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ORG's Collective Strategic Thinking Model
By Emily Richardson and Professor Oliver Ramsbotham
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Based on theory developed by Oxford Research Group's Strategic Peacebuilding Programme (formerly Middle East Programme) in conjunction with its senior consultant Prof. Oliver Ramsbotham and implemented through its projects in Palestine and Israel, as outlined in his 2017 book, When Conflict Resolution Fails.

Introduction

Oxford Research Group's (ORG) Collective Strategic Thinking methodology is a way of engaging with radical disagreement in intractable and asymmetric conflicts. It is the first level of ORG's broader Strategic Engagement approach to environments where traditional conflict resolution approaches (management, settlement, transformation) have so far failed. ORG sees this approach as a cutting-edge contribution of its Strategic Peacebuilding Programme. It engages conflicting parties where they are, and not where third parties want them to be. Therefore it does not begin between the parties when this is not possible – for example through dialogue, problem solving, or negotiation – but instead starts *within* them.

Distinct from private (or partisan) strategic planning which takes place behind closed doors in order to manipulate, collective strategic thinking assists parties to a conflict in determining where they are, where they want to be, and how to get there. In this sense, it is perhaps more similar to ideas of 'theory of change' – which promotes positive social change by defining goals and mapping them back to the requirements for getting there - than to military, commercial, or party political strategies.

The complexity of most conflict environments requires understanding the context, weighing up strategic alternatives, considering advantages and disadvantages, then forging a plan for effective action. When thinking strategically rather than rigidly or from a place of positions, participants prepare for various eventualities and adopt an approach that is flexible and nimble, allowing them to maximise existing or potential opportunities, remain innovative, and draw on available assistance.

As they need to respond to the given context, no two applications can be the same. What we present below, therefore, is merely a suggested outline of collective strategic thinking, which can be adapted and amended as it is applied. A manual for Collective Strategic Thinking will be available soon for practitioners who would like to try this out for themselves. ORG invites them to get in touch if they are interested as we would like to spread this expertise as widely as possible and to share our experience with others.

CASE STUDY
This methodology has been developed through the work of three inclusive strategic thinking groups in Palestine and Israel supported by the Oxford Research Group: the Palestine Strategy Group (PSG); the Palestinian Citizens of Israel Group (PCIG); and the Israeli Strategic Forum (ISF). We will use the experience of these groups to illustrate the methodology as we outline it below. The aim of the inclusive strategy groups is to feed their ongoing work into their national debates at every level – leadership and societal.

Summary: twelve elements of ORG's collective strategic thinking

Below is an outline summary of the twelve key elements of collective strategic thinking that fall broadly into five stages. We unpack each of these elements later in this document.

Stage one: Who are we?	
Strategic identity	Managing overlapping constituencies and defining strategic identity groups: whose strategy?
Strategic unity	Attaining sufficient strategic unity to formulate strategy and sufficient strategic authority to implement it – a strategic prerequisite
Stage two: Where are we?	
Strategic context	Analysing the status quo as a complex system
Strategic balance of power	Assessing and weighing strengths and weakness in light of the opponent's
Stage three: Where do we want to go?	
Strategic futures	Evaluating scenarios to be promoted or blocked by assessing desirability, attainability, likelihood
Strategic goals	Determining short-term, medium-term and long-term destinations
Stage four: How do we get there?	
Strategic paths	Defining and orchestrating complementary options to mirror the complexity of the strategic context: how to get to the goals
Strategic alternatives	Preparing for either-or choices and possible obstacles: forging Plan A, Plan B, etc…
Strategic means	Assessing appropriate forms of power – how best to move down strategic paths
Stage five: What other tools can we use?	
Strategic opponents	Exploring the strategic advantage of looking at the chessboard from the perspective of the opponent
Strategic allies	Eliciting external support as a force multiplier
Strategic communication	Winning the war of words: shaping the mode of international discourse to work towards the goals

Strategic engagement

Before exploring Collective Strategic Thinking in detail, it is important to put it into its context as the first stage of ORG's broader Strategic Engagement approach to intractable conflict where so far traditional conflict resolution methodologies have failed. The first level begins within identity groups when it is not yet possible to work between them, and helps them assess a clear road for a better future. The other levels seek to translate their strategic thinking into positive change at the societal and political levels. The overarching process then can be best illustrated as the following three levels.

Level One: Intraparty Engagement

Collective Strategic Thinking, the main focus of this document, takes place *within* identity groups. It helps parties assess who they are, where they are, where they want to go, how to get there and what tools are at their disposal. Their thinking is then fed into their respective national debates at all levels; societal as well as leadership.

Level Two: Interparty Engagement

It is important to ensure the strategies developed resolve rather than prolong conflict. To do this, it is vital to see the chessboard from the opponent's perspective in order for a strategy to be effective and realistic. Strategic engagement and cross-fertilisation between the groups is necessary to do this.

Furthermore, strategic engagement across and between the parties in conflict fosters connections that can build better relationships and understanding and thus further attempts at a settlement at the negotiating table. It can open channels of communication between constituencies who are otherwise not in touch or even aware of each other's existence. It can also put issues that are otherwise taboo or not in the public domain on the strategic radar.

Our experience tells us that strategic engagement needs to be carried out with careful assessment of the context, often incrementally, and using means appropriate for the readiness of the groups. This may initially be simply through the sharing of ideas and reports, or hosting small meetings with representatives of different groups. Here, an outside facilitator plays a key role. Engagement may later increase, with larger numbers of participants from different groups coming together.

Level Three: Third-Party Engagement

Strategic engagement of third parties is vital. Would-be third party peacemakers are rarely genuinely neutral, impartial or disinterested, and can often become part of the struggle. It is therefore important for them too to review their priorities. They need to honestly ascertain whether they are more interested in resolution – in whatever form it may come – or whether they are seeking a particular outcome in line with their own interests. They then need to shape effective policies of engagement or a peace process that will have longevity. They are greatly assisted in this task by the knowledge gained from the other two levels of strategic engagement not least regarding who or what will block the way, and how, if at all, these obstacles can be overcome.

Model for Collective Strategic Thinking

Before an identity group can begin drawing up a task list and formulating tactics, they generally need to carry out five key stages of groundwork in strategic thinking, as outlined below.

Stage one: Who are we?

Strategic identity

Given the complexity of identity issues in transnational conflicts, there is often an interweaving and overlapping of identity groups. Thus, as an initial step, it is important to consider what constitutes an identity group. In terms of collective strategic thinking, these are groups whose situation and needs are in some way distinct. Some individuals may find they belong to more than one of these groups, inputting differently into each. However, the key is to allow the participants themselves to identify when their shared experience makes it necessary for them to engage in their own strategic thinking and map their own strategic direction.

Strategic unity

Despite their shared circumstances, identity groups are often divided amongst themselves. This can be what makes premature attempts at conflict resolution between identity groups impossible. Therefore, the groups must first agree on the need for strategic unity whatever internal differences there may be. This does not mean they must put aside or ignore their differences, but rather agree to invest in the process of building a shared strategy to make strategic thinking and action possible. This also means that there must be sufficient capacity to implement that strategy.

CASE STUDY

The establishment of the PCIG is a good example of ***strategic identity***. While the PSG is a group for all Palestinians, and ISF for all Israelis, there is a question of identity for Palestinian citizens of Israel, who can fall into both camps. Their identity lies at the very heart of their predicament. They are a distinct identity group in terms of collective strategic thinking because their situation and needs are distinct both from non-Palestinian Israelis and non-Israeli Palestinians.

The PSG particularly exemplifies the need for ***strategic unity***. Without sufficient buy-in from Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem, Israel and the diaspora, there cannot be an effective national capacity for strategic thinking and action. This was a strategic prerequisite for the group as was addressing the divisions between Hamas and Fatah.

Stage two: Where are we?

Strategic context

Before determining where the group wants to go and how to get there, it needs to assess the starting point, that is, the current context. It is important that participants at this stage grasp the complexity of the status quo, particularly in transnational or intractable conflicts where the situation is dynamic and constantly changing. It is worth noting that in asymmetric conflicts the status quo will play different roles depending on whether the strategist is the challenger (underdog) or the possessor (top dog). For both, the continuation of the status quo is likely to be one of the possible future scenarios considered later in the process. However, for the challenger it needs to be transformed, whereas for the possessor it may represent a desired strategic goal.

Strategic balance of power

For those wanting to shape the future, it is important to carry out a strategic assessment of relative strengths and weaknesses, particularly in asymmetric conflicts. This involves weighing up the relative effectiveness of different types of power (the ability to attain desired outcomes) in different circumstances. Here, it is helpful to refer to Kenneth Boulding's three 'faces' of power: threat power (do what I want or I will do what you do not want); exchange power (do what I want and I will do what you want); and integrative power (let us do this because we both want it). Joseph Nye makes similar useful distinctions between 'hard power' and 'soft power'. It is worth bearing in mind here, however, that strengths and weaknesses can be ambivalent; in some situations a strength such as overwhelming military superiority, can also be a weakness; for example, disproportionate civilian casualties for the other side may trigger international condemnation.

> **CASE STUDY**
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> A main focus in the ISF has been how to manage complexity in strategically assessing the *strategic context*. The recommendation has been to establish an inclusive national strategic thinking centre free from government and party political control that can feed creative long-term strategic analysis into national debate and help hard-pressed governments to avoid short-term reactions that do not factor in complexity. Discussion in the ISF showed why, given Israel's current strength as possessor, there will be no transformation until Israelis perceive a better alternative than the status quo.
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> Conversely, through assessing the *balance of power*, it became clear in PSG and PCIG discussions that a prime goal must be to change the Israeli perception that the status quo is the most preferable option. From there, they sought to determine what forms of power were available to them. It became apparent that 'legitimacy power' was one of the strongest tools at their disposal to dismantle the system of occupation over time.

Stage three: Where do we want to go?

Strategic futures

Before determining strategic goals, it is necessary to identify and assess possible future scenarios. What is good for one conflict party may be bad for another, therefore participants must assess both 'good' and 'bad' scenarios as their strategic aim will be to promote the former and block the latter. There are three elements to assessing each scenario that interplay with one another: desirability (whether it is good or bad for the group and to what degree); attainability (how capable the group is of making it happen); and likelihood (how probable it is for the scenario to come about). Understanding the balance of these factors in each scenario will provide valuable input in the next step, determining strategic goals.

Strategic goals

It is common in all complex societies for conflict parties to disagree internally on long-term strategic goals. Therefore, the most significant aspect in the determination of collective strategic goals is the distinction between short-, medium-, and long-term goals. This allows for a flexible approach in which participants can agree on short-term aims while leaving the future open. In any case some opportunities are likely to close down and new ones open up in ways that cannot be anticipated. Sometimes, for example, the achievement of an interim goal may substantially alter the landscape of possibilities requiring recalibration.

It is worth noting how far down the stages of collective strategic thinking the determination of strategic goals comes. This shows the amount of prior analysis that is needed before high-quality thinking about shared goals can be achieved.

CASE STUDY

The first major report of the PSG, Regaining the Initiative (2008), explored ***strategic futures*** assessing their desirability, attainability and likelihood. This led to the development of a new parallel Palestinian strategy alongside struggling negotiations that focused on seeking international recognition for a Palestinian state.

An example of ***strategic goals*** is the work of the PCIG since 2012 in adding strategic analysis to what had hitherto been little more than an uncoordinated 'wish-list' of future goals for Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Stage four: How do we get there?

Strategic paths

The task here is to devise a number of options that address the different interconnecting elements – such as sectors and levels – comprising the current context. In order to be effective, these paths should be complementary where possible, and the group should pursue several paths at once, thereby matching the complexity of the environment and allowing it to be responsive. If one path becomes blocked, progress can be made on another. The aim is to retain strategic flexibility and initiative, but always with clear goals in mind. It is also worth looking at local partners for specific paths; while full cooperation may be impossible, the group may be able to forge links on specific short-term goals.

Strategic alternatives

However, sometimes it is not possible to keep all options open and make all strategic paths complementary. There may be a fork in the road which requires facing genuine strategic alternatives. Given the unpredictability of a conflict environment, the group must prepare a Plan B (and Plan C), in anticipation of such forks in the road, and build assessment points into their strategies to regularly review the viability of Plan A. If it becomes apparent that the way for Plan A is blocked, the group can shift strategy immediately. Moreover, developing and communicating a Plan B can also make it more likely that Plan A will succeed after all. The opponent's awareness of the imminent possibility of an alternative strategy may induce it to comply with Plan A if Plan B is seen to be worse and the threat of deploying it credible.

Strategic means

Discussion about strategic means is discussion about how best to go down strategic paths. Having already assessed the group's types of power, they now need to decide which to use in each case. The strategic question is 'does it work?', and if not, drop it and try another. This is of central importance for all those wanting to encourage a peace process. Peace processes often depend on persuading challengers to give up violent struggles in favour of political ones, and possessors to give up violent repression and share political power. In that case a key distinction is between 'extremists of ends', who are uncompromising about strategic goals, and 'extremists of means' who advocate violence. Peace can be made not just with the moderates who are prepared to compromise, but also with extremists of ends who are not extremist of means.

CASE STUDY

An example of **strategic paths** is an ISF discussion about 'paths to a more equal Israel' in which Israelis across all of society discussed complementary routes to the shared goal. This included heated discourse about both disadvantaged Jewish and Palestinian Israelis.

Strategic alternatives was demonstrated in the PSG development of a two-track national strategy: Plan A, a Palestinian state; and Plan B, equal rights until a state is realised. Plan B was seen as both an alternative future and an inducement for Plan A. This was echoed in the ISF, and later the Israeli Labor party, in arguments against persisting with the status quo on the basis of the demographic danger it posed to Israel.

In exploring **strategic means**, the PSG coined the phrase 'smart resistance' which was used in a number of its papers to signify various forms of resistance assessed by their effectiveness.

Stage five: What other tools can we use?

Strategic opponents

In order for any strategy to be successful, one must view the situation from the opponent's perspective, as in a game of chess. The group will therefore benefit from identifying constituencies within the opponent's society which may be potential allies on particular issues. This is a means of learning what messages are most likely to bring about desired results within the opposing community and leadership, as well as anticipating the opponent's strategic moves in order to counter them.

Strategic allies

The search for external strategic allies is essential in transnational conflict. In many types of conflict, these levels of support and connection can be of the utmost importance in effecting the outcome and securing the success of a given strategy. For example, in many current transnational conflicts it is at regional and international levels that the final outcome may ultimately be decided. The support of external powers can of course also be a source of power assessed in stage two. It is worth noting the greater resources a state player has at regional and global level compared with a non-state actor who may have to work harder to make these kinds of alliances.

Strategic communication

Finally, all the above is animated and enabled by the nature, energy and quality of communication. At the heart of the strategy here is the 'war of words'. Multiple audiences need multiple modes of address, for example, inspiring internal unity is very different from influencing opposed societies or eliciting external support as a 'force multiplier'. This is a matter of both the content of the messages and the manner in which they are conveyed. Above all, it is a battle to reclaim and shape the mode of international discourse about the conflict to complement and work towards the group's aims.

CASE STUDY

An example of analysing *strategic opponents* is the potential role of the PCIG as a catalyst that can give insight to both the ISF and PSG into each other's internal politics.

As for the task of reviewing *strategic allies* to elicit external third-party support, examples are found in the efforts of the PSG and ISF to respond to potential regional Arab unity after 2002 regarding the Arab Peace Initiative, and to disunity since the 2011 Arab revolutions.

In relation to *strategic communication*, from the beginning the PSG has sought to challenge not just Israeli and US discourse, but also that of international peace-making. It sought to shift misleading language of equivalence, concessions and mutual recognition, to discourse about the heart of their strategy, namely rights.

About the Authors

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Oliver Ramsbotham *is a Consultant on ORG's Middle East Programme. He was Chair of the Board from April 2007 until July 2013. Oliver is a specialist on conflict resolution and designed an original approach to handling 'intractable' conflict, which he calls 'radical disagreement'. This approach both informs - and is informed by - ORG's ongoing work with the Palestinian Strategic Group and the Israeli Strategic Forum. Oliver is Emeritus Professor of Conflict Resolution at the University of Bradford (UK) and President of the Conflict Research Society. He is series Co-Editor of Routledge Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution.*