

23 August 2018

Diplomacy: Where the Negotiating Never Ends (Part One)



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You're buying a car. Or a house. Or a business. You're negotiating for the best deal you can get. But what is such a deal? Which factors count?

Money is important! Why pay more than you need to? But so is *predictability*. You want the deal to stick. Likewise *reputation*: if you get known for being obnoxious or tricky, you'll find it harder to strike deals down the line. And *security* broadly defined is crucial – it's maybe worth paying a bit more now to know where you stand, as a basis for going forward.

In other words, the negotiation is superficially 'about' the car or house or business, and the price the sides offer and accept. But it's also about 'deeper', less specific factors. Clever negotiators play on these ideas.

In such everyday transactions, one thing you don't do is invest too much *time* in negotiating. Why haggle for months or years or decades about a car or a house or a business? That's absurd! What you might gain in the deal if your obstinacy finally prevails surely will be worth far less than the opportunity cost of getting stuck in that one negotiation. There are plenty of other deals out there. Go for one of those instead.

In other words, for most negotiating purposes we expect and want the negotiating to end. And it does end. A deal is reached in some sort of reasonable time, or it isn't. The parties move on.

The thing to understand about international diplomacy is that it is not like everyday business negotiating. In diplomacy the negotiating may last for decades, or even centuries. Worse than that. *It may never end.*

Examples aplenty.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

Take Cyprus. It's not a large island – in area and population comparable with England's county of North Yorkshire. Yet Cyprus has been divided since 1974. Greek-speakers control the larger southern part; Turkish-speakers the smaller northern part.

Successive sustained ingenious attempts to find a solution that reunites the two communities have been led by some of the best international negotiators on the planet. They have all bounced off the problem. I recall a (Greek) Cyprus ambassador telling me with tears in his eyes that he could see across the 'Green Line' dividing the island his family house on the Turkish side: *"Our house has been empty for nearly 40 years! How can this happen in modern Europe?"*

Good question. Why exactly has this problem and its attendant negotiations dragged on for decades with no solution in sight?

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One way to look at all negotiating is in terms of five core themes:

Security

Resources

Control

Reputation

Time / Certainty / Risk

It's hard to think of any personal negotiation — annoying teenage children, unhappy departmental reorganisation, stressful house-buying, hostile takeover bid — that does not involve several of these in one way or another. Of all them the most difficult is *security*. That goes to our deepest fears about survival and identity. It's where there's the most at stake. If we get that part of the negotiation wrong, we fear that we may lose everything.

This is all the more explicit at the international level. In the Cyprus case, the Turkish minority on the island want assurances about their safety and cultural identity that for the Greek majority require intolerable concessions on their own security/identity. What is the basis for a deal both communities can live with? An exotic federation or confederation? Partition? While clever negotiators on both sides of the island and around the world ponder these options in micro-detail, the real-life impasse continues.

Likewise Israel and the Palestinians. The Israelis suspect (not without reason) that the basic aim of the Palestinians and their wider Arab supporters (and Iran) is that Israel as the one internationally recognised homeland for Jews should cease to exist. Israel sees itself confronted with Hamlet's security question of questions: *To be or not to be?* As Israel chooses to be, what can be the basis for any deal with those who want Israel not to be?

And North Korea v South Korea. North Korea as a state is a Cold War bad accident. Yet it continues to exist, and has diplomatic relations with most countries. Here again *security* drives the complicated situation on the Korean peninsula. On what negotiated basis if any

might North and South Korea come together again? If security is the core issue, is there something to be said for President Trump to engaging personally with North Korea's Kim Jong-un, perhaps offering him private assurances that a completely new approach is not so risky for him and his elite?

Continued in Part Two

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

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