Deciding on dialogue

Pathways out of violence for armed opposition movements in Myanmar and the Basque Country

Alexander Ramsbotham is Director of *Accord* for Conciliation Resources. Before this he was a research fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research, worked as specialist adviser to the House of Lords European Union (EU) Select Committee, was head of the Peace and Security Programme at the United Nations Association-UK, and has been an associate fellow in the International Security Programme at Chatham House. Alexander completed a PhD in July 2011.

'Armed groups' priorities, structures and goals are not static. They have changed over the last 20 years and will change in the next 20. They need to be understood and factored in to the early phases of peace processes, but their perspectives are often missing.'

Armed group representative in conversation with *Accord*, 2019

This article explores armed groups' pathways 'from fighting to talking', and some factors that influence their decision-making to engage in dialogue in the early stages of peace processes. It reflects conversations between *Accord* and senior members of liberation movements from the Basque Country and Myanmar, which happened on the margins of a larger meeting convened by a fellow international non-governmental organisation (INGO) in late 2019.

The experiences presented here reflect a particular type of non-state armed actor – with a long history of armed resistance, and with political aspirations to represent interests of political constituencies based on forms of belonging and identity including ethnicity, religion, language and location. The analysis does not pretend to be exhaustive, and there are limits to what lessons can be extrapolated from it. Nonetheless, such frank discussions can provide valuable insights into armed groups' priorities, dilemmas and strategies for deciding to engage in dialogue.

The article looks at two key themes underpinning armed groups' deliberations to pursue negotiated settlements: moving beyond narrow security agreements to political dialogue in Myanmar; and maintaining internal cohesion and managing organisational change in the Basque Country. It concludes with perspectives on how international third-party support for armed groups to engage in early dialogue can be more stable, practicable and better managed.

Moving beyond security agreements in Myanmar

Many armed movements have invested significant human, financial and intellectual capital in fighting for a stated cause and cannot abandon the armed struggle without realistic prospect of progress on their political ambitions.

This tendency is illustrated here in relation to Myanmar, where successive regimes have sought to isolate discussions with armed groups from the political sphere and limit them exclusively to narrow security agreements. From the perspective of many armed groups, this tactic has been a major barrier to embracing dialogue. Deep distrust defines relationships between conflict parties.

The historical lack of a political track in Myanmar has undermined more recent efforts to initiate talks since 2011 as part of a major political and economic transition, which have continued to struggle to convince armed groups that talks on ceasefires would provide a pathway to nonviolent political engagement. This is despite additional 'carrots' of removing their proscribed status, which can open up the way for provision of health and education, and other services and official development assistance.

In conversation with *Accord*, Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs – the term preferred by armed groups in Myanmar, partly in an effort to emphasise their political links to their core constituencies) stressed that dialogue must offer a pathway to address their broader political ambitions. EAOs in Myanmar are almost all organised

territorially along ethnic lines and in relation to the British colonial era whereby non-Bamar ethnic groups and regions were regarded as 'frontier' areas.

These groups have been struggling for greater political influence and forms of self-determination for many decades. Their predominant focus has been on establishing a federal state in which ethnic minorities (approximately 40 per cent of the population) are given equal status and recognition. (For more detail, see the article 'Self-determination and peace processes – Pathways and stumbling blocks for conflict resolution' in this edition.)

In August 2011, as part of a new effort to reinvigorate a peace process, then President U Thein Sein offered separate, bilateral talks with individual EAOs at the sub-national level, focused exclusively on securing ceasefires. Many EAOs were wary that the offer did not include a clear avenue to political dialogue related to their central grievances and interests, particularly core concerns relating to self-determination. Their caution was compounded by profound and prolonged distrust. No armed group responded to the president's offer for three months.

The government tried to convince EAOs to engage in a stepwise process: a bilateral ceasefire agreement would be followed by disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, enabling the EAO to register as a political party and participate in elections, after which it could influence amendments to the contested constitution

through parliament. However, this was a long and uncertain route, and EAOs had bitter experiences of 'goal posts' being shifted and of unilateral constitutional reform by past military regimes. From the perspective of EAOs, and also many ethnic communities as well as pro-democracy advocates from among the majority Bamar population, the infamous 2008 Constitution was seen as having been promulgated unilaterally by the military, as being discriminatory, and as further consolidating power and decision-making within the Burmese military elite.

The U Thein Sein government established teams to discuss the ceasefire offer. But these had different structures, and it was not clear which teams EAOs should be engaging with or what the various teams were offering. These teams were variously led by members of parliament (predominantly Burmese men), ministers and others, and each had seemingly different agendas, for example in terms of how expansive they were prepared to be. The formation by the government of more structured mechanisms for dialogue helped to create greater clarity for EAOs, such as the Union Peacemaking Working Committee (UPWC – established in 2012), and then the Myanmar Peace Centre (2015). (See the article in this edition on 'Peace secretariats and dialogue promotion – Potential and limitations' for further detail on these institutions.)

EAOs strove to establish a collective, national ceasefire process and agreement in an effort to gain more influence. It has been a major challenge for disparate EAOs to work

General Secretary of the Karen National Union, Naw Si Pho Ra Sein, signs an agreement in Yangon on 6 April 2012 after peace talks with Myanmar government representatives. © Soe Than Win / Stringer via Getty Images

together to form collaborative structures capable of facilitating cooperation among themselves and negotiating effectively as a bloc. They set up a working group through which they were able to present a counter-proposal to the government's bilateral model, aimed at establishing a National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and framework for political dialogue.

In 2015, the government allowed 17 EAOs to convene a conference in Myanmar for the first time (numerous meetings had been convened in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand prior to this). The EAOs drafted a comprehensive ceasefire agreement and set up the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT). The draft formed the basis of negotiations with the government, and EAOs worked to ensure that the terms of the agreement included commitments to democracy, equality, self-determination and political dialogue. (For more detail, see the article in this edition 'Unsticking stalled peace processes – Insider mediator perspectives from Myanmar' by Ja Nan Lahtaw, an adviser to the NCCT and Co-Facilitator of the ongoing negotiations known as the Formal Political Dialogue.)

Maintaining internal cohesion and managing organisational change in the Basque Country

'How do you know the 'ripeness' of the organisation to enter into dialogue? For ETA, for many years there were many people who said armed struggle had to be left behind. But when is the moment that you can make this step without breaking the movement into a thousand pieces?'

Armed group representative in conversation with *Accord*, 2019

Shifting emphasis from fighting to talking brings tough challenges for armed groups, to maintain internal cohesion and manage the daunting requirements of changing modes of operation. In their conversations with *Accord*, armed group members stressed challenges of shifting from 'winning the war' to 'winning the peace': to understand and engage in bargaining; and to revise objectives that can be supported and sustained through negotiations and that still reflect the ambitions of those they seek to represent. Objectives need to be clear and agreed, but also realistic and relevant to deal-making and (probably) concession. Sustaining the unity of an armed group into a negotiating process is a major challenge that will likely only get harder as a process progresses.

For Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in the Basque Country, for many years of their armed struggle there had been a broad and largely unspoken assumption throughout the movement that they would only agree to relinquish violence and enter dialogue when their core self-determination objective had been achieved.

However, as in many armed conflicts, the circumstances of the decision to pursue dialogue were in fact much more equivocal – with no clear-cut sense of 'victory', but rather deriving from a realisation that there was no military solution and end-point to their struggle. As efforts to engage in dialogue progressed, it became increasingly apparent that self-determination was highly complex. The decision to enter into dialogue did not automatically lead to 'winning' independence, but led to much more nuanced potential outcomes. Intense discussions within the movement followed on what their self-determination objectives from talks now were, and whether political dialogue was compatible with these and was worth the investment.

Dialogue inevitably exposed differences within the movement, which had been held together with common purpose in fighting and 'war mode' for so long. Looking back on the initial phases of dialogue, some members felt that, having decided on dialogue, they had not then dedicated enough time and energy to internal discussions early on in order to think through what realistic outcomes might look like – for example that ambitions carried over from the armed struggle were too high, too idealistic or too categorical. A lesson through hindsight has been that more time spent exploring and agreeing their position earlier on could have helped to mitigate challenges later.

> **The decision to enter into dialogue did not automatically lead to 'winning' independence.**

Sustaining internal cohesion within an armed group is difficult when entering into talks and gets harder as they progress. Compromises agreed in tough negotiations are hard to sell to others in the movement who were not present in the core of the process, risking tensions between the leadership and wider membership. For ETA, maintaining internal cohesion has required understanding how different constituencies within the movement think, as 'pro-peace' elements need to bring sceptics or dissenters with them. ETA's decision to relinquish violence was unilateral. Restrictions on ETA supporters gathering publicly made maintaining internal cohesion towards peace more difficult. Deciding on dialogue is controversial and potentially divisive, but evading or deferring a decision to talk does not offer a safe alternative, as circumstances will not stay the same or wait for a decision to subsequently be made, but may deteriorate or escalate.

Conclusion: managing external support

'Today we talk like we are experts in DDR, mediation, facilitation. But at the beginning, we didn't know anything.'

Armed groups are often ill-prepared for the demands of dialogue and look to third parties for help. But it can be difficult for armed groups to find (especially international) mediation support or advice early on in a peace process, before it has built momentum or gained international attention.

In early efforts to initiate dialogue in the Basque Country, ETA did fully understand how international peace NGOs functioned and which might be able to provide support, and needed themselves to research and identify potential peace partners, reach out to them and convince them to help. The efforts of the Spanish state to avoid international involvement and the listing of ETA as a terrorist organisation presented additional barriers to external third-party support. (For more detail, see the article 'From ceasefire to disarmament without states – lessons from the Basque Country' in this edition.)

'Armed groups are involved in so many meetings: meetings, meetings, meetings! This has become a problem!'

Conversely, when a peace process begins to pick up speed and interest, armed groups can quickly become inundated with offers of outside help. In Myanmar before 2012, only a very few donors and INGOs were working with EAOs that were based externally in India, Thailand or around the Chinese border. As soon as the peace process started, there was a huge influx of international entities seeking to play roles and undertake initiatives, often at cross purposes.

The introduction of the idea of holding 'national dialogues' (effectively sub-national ethnic or thematic dialogues) in particular sparked external interest, including from donors and INGOs who soon after were approaching local organisations to see what kinds of assistance they could provide. Some external partners came with preconceived ideas and predetermined project models of the sort of process they wanted to support. This added complexity,

for example introducing different and sometimes contradictory models of national dialogue.

Armed groups in conversation with *Accord* urged international peace partners to provide more proactive, stable and responsive support to help them navigate the barriers and pitfalls of early dialogue, and to be ready to seize peace opportunities as they arise. For practitioners this demands flexibility, with implications also for funding streams (explored in further detail in the article 'Dynamics and challenges of funding peace – Perspectives from peacemaking practitioners' in this edition). Proscription regimes are also an obstacle in many contexts. Donor policies can be more consistently aligned to facilitate negotiated solutions, for example to avoid clashes between peace process support and counter-terrorism strategies.

Peace process support organisations need to be prepared to engage in different types of conflict, including those that are controversial or overlooked, and to work with an array of local actors – journalists, religious leaders, women's rights groups and business people as well as armed actors – to find appropriate ways to encourage steps towards dialogue and negotiated settlements. Dynamics of 'supply' and 'demand' for external support can easily become unbalanced and need to be considered frankly. Exaggerated or artificial demand for external support invites multiple challenges, from duplication, to conflict parties and civil society being overwhelmed or pressed into inappropriate activities.

Long-term commitment and investment in establishing trusted relationships and partnerships is often essential for external third parties to make informed judgements on risks and advantages of supporting armed groups' preparations for peace talks and transition. Third-party accompaniment of local partners through the twists and turns of peace processes is often essential to achieve incremental gains and shifts towards dialogue. This can also help create space to challenge armed groups' thinking and approaches, for example in relation to rethinking maximal positions or to changing policies on gender and inclusion.