

*Threads of Peace: Leadership and Conflict Resolution in Nested Negotiation Networks*¹
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Overview: Which variables have influenced the resolution of protracted, asymmetric, and ethnonational (PAE) conflicts in Latin America, Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East between 1960 and 2021? How did specific bargaining and leadership strategies contribute to the peaceful settlement of such armed conflicts? To answer these questions, this study utilizes “negotiation system analysis” to compare eleven historical cases to analyze how power, leadership, and relationships lead to the settlement of protracted, asymmetric, and ethnonational (PAE) conflicts. Negotiation system analysis is a methodology used to map such systems, which involve many actors and types of actors, overlapping conflicts and coalitions, and links between local, regional, and global politics. The specific approach uses induction to identify new variables, hypotheses, and causal paths. It employs a diverse set of cases in order to include numerous variables and processes. The objective is to describe a causal model that explains how power, leadership, and relationships can lead to the negotiated settlement of protracted, asymmetric, and ethnonational conflicts.

Model: The methodology employed in this report is a modified version of a methodology that has been used to analyze complex conflict systems in Central Asia and the Middle East and that has guided several Negotiation Task Force research projects (www.negotiationtaskforce.org). The methodology views the relationships between parties as central to the behavior of a conflict system. The applicability of the framework to the cases rests on the applicability of the “nested negotiation network” phenomenon. Three “global trends” created the “nested network” phenomenon that the methodology takes as its core object of study: that stakeholders with influence over decision-making have multiplied; that distinctions between the global, regional, and local environments are breaking down; and that political leaders have found that their conflict management toolkits are unsuited to the conflicts they face.

As was the case with previous negotiation network analysis efforts, the model was constructed using structured, focused comparison (SFC). SFC uses a standardized set of general questions to structure investigation and focuses analysis on its research objectives. The model was constructed in two stages. The first was a descriptive phase in which researchers identified possible explanatory variables and causal pathways by analyzing individual cases. The second was an exploratory phase in which researchers constructed a causal model by comparing cases.

The comparative framework relies on three key categories: (1) Relationship Dynamics, (2) Power Dynamics, and (3) Leadership Dynamics. Within the scope of these categories, this study’s approach focuses on the leadership and power elements that emerged from an in-depth exploration of negotiated relationships between the key stakeholders and their respective associations, which were explored through the negotiation network diagrams and the subsequent network analysis that highlights the

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relationship patterns within each conflict.

Case Studies: This study analyzes eleven cases which include six PAE conflicts that were resolved through negotiations (Northern Ireland-PIRA 1998, Guatemala-URNG 1994, Sudan-SPLM/A 2005, Philippines-MNLF 1996, Bangladesh-JSS/SB 1997, and Angola-UNITA 2002), two unresolved PAE cases in which negotiations failed (Turkey-PKK 2015 and Afghanistan-Taliban 2021), and three resolved cases that did not meet the definition of a PAE conflict but displayed significant similarities with those (South Africa 1994, France-FLN 1962, and Colombia-FARC 2016).

This study uncovers variables that have influenced the resolution of these protracted, asymmetric, and ethnonational (PAE) conflicts between 1960 and 2021. In particular, it analyzes how specific bargaining and leadership strategies have contributed to the peaceful settlement of such armed conflicts. Methodologically, the study integrates conflict system analysis and negotiation analysis. It is based on insights regarding the “nested negotiation network” phenomenon, which are sets of relationships between parties within a larger conflict system. In complex conflict systems, state and non-state actors can simultaneously belong to different, indirectly connected sub-networks of relationships. This has important implications for the ways in which conflict parties are able to exercise power and leadership to influence a peace process.

Using negotiation network analysis, the study identifies the following nine patterns about the resolution of PAE conflicts:

1. Informal negotiations heavily influence the set-up of formal talks before peace negotiations begin.
2. A reduction in major acts of violence precedes the negotiated ending of PAE conflicts.
3. A dense network of positive relationships between parties in a conflict system does not necessarily correlate with an inclusive design of formal negotiations.
4. The ability of civil society groups and indigenous groups to influence peace negotiations depends less on external recognition bestowed on these groups by state actors, and more on these groups’ ability to organize, often under the leadership of skilled unifiers and bridge-builders.
5. The military often acts as a distinct political actor with idiosyncratic interests and a unique network of relationships.
6. Mediators bridge structural holes and connect otherwise unconnected clusters of actors.
7. Groups of aligned actors form clusters in negotiation networks, pointing to the importance of coalition building in multi-party peace negotiations.
8. In most negotiation networks prior to the resolution of PAE conflicts, low-intensity relationships outnumber high-intensity relationships.
9. Individuals and organizations exercise leadership in vastly different ways, which leads to vastly different consequences for the peace process.

A few caveats are in order. Negotiated relationships in PAE conflicts are in-flux and this quantitative analysis is based on a snapshot right before the conclusion of negotiations. While this analysis takes key developments leading up to a peace process into consideration, a detailed analysis of how exactly relationships evolve over time is beyond the scope of this study. This study uses a relationship-driven negotiation analysis framework. This is not to deny the importance of factors such as interests, perceptions, culture, values, and religion in PAE conflicts, but this study focuses on the negotiated connections and on their interplay with power and leadership to address the research question. The framework of the analysis is restricted by the fact that only a limited number of cases fit the criteria

defined by the original call for research proposals of the project that inspired this paper. As a result, we cannot draw statistically significant, generalized conclusions about peace negotiations in general on the basis of the cases under observation. An additional limitation is that the eleven cases deviate on the three PAE variables. Since relationships in PAE conflicts are often in-flux, our model does not fully capture the historically evolving nature of said relationships and their impact on the conflict resolution process.

Considering the wide breadth and nuances involved in each conflict, future studies would benefit from evaluating the case studies from different frameworks of analysis, such as social, political, cultural, economic, etc., and discussing findings in a comparative perspective. Finally, the task of covering such a breadth of complex cases means that the analysis had to be simplified. For future iterations of similar cases, consultations with regional subject matter experts would be conducive to the process of unveiling “why it worked.”

Conclusions: This study focuses on the role of negotiated relationships, with an emphasis on power and leadership dynamics in resolving protracted, asymmetric, and ethnonational (PAE) conflicts. We systematically analyzed eleven case studies, including resolved PAE cases.

The study applies a relationship-centered framework from the lens of power and leadership, that places the key conflict actors at the center of the analysis, along with their formal and informal relationships with other actors that were either connected with the key actors through high-intensity relationships or that exerted significant influence on the peace process. As a result, the study unveiled crucial power and leadership dynamics, along with their impact on the respective conflicts. Its findings uncovered variables that can generate an environment conducive to the resolution of PAE conflicts. The study discusses how the strategic position of an actor in the relationship network impacts their influence and leadership potential on the formal peace process, and how individual authority figures and organizations can leverage their inter-coalition and intra-coalition connections to move the conflict closer to a successful resolution, while safeguarding their own vested interests on the bargaining table. It also highlights the significance of mediators that serve as bridges between coalitions in a leadership capacity, and show the complex interplay between leadership and power that actors can wield to hinder or advance a peace process.

In terms of avenues for further research, future studies would benefit from expanding this study’s analytical framework to include a wider variety and number of cases, which may contribute toward the generation of statistically significant findings. The data-gathering process can be further developed, unifying the data analysis scheme, and analyzing connections between changes in negotiation networks and conflict escalation patterns more thoroughly. There is also potential for a separate study that analyzes the role that external economic incentives play in the context of domestic power and leadership dynamics. While this study’s findings demonstrate that in PAE conflicts, economic incentives can be a viable tool for pushing a peace process across the finish line, the exact mechanism by which this happens remains to be fully understood. Finally, future research could focus on analyzing the causes and consequences of the formation of clusters, coalitions, and sub-networks of actors in conflict systems, and how these different types of groupings influence a negotiation process.