

Inter-cultural dialogue in crises – a comparative study

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Introduksjon

Diplomacy is all about mediating between political units. It is defined by procedures that allow adversaries, even enemies, to talk to each other. At first glance, therefore, the identification of 'dialogue' as a central tool of foreign policy is trivial, since diplomacy must necessarily imply dialogue of some sort. But the question of the nature and effects of dialogue in preventing and resolving conflicts go far beyond the question of whether one should talk to ones enemies. One central issue is whether one should refrain from engaging in dialogue with some actors because they hold values that are diametrically opposed to ones' own. Another is whether dialogue – alone or in combination with other policies – is effective in preventing and resolving conflicts.

The answer to the question of the role and effectiveness of dialogue in resolving international conflicts turns on how dialogue is defined and whether one believes that it can have a transformative effect on the behaviour and values of actors. Jonas Gahr Støre has formulated a position where the burden of proof is on those that rule out engaging in dialogue. Successive American Presidents have opted for the opposite view, defining some actors as beyond the pale, not worthy of direct talks.

This policy brief builds on a recent NUPI-report where we seek to contribute to a better understanding of the virtues, and limits, of dialogue in efforts to resolve or manage international conflicts (Rieker and Sending 2012). We do so by analysing three distinct crises where fundamental values have been at stake and where there has been considerable uncertainty on both sides about the intentions and actions of the other. These are: i) the evolving *Russo-Georgian* conflict, ii) the conflict between *Western powers and Libya* from the late 1990s onwards, and iii) the conflict over *Iran's nuclear programme* over the past decade.¹ We ask three inter-related questions:

1. What was the character of the dialogue between the actors prior to, during, and after the 'peak' of the conflict/crisis?

1 The following authors have contributed with case studies: Sverre Lodgaard on Iran, Jakub Godzimirski on the Russo-Georgian conflict and Målfrid Braut-Hegghammer and Pernille Rieker on Libya.

2. To what extent has the dialogue contributed to a peaceful solution?
3. What determines whether a dialogue can succeed or not?

Dialogue in time of crisis

Dialogue implies a willingness to learn and be persuaded by the force of the better argument. As such, dialogue is something of a paradox in world politics: while it is a defining feature of diplomacy and is frequently called upon to ease tensions and avoid conflicts, it is also quite often considered a sign of weakness, since dialogue implies – precisely – a willingness to change one's position and be persuaded by others' arguments (Kagan 2008). This becomes particularly acute when conflicts over basic values of a society are at stake, and when the relationship between those involved has been defined in terms of enmity. For Robert Mnookin, there are times when political leaders must quite simply choose to fight rather than talk: 'In an age of terror, our political leaders are faced with this sort of question every day. Should we negotiate with the Taliban? Iran? North Korea?' (Mnookin 2010). Subsequent US administrations have adopted this stance, opting either to fight (Taliban) or to demand as preconditions for talks the very things that are at stake in the conflict (Iran). Mnookin's central point is that it is impossible to enter into a dialogue with those whose values one fundamentally rejects without violating one's own integrity.

The Norwegian government has adopted a different stance, rejecting the idea that dialogue with those whose values are fundamentally different somehow serves to legitimize them. Instead, the argument is that it is precisely when fundamental values collide that it is important to engage in dialogue. Former Norwegian Foreign Minister Støre argues, for example, that 'engaging in dialogue with a group and its members is not the same thing as legitimizing its goals and ideology. Used skilfully, engagement may moderate their policies and behaviour' (Støre 2011).

These two positions rest on fundamentally different conceptions of what dialogue is and what it can achieve. An important research task is therefore to assess empirically how dialogue – in isolation or combined with other factors – may help to shape outcomes. Can dialogue, by itself, help to change actors' behaviour? Is dialogue always a positive thing? Can

other polity tools – such as sanctions – operate effectively in combination with and through the medium of dialogue?

We study dialogue in times of crises because it typically involves not only conflicting values but also uncertainty about the intentions of the others. As such, it offers a good vantage point from which to assess the strengths and weaknesses of dialogue as a tool of foreign policy. For the purpose of this report, we define a ‘crisis’ as a set of interlinked events where i) there is uncertainty on the part of actors about how best to advance their interests; ii) there are clashing values and interests, with high stakes involved; and iii) the actors are unsure about the facts of the situation and about the strategies of other actors.

Inter-cultural dialogue and cases

By ‘dialogue’ we mean the exchange of ideas or opinions on a particular issue, with a view to reaching an amicable agreement or settlement. The robustness of dialogue – as a foreign policy tool – will depend crucially on how it functions and shapes actors in different settings. Much hinges on whether dialogue aims to promote understanding, whether it aims to change actors’ identities and interests, or whether it (merely) seeks to avoid escalation and the use of violence. Moreover, the motivations for engaging in a dialogue may differ. In some cases, actors may engage in dialogue for instrumental or tactical reasons, with no real commitment to peaceful resolution of the conflict in question. In other cases, dialogue may be imposed upon the parties by the UN Security Council without there being a sufficient commitment to reach an agreement. Below, we discuss briefly some salient features of dialogue as part of the toolbox of diplomacy.

Dialogue with counterparts within the same culture, where actors typically share a set of values enabling communication and the resolution of conflicts, can be difficult enough. Doing so in the international realm, where there are often conflicting value systems, and no overarching authority to sanction an agreement, is even more difficult. There is often a lack of trust, even outright suspicion, and frequently – as displayed in the cases in this study – no real interest in reaching a consensus. As Jennifer Mitzen has observed, commenting on Habermas’ theory of communicative action, ‘strangers might not see consensus as desirable; they might not recognize one another as capable of communicative consensus at all, much less be willing to listen and reflect on each other’s arguments’ (Mitzen 2005: : 404).

For Dominique Moïsi (2009), the feelings of fear, humiliation and hope are central to the types of conflicts that we analyse here. He argues that the West has been dominated by a culture of fear – fear of the ‘Other’ and of foreign cultures – because it anxiously tries to maintain global dominance. In the Arab and Muslim world, a culture of humiliation is in operation, which feeds into Islamic extremism, leading to hatred of the West. Meanwhile, much of Asia has been able to concentrate on building a better future, creating a culture of hope. These moods, of course, are not universal within each region, and there are some areas, like Russia and parts of Latin America, that seem to display all of these simultaneously. Peter Coleman (2011) has picked up on the centrality of emotions, arguing that when emotions overshadow how the actors define what the conflict is about, the much-lauded integrative approach described above simply will not work. Conflicts that are fuelled by emotions, Coleman argues, are highly destructive and make up an estimated 5% of the conflicts that are seemingly intractable.

In the recent NUPI report we try to investigate this issue more closely. In fact, we try to find out if dialogue is simply cheap talk, or whether it can contribute to resolve international conflicts, and perhaps even lead to fundamental change.

There are different types of dialogue. Without going into the theoretical debates and the different approaches that are discussed in the report, we will just present a simple fourfold table with different dialogue options with two parties. While most approaches to dialogue and negotiations involve a presupposition that negotiations are zero-sum transactions with winners and losers (1-3), there is one approach that aims at win-win solutions, meaning that both parties are winners by making the ‘pie’ bigger. This is often presented as an ideal – and perhaps the only result that will actually lead to stable agreements over time. Still, one may question whether it is possible to achieve win-win solution in deep rooted conflicts where each of the parties might prefer option 3 or 2 (win-lose options)?

Outcome of dialogue	Lose	Win
Lose	1	2
Win	3	4

The cases

Below, we summarize key findings from the three case studies. We conclude that dialogue is a necessary but not a sufficient tool with which to shape political outcomes. Changes in the political situation - or more fundamentally in the core constituencies on which political leaders depend – is consistently what best explains changes in positions. We observe, further, that references to ‘dialogue’ can be used to legitimize the continued use of violence or to stall negotiations, and that western powers have a tendency to universalize their preferred solutions, thereby undercutting their effectiveness to engage meaningfully to achieve core objectives.

Russia-Georgia


First, we study the Russian-Georgian conflict and the intense dialogues that took place in relation to the confrontation in 2008. While this is a bilateral territorial conflict, much more was at stake in that Georgia so clearly oriented itself towards the West. The Russian military intervention has therefore been referred to as a Russian ‘proxy war with the west’. While the dialogue between Russia and Georgia actually broke down in 2008 and resulted in war, the war also ended through successful dialogue and negotiations through the help of the West and the EU as a third party. So – this case is an example where the dialogue first failed and then succeeded. But then it is important to note that while dialogue had some significance in managing the Russia-Georgian conflict after the 2008 war, it did not resolve the underlying territorial conflict.

Libya

In the case of Libya, or rather the cases of Libya as there were several conflicts, like the negotiations concerning the Lockerbie terrorists and the sanctions regime in the 1990s, concerning the WMD programme in 2003, and also the imprisoned Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor in 2007. These conflicts between Libya and the West were very much linked to Libya’s and Colonel Gaddafi’s support to international terrorism. All these negotiations seem to fit with elements of a win-win approach where Gaddafi agreed to cooperate with the west as long as Libya and he was accredited some form of recognition by the international community. But also here the underlying conflict (based on a lack of trust) remained until the military intervention in 2011 that, finally, resulted in regime change.

Iran

The third case is on Iran and its nuclear programme. But this is also at a deeper level, a manifestation of a more fundamental conflict over the future political landscape in the Middle East. The talks, which have been accompanied by strong sticks and modest carrots, have not brought the parties closer to a solution. In fact, mutual mistrust reigns, and the conflict seems to fall squarely in the estimated five per cent category



of conflicts (that are seemingly impossible to solve) referred to by Coleman (2011). Changes in domestic or international contexts may generate stronger incentives for de-escalation, but it is highly uncertain that continued talks will produce more than posturing on each side.

The nature and limits of dialogue

Based on this comparative analysis, we find that dialogue is important as a diplomatic tool, but that the conditions needed for a win-win solution are seldom present in inter-cultural conflicts. Even though such an outcome seems achievable in some specific cases, it is often limited due to a prevailing underlying conflict. Such agreements can provide temporary stability, but are also easily undone.

This indicates that it is difficult to hold that dialogue with those who hold fundamentally different values and interest can change their behaviour. Or rather: contact with such groups may open the way for the application of a host of other foreign policy tools aimed at changing their behaviour and policies, which may be effective over time. It can be anything from the threat of or use of sanctions to the offering of economic incentives and political support. Staying engaged and having contact with actors, then, may *render possible* the application of *other* policy tools that may be effective over time in changing actors' interests and willingness to negotiate. Below, we highlight some general observations that emerge from our comparative analysis and that may point towards some more general lessons or insights.

Lessons

All cases under analysis here supports the view that dialogue can be a useful tool but that there is little inherent in dialogue that promote mutual understanding and enduring, peaceful agreements. Dialogue may be deliberative and serve to change actors' interests and behaviour, but this seems to presuppose trust and a shared communicative horizon. The types of conflict that we analyse here are characterized precisely of a lack of such trust. A more comprehensive approach or set of dialogues at various levels and between different actors might be necessary in order to reach a win-win solution in such enduring conflicts (Coleman 2011). Based on the comparative analysis we have undertaken, we highlight six lessons that can serve as a point of departure for ways to possibly make engagement and dialogue a more effective tool.

1. *Actors' behaviour and positions may change as a result of changing international or domestic circumstances, not as a result of dialogue itself.*

In the case of Iran, there has been little willingness for dialogue and the few attempts we have seen, have been motivated out of an attempt to avoid war (or perhaps to legitimize war on a later stage) rather than out of a fundamental belief that negotiation would increase the understanding between the parties. Mistrust and internal constraints on both sides have put huge limits on the negotiations. The few examples of progress in the negotiations have not been followed up, rather on the contrary. In the case of Libya, we also see that both geopolitical and domestic factors are at play in all of the different dialogue situations and that the dialogue is a facilitating mechanism, but not a mechanism that changes the fundamentals in the conflict or solve the underlying conflicts. It was of course a necessary and important tool and the different negotiated results were real and important, but the reason for the breakthroughs must primarily be found elsewhere – sometimes internationally, sometimes domestically. In this case the underlying conflict was not solved and this also explains why Libya could go so rapidly from being a foe to be a friend and then, in the end, to be a foe again. Similarly, the conflict between Russia and Georgia is of the enduring kind in the sense that the underlying conflict is not solved. In this conflict we also see

other factors than the dialogue itself that may explain the outcome. As we have seen Russia could accept the conditions presented by France and the EU since it had beaten Georgia on the ground. Geopolitics and power politics are important here since this conflict also can be interpreted as a Russian-Western conflict

2. *Dialogue rarely transforms actors' values and identity and is therefore seldom sufficient to solve deep rooted conflicts even though it may affect both the timing of events and the nature of the measures that are adopted.*

As such, dialogue is merely an opportunity to build trust so that – over time – pragmatic solutions may be found if there is sufficient willingness to compromise. Win-win approaches to dialogue seem to have its limits when the aim is to find a solution to long term and deep rooted conflicts or as an approach to negotiate between regimes that have a radically different normative basis. Such an approach requires mutual confidence and trust, and as we have seen, the conflicts under analysis here have parties that do not readily lend themselves to such an approach. The reason for that is that these particular conflicts are in part about the actors' identities and attendant foundational values. The limited successes of dialogue in the Georgia-Russian conflict and that between Libya and the West are interesting, but even in these cases the underlying conflicts were not addressed. In the case of Iran, on the other hand, the underlying conflict seems to prevent dialogue from taking place at all. For long periods of time, the talks have been limited to exchange of positions. Both in the Libya case and the Georgia-Russian case timing also seem to be important and could partly explain the successes of the negotiations.

3. *Lack of enforcement mechanisms in international politics makes any negotiated agreement fragile. As a result, agreements based on dialogue needs enforcements mechanisms.*

Dialogue can result in agreements and breakthroughs, but because dialogue, in and of itself, does not contain enforcement mechanisms, any breakthrough or agreement is inherently unstable: it can easily unravel in the absence of an anchor or enforcement mechanism, which rarely exist at the international level. There are many examples of peace agreements and breakthroughs that have unravelled at a later stage precisely because a consensus/agreement at t-1 can be undone at t-2 by a change in domestic interests or international conditions. Libya is clearly an example of that, but also the various failed negotiation attempts between Iran and the West. Finally, the Georgian-Russian peace agreement of 2008 was successful, but since the underlying conflict is not solved there is no guarantee that it will prevail.

4. *Dialogue or talk is 'cheap' and may easily be used to legitimize or offer cover for other more aggressive strategies.*

The three cases show how dialogue is often used as a foil to advance objectives that increase rather than decrease tensions. Indeed, a central feature of dialogue – diplomacy – is that it is considered progressive and bears promise of peaceful solutions. Because of this, engaging in diplomatic processes often serve to legitimize strategies that are anything but progressive. For instance, this is clearly the case with Iran where initiatives for dialogues are advanced in parallel to rather aggressive statements and actions from both sides. Libya in 2011 and the first phase of the Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008 may also be referred to as examples of attempts to use dialogue to legitimize more aggressive approaches.

5. *The character of the dialogue seem to differ dependent on whether the negotiation is undertaken by experts or by more moderate parties, by parties that are heavily involved in the conflict or if it is facilitated by a neutral third party.*

As the three cases have shown, it is often useful to have interlocutors that are either pragmatic and/or have a cer-

tain distance to the conflict. In the Iranian case, constructive explorations of common ground were made when Ali Larijani, a pragmatist, and Javier Solana was negotiating. This is interesting even though it did not result in anything concrete and that it ended with Ahmadinejad replacing Larijani by a less pragmatic negotiator. In the Libyan case, more neutral parties were often chosen to transmit the message from the regime and the dialogue succeeded when the more moderate forces were representing the regime. Finally the Russia-Georgian conflict clearly shows that a neutral third party may be of a certain importance.

6. *The character of negotiations differs depending on the level of secrecy.*

In the report, we refer to negative and positive sides of secret negotiations. While secrecy may facilitate the initiation of talks and prevent popular interference in the process, talks undertaken in public make it easier for arguments to commit over time. Even though the negotiations are seldom transparent, it is often known that they are conducted. This has been the case in the dialogue with Iran and in the Georgian-Russian conflict. While the Iranian conflict can refer to few or no results, the negotiations in the Georgian-Russian conflict succeeded even though they were public. In some cases, however, the fact that the parties meet at all is also a secret. This was the case in most of the negotiations between Libya and the West, which was at least partially successful. This means that it is difficult to draw a conclusion on what to prefer and that this is highly dependent on the character of the conflict.

7. *Western states often adopt a top-down approach, making it more difficult to generate trust and establish a genuine dialogue.*

Armed with a sense of supremacy anchored in a combination of material preponderance and a claim to universal values, western powers often demand concessions from others as a precondition for starting negotiations. As the Iran and Libya cases both demonstrate, the 'imperial' or top-down attitude of western states generates tensions that undermine the effectiveness of dialogue. It is, we argue, no coincidence that Turkey and Brazil did broker a deal with Iran while EU₃ or the US could not. Libya, Iran and Russia, all wanted/wants to be recognized as significant players in their respective region, a recognition that is often not accorded to them by significant others (US, EU, 'west'). There is a paradox here: While great powers are generally needed to guarantee and make parties commit to an agreement, they are often not the best mediators because of a tendency to try to universalize their particular interests. Conversely, small

and medium-sized powers can be good mediators, but they are often unable to make the parties stick to an agreement because they lack the resources to sanction them.

8. *Dialogue is more effective at preventing conflicts than resolving them.*

We have assessed the nature and effects of dialogue in three cases and concluded that it is only effective as part of a larger battery of diplomatic tools. Nonetheless, it is quite certain that *not* having a dialogue can heighten the risk of misunderstandings and further push actors in the direction of positions that preclude any possibility of an agreement. Indeed, dialogue is perhaps most effective in *preventing tensions from becoming manifest conflicts*. As all the cases show, the fundamentals of each conflict are based on historically received and politically nurtured ideas about the other. If anything, dialogue can help nuance and transform understandings of others and increase the capacity to recognize and tolerate difference.

Concluding remarks

The three cases that we have studied here points in the direction of two general implications. First, dialogue is difficult and the likelihood for failure is high. This means that the possibility of resolving underlying conflicts is often limited. In fact, containment and resolving of immediate disputes is often what is realistic to achieve. Secondly, in order to achieve more enduring agreements and fundamental changes, an approach that promotes mutual respect and trust is required. It seems like a prerequisite for reaching such a situation is the promotion a broader set of dialogues at various levels and between different actors in order to reach a win-win solution in enduring conflicts.

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