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Talking to the Enemy

Track Two Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia

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Summary

Key Questions

How do adversaries manage to sit down and talk about long-standing conflicts while violence and mistrust continue to define their security relations? While official diplomatic communications are the obvious way for adversaries to talk, unofficial policy discourse, or track two diplomacy, is an increasingly important part of the changing international security landscape. Private foundations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), universities, and governments—mostly based in the West—have devoted significant financial and human resources to track two dialogues. What has been the payoff?

The experiences of the Middle East and South Asia suggest that track two regional security dialogues rarely lead to dramatic policy shifts or the resolution of long-standing conflicts. But they have played a significant role in shaping the views, attitudes, and knowledge of elites, both civilian and military, and in some instances have begun to affect security policy. However, any notable influence on policy from such efforts is likely to be long-term, due to the nature of the activity and the constraints of carrying out such discussions in regions vastly different from the West.

As a result, we need to set realistic expectations about what track two can accomplish. Track two dialogues on regional security are less about producing diplomatic breakthroughs than socializing an influential group of elites to think in cooperative ways. Track two dialogues can alter views about the value of cooperation with other regional actors, even if attitudes toward those actors remain generally negative.

Such dialogue serves as a conditioning process in which regional actors are exposed to new concepts, adapt them to their own contexts, and shape policy debates over time.

The reframing of security perceptions and postures gains more traction when regional elites view such change as in their own interests, not as a favor to external actors. Making track two dialogues an indigenous process is thus crucial for their success. Without adaptation to local environments, track two supporters who attempt to sell and spread track two ideas to their own governments and societies will have difficulty being viewed as legitimate.

Track two dialogues typically involve moderate and pragmatic voices that have the potential to wield positive influence in volatile environments, and the stakes are high. Greater understanding of track two dialogues should lead to less skepticism of such activities and a concerted investment in and careful promotion of these efforts.

Track Two Roles and Limits

This study identifies three conceptual stages that define the evolution of track two dialogues, although in practice these stages are not necessarily sequential: socialization, filtering, and policy adjustment.

During socialization, outside experts, often from Western governments or nongovernmental institutions, organize forums to share security concepts and lessons based on experiences from their own regions. This stage focuses on encouraging a small group of influential elites—including those from the military—to think differently about regional security and the value of cooperation, providing new terms of reference and information about specific security issues. Socialization also attempts to limit misperceptions and inaccurate assumptions about regional neighbors or important extraregional actors.

Filtering involves widening the constituency favoring regional cooperation beyond a select number of policy elites involved in track two, through the media, parliament, NGOs, education systems, and citizen interest groups. In practice, this stage has often been the weak link in track two dialogues, as there has been inconsistent translation

of the ideas developed in regional security dialogues to groups outside the socialized circle of elites.

The final stage is the transmission of the ideas fostered in dialogues to tangible shifts in security policy, such as altered military and security doctrines or new regional arms control regimes or political agreements. Track two has not led to such extensive shifts in security policy, although there are examples of track two work influencing official thinking and a variety of security initiatives and activities, particularly in South Asia.

A number of limitations—at the individual, domestic, and regional levels—explain why many track two efforts never reach their full potential. Individuals participating in track two dialogues may be ideological and opposed to cooperation with an adversary. Regional participants may also enter such dialogues with skeptical or hostile positions because they come from security cultures that are adverse to cooperative security ideas. Mainstream positions in regions such as the Middle East and South Asia favor unilateralist, self-help thinking. Indeed, interactions in track two dialogues have, in some cases, led participants to develop views of their adversary that are more rather than less negative. Others may simply fail to buy in to cooperative security concepts.

Another problem with participants may be that even if organizers find individuals who are open-minded to new security relationships and frameworks, these participants may have limited influence with official policymakers and may be disconnected from grassroots groups or other broadly based societal movements. Because track two is a long-term investment, organizers must consider including a wide range of participants—even those initially hostile to the process— because of the possibility that some of these participants may later assume important official positions in their countries.

Domestic factors also can create impediments to progress in track two dialogues. Cooperative security ideas are not popular among populations that have experienced long-standing conflicts and high levels of violence. Cooperative postures are particularly dangerous for vulnerable regimes lacking legitimacy, because domestic opposition groups can use new security policies favoring cooperation with an adversary as

political ammunition against a regime, particularly if such policy shifts are associated with Western agendas. We see great sensitivity to publicizing track two dialogues in the Middle East for this reason.

Finally, the regional environment can affect calculations about whether track two efforts can be introduced to a larger audience. Generally, in more favorable security environments—such as when official peace processes dealing with core bilateral conflicts like Kashmir or Israel-Palestine appear to be moving forward—there is a greater chance for the development of an elite constituency favoring regional security cooperation and for exposure and acceptance at the broader societal level. Conversely, high levels of regional conflict and tension make the transmission of cooperative security ideas to official policymakers and the wider public more difficult. This of course raises the dilemma that when unofficial channels may be most needed, they may be most difficult to bring about.

Key Middle East Findings

Track two dialogues in the Middle East have affected growing numbers of regional elites. Approximately 750 regional and extraregional elites participated in track two activities during the 1990s, of which an estimated 200 were from the military. Today, thousands of individuals have participated in one or more track two activities related to the Middle East. During the 1990s, approximately 100 track two events were organized, averaging one activity per month. Although the pace has slowed for broader regional forums, more recent track two activism in the Gulf suggests that frequent and regular track two activities continue.

But Middle East dialogues are changing. The lack of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track has made unofficial dialogues among Arabs and Israelis more difficult. The tense regional environment has slowed progress on cooperative Arab-Israeli initiatives and increased the stakes for participants. Arab-Israeli–oriented track two groups thus find it increasingly challenging to meet in the region and to attract sufficient funding. Some of the most prominent groups could not have survived

without funding from the U.S. government or other, largely Western, extraregional actors.

Because of these difficulties, over the past several years Middle East track two forums have downplayed Arab-Israeli issues and instead focused on other challenges, particularly Gulf security and Iran. Some track two forums are originating in the Gulf, suggesting a new confidence among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) actors in asserting their interests in forums separate from the broader Arab agenda, which is traditionally led by key Arab states such as Egypt.

What have these dialogues achieved over the years? Their socialization function has succeeded in shaping a core and not-insignificant number of security elites across the region to begin thinking and speaking with a common vocabulary. For example, senior Iranian advisors have given talks that directly mirror the language of cooperative security promoted by various Middle East groups. Similarly, high-level Egyptian officials have given speeches referencing track two ideas. Track two concepts influenced sections of the official Israeli-Jordan peace treaty. And new efforts have sprung up in the Gulf in recent years, leading to new regional security communities increasingly thinking in cooperative terms. For instance, the idea of a Gulf weapons of mass destruction free zone promoted by one Gulf track two group has been the subject of official deliberations within the GCC and the Arab League.

That said, the filtering of track two concepts has by and large failed to penetrate significant groups outside the dialogue process. Domestic environments make participants cautious about exposing track two ideas to wider audiences. Cooperation with Israel is still a dangerous position in the region, and Israelis are suspicious of cooperative postures that may signal weakness. The regional context of a deadlocked Middle East peace process and the bloody and uncertain aftermath of the Iraq war—not to mention enduring rivalries and power imbalances—make regional discussions of confidence-building and cooperative security difficult even in the Gulf context. Ideas supporting regional security cooperation are still unknown or unpopular among vast segments of the population throughout the Middle East.

Key South Asia Findings

As in the Middle East, South Asia experienced a growth in track two dialogues in the 1990s, and many of these efforts continue today. While unofficial dialogues initially focused more on regional economic and development issues, they have become increasingly political, with several focusing explicitly on core political and security issues such as nuclear proliferation and the status of Kashmir.

The direct impact of South Asian dialogues on official policy has been limited, although not entirely absent. For example, one track two group promoted the idea of a joint pipeline to pump natural gas from Iran to India and Pakistan—addressing the growing energy needs of the two countries while also serving as a peace-building exercise. With the renewal of the Indian-Pakistani peace process, the pipeline idea moved to the official track. In another instance, a prominent Pakistani general who was involved in a variety of track two dialogues and published a book supportive of cooperative security concepts is now serving as the Pakistani ambassador to the United States, improving the prospects for track two ideas to filter into official thinking.

A number of confidence-building measures (CBMs) initially discussed in track two forums are now being officially implemented between India and Pakistan, such as the ballistic missile flight test notification agreement, military exercise notifications and constraint measures along international borders, and Kashmir-related CBMs. Similarly, ideas based on track two workshops promoting nuclear risk reduction measures have now surfaced as part of the official Indian-Pakistani dialogue.

South Asian dialogues have also succeeded in changing mind-sets among participants toward more cooperative postures and have had some success in building a constituency supportive of South Asian cooperation, including in challenging areas such as nuclear confidence-building and new approaches to Kashmir. In one case, Indian policy-makers who had attended track two workshops repackaged ideas proposed by extraregionals into their own initiative calling for an organization to monitor the implementation of Indian-Pakistani CBMs.

Filtering is also apparent from the emergence of a variety of regional policy centers focused on issues that are being discussed in track two venues. The growth of indigenous institutions, centers, and dialogues has fostered a sense of regional ownership and identity and has provided legitimacy to track two groups. Local and regional policy centers also broaden the scope and nature of track two participants to involve wider segments of society, including women and youth.

Despite such progress, South Asian dialogues also face challenges. Some elites involved in track two dialogues are still attached to national positions and resist change. More open-minded participants may have difficulty penetrating well-established thinking in official government circles. Government officials are often suspicious of track two processes, and there are no established mechanisms for transferring track two ideas to officials beyond informal and ad hoc contacts.

The continued mistrust of the adversary also makes cooperative security ideas a difficult sell. India has traditionally preferred to deal with its neighbors bilaterally (where its dominance is assured) rather than multilaterally. The prevailing strategic mind-set fosters zero-sum thinking and creates an aversion to CBMs. Indeed, there is regionwide suspicion of CBMs as a foreign import.

Domestic institutions in both India and Pakistan, particularly their intelligence services, are similarly hostile to CBMs that require more transparency in military budgets and defense doctrines. Until security and foreign policy institutions within India, particularly the military, view cooperative security as a benefit rather than a costly imposition, it will be difficult for track two forums to make progress. Finally, the asymmetric relationship between India and its neighbors and the regional conflicts along India's borders, particularly the ongoing dispute with Pakistan over control of Kashmir, create a violent regional environment that is not conducive to regional cooperation.

Regional Comparisons

The case chapters (Chapters Two and Three) underscore the ways in which the Middle East and South Asia face similarly hostile environ-

ments for cooperative security ideas and activities promoted through track two efforts. Neither in the Middle East nor in South Asia is there a common perception of external or internal threats that might propel regional actors toward greater regional cooperation; instead, threat perceptions are often based on actors from within the region or even from within respective societies.

Moreover, both the Middle East and South Asia are dominated by security elites with realist mind-sets, and competitive and zero-sum thinking is pervasive. Cooperative security is a difficult concept in regions where the conventional wisdom is that nuclear weapons are vital for security and where the risks associated with such weapons are not widely understood or acknowledged.

The most powerful actors in both regions—Israel and India—do not view arms control as a vital national interest, nor are they inclined to support regional multilateral security forums, preferring instead bilateral security arrangements with regional neighbors and external actors. Both India and Israel have a similar approach to the sequencing of cooperative security and arms control, with each preferring to first pursue broad agendas of CBMs that address a range of regional issues before focusing on the core issues that their adversaries seek to highlight (nuclear weapons and the Palestinian track in the case of Israel; Kashmir in the case of India).

Still, track two groups in both regions have made considerable progress in socialization. Thousands of military and civilian elites have discussed and engaged in cooperative security exercises. Expertise and knowledge of basic arms control concepts were limited in both regions before the 1990s. Now, because of track two dialogues, there are large communities of well-connected individuals familiar with such concepts. Knowledge of complex arms control and regional security concepts and operational confidence-building activity is now solidly rooted in both regions.

The South Asian track two experience appears to have gone further than that of the Middle East. The public in South Asia is generally more supportive of reconciliation, particularly because recognition of key regional actors and diplomatic relations is the norm, unlike the situation in the Middle East, where normalization with Israel is still

taboo among many governments and the majority of people in the region. South Asians are also culturally similar, allowing for greater potential for the development of peace constituencies at the grass-roots level. Such similarities are missing in the Arab-Israeli context (of course, inter-Arab dialogues do not face this problem, but the gap between Arabs and Iranians is significant). In the Middle East, Arab governments are ahead of the public in terms of reconciliation with Israel; in South Asia, the reverse appears to be the case.

Perhaps in part because South Asia's public is more receptive to reconciliation efforts, track two ideas are spreading to more societal groups in the region and leading to the development of more cooperative regional centers. These developments could also be linked to the stronger tradition of democracy in South Asia. Open discussion of the nuclear issue in South Asia since the 1998 nuclear tests has further facilitated filtering, as advocacy groups focusing on the issue have developed. In contrast, societal nuclear activism is still absent in the Middle East.

Regional Lessons

The more advanced stage and effect of unofficial dialogues in South Asia, as well as the fact that it is now an openly nuclear region, offer lessons and predictions for the Middle East. On the nuclear front, many analysts are concerned that the Indian-Pakistani nuclear relationship will not follow the stability of the U.S.-Soviet deterrence model and that the potential for miscalculation and accidents could lead to catastrophic results. Of particular concern is the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal given the domestic instability in that country and the lack of civilian control over the military. An additional worry is that Pakistan's technology could spread to rogue state actors or nonstate terrorist groups seeking nuclear options (following the example of Abdul Qadeer Khan, the Pakistani scientist who sold nuclear technology to Iran, Libya, and North Korea). The growing military disparity between India and Pakistan could also be a source of future instability, leading to scenarios that suggest more aggressive Indian behavior.

Such concerns are likely to be replicated and viewed with even more alarm in the Middle East if Iran acquires nuclear capability. This is particularly the case given that nuclear breakout is unlikely to remain limited to a bipolar relationship between Israel and Iran but, rather, is more likely to lead to a multipolar nuclear region. As in the case of South Asia, many analysts worry that the Cold War model of nuclear stability will not hold. Indeed, the multipolar nature of a future nuclear Middle East could prove even more destabilizing than the current situation in South Asia, where at least the nuclear issue is contained to two central adversaries.

Still, the nuclear restraint regime that has been developing between India and Pakistan—with many of its components developed in track two dialogues—offers concrete examples for the Middle East. Ideas focused on creating a nuclear safe zone in South Asia—as opposed to a more ambitious nuclear free zone—will be an especially important experiment that Middle Easterners will want to track closely.

While the South Asian nuclear experience raises important lessons for actors in the Middle East, the more immediate impact of the 1998 nuclear tests has been on the conventional front. The potential for nuclear weapons to lead to greater aggressiveness and conflict on the conventional battlefield has played out in South Asia and offers a cautionary message for future Middle East security relationships. Such dangers underscore the need to utilize track two security dialogues to create and improve channels of communication among regional adversaries and lay the groundwork for conceptual and operational CBMs that will help prevent, or at least contain, future conflicts.