THE VIRTUE OF SUSTAINED DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS

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Saunders formerly held a number of positions at the National Security Council Staff and in the US State Department, most recently as Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. His most recent book, *A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflicts,* is published by St. Martin's Press.

This article argues that dialogues take place between people rather than civilizations. The proposition that sovereign nation-states should be the primary actors to initiate a dialogue among civilizations has been undermined by globalization. Effective dialogue begins at the personal level, and globalization has made that not only necessary but possible. By dialogue we do not mean sporadic, one time exchanges, but rather sustained dialogue that builds a "cumulative agenda," develops a "common body of knowledge," and teaches participants that "relationships can be transformed." It is only through the use of this technique, the author concludes, that a clash of civilizations can eventually be avoided and that the patterns of interaction that are ultimately responsible for conflict can be changed.

Our subject is "dialogue among civilizations," and the compelling question is how to make that happen—how to do it. In an attempt to answer this question, I will focus on citizens outside government and their capacity to make and build peace and to build the social capital essential to economic development. Before I delve into the question of dialogue among civilizations, however, I must, as a practitioner, reduce the idea of "civilizations" to human and operational scale. Let me begin by making two points to establish that perspective.

First: We must recognize that civilizations in themselves do not talk. Civilizations speak through human beings and groups of people. One of the reflections we quickly come to as we think about civilizations is how many different voices they have—through cultures and sub-cultures, through national and sub-national groups, through religious and ethnic groups.

I recall in the late 1970s when I was assistant secretary of state going through an exercise to examine what kind of policy the United States should adopt toward Islam. We concluded that thinking on such a broad scale was unrealistic and impractical because Islam is expressed through so many different sects, activist organizations, and national groups. Therefore, the only way to have a policy toward Islam was to have a policy toward the human groups through which it is reflected. In social and political life, it is only realistic to think about how to deal with those practical manifestations of a much larger reality.

Second: A paradigm shift is essential if we are to approach this subject realistically. For years, it has been the fashion in the social sciences that underlie the study of international relations to focus on institutions—beginning with states and working down through formal decision-making groups of one sort or another. It is essential to change our conceptual lenses.

A sentence which captures the old paradigm—often called the "power politics model" or the "realist paradigm"—is the following: Leaders of nation states or formal groups amass economic and military power to pursue objectively defined interests against other such entities in a zero-sum contest of power. In this case power is defined as control.

While that paradigm still has value in many instances, it has been demonstrated in the last thirty years time after time not to be broad enough to include a number of situations we now face. It does not adequately describe, for instance, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or a wide range of deep-rooted human conflicts that have broken loose following the end of the Cold War. It did not adequately describe the turnarounds in East-Central Europe where citizens with little raw power ended up overturning the power structures of empire and national government. It did not describe the "vote no" campaign against General Augusto Pinochet in Chile. It did not help explain the genocides in Rwanda and the Balkans.

In the 1990s, the increasing number of so-called "ethnic conflicts"—which I prefer to call deep-rooted human conflicts—could not be explained in terms of the realist paradigm. Human factors were deeply at work.

The formulation that I use to capture a new political paradigm is the following: Relationships among countries and groups are a political process of continuous interaction among significant elements of whole bodies politic across permeable boundaries.

Whereas the metaphor for the realist paradigm was the strategic chess game with one move neatly following another, the emphasis in this new formulation is on a continuous political process operating simultaneously at all important levels of bodies politic across borders that do not confine identities and important interactions. The metaphor that lodged in my mind during the United States' hostage crisis in Iran in 1980 was much less elegant—a game of squash or racquet ball with four players on a five-sided court with six balls in motion at the same time.[1]

The concept I use for capturing this political process of continuous interaction is *the concept of relationship*. In some ways, this seems an inadequate word: in the US it has been much overused; in other languages there is no direct translation except in such phrases as "the total pattern of interactions." Psychologists have told me that I cannot use an interpersonal word to describe interaction among institutions or groups.

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Despite all those objections, I persist in using the word *relationship* precisely because it is a human word. Human beings are born into relationships and live their lives in relationships, so they have no trouble understanding the dynamics of this new paradigm. This is not a grand theory of international relations. This is a down-to-earth instrument for citizens outside government to use in dealing with the deep-rooted human conflicts that are beyond the reach of governments.

To make the concept of relationship a practical diagnostic and operational instrument, I have broken it down into *five components:*

- *Identity* refers not to just physical characteristics of size, wealth, physical strength but also to the life experiences which have brought individuals and the groups with which they identify to their present point in history.
- *Interests* are still defined in objective terms such as how much oil the

United States will need from the Middle East, but they are also defined as what human beings care about. Interests are defined both analytically and in the political arena as citizens weigh interests that compete for the same resources.

• *Power* has for decades been defined as the ability of one party to force another to do what it does not want to do, but we have learned now to recognize power in an additional form—the capacity of human beings coming together to influence the course of events that citizens with no raw instruments of power can generate simply through the commitments they make to work together toward a common goal.

• *Perceptions, misperceptions, stereotypes* require little comment in the ways they affect how people and groups deal with each other.

• *Patterns of interaction* can be habitually hostile and confrontational, or they can be characteristically collaborative.[2]

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The concept of relationship defined in terms of these five components is *diagnostic* in the sense that it provides a framework within which to begin understanding the dynamics of interactions between two hostile groups; more important, one can listen to enemies exchanging recriminations and grievances and can begin to map the dynamics of their conflict by sorting them among these five components.

More important, the concept of relationship is *operational* in the sense that through dialogue one can get inside each of those components of relationship and change it.

In explaining how one can use the concept of relationship as a vehicle for transforming conflictual interactions, it is easiest to begin with the question of perception. It is easy to observe individuals from conflicting groups change their perceptions of one another as they sit in dialogue and learn to see the others as real human beings with the fundamental concerns that most human beings share.

Next, while individuals do not change their identities in dialogue, participants in dialogue will come to respect an adversary's identity as he or

she comes to know it. Similarly, individuals will not change their inter-
ests—what they care about fundamentally—but individuals in dialogue
can discover that they share important interests. Most obviously, dialogue
participants from groups that have been killing each other can quickly
discover that they share an interest in ending violence. Beyond that, they
may share an interest in building or rebuilding the community that has
been destroyed by violence.

Individuals in dialogue learn that a seemingly preponderant party can-
not accomplish its goals without the collaboration of a seemingly weaker
party. So even their picture of operational power can change. In fact, they
learn a definition of power that is quite different from the view of power
as control. It is the capacity of citizens outside government with no in-
struments of raw power to influence the
course of events through their covenants **The operational**
to work together. Finally, individuals in **instrument for trans-**
dialogue do learn to work together in **forming conflictual**
different ways—ways that would have **relationships is the**
not been imaginable at the beginning of **instrument of** *sus-*
a dialogue. ***tained dialogue.***

The vehicle I see as the operational
instrument for transforming conflictual relationships is the instrument of
sustained dialogue. Please note the use of the word *sustained*. I use that
word to connote discipline, system, perseverance. As with *relationship*,
dialogue is a widely misused word. I once asked a colleague from another
country: "What are the connotations of the word *dialogue* in your lan-
guage?" He responded: "Nice talk without a purpose or a destination."
People use it to refer to the briefest of one-time exchanges. That is not
what I am talking about. Sustained dialogue is an interaction that contin-
ues over a significant period of time. It allows for building a cumulative
agenda, developing a common body of knowledge and experience, and
learning the ways in which relationships can be transformed. It has a
"purpose and a destination." The purpose is to change relationships in
the dialogue room. The destination is to change a community or a coun-
try. Dialogue can happen. Dialogue can change people. Dialogue can change
the course of conflict. It has happened.

In conducting and participating in such dialogues over the past twenty

years, I have discovered that they tend to unfold through a series of stages. It may sound artificially rigid to speak of stages or phases, but there is no question when people sit together repeatedly over time that their relationship deepens and changes character through a progression of experiences as they move forward. I have captured this in the following five stages:

- *Stage One* is a period in which adversaries agonize over whether to reach out to each other at all. It is a period in which they come to a decision to engage with the adversary, with the enemy, or with the unknown. This can be an agonizing decision.
- In *Stage Two*, they sit down with each other for the first time. They do what comes naturally: they pour out all of the anger and grievances with each other that have been boiling inside them. This can go on for days. The dialogue I have conducted with people in the civil war in Tajikistan began in 1993. These people took three three-day meetings to pour out their grievances. This is a period that moderators of such dialogues can use to "map" the problems and relationships that have caused the conflict. As participants engage in this venting, they will ultimately bring this stage to a close when someone says, "What we really have to focus on is...." In this Tajik dialogue in 1993, a participant said: "What we really need to talk about is how to start a negotiation between government and opposition about creating conditions for refugees to go home. Nothing in the country can happen until everybody goes home." When participants agree to that proposal, stage two comes to an end and the quality of the dialogue changes.
- *Stage Three* involves the more disciplined probing of the single problem or complex of problems that the group has identified. The quality of the exchange changes from talking *at* each other to talking *with* each other because they have together named a problem about which all care. They will not only talk to understand the dimensions and dynamics of this problem; they will begin to talk about possible ways of dealing with it. As they weigh possible directions in which they might move, they come to some sense of direction. They bring stage

three to a close when they decide that it is essential for them to try to move in the direction they have identified.

- *Stage Four* is a phase in which they will begin to design a course of action in the form of a series of interactive steps which—because of their interactions—will help to change relationships in a larger community. Participants organize their work around four questions: (1) What are the primary obstacles to moving in the direction we have chosen? (2) What steps can be taken to overcome those obstacles? (3) Who in the broader community can take those steps? (4) How can we sequence those steps so that one will build on another and gradually bring wider elements of the community into collaborative relationships? In this interactive series of steps, one begins to see a community developing a course of action that brings others into the political process and begins to change relationships there as relationships in the room have changed.

- *Stage Five* is a period in which participants decide to take their design for action into the larger community and to begin engaging others in it. The dialogue group does not normally become an action group in itself but rather remains a "mind at work" and puts its designs for action in the hands of others who can carry them out.[3]

Such a process of sustained dialogue is the distillation of three decades of experience in dialogue among citizens outside government to end conflict. Beyond conflict, it is now being used in connection with other approaches to help deeply divided communities, as in Tajikistan, pull themselves together to develop the patterns of interaction that are now being called "social capital"—the collection of civic practices that enhance trust within and between communities that is essential in improving economic performance. Social capital is the long unrecognized critical, missing essential ingredient in economic development—the civic infrastructure for economic development.

Teaching dialogue is not just teaching a technique for solving a problem; it is teaching a different way of relating. As we think about dialogue among civilizations, it is important to recognize two points: (1) We begin with identifiable groups in deep-rooted human conflict across ethnic, re-

ligious, cultural, or even civilizational divides, but we must deal with these at a human level—person by person, small group by small group over time. (2) Only in a process of systematic, disciplined, sustained dialogue will they learn a way of talking that enables people to interact peacefully in transforming their relationships and resolving their problems. This different way of talking and relating is essential *both* to a culture of peace and to economic development and justice, which are critical to peace.

As one example of the peacemaking use of dialogue, this process has been used for more than two decades between Israelis and Palestinians.[4] "Graduates" of these groups number in the hundreds, if not more. Many of them occupy top positions in the two bodies politic. It is never possible to know in complex political situations exactly how one group or one complex of groups has changed a relationship. I believe it correct to say that individuals who participated in those groups played significant roles— along with numerous other experiences in interaction—in changing the relationship between two groups, which in many ways reflect roots in different "civilizations." The point is not that violence continues. The point is that the present violence erupted because two peoples—across a civilizational divide—are in the final stages of peacemaking. The differ- ence between the early 1970s when Israelis and Palestinians would not recognize each other's existence and today's negotiations over the final definition of formal and interpersonal relationships between the two peoples is stark.

As a second example, the dialogue between individuals from differ- ent factions in the civil war in the former republic of Tajikistan that I have mentioned will hold their 30th meeting since 1993 in March 2001. They began before there was any other channel of communication between government and opposition. They continued through periods of formal negotiation and transition to peace. Members participated at all of those levels—hence the term "multi-level peace process." They have now formed the Public Committee for Promoting Democratic Processes to spread their way of communicating into the larger body politic and to apply it to the challenges of economic development through a complex of Economic Development Committees that they have formed.[5]

Third, such dialogues take place between citizens of the United States and the Soviet Union, now Russia,[6] and between the United States and

China. Again, it is presumptuous to claim that these dialogues are responsible for particular changes in relationship. But the testimony of participants leaves no doubt that the experience deeply influenced how they understood the dynamics of these relationships. Many of those participants went on to occupy prominent positions in their societies and governments. But also critical is the work now being done to use sustained systematic dialogue to build social capital.[7]

Perhaps the words that best capture the virtue of dialogue among civilizations are in the logo of the National Issues Forums in the United States: "A different kind of talk. Another way to act." Another way of saying this is to state that individuals learn different patterns of interaction in dialogue and those changed patterns of interaction change relationships.

Forty years of experience—twenty-five of them in high levels of government—have taught me that there are some things that only governments can do, such as negotiating, enforcing and funding binding agreements and important programs. But there are some things that governments cannot do. Only citizens outside government can change human relationships, social behavior, and political culture. Sustained dialogue is the essential instrument of citizens outside government.

This is not to say that either government or citizens outside government are paramount. There are two threads in Western democratic thought. Certainly one of them has to do with the machinery of democracy: one person, one vote, and all the similar practices that we revere. But the other thread comes to us, at least in this country, from the forums of ancient Greece and Rome, through the town meetings of New England and the associations of which de Tocqueville wrote, to the community organizations of today. It is in these contexts that citizens outside government work to change relationships and to build the political culture that is essential to the future of our democracy. We need both effective government and committed citizens outside government. That requires a new dialogue between the citizens inside and outside government to replace the present alienation and confrontation between them. It requires a new view of politics. Politics is not just about power, as political scientists have said. Politics is about relationship, of which power

is only one component. Dialogue is essential. Dialogue is possible. Dialogue is the instrument for transforming relationships, no matter what the barriers may be.

Notes

[1] For a fuller discussion of the paradigm shift, please see Harold H. Saunders, *A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflicts* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), Chapter Four, "International Relationships Across Permeable Borders."

[2] For a fuller discussion of the concept of relationship, please see Harold H. Saunders, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-43.

[3] For a full discussion of the five-stage process of sustained dialogue, please see Harold H. Saunders, *op. cit.*, Chapter Six, "Sustained Dialogue: A Public Peace Process."

[4] See, for instance, Herbert C. Kelman, "In Practice: Contributions of an Unofficial Conflict Resolution Effort to the Israeli-Palestinian Breakthrough," *Negotiation Journal* (Vol. II, No. 1, January 1995), pp. 19-27.

[5] For a fuller discussion of the experience of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue, please see Harold H. Saunders, *op. cit.*, Chapter Seven, "The Inter-Tajik Dialogue."

[6] James Voorhees, *Dialogue Sustained: The Multilevel Peace Process and the Dartmouth Conference* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, forthcoming).

[7] Ramón E. Daubón and Harold H. Saunders, "The Citizens' Political Process: A Method to Enhance the Civic Life of Communities for Their Economic Development" (a working paper in progress, Washington, DC: Kettering Foundation).