

The Inter-Tajik Dialogue

From civil war towards civil society

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The non-official Inter-Tajik Dialogue began in March 1993, when seven individuals from different factions in the civil war sat down around a table in Moscow. At that time, they formed a unique channel of communication across factional lines. Just past the peak of violence in a vicious civil war, they could barely look at each other. By the end of 2000, after twenty-nine meetings, the Dialogue continues. Its members and their process have become a mind at work in the midst of a country making itself. The Dialogue has helped to support a multi-level peace process that includes government negotiators, highly informed citizens outside government, and citizens at the grassroots – all working in complementary ways that reflect these roles.

Participants in the Dialogue helped to start and then maintained involvement with the inter-Tajik negotiations and engaged in activities in the society at large. The Dialogue had been convened six times before the UN-sponsored inter-Tajik negotiations began in April 1994. It continued throughout the period of official negotiations and then through the three-year transitional period after the 1997 General Agreement and beyond. Because most of the participants were citizens outside government, they were at the heart of Tajikistan 'public peace process'.

Background

The Inter-Tajik Dialogue is a child of the Dartmouth Conference Regional Conflicts Task Force. The Dartmouth Conference started in 1960 and is the longest continuous bilateral dialogue between American and Soviet, now Russian, citizens. The Task Force was formed in 1981. It was co-chaired by Harold Saunders and, until 1988, Yevgeny Primakov, who was then succeeded by Gennady Chufrin. In 1992, Task Force members decided to draw on their experience as the basis to foster dialogue in one of the conflicts that had surfaced in the former Soviet Union. At the same time, Chufrin and Saunders published the article 'A Public Peace Process' in *Negotiation Journal*,



which conceived of the process of recurring dialogue as moving through five stages. This model became the operating framework for the Inter-Tajik Dialogue.

The first purpose of the initiators in 1993 was to “see whether a group can be formed from within the civil conflict to design a peace process for their own country.” This objective contrasted sharply with the objectives of some international NGOs that intervene in conflicts with the aim of directly mediating peace agreements. The second purpose was rooted in the conviction that peace becomes a reality only when citizens begin building a society with institutions and practices capable of resolving differences peacefully.

The Dialogue was designed with a dual agenda: to discuss specific problems at length and to increase understanding of the dynamics in the relationships that cause the problems. Patterns of interaction are changed through working together in sustained dialogue. For example, misperceptions give way gradually to a more realistic picture of the adversary. Although no one should be expected to change her or his identity or interests, participants can gain respect for other participants’ experiences; even adversaries can find common interests. The Dialogue aimed to help transform conflictual relationships so that the participants could work together constructively.

Stages in the Dialogue

The first stage of the dialogue process is when participants decide whether to risk talking with the adversary. The initiating team contacted over a hundred Tajikistanis to determine their willingness to engage in dialogue and their capacity to listen to different views. An essential principle guiding the selection of participants was to ensure broad representation from the different factions of the conflict. Participants were typically from the second or third level of decision-making authority, as people at this level are often able to explore ideas more freely.

The second stage of the process – when participants map problems and relationships – began with the first three-day meeting in March 1993. It was facilitated by one American and one Russian who were members of the Regional Conflicts Task Force. During the three meetings between March and August 1993, participants in the Dialogue were absorbed with unloading their feelings about the origins and conduct of the civil war. In the third meeting, someone commented: “What we really need to focus on is how to start a negotiation between the government and the opposition about creating conditions for refugees to go home.” Most participants acknowledged that no other steps toward normalization could happen until citizens were back home. With this observation, the Dialogue progressed into the third stage of probing problems and relationships. In this stage, the participants explore approaches to each key issue and come to broad conclusions about desirable ways to address problems.

At the fourth meeting in October 1993, participants had a straightforward discussion about how to start a negotiation. The immediate problem was that the opposition was ideologically diverse and geographically dispersed. This created a dilemma over who would represent the opposition. Within two months, the leaders of different opposition factions had met in Tehran, developed a common platform, and formed the Moscow-based Coordination Centre of Democratic Forces of Tajikistan in the CIS. Two participants in the Dialogue signed this document and four became members of the steering committee for the Coordination Centre. At the fifth meeting in January 1994, participants from the opposition groups presented this new platform – which was to become the basis for the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) alliance. Pro-government participants questioned them intensively about it over the next two days. Some of the main points in that exchange were put in writing. The pro-government participants left the meeting with the belief that the basis for negotiation now existed and promised to report to the government. One month later, the government of Tajikistan accepted an invitation from the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General to join UN-mediated peace talks.

The Dialogue was a factor in the context that shaped the parties' willingness to engage in official talks. Yet as with any unofficial dialogue process, it is difficult to determine the extent and nature of its influence on government decision-making and hence to assess its impact. In complex political situations, it is almost impossible to identify precisely which of the many inputs bears most responsibility for changes. In this case, the government decision was taken against the backdrop of sustained diplomatic pressure to negotiate and its awareness of the escalating costs of war. Yet as was remarked by a high Tajikistani official who was involved in the government decision to negotiate: 'After six meetings of the Dialogue, it was no longer possible to argue credibly that negotiation between the government and the opposition was impossible.' Among the delegates to the first round of official negotiations in Moscow, one member of the government team and two members of the UTO team were also participants in the Inter-Tajik Dialogue.

In their sixth meeting in March 1994 – one month before the beginning of UN-mediated negotiations – Dialogue participants wrote their first document, the 'Memorandum on the Negotiating Process in Tajikistan'. This was the first of eighteen (so far) memoranda they prepared jointly to convey ideas to the negotiating teams and the larger body politic. Participants recognized that the government and opposition leaders were the main actors in the negotiations but sought to inform them of ideas discussed in the Dialogue. The task of creating the memoranda marked the transition of the Dialogue into stage four, which focuses on building scenarios and

planning strategies that contain mutually reinforcing or complementary steps to create the momentum for overcoming obstacles. The first memorandum recommended the creation of four working groups for the negotiating process. This would allow the diverse points of view held by government and UTO delegates to be channelled into solving practical problems such as refugee return, political change, disarmament, and economic regeneration. Much later the Commission on National Reconciliation (CNR) – the central implementation mechanism of the 1997 General Agreement, which included several Dialogue members – organized its work programme through four sub-commissions, echoing the model discussed in that first memorandum.

Proposals for the peace process

Once the inter-Tajik negotiations began, the Dialogue's aim was redefined as "designing a political process of national reconciliation for the country." Participants also addressed issues that brought the negotiations to impasse. Dialogue members discussed many of the issues that were addressed in the 1997 General Agreement. Although it is difficult to assess the effect of their ideas on the negotiations, the Dialogue influenced the thinking of its members and those to whom they talked. For example, in March 1995, those involved in the Dialogue began to discuss the concept of a 'transitional period'. Rather than endorsing the UTO's inclination to overturn the results of the elections that had excluded them, the Dialogue recommended a process of transition to a more inclusive political system. This concept – deployed in peace agreements elsewhere – was later incorporated into the General Agreement to describe the post-agreement phase, when the CNR continued the negotiating process while implementing the terms of the agreement.

In June 1995, the Dialogue considered a proposal from UTO supporters for a supra-governmental Coordinating Council. After considerable discussion, they issued a memorandum that recommended a Council positioned under the authority of the negotiating parties that would be responsible for implementing agreements. This was intended to address the government's concern that the Council would have greater authority than the government. The memorandum described the need: "to develop broad participation in the functioning of the political system and the affairs of the civil society on the basis of ensuring equal participation in power among all regions, political parties and movements and national communities." The CNR later served as a mechanism similar to the Coordinating Council model developed in the Dialogue. Some participants believe this approach originated in the Dialogue.

In May 1996, the Dialogue met in Dushanbe for the first time. They focused on designing a political process for national reconciliation and identifying the obstacles to it. They stated starkly that: “the primary obstacle to peace in Tajikistan is the absence of an adequate understanding on sharing power among the regions, political parties and movements, and nationalities in Tajikistan.”

In October 1996, after a joint commission that included a Dialogue member mediated the Gharm protocol among field commanders and local authorities, Dialogue members crystallized their concept for the peace process. According to the joint memorandum from that meeting: “Participants believe that one of the main obstacles to peace is lack of a common vision about what kind of country the Tajikistani people want their country to be.” Participants concluded that: “It is necessary to broaden public participation in the efforts to achieve peace by developing a multi-level peace process in order to ensure the widest popular involvement in achieving and implementing a nation-wide peace agreement.” To help achieve this goal, the Dialogue recommended the creation of a ‘consultative forum of the peoples of Tajikistan’ – an idea that was already in the air. Although President Rakhmonov and UTO leader Nuri indicated their agreement with this proposal, the consultative forum was never formed.

Impact for participants

When the participants were asked about the effect of the Dialogue on their own lives and on the larger process of negotiations, they discussed three main types of outcome:

Analytical: The Dialogue helped the participants to gain a new understanding of the sources of the conflict in Tajikistan and about different strategies for managing it. The people who took part in the Dialogue represented the views and perspectives of the different parties and thus influenced each other’s perception of the conflict and understanding of their own and the other party’s interests. The Dialogue also helped participants to moderate their own positions and, in some cases, made them more amenable to compromise. Yet there is no way to document how these shifts in the participants’ views may have influenced their own parties’ formal negotiating positions.

Substantive: The Dialogue cannot claim credit for ideas that were put forward in the official inter-Tajik negotiations. Dialogue participants believe their own discussions of some of these ideas preceded those in the official negotiations. Some participants were also delegates to the official negotiations and were able to transmit the ideas into their teams. Memoranda produced during the Dialogue sessions were normally

shared with the leaders of the two opposing camps and with UN headquarters.

Informational: A series of public events were held in the US, Russia and Tajikistan. For example, the Dialogue group held a session at the United States Institute of Peace in June 1994. The members discussed the events in Tajikistan and various strategies for representing the different regional and ethnic interests in the country, including a variety of formulas for proportional and regional representation. In May 1996, the Dialogue group held its first meeting inside Tajikistan. It presented itself publicly in Dushanbe at a US embassy reception and before a seminar attended by three dozen university administrators and faculty. It is hard to document whether or how these events influenced public opinion. Yet at a minimum they provided public fora where ideas about conflict analysis and settlement could be presented and discussed. In the long-term, it is hoped that such ideas penetrated the political debate both domestically and internationally.

The transitional and civil society phases

After the General Agreement was concluded, most Dialogue participants remained active in peacebuilding and consolidation. Four Dialogue participants became members of the CNR. Others became active in new civil society organizations. One member formed the Tajikistan Centre for Citizenship Education, which produces materials and organizes roundtable seminars on subjects important for peacebuilding, such as regionalism. With the formal end of the transition period, members of the Dialogue joined with others to create the Public Committee for Promoting Democratic Processes, registered in February 2000. This Committee is working on a range of projects that help to: (a) foster economic development benefiting all members of strife-torn communities; (b) develop university programmes and courses in conflict resolution; (c) foster dialogue in public forums at the regional level on issues of national importance; as well as (d) create a second national-level inter-Tajik dialogue.

In the post-transition period, Dialogue participants and their colleagues in the Public Committee are recognizing the importance of a concept that guided the Dialogue from its inception: a society committed to remaining at peace and developing peacefully must enlarge the spaces where citizens can come together to resolve differences and must engage citizens in ever larger numbers in the process of building the country. Dialogue members have moved from civil war to a concern for building a Tajikistani version of a democratic civil society. Throughout those nearly eight years, they have played significant roles at all levels in the multi-level peace process.