

Contested lands: paths to progress

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Peace processes are notoriously fragile. The history of recent years is littered with the wreckage of peace processes that aimed to settle intractable disputes, but failed to live up to that promise. The fate of the 1993-2000 "Oslo" process between Israel and the Palestinians is the most spectacular example. The price of failure is predictably high - relapse into violence worse than anything seen before, and the renewal of instability in the world's most volatile regions.

In my new book, *Contested Lands: Israel-Palestine, Kashmir, Bosnia, Cyprus, and Sri Lanka* ([Harvard University Press, 2007](#) [1]), I look at five such disputes, and peace processes - Israel-Palestine, Kashmir, Bosnia, Cyprus, and Sri Lanka - in a comparative perspective. I delve deeply into the distinct histories and contexts of each case - which are all defined by competing claims to national self-determination - but my overarching objective is to tease out general insights both regarding the *substance* of durable accords, and into the tortuous *process* of getting to such accords.

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Although it may make some [liberal cosmopolitans](#) [4] and believers in post-nationalism uneasy, the prospects of peace depend above all on negotiated solutions to the bitter conflicts over territory that form the core of self-determination disputes. The pragmatic answer lies in self-rule - which can take the form of either autonomy within a decentralised state for independence-seeking groups (Turkish Cypriots, Kashmiris, Bosnian Serbs and Croats, Sri Lankan Tamils) or sovereignty (for Palestinians). Political communities built around a common "civic" identity are not possible in these contexts, and there is no alternative to the accommodation of collective ethnic/national rights to self-governance.

Such accommodation is not necessarily inconsistent with liberal values. In fact, the strongest opponents of diffusion of political authority and sharing of power are very often deeply illiberal elements - ethnic-majoritarian nationalists among Indians, Sinhalese Sri Lankans, Greek Cypriots, and even [Bosnian Muslims](#) [5] - who sometimes try to obscure their real agenda, centralisation and domination, by invoking the principle of equality of all citizens regardless of ethnicity or nationality.

In the Israeli-Palestinian case, the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state on a territory that closely approximates the pre-June 1967 borders between Israel and the occupied territories, with its capital in east Jerusalem, is the *sine qua non* of a settlement. The idea of a single, [binational state](#) [6] of Israel/Palestine is deeply infeasible in light of history and of contemporary realities, and it violates the essence of the creed of self-determination of both peoples.

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(17 November 2006)

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Formula and flexibility

The poet [Robert Frost](#) [12] famously wrote that "good fences make good neighbours." But he also wrote: "Before I built a wall I'd like to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offense. Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down." Following Frost, it is imperative to not make a fetish of the borders, literal and figurative, that divide antagonistic peoples. Self-rule does not imply, let alone equal, segregation. Settlements to self-determination disputes must ensure that the borders that divide are as open and porous as possible - so that the "green lines" of Cyprus and Israel-Palestine, the inter-entity boundary line in [Bosnia](#) [13], the "line of control" (LoC) in Kashmir, and the border between an autonomous Tamil-majority entity in northeastern Sri Lanka and the rest of that island become bridges of cooperation rather than barriers of separation. The development of ties of cross-border cooperation and regional integration represent the long-term anchor for peace accords, and a beacon of shared prosperity, in the Middle East, south Asia, the western Balkans, and the eastern Mediterranean.

The [path to peace](#) [14] is a daunting obstacle course, however, strewn with hurdles and traps. Many peace processes follow an "incremental" strategy - based on gradual "confidence-building" between the parties, while deliberately putting off engagement with the core issues of the conflict until a climate of mutual trust propitious to a final solution has been created. The [Oslo process](#) [15] was an exemplar of the incremental model.

[Contested Lands](#) [16] argues that contrary to much conventional wisdom, the incremental approach is rife with risks, even perils. The window of opportunity represented by the onset and early stages of a peace process is both precious and tenuous, and time is not necessarily on the side of the supporters of peace. If the incremental process fails to deliver on its promise of piecemeal yet tangible progress, confidence-building can be turned on its head and become an exercise in confidence-destroying, as exemplified by the steady decline of the [Israeli-Palestinian process](#) [17] through the 1990s. The gradualist approach also has the effect of giving "spoilers" on various sides - elements opposed to a negotiated peace - the time to mobilise, and prepare and implement destructive interventions. In addition, the incremental approach may in fact be, or become, a pretext for the more powerful party in a peace process to dictate its agenda, as some influential critics of the Oslo paradigm have argued.

There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to making peace. But in some situations at least, a better strategy may be to aim for a comprehensive settlement to the dispute in all its dimensions, while staggering the *implementation* of such an agreement over time, as is inevitable due to practical and logistical compulsions. Apart from avoiding the pitfalls of incrementalism, such a strategy

"locks in" the adversaries - however grudgingly and reluctantly - into the framework of a substantive settlement, and makes a total relapse into renewed warfare less likely.

This is, broadly, the experience of Northern Ireland [17] since the Good Friday agreement of April 1998, and of Bosnia since the Dayton agreement [17] of November-December 1995. In contrast, the absence of such a "locking in" mechanism has been a major factor in the unravelling [17] and breakdown between 2002 and 2006 of Sri Lanka's peace process - which was premised, even if implicitly, on the incremental approach to peace-building - while the India-Pakistan peace process underway since 2004, based on the same evasive paradigm, is stalled. There is something to be said for the "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" formula - the motto of the United Nations's heroic if ultimately unsuccessful attempt, between 2000 and 2004, to mediate a solution to the Cyprus [17] conflict.

The ethno-national problem

Other challenges remain. Self-determination disputes - the most intractable genre of political disagreement - have virtually no chance of progressing toward settlement in the absence of third-party intervention, although the presence and activity of a third party is in itself no guarantee of a success. But the role of the third party, whilst essential, can have a very variable impact on the prospects of peace processes - constructive, ineffective, or even destructive.

The American role in the Oslo process, hobbled by the structural bias [17] of United States policy towards Israel, deepened, instead of diluting, the massive power-differential between Israel and the Palestinians, and contributed to the eventual demise of that process. As a genuinely neutral third party, Norway [18] played a pivotal role in the origins of Sri Lanka's peace process, bringing about the now-collapsed ceasefire agreement of 2002. But when the peace process became bogged down from 2003 onward, Norway, *because* it is a small, "do-gooder" country not taken too seriously by either belligerent, proved incapable of extricating the process from ruinous logjam.

There is also no easy or uniform answer to the "spoiler problem [19]". The most effective strategy to combat spoiler elements depends on the context, and ranges from politically marginalising Sinhalese ultra-nationalists in Sri Lanka to - possibly - co-opting Hamas in Israel-Palestine. The most fundamental impediment to peace processes and accords often comes, however, not from political movements commonly derided as "extremist" and "terrorist" - such as Hamas, or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka (LTTE) - but from ethno-national majority populations (Sinhalese-Buddhists in Sri Lanka [19], Protestants in Northern Ireland, Greek Cypriots on Cyprus) among whom ideas of hegemonic dominance continue to hold sway, or from states, such as Israel, trapped in a militarist ethos and fortified by superpower patronage.

Still, contested lands do not have to remain contested. Chronic confrontation is not inevitable or immutable, and compromise and coexistence remain eminently feasible objectives. The challenge is immense, but the dividends are so great, and the alternatives so grim, that the struggle for peace is worth every ounce of sweat and toil.

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