LONG-TERM NETWORKS FOR PEACE BREAKTHROUGHS

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BRIEF SUMMARY

Thirty, highly experienced mediators and peacemakers were interviewed and asked, 'What works?' By far the most common answer was the importance of having long-term networks of inter-party or inter-group contact in place. These Track 1.5 networks provided spaces for awkward conversations, sustained contact and the floating of ideas. They can act as nudge mechanisms, acculturating actors to new ways of thinking and possible routes out of conflict.

KEY MESSAGES

The long-term networks allow sustained contact and free actors from the two or three-year project cycle

A key aim is to reframe the conflict and have future-orientated conversations

The networks can help socialize participants to credible options for change

By keeping in touch over the longer term, the networks are in place when there are possibilities for peace or the urgent need for conflict de-escalation

The networks work best when they are attended by well-placed individuals who can influence their superiors

The networks can focus directly on the conflict, or on symptom issues such as resource sharing
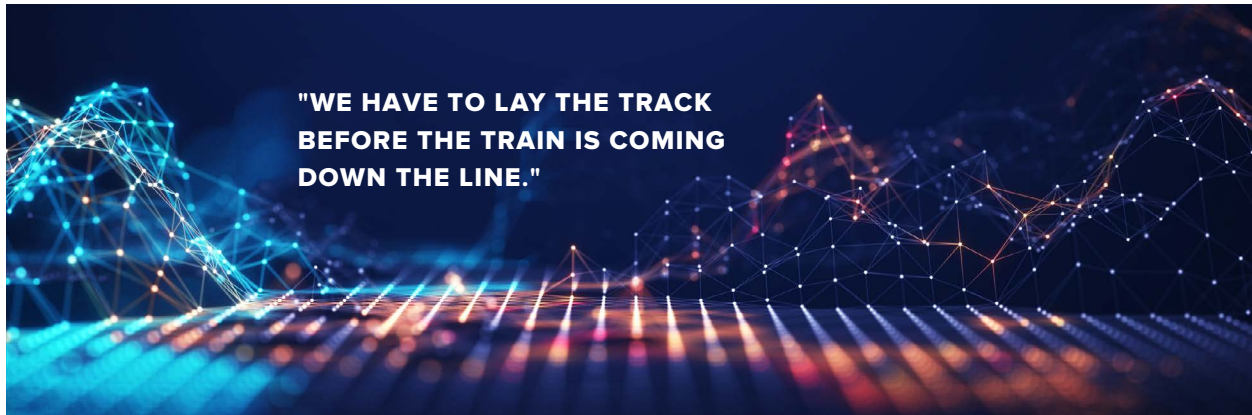
"WE HAVE TO LAY THE TRACK BEFORE THE TRAIN IS COMING DOWN THE LINE."

THE POWER OF NETWORKS

Interviewees stressed the importance of sustained contact networks that operated across conflict boundaries at the Track 1.5 level. These networks provide a space for contact, dialogue, and trust-building. They are a forum for influential people who are wary of one another to be in contact and remain in contact over the longer-term. Once in place, the lines of communication can prove useful for de-escalation, but their longer-term purpose is to provide a space for a thinking-through of ways out of violent conflict.

The networks are about creating processes where there is none. At a minimum they are about providing lines of communication and 'recognizing shared humanity' between conflict parties. More advanced networks allow for trust-building, awkward conversations and the seeding of ideas that might allow participants to reframe the conflict away from grievances and towards issues of shared concern. At a very advanced stage, the networks might develop frameworks that can provide the basis for protocols for the conduct of the conflict, or negotiations as part of a structured peace process.

All of the above depends on the formality of the networks, their longevity and the level of influence held by the participants. In some cases, government quality documents are produced that may serve a purpose in later negotiations.

APPROACH

A number of interviewees mentioned that the networks were not spaces for participants to renounce their politics or goals. Instead, they were spaces to encourage different ways of thinking, especially future-orientated thinking that transcends the politics of recrimination. Interviewees noted that this depended on the careful selection of participants and 'working within the boundaries of possibility'. As one said, 'ultimately what you are doing is politics'.

The networks involve innovation and creativity such as introducing new ideas and slowly testing the political risk appetite. One interviewee noted that 'It is about getting past bargaining towards interest-based negotiations and dealing with needs'. Another pointed to the importance of finding shared values such as reducing civilian casualties.

A key issue discussed in the interviews was whether the networks focus on the core issue of the conflict, or take an indirect approach and discuss issues of shared concern. The latter approach sometimes can act as a gateway to more substantive discussions on the main conflict and can enhance relationship-building.

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"OUR JOB IS TO FIND TRACTION WHERE THERE IS LITTLE HOPE."

PERSONNEL

Interviewees stressed the importance of having 'the right people in the room'. One noted, 'It is important to work with people who have power.' This means individuals who can influence their superiors and can act as catalytic thinkers and persuaders. Often these individuals moved between Tracks 1 and 2 and were able to start awkward conversations on their own side and be capable of strategic foresight, or imagining their context in the future. A number of interviewees noted the importance of thinking through the implications of the conflict continuing decades into the future and thus the need to map out alternative scenarios.

Participation in these networks is not risk free. In some cases, there are security concerns and in other cases there is a risk that participants may be seen as disloyal to their own cause. In many cases, participants remain members of these networks with the permission of their political or military bosses. Confidentiality is key and interviewees alluded to a number of well-established networks working – at subterranean levels - across contemporary conflicts.

SETBACKS + SUCCESS

More than a few interviewees likened the networks to the task facing Sisyphus, pushing a boulder up a hill only for it to roll down again. A common setback was a change of government and the risk of Track 1.5 participants losing their influence. Another obstacle was seen as changing geo-political conditions that make conflict continuation more attractive than investigating options for peace.

In terms of success, interviewees were keen to point out that these Track 1.5 networks should not be seen in isolation. They are usually just one part of a more complex constellation of actors and initiatives, and ideas that begin in Track 1.5 may find their way to Track 1. As one mediator observed, 'My work only makes sense if other people are doing things'. Success was seen as network survival over the longer term, and then being in place when opportunities for a pivot towards more peaceful options arose.

According to one interviewee, 'The reason you continue trying for 10 years before they are ready is that when they are ready, you are not starting from scratch.' Another noted how network participants 'usually start from a position of cynicism' but that a secure and sustained process was a way of nudging people towards future-orientated thinking.

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"WE BUILT RELATIONSHIPS THAT ENABLED US TO PUSH PEOPLE TO THINK BEYOND THEIR COMFORT ZONES."

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Thirty senior mediators and peacemakers were interviewed in June- August 2024 on effectiveness in peacemaking. All had over two decades of experience and had worked in multiple contexts. They worked for international organizations, governments, INGOs, NGOs, and donor organizations. A number worked independently. They mainly worked in Track 1.5 and often between Tracks 1 and 2. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and on the basis of complete anonymity for individuals and employer organizations. Questions centred around effectiveness and "What works?" in mediation and peacemaking rather than on peacebuilding.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR + ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Roger Mac Ginty is a Professor at the Durham Global Security Institute and the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University. The author is grateful to the interviewees and the Effective Peace Initiative.

roger.macginty@durham.ac.uk

X: @rogermacginty

HOW TO CITE

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