OttawaDialogue

Policy Brief No.1 • February 2021

Is There a New Track Two? Taking Stock of Unofficial Diplomacy and Peacemaking

The Ottawa Dialogue Policy Briefs series is intended to stimulate discussion around key issues in the field of Track Two Diplomacy. They will be published three times a year. Each Policy Brief will be written by a leader in the field.

The first Policy Brief of the series, written by Dr. Julia Palmiano Federer, looks at the evolution of Track Two since it was first named in the early 1980s. Based on academic and policy scholarship on Track Two and her research on NGO mediators, she identifies the key ideas and concepts which have shaped the discussion of the field in this time and provides insight into where Track Two may be going. Your feedback and comments are welcome and may be sent to Dr. Palmiano Federer at julia.palmianofederer@uottawa.ca.

The author of each Policy Brief is entirely responsible for its content.

Executive Summary

Since its emergence in the 1960s and 1970s, "Track Two diplomacy," or informal and unofficial forms of dialogue facilitated by scholar-practitioners, has become a well-established and prominent form of peacemaking practice.[1] This policy paper looks at the evolution of Track Two theory and practice, drawing insights about how it has evolved and providing thoughts as to where it is headed.

Some analysts argue that Track Two is "the future of peacemaking," as formal political processes are increasingly challenged by a fragmented and complex conflict landscape. Several new developments characterize the field today: first, Track Two initiatives have proliferated and professionalized within the last forty years. Second, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who engage in or take on mediation and facilitation roles (hereafter NGO mediators) have increasingly taken lead roles in facilitating Track Two dialogues. Third, many Track Two initiatives are now increasingly concerned with linking Track Two and Track Three participants directly to Track One.[2]

The proliferation of Track Two initiatives represents an important shift in the field and presents both new opportunities and challenges. Three implications in particular are relevant for policymakers and practitioners:

- The growth of the Track Two field speaks to its effectiveness as a conflict resolution tool, but the Track Two concept is increasingly used in multiple ways and in different contexts, risking uncoordinated planning and interventions, especially in contexts that feature multi-track initiatives and multi-party mediation. This is not a new phenomenon,[3] but it seems to be increasingly the case.
- Track Two has increasingly become a vehicle for normative considerations such as increasing gender equality and civil society inclusion for peace processes, as linkages between tracks are promoted by peace practitioners.
- The measurement and evaluation of Track Two dialogues' impact on peace processes has become more complex due to the increasing number of actors, initiatives and practices, but simultaneously more sophisticated due to advancements in research methodology and the amount of empirical cases available.

Policy Recommendations

It is important to regularly and systematically take stock of these new opportunities and challenges as Track Two continues to grow in prominence and relevance as a key conflict resolution tool. To address the above issues, peace policymakers and practitioners should:

⇒ Invest in conceptual clarity when planning, programming or undertaking a Track Two initiative or intervention. This means understanding what "Track Two" means and what it does not in a given context.
⇒ Prioritize role clarity and mapping of Track Two actors (both third parties and participants) in a given context.
⇒ Include a conflict sensitivity and gender analysis when addressing questions of effectiveness, measurement and evaluation of Track Two initiatives.

Sixty years on, Track Two diplomacy has evolved from a "left-field" conflict resolution approach to an essential tool of statecraft and peacemaking, and warrants systematic analysis.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.20381/Z5GA-KE94

Introduction

The year 2021 marks 40 years since diplomat Joseph Montville and psychiatrist William Davidson first coined the term "Track Two diplomacy." In their 1981 Foreign Policy article, they described Track Two as unofficial informal interactions between conflict parties facilitated by a third party to develop strategies and ideas in ways that contribute to the resolution of conflict. Track Two dialogues have become increasingly mainstream over the last four decades, but the emphasis on political flexibility and informality has contributed to an unintended by-product: Track Two is necessarily a loosely defined concept,[4] and is increasingly utilized and implemented by peacemaking actors, policymakers, diplomats and researchers in different ways. While creativity and spontaneity are hallmarks of the field, an unconstrained lack of discipline can result in Track Two initiatives that can vary in effectiveness, overlap and even contradict each other in the field – as well as prove difficult to evaluate.

> Track Two was first defined as "unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations that aim to develop strategies, influence public opinion, organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict."

This policy paper argues that while Track Two retains most of its original definition as unofficial, informal and discreet processes between nongovernmental actors, many aspects of the main modalities have evolved overtime to feature "a fancy name, a reputation and a set of established practices." In particular, it focuses on the increasingly important role that NGO mediators play as Track Two third parties and the consequences this has on the objectives and methods of Track Two practice. There is a need to assess the current concept of Track Two and take stock of these new developments. This policy paper addresses this gap by analysing who these new actors are and what they bring to bear on Track Two peacemaking practices.

This Policy Brief finds that some NGO mediators are broadening the objectives and methods of Track Two beyond the practice of generating ideas in workshops to feed into a Track One setting. Many Track Two initiatives now involve linking Track Two and Track Three participants directly to Track One as well as brokering peace agreements at the local and community level. These developments introduce new opportunities and challenges for peace practitioners and policymakers and warrant systematic analysis.

The Evolution of Track Two Concepts and Theory

Built on the foundations of informal meetings between conflicting parties facilitated by academics such as John Burton, Herbert Kelman and Leonard Doob in the 1960s and 1970s, early Track Two initiatives developed into theories promoting a problem-solving approach to peacemaking through an informal, unofficial workshop format setting.[5] A more systematized approach to Track Two emerged from a social-psychological approach to peacemaking developed in the 1980s and 1990s at the tail end of the Cold War.

The distinction of Track Two from Track One was primarily down to the unofficial nature of the workshops and the participants, who were not official government actors but influential private citizens and thought leaders in their communities. They were invited by panels of scholar-practitioners in an informal setting to discuss sensitive issues and generate ideas to bring into the Track One formal process. These scholar-practitioners took on the role of third parties practicing a light-footprint, facilitative approach that focused on social persuasion techniques including changing attitudes, developing common ground and shifting from a bargaining to problem-solving mode of interaction.

Initially conducted in the throes of the Cold War era where positional bargaining and power-brokerage reigned supreme, these alternatives to such a system were met with uncertainty and suspicion by some Track One actors. Nevertheless, the concept of Track Two diplomacy caught on and precipitated a number of pioneering dialogues that took place under discreet circumstances between conflicting groups in conflict contexts in Cyprus, Northern Ireland, South Africa and in Israel and Palestine. Additionally, formal negotiations often took on a zero-sum, strategic bargaining approach. The objectives of the Track Two concept was highly influenced by a principled negotiation approach, which championed win-win over win-lose (zero-sum) outcomes, mutual gains and looking for interests beyond negotiation positions. The following table sums up the components of a Track Two initiative within this period.

Components of Track Two Initiatives	1980s – 2000s
Third Party	Scholar-practitioners
Participants	Track Two identified actors
Format	Interactive conflict resolution workshop (problem solving approach)
Objective	Transfer into Track One

Table 1, Components of Track Two Initiatives, Phase 1

Track Two was further influenced by an emerging peace research field. Track Two scholars expanded the theory into multiple tracks featuring diverse modalities, formats, settings and actors. First, Diamond and McDonald[6] expanded on the systems thinking approach that had influenced early Track Two scholars by introducing a conceptual framework of "multitrack diplomacy" that features nine tracks of actors ranging from private citizens to business actors to media institutions, all interdependent on each other's unique characteristics and comparative advantages to bring about peace. Notably, Diamond and McDonald and other scholars, such as Saunders, labelled Track Two actors as professional conflict resolution organizations for the first time, in recognition of the growing role of NGO mediators who

DOI: https://doi.org/10.20381/Z5GA-KE94

increasingly conducted mediation and negotiation activities directly with armed groups.[7]

Second, John Paul Lederach's seminal work on conflict transformation further broadened the "track" concept by adopting three levels of tracks to represent different levels of peacemaking within a society. These are visually represented in a pyramid format that features different types of actors conducting various types of peacemaking activities that are relevant to the level of society they represent.[8] According to Lederach, Track One consists of top leadership in societies (e.g. military, political and religious leaders) conducting high-level official negotiations, while Track Two is viewed as middle-range leadership from ethnic or religious groups, academic institutions and humanitarian leaders conducting problem-solving workshops, training in conflict resolution and working with insider mediators. Lederach, and others who have followed, have argued that peacemaking must pay much more attention to Track Three if conflicts, and the socio-economic patterns which sustain them, are to be transformed and real peace made.[9]

While Diamond and McDonald's multitrack diplomacy model offers a systems approach to divide Track Two into many more tracks, Lederach contents himself with adding a third track in order to incorporate the growing consensus around a bottom-up approach to sustainable peace. His Track Three represents the grassroots level of society in which local and community leaders of indigenous groups, health institutions and refugee camps are integrated into peace processes by conducting local peace commissions, psychosocial (trauma healing) work and community activism. This concept has become mainstreamed in peacemaking.

The introduction of this third track means that Track Two can become, if necessary, an important form of linkage between Track One and Track Three.[10] The notion of differentiations and possible linkages between the tracks was further conceptualized with the notion of Track 1.5, which describes activities in which unofficial actors work with official representatives of the conflict parties[11] in order to influence attitudinal changes between the parties. These new levels represent the broadening of the Track Two concept, and dovetails with the broadening notion of peace beyond the cessation of hostilities into something more sustainable, legitimate and effective. These new developments are presented visually by Jones (2015).

Figure 1, Visual of "tracks," published in Jones, 2015

These developments were accompanied by a major turn towards designing Track Two interventions based on a 'theory of change.' This entails moving towards initiatives that are intentionally designed, monitored and evaluated based on expectations about how changes or results follow from a set actions,[12] rather than third parties 'trusting their gut' when deciding when and how to go about Track Two activities and practices.

During the 2000s and 2010s, an increasingly globalized world order characterized by conflict complexity was accompanied by a more nuanced and interdisciplinary understanding of how to study, resolve, and transform conflict. Research increasingly focused on studying the impact and effectiveness of conflict resolution initiatives and developed more sophisticated methodological tools. This permitted further evolution in Track Two theory drawing from a large group of scholarship focusing on assessment, impact and effectiveness of Track Two initiatives.[13] Track Two scholars also contributed case studies focusing on regional security aspects of Track Two in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.[14] Past instances of interactive conflict resolution workshops were also empirically analysed using mixed-methods and allowing past and ongoing processes to provide new insights into how the ideas generated in the workshops fed into Track One processes.[15] The following timeline illustrates the evolution of Track Two practice-informed theory:

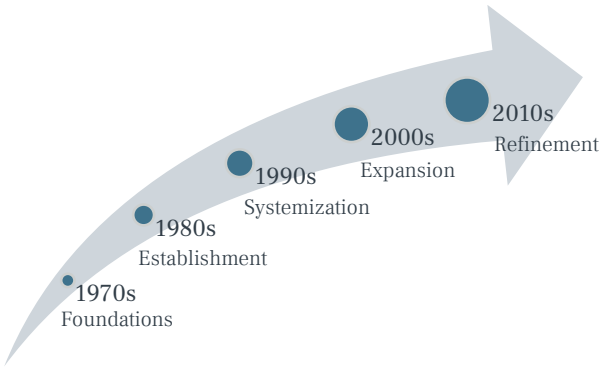

Figure 2, Evolution of Track Two Practice and Theory

The "New" Track Two: Developments from Policy and Practice

Today, peace mediation and dialogues have become an established conflict resolution mechanism and potent symbols of the liberal international order. In this post-Cold War period, internationally-mediated settlements of armed conflicts are increasingly brokered by professionalized NGOs who specialize in conflict resolution actively mediating between armed groups.[16] While scholar-practitioners were developing the problem-solving approach as private citizens, faith-based NGOs and religious organizations such as the Quakers were pioneering private and unofficial mediation in Kashmir and Israel-Palestine.

While these instances of unofficial mediation conducted by nongovernmental actors set a key precedent in peacemaking practice, these instances were relatively rare and mostly focused on humanitarian objectives and aid delivery. It was not until the

DOI: https://doi.org/10.20381/Z5GA-KE94

Community of Sant'Egidio, a public lay organization of the Catholic Church, led the mediation between the socialist Frelimo government and rebel group Renamo in Mozambique's long-running civil war leading to the 1992 Rome Agreement.[17] This experience set a precedent in NGO mediators taking *leading* mediation roles in between warring parties. Soon after, international NGOs such as the Carter Center and International Alert started to expand their activities into conflict resolution and mediation. Subsequently, organizations like the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the Crisis Management Initiative were pioneering new forms of NGO-led mediation that combined professional expertise on technical matters related to ceasefires and process design with private diplomacy.[18] This proliferation of NGO mediators created a shift towards the privatization of peace, changing how diplomats and other conventional political actors attempt to resolve conflicts.[19]

The rise of NGO mediators was bolstered by the professionalization of the mediation field that favoured a more systematized approach to supporting and training mediators and peace practitioners. This led to the creation of mediation support units that undertake capacity building, research and operational support to mediators. NGO mediators play large roles in such units, and employ a niche comparative advantage by taking on both NGO and mediation roles.[20] They can conduct mediation, "support" mediation or do both.[21] The comparative advantage of NGOs acting as both mediators and mediation support actors has further cemented their role as leading Track Two third parties. This shift has affected Track Two peacemaking practice in the following ways.

First, these new Track Two third parties have broadened and diversified the goals and objectives of Track Two peacemaking initiatives. For instance, similar to the scholar-practitioner workshop in early Track Two theory, NGO mediators pursue the broad goal of resolving conflicts through convening informal dialogues between conflicting actors, but have integrated this as one modality of peacemaking within a larger mediation and peacebuilding framework. Some NGO mediators aim to directly mediate and facilitate agreements directly between parties at local or community levels, or directly at the Track 1.5 level. NGO mediators do not always take on leading roles in mediation processes, but more commonly provide private and discreet support early on in the process, usually in the format of Track Two workshops and advising in the absence of an official third-party mediator (e.g. the Myanmar peace processes) or as part of a hybrid contact group (e.g. the International Contact Group in the Philippines) or directly supporting other types of mediators (e.g. the Civil Society Support Room in the Syrian peace process). Furthermore, due to their political flexibility, NGO mediators often conduct and support informal dialogue processes between the negotiating parties in pre-negotiation phases of peace processes through back channel talks, bilateral meetings and shuttle conversations.[22]

Second, some NGO mediators not only aim to impact formal processes, but increasingly aim to establish linkages between Track One and Track Three, depending on the context. Due to the increasing normative imperatives around inclusion in mediation practice, NGO mediators use Track Two initiatives as a vehicle for the inclusion and participation of nonofficial participants directly at the Track One level. Therefore, a goal of NGO mediators as Track Two third parties distinct from the scholar-practitioner approach fulfils a normative claim: they represent unofficial actors vying for greater legitimacy, often at the grassroots level.

Third, Track Two peacemaking has evolved in its methodology beyond the interactive conflict resolution workshop format and towards more robust forms of mediation and knowledge production. NGO mediators as Track Two actors employ a more systematic range of epistemic practices in the design of their Track Two initiatives. For instance, NGO-mediator led Track Two initiatives can consist of capacity building workshops in which training and expert inputs from external resource persons on different dimensions of peace process design are brought to the parties. NGO mediators can also use research itself as a form of intervention at the Track Two level, in which they (for or alongside Track Two participants) can conduct conflict analysis, develop codes of conduct, and develop practical guides and manuals that frame important issues or assess ongoing peace processes in a given context. Still another new Track Two practice is knowledge transfer or knowledge support, conducted through 'exposure trips' or 'study tours' for Track One or Track Two actors.[23] Exposure trips refer to external facilitators, often NGO mediators,

Components of Track Two Initiatives	Phase 1: 1980 – 2000	Phase 2: 2000 - 2020
Third Party	• Scholar-practitioners	• Scholar-practitioners • NGO mediators • Individual private citizens
Participants	• Track Two identified actors	• Track Two identified actors • Track One, Track 1.5 and Track Three Actors in multi-track settings
Format	• Interactive conflict resolution workshop	• Interactive conflict resolution workshop • Trainings and workshops • Joint production of knowledge products • Exposure trips/study tours
Objective	• Transfer into Track One	• Transfer into Track One • Transfer into multitrack-process (Track One, 1.5 Track Three) • Local level agreements

Table 2, Components of Track Two Initiatives, Phase 1 and 2

DOI: https://doi.org/10.20381/Z5GA-KE94

taking negotiating parties or conflict stakeholders to post-conflict or post-agreement contexts to glean from comparative experiences. These trips may also include international resource persons sharing expertise and "lessons learned" from other peace processes.[24]

Potential Problems and Issues to Watch For

While the growth of the Track Two field speaks to its effectiveness as a conflict resolution tool, the emergence of these new actors and practices have contributed to conceptual confusion among peacemaking actors and policy makers. Track Two language remains contested and used in multiple ways in different contexts. This risks uncoordinated Track Two initiative programming, especially in contexts that feature multi-track initiatives and multi-party mediation.

There also remains a lack of empirical evidence that the normative imperatives of inclusivity and linking the tracks result in positive and effective outcomes. The field is improving in its understanding of these issues and the techniques it can bring to bear on the subject of "measuring" its impact generally. But there remains an element of "faith" in terms of assertions as to how effective these interventions really are.

Furthermore, as private actors, NGO mediators are less constrained by political and legal parameters than facilitators with more official mandates such as the UN or states. This can result in questions and critiques around accountability and ethics. Track Two participants can also include politically sensitive actors such as armed groups proscribed as terrorists. This can be a boon in terms of opening up channels which might not otherwise exist, but a robust ethical framework is required to avoid falling into dangerous traps.

Lastly, the question of local ownership of Track Two dialogues has become a central consideration for both third parties and participants. This presents an important agenda for future research and practice. While "local ownership" of peace processes is an intrinsic good, recent scholarship argues that it also has its drawbacks. Instead, a hybrid of local and outside facilitation, acting in partnership, seems to be the best answer.[25]

The evolution of the field therefore presents both opportunities and challenges and must be systematically assessed by both policymakers and peace practitioners.

Implications for Peacemaking Practice

The emergence of these new actors, practices and objectives in Track Two have important implications for peacemaking actors:

- Lack of conceptual coherence: Track Two has always been characterized as a concept that is difficult to define. The discreet and informal nature of Track Two has made it difficult for both scholars and practitioners to find a common "Track language" that is context-specific, conflict sensitive, and addresses concerns of Track Two methodology being a largely Western-centric notion of peacemaking. However, as conflicts become increasingly complex and internationalized and multi-track processes become the norm for many ongoing and emerging conflicts, the need to define Track Two in a way that is historically, culturally, conceptually and politically cohesive is important to increase its effectiveness.

- Monitoring and evaluation: Related to effectiveness, the "new" Track Two has not solved the difficulty of measuring, evaluating and assessing the impact of how Track Two initiatives "transfer" or contribute into Track One processes. This is a major field of research and innovative practice attempting to address these issues in the conflict resolution and peacebuilding field writ large, but requires more integration and cross-fertilization with the specific methodology and practices associated with Track Two.

- Accountability and ethics: Furthermore, as informal Track Two third parties take on increasingly robust roles described above, questions around measurement and evaluation bleed into issues of accountability and ethics. Track Two third parties often act on mandates that are less constrained by international normative and legal frameworks and require their own ethical code in these circumstances. This is especially pertinent in a post-9/11 context in which the Global War on terror has made engaging with armed actors proscribed as terrorists on national, regional or international terrorist lists difficult. However, the inability to engage with such politically sensitive actors clashes with mediation norms of engaging with all parties. Track Two has been seen as a potential solution to this quandary, and more must be understood about the delicate nature of informal engagement with proscribed actors in a Track Two setting, as more formal actors such as the UN, regional organizations and states increasingly turn to risk-sharing and outsourcing to NGO mediators to reach out to such actors.[26]

- The normative framework in mediation: The mediation and conflict resolution field has become more normative. Third parties are increasingly expected, often by funders of these dialogues, to integrate international normative expectations around broader political participation, especially around the inclusion of civil society. Civil society itself is complex and should not be treated as a monolith, especially when it comes to "lumping" civil society actors into Track Two and Track Three initiatives – this is where much of the conceptual confusion arises around which actors are considered to belong to which track and which actors are moving between the tracks and linking between them. There is a need for more research and practice to understand the role that Track Two plays in multitrack peacemaking in terms of actors, initiatives, and the linkages between them. Track Two does not exist without Track One, and increasingly not without

DOI: https://doi.org/10.20381/Z5GA-KE94

Track Three, as the normative push for broader participation is increasingly understood as a basic condition for legitimate, sustainable and effective solutions.

- Gender inclusivity and participation: Track Two in particular has been seen as a concrete mechanism in which to promote women's participation in peace processes, as Track One formal processes continue to be dominated by men in government positions and in armed groups. While this is rapidly changing, questions of legitimate representation and tokenization of female representatives remain. Furthermore, despite growing attention, policy and practice has not engaged systematically on the role that gender and inclusivity agendas play in affecting Track Two peacemaking initiatives.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Based on the insights above, this policy brief offers recommendations for policymakers, practitioners and researchers working on or interested in Track Two:

- Invest in conceptual clarity when planning, programming or undertaking a Track Two initiative or intervention. Accept that there are many meanings and definitions of Track Two concepts and actors, many of them new and evolving, but seek as much conceptual clarity as possible for the specific initiative and intervention.

- Take on a regional and context specific approach. Prioritise "local ownership" to the degree possible, while recognising that best results can often be achieved when local and outside actors work together to complement each other's strengths.

- As part of a robust theory of change, conduct a conflict mapping exercise in each region of operation. The conflict mapping should be carried out through collaboration with local parties (Track Two actors and non-Track Two actors). The purpose is to create a blueprint of the conflict that allows the practitioners to have situational awareness of the way the conflict is evolving and the roles and relations between different actors and eventually to be able to pinpoint the impact of specific activities to credibly assign contribution or attribution.

- Develop a working relationship with the funding parties that is based on the understanding that Track Two diplomacy does not adhere to the linearity of measuring impact in other types of activities, and that showing "value for money," although a requirement by many funding parties, is not always reflective of the success or failure of Track Two dialogues.

- Prioritize role clarity and mapping of Track Two actors (both third parties and participants) in a given context. In a second step, map out and analyse the relationship between Track Two and other tracks and initiatives, understanding that the Track Two initiatives are usually taking place in a larger system of multitrack peacemaking initiatives occurring on different tracks.

- Bring an interdisciplinary approach to research and practice when addressing questions of effectiveness, measurement and evaluation of Track Two initiatives. Combine Track Two literature and practice more systematically when trying to address issues of measuring and evaluation or conflict sensitivity.

- Integrate an intersectional perspective that understands what gender, race, class, sexual orientation brings to bear on Track Two peacemaking across a range of contexts, especially when planning Track Two initiatives.

Forty years on, the core tenets of Track Two have not changed, but the modalities through which it is implemented have evolved significantly. To maximize the potential and effectiveness of Track Two initiatives, both theory and practice must harness and assess this evolution.

About the Author

Dr. Julia Palmiano Federer is the Head of Research at the Ottawa Dialogue. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Basel and a MA from the Graduate Institute of International Affairs and Development Studies, Geneva. Her research focuses on NGO mediation, peace process design, multi-track peace processes and topics related to inclusivity, gender equality, and diversity in Track Two peacemaking practice.

About Ottawa Dialogue

Established in 2009, Ottawa Dialogue is a university-based organization that brings together research and action in the field of dialogue and mediation. Guided by the needs of the parties in conflict, Ottawa Dialogue develops and carries out quiet and long-term, dialogue-driven initiatives around the world.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.20381/Z5GA-KE94

Endnotes

[1] For purposes of brevity, this policy paper utilizes the term "peacemaking" to describe conflict resolution activities including peace mediation, dialogue and conflict. It also uses the term "initiative" as a general term for a broad scope of Track Two diplomatic and dialogue-based activities. For more on the contested nature of "track language," see, Palmiano Federer, J., J. Pickhardt, P. Lustenberger, C. Altpeter and K. Abatis (2020). Beyond the Tracks? *Reflections on Multitrack Approaches to Peace Processes.* Zürich, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Centre for Security Studies ETH Zürich, swisspeace, Folke Bernadotte Academy. For a history of the field see, Fisher, R. (2009). "Historical Mapping of the Field of Inter-Active Conflict Resolution," in Davies, J. and E. Kaufman (eds.), *Second Track/Citizen's Diplomacy: Concepts and Techniques for Conflict Transformation.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

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[13] See, for example, Fisher, R. (2020). "Transfer Effects From Problem-Solving Workshops to Negotiations: A Process and Outcome Model," *Negotiation Journal*. 36(4): 441-470; Jones, P. (2019). "Talking for the Sake of it, or Making a Difference? Measuring and Evaluating Track Two Diplomacy," in D'Estree, T.P. (ed.) (2019). New Directions in Peacebuilding Evaluation, New York: Roman and Littlefield

[14] See, for example, Kaye, D. (2007). Talking to the Enemy: Track Two Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia. Santa Monica: RAND Corp.

[15] See, for example, Cuhadar, E. (2009) "Assessing Transfer from Track Two Diplomacy: The Cases of Water and Jerusalem," *Journal of Peace Research* 46(5): 641-658.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.20381/Z5GA-KE94