

Changing conflict asymmetries constructively

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The complex and fluid nature of asymmetry is analyzed and then the sources of changes in conflict asymmetry are discussed. This analysis is then applied to particular conflicts that have followed different trajectories of asymmetry and conflict transformation. The trajectories include (1) transformation toward symmetry and equitable resolution (South Africa and the civil rights struggle in the US South) and (2) protracted failure to achieve appropriate symmetry or to have unilateral imposition (Sri Lanka, Palestinians and Israelis).

Keywords: asymmetric conflict; ethnopolitical conflict; social movement

Asymmetries in conflicts deserve attention because they exist in some degree in all conflicts and often are obstacles to resolving or transforming a conflict equitably and durably. Therefore, in this article I examine how asymmetries can be reduced or managed so that a conflict is not waged very destructively, but instead equitable and enduring accommodations between adversaries become more likely.

My focus is on large-scale conflicts, between or within state and non-state collectivities. The discussion is based particularly on cases where adversaries have waged protracted destructive struggles that became substantially transformed so that mutually acceptable accommodations have been achieved, but also considers conflicts where protracted struggles are destructively conducted and have not reached mutually acceptable accommodations, as well as conflicts where one side largely imposes a termination.

Perceived asymmetries may contribute to highly destructive waging and ending of conflicts due to their effects on the dominating and on the dominated side in conflicts. Members of the dominant group may seek to impose their will and exploit those they can intimidate, giving little credence to their interests. Furthermore, the party that considers itself to be much stronger than its adversary may be tempted to demand so much from its adversary that it overreaches, with damaging consequences. This may occur as a result of conflict escalation that becomes self-destructive. On the other hand, the people who consider themselves to be weaker and dominated by another party also often conduct themselves in ways that make an equitable and enduring accommodation less likely, and even self-destructive. They may believe that they must accept oppressive conditions, and that belief in their

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inferiority can contribute to a self-defeating sense of being powerless victims. Or, if legitimate ways to seek redress for their grievances are blocked, they may resort to challenges and resistance in ways that produce greater isolation and suppression.

I do not assume, however, that asymmetry always contributes to destructive conflict and hampers constructive conflict resolution. Equity and justice are not always served by increasing symmetry. In the 1930s, the rising power of Nazism in Germany and then of German power in Europe did not advance human rights and justice for Germans or any other people in Europe or across the world. Frequently, small organizations advocating extremely intolerant ideological, religious, or nationalist policies, when they become strong, produce widespread disorder and if they triumph destroy many lives and suppress opponents and resisters. Therefore, adherence to standards of human rights and the avoidance of oppression should be part of the equation in assessing the problems possibly resulting from asymmetry.

The degree to which the members of opposing sides are interdependent and share the same values and beliefs also has implications for the effects of asymmetry. A high level of integration and shared identity tends to mitigate the destructive potentialities of asymmetries. If there is mutual respect between parties with different resources, the one with more resources is less likely to try to extract even more benefits from the other side, and the side with fewer resources is less likely to attack members of the other side in order get more from them. On the other hand, if the relationship is marked by hatred, fear, and disrespect, the consequences of asymmetry will tend to be more destructive.

A high degree of symmetry in a highly escalated conflict, it should be noted, does not easily result in a mutually acceptable outcome. It is likely to be protracted as each side thinks if it holds out a little longer, the other side will succumb. Under some circumstances, a mutually hurting stalemate is the prelude to a negotiated settlement (Touval & Zartman, 1985; Zartman, 1989). A most important circumstance is the appearance of a better option than continued fighting. Again, the degree of asymmetry itself does not determine the duration or destructiveness of a conflict.

Reducing asymmetry, then, is not necessarily conducive to transforming a conflict and settling it constructively. That depends in good measure on the direction in which asymmetry is reduced (Mitchell, C.R., 1995a). Thus, if one side has greater cohesion than the other, asymmetry that is reduced by raising the other side's cohesion would be conducive to mutual conflict transformation. On the other hand, if one side has greater commitment to the issue in contention, asymmetry that is reduced by that side lessening its commitment would be conducive to mutual conflict transformation.

This article consists of three sections. First, the complex and fluid nature of asymmetries in conflicts within diverse contexts are discussed. Second, I discuss the sources of changes in the degree and kind of conflict asymmetries and their effects on the likelihood of reaching enduring and equitable relations. Third, I apply the proposed generalizations to particular conflicts that have followed different trajectories of asymmetries and conflict transformation.

Variations in asymmetries

To begin, I address the issue that plagues all discussions of asymmetric conflict, the characterization of conflicts as asymmetric (Mitchell, C.R., 1995a; Rouhana, 2004). Too often, asymmetry is measured only in terms of differences between adversaries in their capability to apply violence against the other. Actually, each adversary has

many ways to induce an adversary to comply with its wishes or to defend itself against the other's coercive and non-coercive inducements. And these many ways are unequally available to the adversaries. These other inducements include economic resources, moral or legal claims, population size, and allies. Members of each side in a conflict combine various capabilities to apply nonviolent as well as violent sanctions, to promise benefits and to construct persuasive arguments in order to win over some members of the opposing side.

Adversaries in a conflict certainly differ in their capacity to threaten violence, to withhold economic benefits, to appeal to values held in common, and in many other capabilities. The degree of asymmetry depends not only on the overall level of each side's resources, but also on their capabilities relative to each other in regards that are relevant for the issues in contention and for their overall relationship. Thus, the adversaries' degree of integration or of economic and social independence affects each side's vulnerability to sanctions that the antagonist may employ. In addition, the more the opponents share values and beliefs, the greater is the effectiveness of persuasive appeals.

Not only is asymmetry multi-dimensional, but it is also contingent on the issue in dispute. For example, the matter in contention may pertain to territory, which is more distant from one side than the other. The relative military strength of the adversaries is then affected, with the adversary fighting a battle far from its home base with diminished military capability compared to the adversary fighting on its home ground. Issues also differ in their importance for each side. If an issue is more vital to one side than to its antagonist, the former will be willing to employ more of its capabilities to win on the matter in contention than would the adversary. The failed US engagement in the war in Vietnam is illustrative. In addition, some matters are more amenable to particular inducements than are other matters; thus, obtaining or attracting foreign economic investments would be more readily achieved by cooperative trading than by coercion.

Asymmetries also depend on how the adversaries define themselves and define each other. The parties in a large-scale fight may seem to be obvious, but they actually are contested and fluid. Often in a fight, each side tries to define the opponent as a small, isolated group and to characterize itself as a large inclusive collectivity or coalition. Osama bin Laden claims that he and the al Qaeda organization represent all true Muslims, while his opponents depict him and his followers as a small group that tries to hijack Islam. Such characterizations tend to be made by leaders in order to mobilize their supporters and to divide their opponents. Differing definitions are plausible since adversaries in large-scale conflicts are never homogeneous and unitary. They are differentiated by degree of authority and of commitment to the conflict as it is being conducted. Various internal segments also have varying capabilities and proclivities to employ diverse inducements.

Finally, asymmetries depend upon the relations each adversary has with external organizations and other collectivities. Each side has some allies and also other antagonists who must be taken into account in assessing the degree of asymmetries between them. How each side characterizes itself and its antagonist affects not only the members of each side but also possible allies and intermediaries. For example, a collectivity defining itself by characteristics that can be widely achieved, such as being democratic, potentially have many more adherents and allies than collectivities defined in terms of ascribed ethnicities. The complexity and fluidity of asymmetries are crucial in the transformation of many conflicts.

Changing asymmetries

The degree of asymmetry in a conflict is never permanent. It shifts as one or another dimension becomes more prominent, as the issue in contention changes, and as the identities of the adversaries evolve or are reconstituted. I first discuss the sources of long-term changes that are not readily affected by individuals or by small groups. Then I examine short-term changes that may be the result of calculated efforts by individuals and organizations.

Long-term changes

Long-term changes arise from new developments in the external socio-political environment and from developments within one or more adversary that alter the relationship between them. Fundamental transformations result from the convergence of particular changes from many sources.

External developments

As the social context of the contending adversaries changes, the asymmetries of their relationship often are impacted and with that the chances of constructing durable and just accommodations are altered. Thus, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union changed the relative power and expectations of antagonists who had close relations with opposing sides in the Cold War. They also affected the ideological claims available to different parties, and contributed to the increased influence of international norms supportive of human rights and electoral democracy. Furthermore, the UN and other international governmental and also nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) gained increased legitimacy and capability to intervene in international and domestic conflicts.

These developments contributed to the significant decline in international and intrastate wars after 1990 (Eriksson, 2004; Human Security, 2005; Marshall, 2005). This decline, however, cannot simply be attributed to declining asymmetries. Some conflicts earlier had persisted violently because the antagonists were balanced enough that they could keep on fighting. After all, the demise of the Soviet Union resulted in relations between some adversaries becoming more asymmetrical. Globally, the dominance of the USA had increased during that decade, and in many local conflicts the side that had relied on the Soviet Union was severely weakened. However, even the side that had received American support in some ways had reduced leverage to maintain American support, as its value to the USA had lessened after the Cold War ended. Under those circumstances, the option of settling the conflict might seem more attractive to both antagonistic sides in a local conflict.

Many other global developments affect the degree of asymmetries between antagonistic countries and between antagonists within a country. These developments include the growth of transnational NGOs, global communication, norms regarding human rights, ideologies of liberal democracies and private economic markets, and religious revivalism. These developments reduce the isolation of each conflict and increase the permeability of each adversary's boundaries. Consequently, external intervention is increasingly likely, adding new possibilities of altering the asymmetry between any given pair of antagonists.

The increasing acceptance of norms regarding the protection of collective as well as personal human rights naturally strengthens the hand of some groups relative to others in societies around the world. Subordinated groups can mobilize themselves under the banner of human rights, winning external allies and undermining the moral standing of those they claim to be their oppressors. This clearly was the case in the successful struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

Other developments directly affect the likelihood of antagonists employing various conflict strategies. The development of new weapon technologies and innovative applications provide attractive ways for various groups to rely on violence to increase their dominance and for other groups to use violence to counter that dominance. For example, the development of various “smart” weapons enables the USA and other militarily advanced countries to attack and kill individual opponents with little likelihood of suffering deaths of their own forces and avoiding extensive deaths of noncombatants. On the other hand, powerful explosives and persons willing to die in the process of killing military personnel and civilians enable even small non-state organizations to disrupt and terrorize a strong opposing side. Interestingly, such conduct characterizes what the US military designates as asymmetric conflict (Arreguin-Toft, 2005; Thornton, 2007).

Significantly, too, non-violent methods of waging and settling conflicts have become more prominent in recent decades, and that may empower one side more than another (Schock, 2005; Sharp, 2005). These methods include non-violent action, methods of problem-solving conflict resolution, and reliance on political elections. Thus, massive public demonstrations and withdrawal of legitimacy from officials strengthens the groups that can mobilize large numbers of people. Mediators and other contemporary conflict-resolution workers usually seek an end to organized violence and encourage a mutually agreed upon settlement; that lends support to those partisans who articulate goals and methods that make a mutually agreed upon settlement seem plausible.

Interveners in recent decades are generally supportive of elections as a way of helping to transform a violent conflict and to build a stable and just political order. Under appropriate conditions, this may be so, and politically marginalized segments of the population may become more empowered. However, too often elections are undertaken hastily with too little preparation and too little monitoring afterwards. As a consequence, elections may turn out to be a vehicle for armed groups and leaders with intolerant policies to take power (Lyons, 2002; Paris, 2004).

Interveners recognize the importance of economic reconstruction and development to provide employment and improvements in living conditions to build a secure, stable, and just society. However, guided by a free-market ideology, the USA and international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization often have insisted on privatization, reduced governmental regulation, and other policies to foster local enterprises and attract foreign investors. However, these policies if pursued without adequate attention to the dislocations they produce, may increase inequalities in societies and injure vulnerable population segments. The resulting inequalities can be a source of renewed struggles.

Internal developments

Within each collectivity, demographic, ideological, technological, economic, and many other characteristics have their own dynamic of development that affect the

symmetry of a collectivity's relations with other parties. For example, a subordinated group with a high reproduction rate will tend to gain political strength relative to a collectivity with a declining population, perhaps upsetting the prior balance. This played an important role in changing the equilibrium among religious communities in Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s. Expectations of changes in relative population sizes affected Afrikaans' judgments about accommodations with South African blacks; such expectations also affected many Israeli Jews' judgments about agreeing to a Palestinian state.

A prevailing ideology certainly may lose adherents when the policies pursued by its advocates against external challenges seem to have failed; consequently, new ideologies with new supporters may become dominant and redefine the external conflict. This has notably been the case in Arab countries' relations with Israel and the West, and also in many societal conflicts within Third World countries. The attractiveness of nationalist and of Marxist ideologies in the newly independent and economically developing countries was great in the 1960s, but faltered in the 1980s and declined greatly in the 1990s. Faith-based ideologies then became more attractive for many people.

Economic conditions may worsen seriously and consequently the public demands that the government act to rectify the deteriorating conditions. Such public pressure, sometimes expressed by demonstrations or even by riots, can affect a government's policy on foreign policy issues (Colaresi, 2005; Kriesberg, 1992; Suri, 2003). In the face of public discontent, government leaders sometimes escalate an ongoing or dormant foreign conflict, and so distract public attention from their domestic concerns. For example, in 1982, Argentine military leaders ordered the invasion and incorporation of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, which were long governed by Great Britain. This move challenged British rule of islands close to Argentina, which Argentina long claimed. The invasion won the military junta great public support, until the venture turned into an Argentinean military fiasco.

Pressure from discontented constituents regarding domestic concerns also can contribute to government leaders trying to de-escalate a foreign conflict. The leaders may act in ways that indicate a readiness to accept an accommodation with their foreign adversary, something which they earlier would not have accepted. This change derives from their sense that more attention and resources should be directed to constituent concerns, and this, in a sense, means a reduction of their strength relative to their foreign opponent on particular matters in contention. There is evidence of this process in the shift in Soviet policy toward the USA after Mikhail Gorbachev was chosen in 1985 to lead the Soviet Union (Oberdorfer, 1998). Another example is the change in Egyptian policy toward Israel and the USA when Anwar el-Sadat became president of Egypt after Gamal Nasser's death in 1970.

Economic developments within a community or society can greatly affect the symmetry of the communities and societies with each other, in diverse ways. Particular patterns of economic development may favor one geographical region in a country, which may enhance the prosperity of the ethnic, linguistic, or religious community living there. This was the case in Belgium, to the advantage of the Flemish (Dutch) speakers, relative to the Walloons, who are French speakers (Covell, 1993). On the other hand, economic expansion can ease the strains to which asymmetries between different communities may contribute. The prospect of continuing further growth can provide an incentive for cooperation and the avoidance of intercommunal strife, as has been the case in Malaysia (Mauzy, 1993).

It can also facilitate reaching an accommodation in which the relatively disadvantaged community or society receives benefits and protections without substantive sacrifice from the more advantaged. For example, affirmative action policies in the USA during the 1960s were eased by the general economic expansion at the time.

Short-term possibilities

Some changes are amenable to human agency in the short run; they result from the strategies adopted by official and nonofficial leaders of major institutions as well as by sub-elites and rank-and-file groups (Dayton & Kriesberg, 2009). This discussion focuses on strategies that may be taken both by adversarial parties and by external interveners.

Partisan strategies

In conditions of conflict asymmetries, adversaries can choose from many strategies to reduce the asymmetries or overcome them so as to help transform their conflict and reach a mutual accommodation that is enduring and equitable. Varying strategies are relevant for two kinds of partisans (Mitchell, C.R., 1995a). First, I discuss strategies that are particularly relevant for groups that regard themselves as disadvantaged and aggrieved, who are challenging those they regard as antagonists. Second, I consider strategies particularly relevant for groups that regard themselves as defending themselves against challenging adversaries.

For the challenging groups, given their relative disadvantages, they should be cautious not to provoke more than they can handle; indeed, radical groups that resort to violence are generally defeated (Gamson, 1990). A good general approach for challengers is to try wining allies for their side and to isolate the adversary. The first step in developing appropriate strategies is to analyze the conflict, considering (1) the various contexts in which it is manifested, (2) the major parties in the conflict, including their allies and the diverse subgroups within each, and (3) the interests and concerns of the many engaged parties. Pursuing strategies that gain allies and isolate the dominant adversary can reduce asymmetries.

One famously discussed and practiced strategy, particularly in the 1960s, is for the challengers to create a situation favorable to their cause by provoking the authorities to overreact and to act so atrociously they drive the population into supporting the challengers (Fanon, 1966). Fidel Castro and his small group of associates, including Che Guevara, followed this policy and committed acts that provoked the Cuban government. At the direction of Fulgencio Batista, the self-appointed president, increasingly harsh and indiscriminate countermeasures were taken, antagonizing many Cubans. The government became isolated and fell in January 1959. Che Guevara considered this strategy to be a generally effective way to create a revolutionary situation and he and others attempted to follow it in several countries, but it failed, as governments avoided overreacting.

Various nonviolent strategies have often been used effectively to change governments, to improve living conditions, to achieve cultural autonomy, and even to win political independence (Gandhi, 1962; Sharp, 1973). Nonviolent actions take very many forms, including demonstrations, boycotts, disobeying laws and orders, and establishing alternative institutions. Official efforts to suppress such

actions may arouse widespread support for the challengers, as happened during the civil rights struggle against the discriminatory practices in the American South. Official violence against nonviolent strategies often results in the challengers turning to strategies that include some form of violence, as happened in South Africa and Northern Ireland.

Some strategies aim directly to undermine constituency support for the hard-line position of the adversary's leadership. The strategies can entail appeals for sympathy and understanding; and also arguing how yielding what is asked for will result in material benefits, or fulfill shared values. This may be conveyed in speeches, novels, empirically based analyses, songs, and films; and they may be the product of cooperation with subgroups from within the opposing side.

Another often effective strategy for challengers, which may seem counter-intuitive, is to reassure the challenged group. An important insight in the field of conflict resolution is that people on each side of a conflict often feel frightened and threatened by their opponent; yet members of neither side readily recognize that the other side also has such fears. Reassurance may take the form of asserting and demonstrating that getting what is being sought will not damage the highly important interests and values of the adversary.

Defenders have parallel strategies that may serve to maintain the asymmetries they wish and an accommodation they can accept (Kriesberg, 2006a). Given their relatively advantaged position, considerable cautiousness should constrain the strategies they adopt. The risk of overreacting and overreaching is often tempting for the dominant side, and acting on that temptation can result in a self-defeating escalation. This argues for using precise police actions, and not broad military ones; it also argues for considering seriously the issues raised by opponents, and not dismissing them.

Defenders can make use of their advantaged position to utilize strategies that challengers find more difficult to implement, applying noncoercive inducements or soft power (Kriesberg, 2009; Nye, 2004). They can provide limited gains to some persons and small groups in the challenging camp, which may splinter the challenging side. Such strategies, however, can result in accommodations that in the long run are viewed as unjust and unacceptable by members of the broad challenging community. Nevertheless, they can be part of a long-run reduction in asymmetries, of a transformation in the relationship between the adversarial camps, and of a more equitable and enduring accommodation.

Parties countering challenges to them and to their position also have a wide variety of narrower strategies they can adopt. They may make some concessions related to the matters in dispute, without seeming to yield to pressures from the challengers. The risk that defenders often worry about is that making any concession will encourage the challengers to raise their demands; they may fear that appeasing the challengers will only whet their appetites. Taking such actions before the conflict has intensified and the threats and mistrust have grown high can reduce that risk. In addition, the risk may be reduced by private exchanges and quiet understandings between members of the opposing sides (Kriesberg, 2006b; Mitchell, C.R., 2000b).

Finally, defenders and challengers may both benefit by seeking and obtaining assistance from intermediaries and other kinds of external interveners. How outsiders can assist in overcoming asymmetries and fostering constructive accommodations is discussed next.

External intervener strategies

External intervention strategies range greatly in their intrusiveness, forcefulness, and one-sidedness. Strategies carried out by private persons and by government officials as go-betweens are among the least intrusive and least forceful; go-betweens transmit information from one opposing side to the other about the matters in contention. Mediators employ a wider range of strategies, with varying degrees of intrusiveness. Nonofficial mediators generally are more facilitative and less able or likely to apply any sanctions, positive or negative, in their work. They are more able than government officials to perform mediating functions in conflicts where one of the adversaries is a nongovernmental actor, since their engagement does not provide official recognition and ostensible equality to the nongovernmental organization (Hume, 1994).

Interveners can employ a wide array of sanctions in the course of a conflict to limit or end a conflict, and employ them differentially toward the adversaries. Sanctions include the assertion of standards and judgments about the adversaries in a conflict, as in UN resolutions, and much more forceful interventions, which may include constraints on economic activities or military deployments (Cortright, 2002; Stedman, 2002).

Case applications

Some large-scale conflicts have undergone remarkable transformations so that asymmetries were reduced and more equitable relationships have been constructed. However, other large-scale conflicts have not been so transformed, and asymmetries have persisted with severe violence and oppression for many years. I briefly discuss cases of these kinds of conflicts, although there is likely to be disagreement among some members of the opposing sides, as well as among observers, about the placement of a conflict in one or another category.

Transformation toward symmetry and equitable resolution

Among the major conflicts that have persisted at great cost for a very long time, I discuss three that have ultimately been significantly transformed and accommodations between the former antagonists have been reached. The role of changing asymmetries in conflict transformation and accommodation is noted.

South Africa

The establishment of a government determined by direct elections, with each adult citizen having a vote, irreversibly manifested the constructive transformation of the white–nonwhite conflict in South Africa. Several long-term external and internal developments contributed to reducing the asymmetry of the conflict between whites and blacks, and therefore between the South African government and the African National Congress (ANC). The developments include demographic changes, with the proportion of blacks increasing; external moral and economic sanctions against the South African government; and the rising global consensus regarding the protection of human rights. The end of the Cold War also contributed to the conflict's transformation, in part because the South African government's assertions

that the ANC constituted a communist threat lost credibility among South African whites and the US government saw that it had little to lose in pressuring the South African government to end apartheid.

Many of the South African leaders and organizations, white and nonwhite, pursued policies that effectively guided the transformation; and they isolated those that acted violently to halt the transformation. While steadfast on gaining a political order shaped by every adult having one vote, the ANC reassured the whites regarding their property and the essential unity of all South Africans, whatever their color. Nelson Mandela was extraordinarily skillful in articulating and demonstrating those policies.

Important changes happened among white South Africans that made an equitable accommodation with nonwhites seem possible. In December 1984, an informal meeting between ANC officials and Afrikaner newspaper editors was held, in Zambia, which was arranged by an Afrikaner academic; various other similar meetings followed (van der Merwe, 1997). In October 1986, the general synod of the Dutch Reformed Church resolved that there is no biblical imperative for the forced separation of peoples. In August 1989, Frederik Willem de Klerk was elected president of South Africa, and in February 1990, Mandela was unconditionally released from prison, having been imprisoned for 27 years. In March 1992, a whites-only referendum supported negotiations to end white minority rule. Agreements were reached on a new political system and on transition arrangements; then, in April 1994, Mandela was elected president of South Africa.

Neither side had been able to unilaterally impose a settlement of their conflict and chose to negotiate a mutually acceptable accommodation. Apartheid was not a sustainable system and in many ways was breaking down. Shared identities as South Africans and as Christians, as well as the benefits of cooperation calculated against the costs of escalating violence, made a negotiated agreement attractive. Leaders who consistently and convincingly proclaimed those realities were crucial in this transformation process. The transformation was irreversible, despite the many problems that the people of South Africa confront.

Blacks in the US South

The civil rights struggle by blacks to end official segregation and discrimination in the American South is generally viewed to have been waged effectively and to have resulted in a more equitable and stable accommodation. Several long-term trends contributed to reducing the asymmetry in black–white relations in the American South and to transforming the conflict regarding equal rights for blacks.

Several changes in the USA and its place in the world reduced the asymmetries between the dominant whites and the subordinated blacks in the American South. The ideological struggle with Soviet Communism made the treatment of Negroes in the South a great embarrassment for the US government and for Americans generally. The growing number of African-Americans in the middle class in the North and in the South provided skills and resources to take action against what was increasingly regarded as the unacceptable denial of American civil rights to Americans of African descent. The increasing education of white Americans and their changing conventional understandings about races undermined their racist ideas.

The leaders of the civil rights organizations chose goals and methods of struggle that maximized their resources and won them allies, while the leaders of the white

resistance often chose strategies that were short-sighted and self-isolating (Branch, 1988). The objectives of the civil rights struggles were framed in terms of the basic American ideals of equal opportunities for all. By seeking redress in the courts and by nonviolent demonstrations and boycotts, the blacks won media attention, white allies, public support, and federal legislation according them the rights they sought. To a significant degree as the new realities emerged, white Southerners accommodated to them, and recognized their propriety and even benefits for a new South.

Once these institutional and social changes took root, the transformation of black–white relations in the USA grew, overcoming many obstacles. The election of Barack Obama as president of the USA was a sign of that fundamental transformation, as was the widespread satisfaction with themselves that Americans demonstrated about the choice.

Northern Ireland

Like other conflicts, the protracted conflict in Northern Ireland has consisted of many overlapping contentions, each intertwined with still other fights (Holland, 1999; McCartney, 1999). Protestants have tended to see the conflict in terms of constitutional and security issues, wishing to preserve Northern Ireland's union with Britain. Some Catholics have stressed nationalist concerns and sought self-determination, while other Catholics have been particularly concerned with their political and economic inequities. Various organizations have sought to advance their differing programs, using political and judicial methods, marches and demonstrations, and sometimes violence to defend themselves and to attack others. In addition, the British government, the sovereign ruler of Northern Ireland, used its powers to sustain peace and protect its interests. When the conflict began escalating in the late 1960s, civil rights and economic issues were prominent among the nonviolent Catholic protesters. As confrontations grew, British troops were deployed in August 1969 to maintain order, effectively on behalf of the loyalist (Protestant) administration in Northern Ireland. The issues became more nationalist, and militant Catholic and Protestant organizations resorted to violence, resulting in many deaths of civilians and of security forces, particularly in the 1970s.

Efforts to stop the violence and reach a generally acceptable accommodation were made by the British government and some of the political parties of Northern Ireland. A major step toward an equitable and enduring accommodation was made in 1985 when the British and Irish governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement to work together to end the paramilitary threat. This broadened the system within which the conflict was conducted and also reduced some of the asymmetry of the Protestant–Catholic relationship in Northern Ireland. Following unsuccessful efforts to achieve an agreement, a comprehensive settlement was reached in 1998, on Good Friday, in Belfast. The agreement had three strands: proportional representation and power sharing in the north, a linked ministerial council between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and a British-Irish council and intergovernmental conference. The implementation of the agreement progressed, but with many stoppages and regressions. The conflict had become transformed sufficiently to be conducted within the institutionalized political process.

The transformation of the conflict in Northern Ireland is a result of some changes that reduced the asymmetry that existed in the 1960s and the way the contending

parties adapted to them. Long-term global trends lent increasing legitimacy to Catholic claims for social and economic equality. Increasing economic well-being in later decades in Ireland and in Northern Ireland eased some of the zero-sum quality of resolving those issues. The system context changed as the European Union (EU) became more significant, reducing the primacy of the national state.

Furthermore, international trends in norms and practices about the way to conduct and settle conflicts denied legitimacy to using violence against civilians for political purposes. This became particularly marked after the terror attacks against the USA on 11 September 2001. Furthermore, the important American Irish Catholic community that had given some support to the militants in Northern Ireland increasingly counseled reliance upon political processes.

Many, but not all, of the strategies chosen by the partisans, both in the challenging and in the opposing sides, contributed to the transformation of their conflict. The leaders of the major parties, John Hume, of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and David Trimble, of the Ulster Unionists, strove to represent their respective Catholic and Protestant constituents, and to find a mutually satisfactory accommodation. They received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998 for their successful work. They insisted upon including the more extremist organizations on each side in the negotiations to resolve the conflict. Hume talked with Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein for many years, which led to the IRA cease-fire in 1994.

External parties also played important roles in restructuring the conflict and its context, and in mediating and supporting negotiations to resolve the conflict. Mediation lends legitimacy to an adversary that may have been excluded from negotiations to reach a settlement. For example, in 1994 and 1995, when negotiations about the status of Northern Ireland were stalled, President Bill Clinton met with Gerry Adams, thereby raising Adams's status and helping him enter negotiations. In November 1994, Clinton visited Northern Ireland and was welcomed by enthusiastic crowds. These actions spurred negotiations by throwing a bright light on the situation and the wide support for a settlement of the conflict.

The former US senator George Mitchell provided mediating services that contributed to reaching the Good Friday Agreement (Mitchell, 2000). In 1995, he chaired an international committee to make recommendations on the issue of decommissioning (disarming) underground organizations. In September 1997, peace negotiations began in Belfast with an extraordinary wide range of groups represented and Mitchell as chair. Besides chairing the sessions, he acted as a go-between for parties that would not talk to each other directly and he helped provide norms for the discussion, creating a safe space for negotiations. He also helped establish rules to reach decisions by significant consensus and in addition he had access to President Clinton, who at times spoke directly to the parties.

Consequently, the conflict was sufficiently transformed to be conducted within the newly normal political system. Problems and delays ensued, but within the emerging political process.

Protracted failure

Sri Lanka

The struggle in the island of Sri Lanka between the Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the largely Hindu Tamil minority has been extremely violent and protracted (Little,

1994). Sinhala Buddhist revivalism in Sri Lanka began in the late nineteenth century when Sri Lanka was a British colony known as Ceylon. Anagarika Dharmapala was one of its leaders, combining indigenous and colonial influences to claim that the Sinhala are a chosen people, with the mission of administering the island. Sri Lanka became independent in 1948; then, in the elections of 1956, Dias Bandaranaike and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party came to power and implemented Buddhist revivalist policies. The Tamil language and other rights were diminished and Tamil discontent grew. A dynamic of Tamil protest and Sinhalese government repression began and escalated with increasing violence by both sides. In 1976 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerged under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran to fight for independence and Tamil rule in the northern and eastern provinces of the island. The LTTE began a guerilla war, suppressed moderate rival Tamil organizations, and committed terrorist attacks, sometimes using suicide bombers.

Many of the long-term trends previously discussed strengthened the Tamil minority in their claims for basic human rights, reducing the asymmetry of their relations with the Sinhalese. The LTTE's reliance on violence, its destruction of rival Tamil organizations, its use of young people as fighters, and its recourse to suicide bombings and assassinations, however, alienated the international support that the Tamils otherwise might have won. Consequently, despite the injustices imposed by Sinhalese, Tamil resistance received little external support, aside from the Tamil diaspora.

The Sinhalese government policies had also been increasingly anti-Tamil in the early period of escalation. When some possible concessions began to be offered, they were viewed with mistrust and seemed inadequate to the LTTE.

The several efforts at intervention were largely failures. In 1985 India began some mediation efforts between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil groups (Bose, 2002). Then, in 1987, the Indian prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and the president of Sri Lanka, J.R. Jayawardne, signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. This agreement to bring peace to Sri Lanka was reached without any consultation with the LTTE or other Tamil groups. Soon thereafter, an Indian peacekeeping force of 20,000 landed to enforce the agreement; those actions were rejected by the LTTE, which fought the Indian forces and forced them out in 1990. The Indian intervention did not contribute to reducing asymmetries or opening nonviolent channels for mitigating the conflict (Rudrakumaran, 2005). In 1991, the LTTE assassinated Rajiv Gandhi.

A convergence of developments beginning in 2001 produced signs that the conflict was beginning to be transformed. In the Sri Lanka elections in December 2001, the United National Front won the elections to the Parliament, leading in February 2002 to a formal cease-fire agreement between the government and the LTTE. The Norwegian government had facilitated communications between the two sides since 2000, and the cease-fire enabled direct negotiations to start. The LTTE began to discuss possible federal solutions, no longer insisting on an independent Tamil state. The asymmetries had not changed significantly, but the hurting stalemate had taken its toll and new options began to seem more attractive. Moreover, the global mobilization against terrorism, after the 11 September 2001 attacks, contributed to increased international engagement and pressure to end the violence in Sri Lanka. For both sides, a different course seemed preferable to the fighting. Instances of violence did occur, but negotiations were renewed, with Norwegian mediation.

The negotiations, however, were unsuccessful, violence erupted again, and in 2008–9, the government forces largely took control of the territories that had been

held by the LTTE. The LTTE seems to have been defeated; it had not been changed enough to win the international support needed to reduce the asymmetry relative to the government (Orjuela, 2009). To what degree the government will attempt to create a new political order that meets some of the concerns of the Tamils in Sri Lanka remains to be seen.

Israel–Palestine

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been embedded in larger international connections since the conflict's origin. In its contemporary form, it began after World War I with the creation of Palestine under British Mandate. Then, following World War II, Israel was established, and a war followed the Arab countries' rejection and the Zionists' acceptance of the UN partition plan for Palestine. The former Palestine was divided into Israel; the West Bank, which was incorporated into Jordan; and Gaza, which came under Egyptian control. That remained the situation until the Israeli military victory in the 1967 war resulted in the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and the Sinai.

Beginning in the 1950s, the Cold War overlay had helped sustain the Israeli–Arab conflict. Even before the end of the Cold War, however, the Israel–Arab conflict had begun to become a Palestinian-Israeli conflict, particularly after the 1979 Treaty of Peace between Egypt and Israel. In that context, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict became even more asymmetrical, disadvantaging the Palestinians. The first intifada, which broke out in December 1987, was in part a popular Palestinian response to their international neglect and isolation. In order to reduce its isolation, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) tried to satisfy US demands to forswear terrorism and acknowledge the right of Israel to exist in peace and security. In December 1988, Yasser Arafat said enough to enter direct communications with the US government, but this did not materially alter Palestinian-Israeli asymmetries.

In 1991 the USA led a large coalition, including most Arab countries, to drive Iraqi forces from Kuwait, which Saddam Hussein had conquered. Palestinian leanings toward Saddam Hussein lessened support for the PLO by Arab countries and the USA. When the USA organized the Middle East Peace Conference, held in Madrid, in October 1991, Palestinians (not including PLO members) and Israelis were induced to enter negotiations. Those negotiations soon stalemated, and in 1993, nonofficial, secret PLO-Israeli meetings began near Oslo. The meetings yielded what was widely seen as a fundamental transformation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, a mutual recognition of the PLO and of Israel. The “Oslo Process” was underway, with the establishment of a Palestinian Authority, Palestinian elections, and the withdrawal of Israeli authority from major Palestinian populated areas in the occupied territories.

This step-by-step process, however, did not go smoothly (Ross, 2004). Negotiations were slow, implementation was incomplete, and each side faulted the other for its actions (Parsons, 2009). In 1999, the newly elected prime minister of Israel, Ehud Barak, and Arafat agreed to push ahead with permanent status negotiations to end the conflict. Issues that had not previously been officially discussed, including the status of Jerusalem and of Palestinian refugees, were now on the negotiating table. Despite meetings at Camp David in July 2000, mediated by President Clinton, an agreement was not reached. In September, the second intifada erupted with great violence and continued with varying degrees of Israeli and Palestinian ferocity, until it was largely suppressed and Arafat died (in 2004).

In part, the second intifada resulted from Palestinian belief that Israel sought to impose a settlement and they must resist by resorting to violence. The effect of the violent uprising, however, was to undermine the Israelis who had believed a mutually acceptable accommodation with the Palestinians was possible. Ariel Sharon, who overwhelmingly defeated Barak in the February 2001 elections, escalated the fighting. Shortly thereafter, the Israeli government began unilaterally to build a separation barrier, and then, in 2005, again unilaterally removed Jewish settlers and Israeli armed forces from the Gaza Strip.

The dynamics of the interaction between Israelis and Palestinians did not reduce their asymmetry or improve the probability of a mutually acceptable agreement, which had risen at the outset of the Oslo process. On the Palestinian side, Islamic sentiments grew as a better alternative than the relatively secular, nationalist views important for PLO supporters. The growth and appeal of Hamas built on this shift, and also on its externally funded welfare system. Furthermore, it could promise reducing the power asymmetry relative to the Israelis by its resistance and by winning support from the Islamic world.

On the Israeli side, the earlier nascent shift toward post-Zionism and historical revisionism was overcome by tough-mindedness (Kelman, 1998). The global mobilization of the war on terrorism seemed to ensure enduring support from the USA and the whole Western world. A fierce conflict seemed inevitable for many years to come.

Nevertheless, some changes are happening that reduce the asymmetry of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and they may help reach a mutually acceptable accommodation in the future. The demographic growth of both the Jewish and the Palestinian populations has been an important dimension of asymmetry. After World War II, many of the survivors of the Holocaust settled in Israel, and Jews from the Arab countries fled to Israel. But the movement of Jews to Israel then slowed, except for the immigration from Russia after the Soviet Union dissolved. On the other hand, the Palestinian population was increasing by natural growth, despite the initial flight and expulsion and later emigration. By the 1990s it was becoming clear that the Palestinian population in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea would soon be larger than the population of Jews. The Jews wanting to live in a democratic country with a Jewish majority did not want to incorporate all the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza with their Palestinian populations into Israel.

The official entrance of Hamas into the Palestinian polity brings in an important actor, which had been excluded by the bilateral relations between the Israeli government and the PLO or the Palestinian Authority it controlled. If Hamas adapts and joins with the PLO to enter direct negotiations with Israel, more binding Palestinian commitments may well result.

External intermediaries have been important in shaping the course of the conflict. In particular, the US government has played critical roles in the peacemaking that was achieved in Israeli–Egyptian and Israeli–Palestinian relations. Presidents Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush, and William J. Clinton were each heavily engaged in mediation efforts. These efforts are open to criticism and the efforts of George W. Bush are widely faulted (Kurtzer, 2008). In addition, many other national governments have undertaken intermediary roles, notably Egypt and Jordan, as well as international governmental organizations, most significantly the UN and in recent decades, the EU. NGOs have also played vital roles in helping prepare for negotiations and in

conducting complementary activities during the negotiations. Such Track 2 actions were conducted at various levels of the Israeli and Palestinian societies.

Clearly, however, the intermediaries did not do enough that might have overcome the obstacles and so enabled the Oslo process to succeed (Kriesberg, 2002; Kurtzer, 2008; Malley, 2004). If they had done more monitoring of each side's implementation of the agreements that were reached and were more actively engaged in ensuring compliance, each side's dissatisfaction with the other might have been significantly less. To reach a mutually acceptable accommodation in the future, external intermediaries of many kinds will be needed. The US government could be more effective than it has been in the past if it encourages and supports other intermediaries to mediate and also to help reduce the asymmetries in the Israeli–Palestinian relations.

Conclusions

Asymmetries in conflicts are always present; but they vary in degree along many dimensions and they change over time. They also vary in their relevance for the transformation of destructive conflicts so that the conflicts are waged and settled constructively. Sometimes, the asymmetry is so great that one side can impose its desired outcome; such impositions, however, often are not sustainable. Frequently, a balance is struck between the kind of asymmetries that exist and the goals sought, so that the conflict is transformed sufficiently for a mutually acceptable accommodation to be achieved. In some ways this was the case in South Africa, as the whites modified what was essential for them in any agreement to which they acceded.

This analysis focused on both the organizations seeking to challenge the existing relationship and those opposing the challenge. Each contending side tries to modify the asymmetries in order to induce the adversary to yield much of what it seeks. For the challenging side, that often means reducing asymmetry, while for the dominant side that may mean making the deal seem more attractive than it had been for the challengers. The engagement of Ireland and the EU context contributed to those effects in the Northern Ireland case.

In addition, intermediaries may pursue diverse strategies to help the adversaries overcome asymmetries and transform their protracted conflict. The analysis suggests some general strategies for adversaries on each side of an asymmetric conflict and for intermediaries that may help them construct a transforming settlement. In the Northern Ireland case, the change in the stance of the Irish-Americans and of the US government bolstered the standing of the Republicans and helped turn them to adopt a more accommodative approach. In the Sri Lankan and Israeli–Palestinian cases, although there were intermediary efforts, they were too limited to overcome the prevailing asymmetries.

Effective approaches for groups within the challenging side include the following. They must win allies, and not alienate them. They must avoid extreme and indiscriminate violence, which is often counterproductive. They must reassure the opponents that their vital concerns are not threatened, if necessary limit and isolate opposing leaders, but woo moderate constituents. The LTTE and the PLO, at crucial times, did not pursue those policies. The ANC and the American civil rights organizations tended to adopt those approaches.

Some effective strategies for groups within the side resisting the challenge to the status quo are similar. They include trying to win allies, avoiding indiscriminate violence, and not making existential threats. Given their relative dominance, they

risk overreaching and therefore failing. Having more resources in some dimensions of symmetry enables them to make offers and provide benefits that can win over important segments of the challenging opponents. This was evident in the policies of the dominant groups in the USA during the civil rights struggle.

Intermediaries and other interveners often play important roles in changing the asymmetries in a conflict and helping to transform and settle it equitably. They may help the adversaries communicate with each other and come to understand what the other side believes and feels. They may contribute to making a settlement seem credible, safe, and fair. They can do so by championing international norms, such as those relating to the protection of human rights; and they can monitor compliance to agreements and sanction violators. They can help the parties achieve the “parity of esteem” that is often so important in making peace between adversaries even with different degrees of power (Crooke, 2005).

Intermediaries also can help reduce asymmetries that hamper reaching equitable and enduring accommodations by working with only one side to improve its capacity to negotiate effectively and by training or consulting with negotiation teams. This was done in South Africa. Mediator engagement often is of assistance to the relatively disadvantaged side, but that is generally more effective if the assistance is conditional on how the challenging party conducts itself in the struggle and whether it recognizes the adversary’s legitimate rights. This was noted in the discussion of the Northern Ireland case.

There can be no formula that will produce a degree of symmetry appropriate to adversaries in a conflict reaching a constructive accommodation. Every conflict is unique in some ways and various participants have different goals and hopes. This analysis indicates the variety of conditions and strategies that help correct destructive-prone asymmetries. For any given conflict transformation to occur, many of those conditions and strategies must complement each other and converge at the same time.

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