The relationship between track one and track two diplomacy

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Track one actors (governmental officials, representatives of inter-governmental organizations, and third-party governments) are common and established interlocutors with armed groups in the context of peace processes. The last twenty years have seen track two actors (non-governmental and unofficial groups and individuals) play a wide variety of roles vis-à-vis armed groups and peacemaking.

Joseph Montville, who coined the term ‘track two’ in 1982, defined track two diplomacy as:

“an unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations that aims to develop strategies, influence public opinion, and organize human and material resources in ways that might help to resolve their conflict. …[It] is a process designed to assist official leaders to resolve or, in the first instance, to manage conflicts by exploring possible solutions out of public view and without the requirements to formally negotiate or bargain for advantage”

Broader theoretical systems have been developed since then to differentiate further between different actors, and different segments of society can play a role. The Institute of Multi-Track Diplomacy’s model of Multi-Track Diplomacy defines ‘track two’ as peacemaking by conflict resolution professionals and NGOs, with a number of other tracks from ‘track three’ (peacemaking through commerce or business) through to ‘track nine’ (peacemaking through the media and information) having a role. Within a multi-track system it is important to see negotiations as taking place at multiple levels, while the different tracks can be either engaged in sequence or parallel, or even get mixed up to the extent of having various tracks knitted together and strongly interrelated.
The growing appreciation of models of peacemaking driven by non-state actors is partly explained by the way non-state armed groups have become more complex, heterogeneous and harder to deal with. For example, many armed groups have evolved to diversify their economic resource base. This phenomenon was clearly seen during the civil war in Lebanon, where no militia could survive without an economic base in the ‘taxes’ gathered from the communities or diasporas, extorting money from business circles, or creating legal or illegal businesses. Because of the complex nature of armed groups, negotiations with them need to cover much more than military aspects, and include broad societal issues and the reintegration of former combatants.

This development demands the diverse kinds of peacemaking that increasingly flexible and pragmatic multi-track diplomacy offers.

Comparative advantages
While distinctions between tracks are not always as clear in practice as they are in theory, it is useful to recognize how each track can have its own advantages and disadvantages for engaging armed groups in dialogue. Track one actors are more likely to have resources and status. They may have powerful ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks’ in terms of their ability to intervene militarily, support peace processes/agreements with monitors and peacekeepers, and give or withhold legitimacy, aid, trade or loans, etc. They may also be constrained from acting effectively as they may be wary of conveying status and legitimacy on ‘rebels’, may be compromised by national interest or seen as too partial toward one of the combatants or have too great a stake in the outcome of the process. There may also be legal constraints and difficulties in acting without drawing lots of media attention.
Track two parties are less threatening to armed groups, and find it easier to work flexibly, unofficially, and off-the-record, and have less to be concerned about in terms of conveying official/legal recognition. Lacking geopolitical interests and stakes in the conflict, they may be more impartial, forming relationships with a wider variety of actors in the conflict, and hearing things official actors do not. On the other hand, they lack the capacity to compel or coerce parties, can have a harder time ‘gaining entry’ to a conflict (especially with state actors), and cannot provide the same incentives and guarantees as a track one actor. Importantly, they often lack resources and funding, especially for their more longer-term work that is ‘out of the spotlight’.

Ways that track one and track two can work together well

In many peace processes now it would be unrealistic to think that one track could work without the others, or that you can totally separate the track roles to the extent that each level can work autonomously, ignoring the others. There are several ways in which track one and track two contributions complement each other:

Track two can assist the process of understanding armed groups

Like most organizations, armed groups do not appear spontaneously and remain stable until the end of their existence. Because armed groups are highly volatile organizations, building up an understanding of them can take many years. Track two actors can help build this gradual understanding. One of the essential tasks of any mediator interested in an armed group is to watch and measure the phases within an armed group’s life, so as to understand its intentions, reasoning, strategy and evolution in such as way as to be in a position to help prevent the situation from deteriorating, or occasionally to help set the venue and agenda within pre-negotiations. This has been the case in Burundi, for example, where a number of NGOs sustained contact with the Forces for the Defence of Democracy–National Council for the Defence of Democracy (FDD-CNDD), while discussing issues with them, organizing seminars and trying to help them build a political agenda solid enough to deal with the Burundian government. The FDD-CNDD eventually decided to negotiate in 2000.

Track two can help build the willingness and ability of armed groups to participate successfully in a peace process

There is a sort of myth that in negotiations – especially between armed groups – militarily-trained leaders are apt to be pragmatic, and can simply start talking to each other if seated at a table. Rather, parties are likely to sit down and continue fighting across the table, as if the battlefield had simply been replaced by a meeting room. To avoid this, a lot of background preparatory work needs to be done over months or years at different track levels. ‘Shadow diplomats’ or professional intermediaries regularly engage in informal meetings where delegates or friends of an armed group will participate, often anonymously, to learn about experiences elsewhere, or sound out ideas. Where sides participate together, the process of drawing on experiences from elsewhere and studying alternative practice is a way of sounding out what the other is thinking, or gauging reactions. These meetings can become a sort of testing ground for what the leaders might discuss at a latter date in track one negotiations. In this way a track two process helps prepare for a track one process, and different projects at different levels can inter-connect.

Keeping lines of communication open

Track two actors might be employed by formal mediators to make informal contact with armed groups with the aim of following events within the movement, grasping its logic, and letting them know that when they want to sit down and talk there are organizations willing to assist. Messages may be carried across lines with the hope of sharing and cross-fertilizing each side’s perception of events, or to negotiate an exchange of prisoners or the liberation of hostages. In this process of ‘putting one’s foot in the door,’ track two mediators do not try to impose themselves, but just follow events and, if required, try to find some alternative paths towards peace. Another reason for the need to constantly keep channels open is to prevent armed groups from falling into total isolation, to the extent that they bury themselves in their own logic, making any form of contact more difficult. It is slow but essential work: an armed group’s confidence in a political dialogue cannot be built overnight. It demands a significant investment of time and energy and constant follow-up. It is also complicated, especially as changes in leadership can be relatively common due to internal struggles or military defeats. The best known example of this kind of activity remains discussions with Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland before the Belfast Agreement, but it is also commonly practised in Europe, the former Soviet Union, South America and elsewhere.
Support from above
An effective track two actor may have a high level of technical and process expertise, and acquired knowledge of the armed group, but without track one political pressure, help and backing, professional mediators or facilitators would be lost. Armed groups are in need of reassurance that the international community and its official representatives will back the peace process and help implement and guarantee the results. This was clearly the case in Sudan’s Machakos negotiations, where the close and steady watch of the international community and its reassurances on assistance with implementation made the agreement reached in January 2005 feasible.

Blurred boundaries
As the number, roles, and importance of track two actors have proliferated, the management of the track one – track two relationship has come to have a significant effect – positive or negative – on the process of getting armed groups successfully engaged in political dialogue.

A number of problems can arise in complex, multi-level peacemaking. Track two actors do not always conduct themselves responsibly or act with sufficient accountability. When there are a number of track two actors involved in a single conflict, it can be confusing for all concerned, increasing the risk of misunderstandings and disagreements. It can be especially confusing for armed groups when track two actors appear to speak for a country or state they do not necessarily represent, and NGOs sometimes underestimate armed groups’ confusion between the NGO and the state representatives of the country where the NGO has its headquarters. Quite often warring parties do not necessarily grasp the difference between state and non-governmental intermediaries, confounding informal track two positions on certain issues with state positions.

Track two actors should make an effort to understand their position in a complex peace process. They must also try to understand that track one actors are under various pressures: i.e. they must “get results” and “show success” while making sure they serve their own government or agency’s strategic interests. It is important that track two actors recognize the political and diplomatic constraints that they are not themselves subject to.

The most important response to these problems is better communication and networking. We need to hear more about complementary roles that different tracks have played in peace processes. We need more proposals on rules of conduct for interaction between tracks, addressing such issues of confidentiality, transparency and respect for boundaries. Perhaps the hardest issue to deal with is when and how to convince an NGO working within track two that its task has been fulfilled and it is time to step down. Many NGOs have had their fingers burnt on this issue by wanting to stay on to fulfil a task that they are not needed for any longer.

To conclude it must be noted that practical experience casts doubt on the applicability of neat distinctions between track roles and identities: in reality they are often hazy. Complex peace processes are by definition untidy affairs: track two actors do not always feel they are doing track two work – and the same is true with track one actors and their work. While distinctions between tracks continue to have theoretical usefulness, as negotiations themselves become increasingly complex the nuances and distinctions between tracks become less clear-cut.