

Why Has Negotiation Gotten a Bad Name?

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You can't negotiate with terrorists. You can't negotiate with rogue states like Iraq and North Korea - that would be rewarding their threatening and bad behavior. You wouldn't negotiate with Hitler would you - look what happened to Chamberlain!

Does all this sound familiar? It should, because this is what leaders and many mainstream pundits have been saying for the last year or so and why the practice of negotiation is getting a bad name. As a result, negotiation has inappropriately and unjustly become associated with weakness. Now for all those who engage in the process of negotiation we know nothing could be farther from the truth. There is nothing weak about negotiation -- that is, if negotiation is done properly!

One only needs to scan the newspapers or turn on the television to become infused with the message that negotiation is equal to acquiescence or the compromising of one's principles for the sake of an agreement (or peace in the international context). That is indeed a dangerous message for the mainstream to hear. Moreover, if that is what negotiation is I too would not want to engage in it. However, that is what bad negotiation is about. (British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who rolled over to Hitler and did not protect his interests, was a bad negotiator).

Good negotiation and good negotiators are very skilled at protecting and fulfilling their own interests, while trying to find creative ways to minimally satisfy the others interests as well. If a negotiation does not do that then no agreement should be made.

When international crises erupt, the knee jerk reaction is to proudly proclaim that "we will not negotiate with ... (Iraq, North Korea, etc)." However, during times of crisis and conflict, more communication is needed, not less. Misunderstandings and the unverified rumors related to desires and motives fuel escalation when negotiation is not present. Now, it should be made clear that negotiation does not mean agreeing. It means conveying your interests and why, and trying to understand the others interests and why they want them. If you do that and still disagree you can and should walk away.

As an example of negotiation and its strength in the international context one only needs to go back to October 1962 and the Cuban Missile Crisis, which held the world on the brink of annihilation. Despite incessant prodding by his military advisors that there was no other course of action but a preemptive strike, President Kennedy instituted a blockade of Cuba and kept a back channel negotiation open with the Soviet Union. It was that negotiation that kept the situation from escalating out of control. Kennedy's overriding interest was to prevent nuclear war, have the missiles removed from Cuba, and save face for the US and he did that as well as meeting the needs of the Soviet Premier Krushchev.

Moving forward to the current day example of North Korea, the danger of not negotiating can be seen in what transpires in its place. In the absence of negotiations North Korea restarted its nuclear program. Instead of being able to verbally convey their concerns they are trying to send a message of extreme displeasure by taking a drastic step, however strange that may seem to the rest of us. When negotiation is absent it is important to remember that communication does not stop, but that messages are sent with actions open to multiple interpretations. During tense large-scale conflicts between nations, when mistrust is high, most actions taken are assumed to be belligerent.

In this particular situation, North Korea (the sender of the message) is a nation that has been isolated from the world and has little stature to garner attention. Therefore, they begin from

that perspective and try to convey a message that they believe is clear, unequivocal, and will get them noticed. It is then logical for North Korea to pull out their biggest threat - that of acquiring of nuclear weapons - to make certain they are heard and become important enough to negotiate with. By not being "worthy" of negotiation, which is what the North Korean's heard from the US response of "we will not negotiate", the North Korean's perception of their unimportance is solidified. In addition, the international community lead by the US (the receiver of the message) is not particularly adept at listening to "the message" behind the message. In fact, if the message is not conveyed in the form of a threat the US and the rest of the world tend not to listen or dismiss the concern altogether.

After throwing its chest out and learning the hard way, in the form of an international crisis, the Bush Administration agreed to "talk" (note that they used the word talk because they believe negotiation carries a negative connotation) to the North Koreans and try to determine why they have taken such a bellicose position. After making that important move, the US quickly unlearned any useful lesson and escalated the situation again by referring the matter to the UN Security Council when the North Koreans were adamant about only wanting to talk with Washington. With North Korea continuing to ratchet up the pressure, the US is struggling to get out of the corner they have painted themselves into. On the off chance that the US were actually to talk and listen to the North Koreans they would find there is indeed something behind the North Koreans actions (i.e. status, economic concerns, potential starvation, an energy crisis, etc) that can be satisfied and that will bring them back into the international community. Unfortunately, this entire scenario could have been addressed without a crisis had the people in the US administration not characterized negotiation as weak or that engaging in the process somehow rewards bad behavior, but rather as the best means to diffuse the problem.

Negotiation, in short, is not about acquiescence and not about compromising your principles. That is bad negotiating and it should be labeled as such. Framing all negotiations in that light will not only bring drastic consequences, but it will take away humanities greatest tool in resolving conflict.