that it was possible to deal with most of the "unsavory characters" on the other side, and (c) that the other side was also ready to make significant concessions. This took a lot of time, but the time was worth spending. The Oslo talks were much narrower and produced a premature agreement that did not last.

Taking time to develop a lasting agreement is not a formula for inaction – for sitting on one's hands. What happened after 1986 in Northern Ireland was a crescendo of activity – numerous meetings, uncounted messages flying back and forth, and the building of many new cross-community groups to put pressure for conciliation on the political system (see Fitzduff 2002). No less is required today in other troubled areas around the world, including the Middle East.

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