

Book Review: “The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases”

By Edward E. Azar

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The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases” by Edward E Azar is intended to demonstrate a *brief* discussion of the phenomenon of protracted social conflicts (PSC) and its possible practical strategy called Track Two Diplomacy via ‘problem-solving forums’. The book promises to provide a dual contribution to conflict management studies that is; first, to advance reader’s knowledge about conflicts dynamic and characteristics; second, to present the problem-

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solving forums as a tool of Track Two diplomacy to manage the conflicts.

As its promises, the books provides an insightful theories of conflicts behavior and conflict management throughout the first three chapters, then follow by another three chapters examining the applicable of problem-solving forums on the world's major PSCs at the time, cases of Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and the Flakslands/ Malvinas islands. Then, in the flowing chapter, the author evaluates his PSC management strategy by pointing out its critiques and problematic aspects in applying the strategy, especially ones caused by the limitations of the nature of the strategy. In the last chapter, the author tries to conclude the importance of the Track Two Diplomacy by introducing readers to the concepts of conflict identification and tracking, structural development, and development diplomacy.

To introduce readers to PSC, Azar gives great attention to provide an analytical framework of the conflict. He demonstrates the progress of PSC, contrast with a realist notion of politics that saw conflict being an inevitable power struggle by defining a number of key characteristics incorporating three key phases, *Genesis*, *Process* *Dynamics & Outcomes Analysis*, which actors at all levels try to establish some comparative advantage and spread a view that sought 'collective security, community building and prosperity'.

Genesis refers to a 'set of conditions that are responsible for the transformation of non-conflictual situations into conflictual ones' identify by four key variables for this process: *Communal Content*,

a ‘multi-communal’ composition society that lead towards the formation of PSC; *Human Needs*, grievances resulting from deprivation to access developmental human needs of identity groups; *Government and the States Role*, failure of authority to redress those grievances; and *International Linkages*, ‘economic dependency’ and ‘client relationships’ effecting state’s domestic policy towards the conflict.

For *Process Dynamics*, Azar recognizes variables which are responsible for the activation of overt conflict: *Communal Actions and Strategies*, the potential of various ‘triggers’ that could lead to more violent conflict; *State Actions and Strategies*, the response by states to the communal grievances; *Built in Mechanisms of Conflict*, the perceptions and behavior of belligerent groups in the conflicts towards one another.

Azar’s *Outcomes Analysis* distinguishes PSC as those which result in negative-sum consequences when there is often no clear end-point and no clear winner with the possibilities of: *Deterioration of physical security*; *Institutional Deformity*; *Psychological Ossification*; and *Increased Dependency & Cliency* that drawn external actors into the conflicts. He points out that the conventional approaches preventing these outcomes have been too narrowly conceived and necessity to address the underlying dynamics that drives PSC and tackle the long-term problems is to pursuit Track Two Diplomacy.

The author then dedicates two consecutive chapters of the book to address basic principles of Track Two Diplomacy and its tool; problem-solving forums/workshops, by providing its background and its

development as informal conflict management alternative approach which will eventually 'hook up' with official approach or the Track One Diplomacy. Azar introduce Track Two Diplomacy by emphasizing the promotion of balanced socio-economic and political development, and facilitation of psycho-political problem solving-- the conflict management approach that calls for non-official, sub-national, and analytical problem-solving orientations. He highlights the use of a panel of trained individuals, as an facilitator, to help create a non-bargaining, analytical environment in which participants of parties to a dispute can explore alternatives in the movement from war to peace that leading ultimately to the enabling of other components of conflict management and resolution, including appropriate official actions to the dispute.

To elucidate his problem-solving approach, Azar concentrates upon elements that play a crucial role in the forum environment to facilitate breakthroughs in a conflict situation and encourage representatives from the adversarial parties to address the basics grievances and needs concerning mutual compatibility, and failing to set up these elements could be a serious threat in achieving the forum's goal. First, the setting of the forums needs to be informal and neutral, such as in an academic sphere, so that participants and facilitators feel comfortable and willing to engage fully in the process. Second, the type of the forum will not be a formal bargaining between parties, instead, it will be an opportunity to co-discover ways to mutual accommodations in the dispute. Third, individuals in the participation, ideally, should be individuals who are influential within their community. Fourth, the

facilitators have to be impartial, possess skills and knowledge about protracted conflicts, and must be perceived by the participants as an ‘honest broker’ who unbiased and trustworthy. The role of the facilitators in the forums is not to propose solution, but rather create the environment in which the participants themselves can discover a mutual agreement to resolve their conflict. Finally, the requirement of ‘follow-up’ and communication between individuals in each community, by ‘networking’ with participants and facilitators for tracking of the conflict and outcomes as well as learning to improve the problem-solving model itself.

To validate theories of PSC analytical framework and the potential of problem-solving approach in protracted conflict management, Azar examines three different cases which vary in its origin and process dynamic but possess the similarly PSC characters namely the case of Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and Flakslands/ Malvinas islands. In each case, the author provides a brief background of the conflict’s origin, progress, attempts to find a resolution done by various approaches and most importantly, the attempts to manage the dispute via problem-solving workshops. The provided background of the case studies confirms his argument of PSC characters and the essences of three key phases: genesis, process dynamics and outcomes. Every case mentioned in the book fits the analytical framework noted by Azar that unmet material needs is not necessary leads to the conflicts, but the key is the degree to which minority groups can access the market or political institutions or the recognition of communal existence.

Although the dynamics and actors in each case are extremely vary, Azar believes that the problem-solving forums can still produce desirable outputs for each case. He argues that at the first problem solving workshop, especially the first day, participants in the cases were 'armed' with their one-sided grievance and the negative perceptions towards one another, but by the end of the workshops, Azar claimed to detect a wider, more generous comments and genuine desire to settle down the agreement from the participants in parties of the dispute. In Lebanon case, the forums even produced the declaration outlining some interim consensus and long-term concerns of the dispute. However, it is hard to track the real outcome of the forum since such a psychological based approach requires and human opinion to evaluate participant's behavior and a great amount of time to prove its achievement in the long-term movement from war to peace.

For that matter, one of the strengths of the book is the author's recognition of the forum achievement as well as its limitations. As he claimed the validity of his protracted conflict theory, he also illustrates the critiques in which Track Two Diplomacy could fail to response in such conflicts. The critiques draw the reader to problems regards the ethics and utility of the third party intervention, technical nature of the approach which having to do with the composition of panels of facilitators and participants, and also problems towards the perceptions and the goals of the process.

On one hand, the demonstration of the Track Two Diplomacy critiques gives readers a crucial understanding of the approach. Azar

repeatedly mentioned the weakness of his model as an outcome of the differences of each conflict and most of them are avoidable. It is useful for the reader to keep in mind that, Track Two Diplomacy, given by its informal nature that thrives on innovative idea, is not a strict methodology of conflict resolution. However, on the other hand, while Azar points out a number of limitations that could prevent Track Two Diplomacy from success, he fails to demonstrate the difficulties towards the measurement of the long-term outcome and the achievement of the Track Two Diplomacy that post the crucial limitation of this approach. Since Track Two Diplomacy and its problem-solving approach not only possess the characteristics of psychological process and affects which require long-term assessment but it also needed to be arranged in an informal and confidential setting environment, thus it is relatively more difficult to be evaluated. Accept from the Lebanon case that the problem-solving forum has produced the physical declaration papers, Azar simply concludes the achievement in other cases by claiming that he and his colleagues ‘detect’ the changing behavior and perceptions among participants. And for this matter, the detection that depending on the forum establisher opinion might not very credible in term of finding an empirical evidence to support the validity of Track Two Diplomacy approach.

Other flaws of “the Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases” could be seen in the content arrangement of the book. Firstly, the irrelevance of the title “the Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases”, the first glance, because of its title,

the book could be perceived as a book that cover all the major contents concerning the management of protracted social conflict. The author initially mentions four elements constitute the core of effective management of protracted social conflicts, which are conflict identification and tracking; facilitation of breakthrough in a conflict situation through problem-solving forums; promoting self-sustaining structural development; and, adopting development diplomacy to alleviate external barrier to the termination and prevention of protracted social conflict. Nevertheless, the book turns out to be a great read for a reader who interests in one particular element in protracted conflict management, the alternative approach of problem-solving forums. Through seven out of eight chapters, the book merely presents the theory and cases involving in Track Two Diplomacy and leave out the other core elements by briefly mention them in the concluding chapter.

For that matter, to consider the fundamental perception that the conclusion chapter *should* conclude the main argument and outline the validity of the evidence, the book's conclusion chapter might not fit in such perception. Instead of giving the summarize content from other chapters, the focused content in the conclusion chapter of the book has drawn an attention to the introduction of the three other core elements in protracted social management that were left out from the rest of the book. Despite the usefulness of the detail given, it is quite confusing to explore the other crucial elements, which in essence

associated with Track Two Diplomacy approach, to effectively manage the prolonged dispute at the end of the book.

However, throughout the book, readers, especially those who believes that politics and diplomacy are about building consensus, will benefits from the frameworks for thinking about what needs to change in the merit of movement from state of conflict to peace. Protracted social conflict requires changes in attitudes and interaction patterns as well as improvement of inequalities in participants' abilities to address their needs. Through suggested Track Two Diplomacy and its problem-solving forums, representatives from parties of the dispute will have opportunities to co-discover and craft mutual political agreement that will address the structural inequities and injustices that are at the root of PSC.

“The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases” is a classic piece of work that stands through the challenge of time. Azar has successfully introduced method for creating both new awareness and new solutions: interactive problem-solving, in the time, when the book was written, where there is very limited number of alternative approaches to deal with PSC. Through time, Azar’s analytical frameworks of PSC as well as the potential of Track Two Diplomacy has proven to be valid. It is now broadly studied and become the mainstream approach to tackle protracted conflict in Conflict Resolution studies. The achievement of the approach has proved that Azar’s perspective that effective conflict management thrives on consensus-building augmented by socio-economic development is relevance. At

the bottom line, "The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases" by Edward E Azar is the noteworthy piece of Social study research, valuable in Peace and Conflict studies, and ideally deserve to be read by every Social Science scholars by all means.