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Psychology and the Round Table Talks

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Abstract

Poland in 1988 was on the edge of economic, social and political collapse. The two antagonistic entities – the communist party and the government on one side and the Solidarity movement on the other - were each too weak to overcome the crisis by itself. Undertaking negotiations appeared to be the last chance to solve the crisis peacefully. There was a number of external circumstances and opportunities that supported undertaking the Talks, including Michail Gorbachev’s perestroika in the East, Ronald Reagan’s anti-communist policies in the West, the support of the Catholic Church and the support of the vast majority of Polish society. The whole Round Table story can be viewed as a transformation from a zero-sum game to a cooperative non zero-sum game with the solution close to a Pareto optimal solution. The processes included, among others: concentration on problems rather than people; building a mutual trust; creating the idea of the common good; and partitioning negotiations into many teams thereby creating a decision-making structure that was both hierarchical and flexible. After thirty years, both democracy and the rule of law are at stake again in Poland. Unfortunately, however, it does not seem that today’s socio-political situation is capable of fostering negotiation methods for solving the nation’s problems.

Keywords

Round Table Talks, psychological factors accounting for their structure and course, conflict, peaceful problem solving



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The agreement reached in the Round Table Talks in 1989 can be only in part attributed to the wisdom and negotiation skills of the Talks' participants. There are many other significant factors and events that accounted for the final outcomes of the talks. It was, among other factors, the balance of the strength of the negotiation positions between the sides, the pyramid structure of the Table, the support of the Catholic Church, the support of international community, and finally lucky coincidences of circumstances and opportunities. The most important of these was the international situation with Michail Gorbachev's perestroika in the East and Ronald Reagan's anti-communist policies in the West.

This chapter is mainly focused on psychology of the Talks, the main theme of the special issue. Let me start, however, with several social political remarks.¹

It is not an accident that the bloodless revolution happened first in Poland. Poland had the longest tradition of organized opposition against government in Central Europe. These included, to recall only the largest groups, Workers' Defense Committee (KOR), Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia (KIK), Free Trade Unions (WZZ), Solidarity (1980-1981), underground Solidarity and many smaller underground organizations and groups. In Poland and only in Poland, the areas of small business and private property have been preserved, mainly in the areas of agriculture, small-scale crafts and trade. They were islands of independent thinking and decision making. It is worth adding that Poles, despite the great limitations, still had the greatest travel opportunities and contacts with Western culture in the Eastern block, mainly in the period after 1970, a decade before Solidarity was created. Some Polish intellectuals, not necessarily the most loyal to the system, had access to the West long before and they smuggled ideas, books, and periodicals to Poland.

It is true that the Polish People's Republic was a totalitarian and non-sovereign regime, a dictatorship where human rights and freedoms were violated everyday, and where, with almost no exception, a precondition for any career was affiliation to and being loyal to the ruling party, where prisons were filled with political prisoners. However, besides periods of oppressive political control, there were also short periods of very limited, but nevertheless "political thaws". Episodically, in such periods, a dialogue between intellectual elites of communists and the opposition took place. This mainly but not exclusively occurred in Catholic environments, e.g., Catholic University of Lublin and Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia. Already in the 1970s, and in the 1980s, illegal books, semi-periodicals, samizdats were created and they were widespread underground throughout the country. The Flying Universities, illegal and very violently oppressed groups of intellectuals, closely connected with KOR, giving illegal lectures, seminars for, among others, students, teachers, workers.

Another important factor to consider was that the Round Table Talks followed martial law, but martial law followed a unique historical experience of collective agency

1) The comments were made before the main theme of the special issue was expanded to the period of 30 years after the Round Table Talks.

in 1980/1981. Typical of almost all spontaneous social movements, those 16 months had some elements of chaos. Deliberation costs time. It also often costs consistency of collective action. At the same time, that period was a great and fast lesson of deliberative decision making for managers, politicians, and the general public. In countless places in Poland and in a variety of public life domains we felt a foretaste of democracy. The memory of this was reborn during the new wave of strikes in 1988 that strongly affected the way the Talks were conducted.

Finally, it should be emphasized that despite the numerically decreasing opposition in 1982-1988, numerous underground groups worked intensively on the concepts of the rule of law in a democratic system, on the introduction of a free market economy, on reforming the health care system, on the education system that teaches independent thinking, on the model of free media, on ensuring the protection of human rights, and on many other reforms. They worked on it, although significant systemic changes seemed unimaginable then.

Thanks to this enormous body of work, the Solidarity team was in 1988 quite well prepared, which does not mean it was sufficiently prepared to dialogue on the most important problems of Poland.

At the end of 1988, Poland was on the very edge of economic, social and political collapse. The Communist Party was lacking social support, it was disaggregated and with no clear idea of how to protect the state of the catastrophe. The Party was too weak to overcome economic crisis itself and to assure Poles of decent lives. It was, however, still strong enough to stay in power. On the other side, the underground Solidarity after seven years of oppression, counted probably fewer than a hundred thousand active members. It was only a small fraction of the ten million union members claimed in 1981. However, this fraction had broad social/moral support and it was still able to mobilize masses. A big wave of strikes in 1988; Wałęsa's ability to suspend the strikes; his victory in the public debate with his rival Alfred Miodowicz, a leader of the regime trade union; all proved that Solidarity and its leadership were strong enough to affect the future course of action but it was too weak to introduce any systemic changes itself.

Some of the above remarks were triggered by the political and social image of Poland painted by Janusz Reykowski in the introductory paper. From my perspective, the image is too mild. It does not adequately reflect the dark sides of the regime and positive sides of the so called "first Solidarity".

Interdependence

The two sides of the negotiations, the Government and Solidarity, were interdependent in that gains and losses of each side depended not only on its own actions, but on actions taken by the other side. Interdependence situations are best defined by (1) the allocation of available outcomes and (2) the kind and amount of control that each side has over

the allocation of outcomes overall (e.g., Kelley, 1997; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Van Lange, Joireman, Parks, & Van Dijk, 2013).

Control can be considered as the ability to change the outcomes of negotiations in a desired direction. It can also be viewed as an end in itself. Control was the initial object of desire and the key issue of the RT negotiations. There were several important aspects of the desire for control on the part of the government. These included whether the government and the communist party was intent on maintaining all of the power or whether they were willing to pass some to Solidarity and new democratic institutions, that is, to move toward a partnership kind of control (Grzelak, 2001).

If the government was willing to share power, how much power would be relinquished? This was the main issue discussed in the Table groups and sub-groups. It was also, of course, the main source of conflict.

The situation appeared to be, but it was not really, a zero-sum game in which one side gains as much power as the other side loses. The talks made sense only on the assumption that some, maybe a small amount of, participation of Solidarity in state management was possible. The talks started from the position of returning Solidarity to the status of a legitimate trade union. It was not a zero-sum game since there were many intermediate solutions between 0 (delegitimization) and 1 (restoration of all attributes of legal organization).

However, the situation was perceived as so antagonistic that its subjective image was more likely to activate schemas of zero sum than cooperative schemas of mixed motive games. It activated the whole syndrome of an enemy rather than a partner on the other side of the table. This opposition affected the course of the first days of the talks. It inhibited discussions on possible concessions to the other side, and instigated distrust. The out-group was viewed as homogeneous. It took time to see differences, to see the heterogeneity of the other side (e.g., Judd, Parks, Yzerbyt, Gordijn, & Muller, 2005).

The process of reallocating power is also worth considering. Negotiations between individuals or groups were all about influencing others. The way in which this influence is exerted is essential. In tough, positional negotiations it is important to use all your power, including manipulations and dirty tricks, to force the other side to make as many and as large concessions as possible. This type of negotiation very rarely leads to a solution that is satisfying for both parties. Moreover, power orientation of one negotiation party induces the need for exercising power in the other party. This often leads to a breakdown in negotiations. On the other hand, showing a desire for collaboration and respect for other negotiation participants induces and activates the same attitude on the other side of the table. Instead of conflict, a problem solving set is likely to occur. This is why theorists and practitioners pay so much attention to the procedures eliciting respect and desire for collaboration (Bazerman & Neale, 1992; Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011; Grzelak, 2001). Table 1 shows the principles of a problem solving strategy as compared with positional bargaining (after Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011).

As said before, the situation in the Round Table Talks was not a zero-sum game, although in the beginning that appeared to be the case.

There were three important preconditions that made the Round Table Talks possible at all. These were 1) the motivation to talk; 2) the existence of trust, conditional in nature, but trust; and finally, 3) small and ill-defined but existing space of outcomes acceptable to both sides.

Table 1

Two Most Contrasting Modes of Negotiations (after Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011)

Positional bargaining	Negotiating on the merits
Participants are adversaries.	Participants are problem solvers.
The goal is victory.	The goal is a wise outcome reached efficiently and amicably.
Demand concessions as a condition of the relationship.	Separate the people from the problem.
Be hard on the problem and the people.	Be soft on the people, hard on the problem.
Distrust others.	Proceed independent of trust.
Dig in to your position.	Focus on interests, not positions.
Make threats.	Explore interests.
Mislead as to your bottom line.	Avoid having a bottom line.
Demand one-sided gains as the price of agreement.	Invent options for mutual gain.
Search for the single answer, the one <i>you</i> will accept.	Develop multiple options to choose from; decide later.
Insist on your position.	Insist on using objective criteria.
Try to win a contest of will.	Try to reach a result based on standards independent of will.

The negotiations agenda included a very wide spectrum of possible outcomes. In fact, the closest game to the completely antagonistic zero sum was the game for power. It was possible to allow for different variants of solutions for the different areas of social and economic life. The most important problem, however, was who would decide on the choice and who would implement it (Grzelak, 2001).

Motivation

Motivation for problem solutions can begin with an understanding of the necessity of a solution. This is what occurred in 1988 when the decision to arrange the Talks was made. As said before, both sides were weak and they could not solve the crisis without the other side. Both sides were aware of their weakness. Any options other than the Talks were, in terms of expected outcomes, worse than the Talks. Both sides were simply doomed to talks since they had no better option, given that both wanted to avoid a state catastrophe. The main source of motivation was not then of a positive nature. It was the result of calculation, or of understanding the logic of the situation. It was not profitable for any of the parties not to talk even if hope for success was very, very remote. To state the situation in other, more technical words, neither party had a better BATNA - Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (Brett, Pinkley, & Jackofsky 1996; Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011; Thompson, Wang, & Gunia, 2010). It was a stage of minimal motivation. Both sides realized that they were yoked to each other and therefore the readiness to talk was not purely declarative. It was the best available option.²

In addition, taking part in the talks was for some participants a kind of moral obligation, a kind of categorical: even if the chances of success are slim, they should be used. One of the sources of motivation to undertake the talks was then fear of losing a unique opportunity. The talks appeared to be the best way to prevent state collapse.

Trust

The simplest and most common notion of trusting another party is the belief that the other party is not willing to harm our party even if there is a temptation to do so. It seems to be a notion dealt with by many trust theorists (e.g., Barber, 1983; Hardin, 1991; Orbell, Dawes, & Schwartz-Shea, 1994, Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994).

Solidarity did not have a good reputation in the eyes of the governmental side of the negotiations. It was perceived as aggressive and aimed at overthrowing the ruling party. Conversely, the governmental side similarly did not have a good reputation in the eyes of Solidarity, being viewed as interested only in maintaining power. The first steps to a free market in 1988-89 were seen as means rather than goals. The initial positions of the two sides of the talks did not imply trust. They could only imply some limited degree of partner predictability. This way of reducing social uncertainty is close to Russell Hardin's notion of encapsulated self-interest (Hardin, 1991) and Toshio and Midori Yamagishi's notion of assurance (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). The latter made a clear distinction between trust and assurance: "Trust is based on the inference of the

2) BATNA determines the point at which a negotiator is prepared to walk away from the negotiation table. In practice, it means that the negotiators should be willing to accept any set of terms superior to their BATNA and to reject outcomes that are worse than their BATNA (Spangler, 2003; Thompson et al., 2010).

interaction partner's personal traits and intentions, whereas assurance is based on the knowledge of the incentive structure surrounding the relationship. An example will help making the distinction intuitively clear. Suppose I have a special tie with the Mafia, and my trading partner knows this. I am certain that he will not cheat on me; he knows that if he does he will be quickly sent to a mortuary. My expectation of the partner's "honesty" is based on the fact that acting "honestly" is in his own interest, not on the belief that he is a benevolent person. Here, assurance exists but not trust."

A step below unpredictability indicates a level of distrust where there are reasons to believe that the other side has an intention to harm our party. Mutual understanding that the two sides were acting in a situation of minimal motivation gave them a sense of security that the other party was willing to reach an agreement.

Neither Government nor Solidarity initially believed in the good intentions of a dialogue partner, but it was also difficult to recognize that the attitudes and manner of proceeding fit the bad faith model of negotiating, i.e., that negotiations were started without a real intention to make concessions and an agreement (Wallihan, 2007).

The doubts and fears, as previously said, were justified by decades of experience with the communist regime. Initial distrust weakened week by week through learning about the intentions and goals of the other side and discovering the growing scope of the common interest. Distance, and perceived hostility gave way to more partner and problem solving attitudes. A zero-sum game-like view of the situation gradually turned to a complex non-zero-sum game (mixed motive game) view with some conceivable win-win solutions. Facial expressions of participants changed in the course of negotiations from raw, stiff, hostile and official to "human friendly". Dehumanization disappeared.

Each party was initially afraid that the other one would like to cheat and outwit the other party. Distrust was very well grounded in the past experience of the Poles. Therefore, trust could not rely solely on declarations. The talks were increasingly aimed at making institutional and procedural guarantees, which had to lead to substantial changes in the system.

Many politicians now and then believe (d) that these contacts have turned into excessive fraternization, which in turn created a danger of readiness to make some compliances that are too easy and too big. This was what the radical wing of the now-ruling party still blames Solidarity negotiators for: rather than insufficient hardness in the talks. I do not agree with these critics but, of course, there is no way to check the validity of this interpretation now.

For very many, both shortening the distance and perceiving interdependence situations in terms of mixed motive rather than antagonistic (constant sum) games was a precondition for initiating any constructive dialogue between the involved players. On the other hand, originally antagonistic perceptions of the Round Table facilitated unrealistic aspirations of a one-sided victory, inhibited the tendency to search for alternative conflict solutions, and instigated distrust, since the other party's interests were perceived

as contradicting own ones. The gradual change in the vision of the negotiations was the result of many of the factors of which shortening the distance was certainly important but not most important.

Table Architecture

One of the well-known, although not very often used, negotiation recommendations is: if the problem is very big and complex, divide it into parts. Poland in 1989 was a big and complex problem.

The partitioning problem of Poland, creating separate negotiation teams for each of the highlighted parts of the problem, giving the whole shape of the pyramid was, I believe, one of the primary strengths of the Round Table. It was probably believed that teams, or at least their management, would be getting together from time to time to agree on strategies. There were basically no such meetings, but the common, consistent line of tables, at least on the side of Solidarity, was preserved.

The scheme of the Round Table is depicted in Figure 1. At the top of the multi-level structure was a team called Magdalena, after the name of the village where they were held.

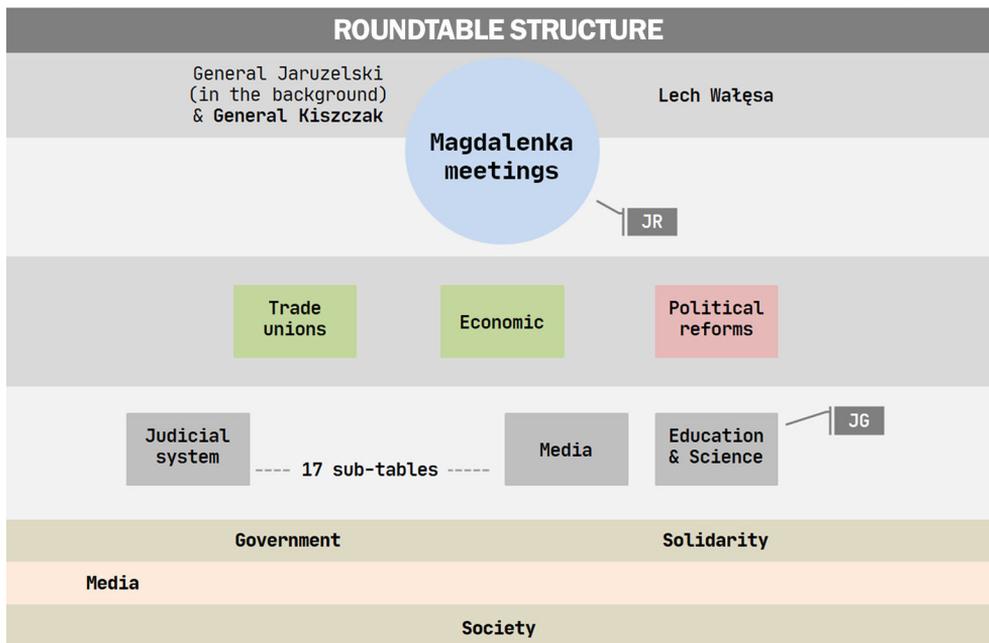


Figure 1. The structure of the Round Table Talks. JR = J. Reykowski; JG = J. Grzelak.

Magdalena fulfilled several important roles. First of all, surprisingly, it was an efficient think tank. 40 people were delegated to the team by two sides and, importantly, two representatives of the Hierarchy of the Catholic Church. It was there that Solidarity leaders and government leaders, after consultations with their leadership, made preliminary analyses and agreed on the next steps of negotiations. There were no final decisions made there; they were subjected to a preliminary fire test.

Magdalena was supposed to be the penultimate appeal in disputes that could not be resolved in teams (the last were, of course, leaders), and was a source of inspiration for further solutions. It was the first forum where these solutions, after consultation with the leaders, were discussed. In Magdalena, the main rules and the negotiation code were also agreed upon: take turns in leading table/sub-table discussions, do not interrupt when someone speaks, listen carefully, react to the opponent's words rationally, not emotionally, show respect for the interlocutor, take care of the equal division of time between participants of different parties, and avoid evoking emotionally bad memories, especially for the other side.

As said before, the logic of goals created minimal motivation. It also reinforced trust. I trust someone who aims to solve problems as much as me, and our side, does. Still another source of limited trust emerged from long-lasting interpersonal contacts. Some of the RT participants knew each other from the past as ideological opponents that could at least on some issues agree, and they were not necessarily in relation: oppressor – victim.

Day by day, spending time together, not only on battles but also on lengthy discussions and joint meals, brought about a lot of mutual understanding, discovery and appreciation of common goals. Finally, the multilevel, pyramid construction of the Table had a tremendous influence on the feeling of security of the participants. Any mistake made at the lower level of the pyramid could be easily corrected without any fear of losing face.

Size of the Pie

The very initial level of aspiration was, as we know, not high: the re-legalization of Solidarity. The original expectations increased gradually but quickly (more freedom of speech, access to mass media, more elements of a free market economy, political independence of education, finally a partly free election, and many others...). In the course of negotiations, step by step, the pie had been enlarged by a growing body of in-table settlements (with a temporary crisis here and there, like in the table for youth problems). It once again showed the wisdom of a partial as compared to global structure of the table, although the Talks seemed to lead rather consequently to a mutually satisfying package of Pareto optimal outcomes³ being in equilibrium.⁴

The results of the Round Table Talks are commonly known. Finally, near the end of negotiations, a new state of social awareness seemed to become more salient: we did not have to be opponents at all, maybe a win-win solution was conceivable. And it was reached after a deep crisis near the end of the talks. The subject of living controversy was then establishing the highest state institutions. Expanding the area of consideration with additional elements had increased the pie and had become acceptable to both parties. It was reactivation of the state power triad: Sejm as the Lower Chamber, Senate as the Higher Chamber and the President. In the first election, 1989, Sejm was to be elected in a partly free election, Senate in a free election. Hidden, not officially saved, but the default part of the deal was that Wojciech Jaruzelski would become the president of Poland.

Two months of talks seemed to change political elites. The relatively short negotiation time and the scope of the results were surprising. The most amazing, however, was the mental change in the view of Poland's problems and the approach to solving them. The narrow perspective of party interests was often replaced by concern for the common good, for the good of the state, and immediate problems gave way to reflection on future generations. This is what happened in our, that is, Table participants', brains. Unfortunately, such attitudes were alive among the elites only at the beginning of the transformation of the thirty-year perspective. For most of the past 30 years, the value of the commons seems to be in dramatic decline especially among political elites and high rank party activists.

Communication

During the talks Solidarity was very concerned with disseminating information on what was going on at the Table. Almost every day press conferences and articles in the underground press hypothetically allowed everyone to follow the negotiations.

In the Communist time, mass media were monopolized and fully controlled by state agencies. Poles looked then for independent sources of information. I remember from my childhood that when our radio was broken, with the consent of the neighbor, we put a cup and ear to his wall and listened to his radio. The neighbor was a member of the Communist party and a mid-level manager in a state factory. He listened to the stations of Radio Free Europe and Voice of America at appropriate times. We could talk about being in two different camps. It was almost an everyday experience for millions of Poles, even though the broadcast was jammed, and listening could be punished. In the

3) Pareto optimal solution means that there is no other solution in which one party is better off and no other party is worse off. It means a state where negotiation outcomes cannot be changed to make one party better off without making at least one other party worse off. Pareto optimality implies that outcomes are allocated in the most efficient manner, but does not imply equality or fairness.

4) According to game theory, a prototype of the interdependence theory, the optimal outcome of a game is one where no player has an incentive to deviate from his chosen strategy assuming other players remain constant in their strategies.

majority of conversations held at that time, I could assume that I and my interlocutor could have the same knowledge about the world, knowledge based on both the state-run media and independent sources. Paradoxically, today, when we have free access to free media ourselves, those who are politically involved voluntarily reach for only the media associated with the political camp closest to us in ideology. Camps speak different languages, have different images of the world, and hardly understand each other.

Some origins of the present state may go back to the year 1989. As said at the beginning of the chapter, a large group of Solidarity participants of the Talks were people who spent years before 1989 on socio-political analyses and group debates on the totalitarian system, on its social, economic and psychological consequences, on possible ways to transform so called socialism to democracy and a free market economy. The Round Table accelerated maturing to real systemic changes. It was a short and extremely intense lesson. For whom? Basically for the Talks' participants, not for majority of society. We, as talk participants were very limited, with rationed access to the mass media. It was quite naive thinking that press conferences, interviews, and leaflets could have prepared people for sudden, complex and very psychologically and economically costly systemic changes, that it all would compensate for state run propaganda. The size of the victory in the 1989 election reinforced an illusion that almost all of society supported the RT agreement. Yes, it was an illusion. There was a minority but not a small minority that did not support the RT settlement even if they in part voted for Solidarity candidates: those for whom changes introduced by the Round Table were too small, below their expectations, those politically indifferent, those emotionally involved but not realizing the real consequences of future transformation, the anarchists, and finally those who were defenders of the old systemic order as well as its beneficiaries.

Add to that large groups of unemployed workers of liquidated and / or bankrupted state-run enterprises and farms (PGR). It was an economic necessity, but it should have been accompanied by state economic protections and a social psychological campaign much stronger than took place in the '90s.

In this situation, it is not surprising that a part of the public was and is disappointed with the transformation, and that it finds some sources of that disappointment in the Round Table.

Is the Round Table a model to be followed in other, seemingly intractable, societal conflicts, like the one we are facing now? It does not seem realistic in the present state of events in Poland. The state is ruled by one of a few, not only of two political forces. Who would talk with whom? The political environment today is quite different than it was at the time of the Round Table Talks. Would it be a battle of emotions or a dialog? If a dialog, what would be the language adopted by negotiation parties? There is no common, external enemy such as the Soviet Union outside or its supporters inside. There is also no common misfortune, which at the time of the 1989 Talks was a great economic crisis.

Despite the poverty zone, millions of people enjoy the growth and social policy of the government.

The Government is performing a four-year concert of social benefits. Are they big enough to counterbalance losses in the juridical system, health services, long-term losses in education, in environmental protection, in damages to the reputation of Poland...?

The Round Table experience may not be applicable in Poland now, at the very moment of our contemporary history, but in general seems to be a very good lesson of how to turn seemingly intractable conflicts into tractable ones. It seems worthwhile for favorable conditions: motivating all potential sides to negotiate, to have at least a rough image of a common good, to have at least some level of trust or assurance, to be ready to respect the opponent, to partition complex problems, to focus on the problem, not on the image of own party prestige and victory; finally, to have favorable external forces in order to undertake and successfully carry out the talks. Happily, we did.

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