

## THE CENTRALITY OF NON-STATE ACTORS IN PROMOTING PEACE & STABILITY

The role of non-state actors in international affairs is becoming increasingly important, especially in terms of conflict. In the post-bipolar era, and especially after 9/11, a major trend in violent conflict is asymmetric warfare – be it intra-state civil war struggles, insurgencies or terrorism. Traditional warfare, in the form of conventional war between two states has been replaced increasingly by asymmetric and unconventional warfare with states using low intensity warfare to undermine an enemy state from within.

Within this context of war and conflict, it becomes equally important to involve non-state actors in the promotion of peace and stability – be it within states or at the international level. International organisations (IOs) have always been accepted, in varying degrees and at various levels, as stakeholders in global politics and international peace and security – but in most cases these multilateral institutions have had to concede to the supremacy of the notion of state sovereignty, except where states themselves have waived that right. Ironically, though, IOs like the UN and other multilateral bodies can be most effective if they are able to act as an international collectivity rather than merely as a source of providing legitimacy to the policies of the major powers. But so far, this has not been possible except in cases where the major powers let this happen- as happened in the case of East Timor.

However, within the present context of asymmetric conflicts, not only have the group of non-state actors expanded but also, such actors have become central players in any peace and stability process. Amongst the non-state actors besides IOs, one can include non-governmental organisations (NGOs), religious leaders and/or communities, business organisations and groups actually involved in violent conflicts themselves. An important point to remember is that in armed or violent conflicts, unarmed non-state actors are not as influential as armed non-state actors. So the effort has to be to convince the armed groups that they would have a stake in the peace process.

Increasingly, national and to a lesser degree, international NGOs have become more intrinsically involved in issues of peace and security – especially in instances where a trust deficit persists at the official level between adversaries. In such instances, NGOs can play an effective role – and have done so. However, if NGOs become too aggressive in selling their “peace” agenda, it can backfire as has happened in the case of Pakistan and India. The same can also happen if the NGO is funded primarily by foreign donors or is a subsidiary of an international NGO. Trans-national NGOs, be it in the form of a subsidiary of a foreign NGO or an

equal component of an international NGO, or local NGOs funded by primarily by foreign donors, can be most effective when they act as facilitators rather than as arbiters.

Unlike an IO, for an NGO non-state actor to be effective in furthering the peace dividend, it has to be sensitised to the position of the state as well as the mainstream civil society. Opinion-making or opinion-altering is most effective if done in a non-aggressive and subtle fashion. Yet another actor that can be effective in furthering the peace dividend is the quasi-state actor such as officially funded think tanks which can sponsor peace conferences and other related activities including providing a platform for dissidents before the state is officially prepared to recognise them. Finally, the state can also use an individual for back channel diplomacy as continues to happen in the Pakistan-India equation. However, sometimes, because of the suspicions between the government and civil society, the backdoor channel becomes a source of aggravated suspicions that the government may be “selling out”.

In the case of non-state actors, unless the dialogue is with “the other”, it can end up simply as an exercise amongst the already converted – as happened amongst some of the Track II groups in Pakistan and India where the main body of the participants comprised like-minded people and an effort was made to keep the alternate viewpoints out of the dialogue.

*Why have non-state actors become increasingly relevant in the peace and security equation today?*

The growing importance of non-state actors has been a direct consequence of the growth in asymmetric conflicts where at least one party is a non-state actor. Because most conflicts in the world today involve non-state actors, and are intra-state rather than inter-state in nature, so peace has to also involve the relevant non-state actors.

For example, post-9/11, the US-led war on terror is primarily a war by the US and its allies against non-state actors; as for the war in Iraq, post the fall of the Saddam regime, it has transformed itself into a war between the US and its coalition of the willing on one side and a motley group of non-state actors on the other. In Afghanistan also the US, NATO and the Karzai government are fighting non-state actors in the form of Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The Pakistani state is also fighting non-state actors in its own war on terror.

So, just as prevailing wars are with non-state actors, the peace has to also come from negotiations with non-state actors. In this context, therefore, non-state actors become central to any future peace dividend. That is why it makes little sense to have talks on the Middle East or even on Kashmir without the involvement of crucial non-state actors. The states involved cannot resolve the conflicts amongst themselves. In fact both the Pakistan and Indian

governments have realised this and have begun interaction with Kashmiri groups. Non-state actors have to have a stake in the peace dividend.

Non-state actors can also raise issues or offer blueprints for peace, sometimes with the approval of the government – often as trial balloons – which states cannot concede to initially. Public responses to such plans can impact government policy as well as policies of international actors.

Non-state actors can also help bridge the human dignity deficit within states, which in itself is a source of conflict – e.g. between the majority group and minorities. However, at the end of the day, non-state actors need state support to become effective peace builders – so it is essential for them to have trust from both the state and civil society. The non-state actors have to work with the state if their role in the peace process – peace building and sustenance – is to be substantive.

All in all, whatever the level of state and non-state actors in peace building and security, the old rules involving only states in peace building are not relevant anymore. International politics now involves non-state actors centre stage, and as such blueprints for peace and security have to involve expanded dynamics. The relationship between state and non-state actors has altered qualitatively and this has to be reflected at all levels of international relations – but especially so in the context of conflict resolution and peace building.

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