

Second Track / Citizens' Diplomacy

*Concepts and Techniques for  
Conflict Transformation*

EDITED BY

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## Mapping Cultures: Strategies for Effective Intercultural Conflict Resolution

Christopher Moore and Peter Woodrow

“We are hopelessly lost!” exclaims the weary traveler. “I don’t recognize any landmarks, and without a map we’ll never find our route, or a place to stay for the night!” Lacking familiar landmarks, a map, or a friendly person to help them locate themselves and identify possible routes to their destination, travelers often feel lost and overwhelmed in unknown territory.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, people interacting with people from other cultures often feel lost. Lacking familiar attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, procedures or structures that shape day-to-day interactions, people in cross-cultural situations often get disoriented, make mistakes and spend time and energy merely surviving rather than understanding and appreciating the differences they encounter. They also often fail to resolve serious conflicts due to cultural misunderstandings.

Intercultural negotiators and conflict resolution professionals need general principles to guide their negotiation or mediation strategies and a cultural map that helps them to:

- Identify the general “topography” of cultures: the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, procedures and social structures that shape human interactions;
- Identify potential hazards, obstacles and pleasant surprises that intercultural travelers might miss if they did not have a trusty guide;
- Select responses that will promote successful interactions and outcomes.

Unfortunately, few analytical frameworks identify, interpret and respond to cultural differences. Few maps describe how different cultures solve problems, negotiate agreements or resolve disputes. This chapter will help address this gap.

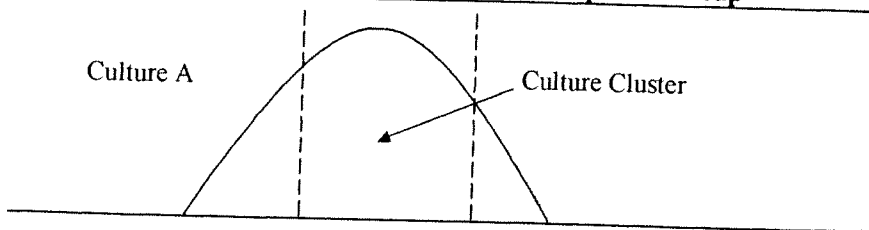
## Defining Culture

Culture is the cumulative result of experience, values, religion, beliefs, attitudes, meanings, knowledge, social organizations, procedures, timing, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe and material objects acquired or created by groups of people, in the course of generations, through individual and group effort and interactions. Culture manifests itself in patterns of language, behavior and activities and provides models and norms for acceptable day-to-day interactions and styles of communication. Culture enables people to live together in a society within a given geographic environment, at a given state of technical development and at a particular moment in time (adapted from Samovar and Porter, 1972).

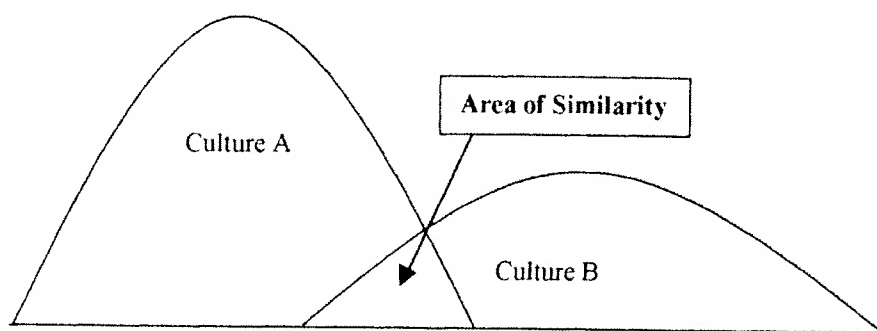
When we think of culture, we often think of the national cultures reported in the international media. However, culture is much broader and encompasses the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of diverse ethnic groups, clans, tribes, regional subcultures or even neighborhoods. Culture differentiates people by religious or ideological persuasions, professions and educational backgrounds. Families also have cultures, as do the two largest cultural groups in the world, men and women. Companies, organizations and educational institutions also demonstrate unique cultures. With all of these cultural variables and significant variations within cultures, how can we develop any common understanding, general hypotheses or conclusions about how a particular person or group from any one culture might behave in conflicts or negotiations?

Specific cultures do contain clusters of people with fairly common attitudinal and behavioral patterns. As indicated in figure 7.1 below, these clusters occupy the middle portion of a bell-shaped curve (Trompenaars, 1994).

**Figure 7.1 Distribution of Cultural Patterns in a Specific Group**



However, every culture includes outliers, people who vary significantly from the norm. While still contained within the range for their culture, their views and behaviors differ significantly from those of their peers and may even look similar to those of other cultures. For instance, a businessman or engineer from a developing country who was educated in England may have more in common with his or her peers in Europe than with his countrymen (see figure 7.2).

**Figure 7.2 Similarities and Differences among Members of Cultures**

For this reason, we must be wary of generalizations about how people from a specific culture may think or act. Rigid notions about a group's cultural patterns can result in inaccurate stereotypes, gross injustices to the group and possibly disastrous assumptions or actions. Common cultural patterns found in a group's central cultural cluster should be looked upon as clues to the ways a cultural group may think or respond. But the hypothesis should always be tested and modified after direct interaction with the group. We may well encounter an outlier who seems more similar to us than we ever expected.

With these cautions in mind, we consider two intercultural situations and present guidelines for developing effective intercultural strategies.

The journal entry and e-mail message in boxes 7.1 and 7.2 illustrate some of the difficulties of cross-cultural work. The journal writer encounters a group that expends considerable effort in getting to know its potential business partner, devoting time to meals, tours and informal opportunities to talk. He worries that concrete negotiations may never get started. The writer of the e-mail message has a similar dilemma, but in his case, formal ceremonial events, a confusing decision-making process and unclear power dynamics have him stymied. We will address these issues further below.

#### **Box 7.1 A Traveler's Journal**

*April 27, 1999*

*I finally have a few minutes to catch my breath and jot down some events of the last week. These days have been hectic, starting with two days of trying to get everything done before leaving, a very long plane ride and jet lag. We had no sooner arrived than we were whisked off to a big party arranged by our counterparts. I've never been so tired in my life!*

*The next day we started what I thought were to be negotiations, but it was only the first of a number of welcoming meetings attended by anywhere from ten to twenty people. I didn't know so many people were interested in this deal, although I am not at all sure how everyone fits in. We finally had a meeting where we each made an opening statement. Theirs was quite long and with lots of flowery words about creating a special friendship that would help overcome the past decades of*

**Box 7.1—Continued**

*tension between our two countries. I tried to move the conversation toward business at hand and made a statement that was short and to the point.*

*It felt like we were just getting started when they told us that they had arranged a tour of the city and the facility. After the tour, we had a late ceremonial lunch and lots of informal talks, only some of which related indirectly to the deal. After a break in the afternoon for us to go back to the hotel to refresh ourselves, we held another brief meeting that gradually moved toward the substance of our negotiations but stayed very general. Then another large meal! I was beginning to wonder if/when negotiations were ever going to start.*

*The next three days were crazy. They asked us for a proposal, which we readily presented, and then began both to take it apart and to ask myriad questions. They didn't reject our ideas, only asked questions and remained stoically distant. It was not clear to me what they were up to.*

*Well, it is 11:30 P.M., and I'm off to bed. Hope to get more sleep than in the last few nights. I am finally adjusting to the time zone and tomorrow is the weekend. Maybe I'll get some time to myself and not have to be the good guest all the time!*

**Box 7.2 An E-mail Home**

To: gangatoffice@develop.org  
Subject: Progress on Water Development Talks

*This is an update on how the talks are proceeding. In my last message I told you we had to meet the local leader to proceed. Well, that meeting happened, and it was quite an event! We were met by a whole group of notables and what must have been his bodyguards all decked out in uniforms. We proceeded to a small but sumptuous audience hall and were served refreshments and carried on small talk. One of our colleagues raised the issue of the project, but the leader said that we should discuss it later with some of his colleagues. We took the hint and returned to small talk.*

*Upon adjourning we were shown into another large room and seated at a table at the front. About 25 men and three women filed in behind us and took their seats in a fairly large circle. A number of subordinates also stood around the outside of the circle, constantly coming in and out delivering messages to their bosses. Occasionally, a cell phone would ring, and the recipient of the call would rush to the back of the room. We were asked to make our presentation, while everyone listened politely. Then they began a long and elaborate discussion that didn't seem to have much focus on either us or on the project proposal.*

*For long periods they seemed to be arguing among themselves. They occasionally asked us questions, but the discussion focused on several men who made fairly long vociferous speeches.*

*They seemed to circle the question without ever explicitly supporting or rejecting it. I guess they got all the views out and assessed the lay of the land without committing themselves. When it seemed appropriate, we added our comments and tried to answer the questions. Finally, one of the older men said he liked our ideas, made a general counter-proposal and suggested that talks continue next week. I guess this will take longer than I figured! Please change my return air reservations to late next week. That's all for now.*

## **Preparing for Intercultural Conflict Resolution**

The next section will be divided into what can be done to prepare before dialogue or negotiation begins, and strategies that can be used during actual problem-solving activities to accommodate different cultural patterns.

### **Understand How Culture Can Make a Difference, and Pay Attention to It**

People just starting to work across cultures, and even some with extensive experience, often make one of two significant mistakes. First, they assume that all of us are basically the same, that underneath our multipigmented skin, exotic clothing and diverse languages and practices, we all have identical wants and desires and similar approaches to negotiations and conflict resolution. Those who assert the basic similarity of cultures assume that “if we can just communicate,” all problems will evaporate.

While this view is less common than it used to be, it is still frequently found in people with little experience working in diverse cultures. It is also prevalent among those who, when abroad, spend most of their time in international enclaves or tourist havens, and among members of dominant cultures who have never had to accommodate or adapt to the cultures of other groups.

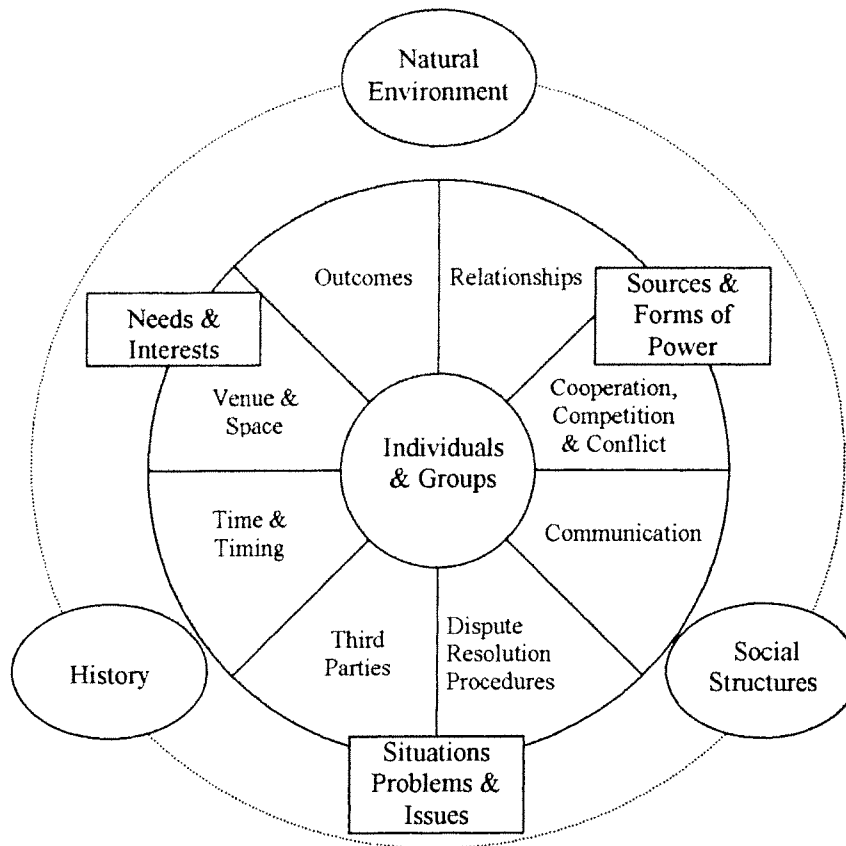
The second common mistake, currently in vogue, is to romanticize culture and diversity and to treat other cultures as exotic, sacred and deserving of protection from “cultural imperialism.” Followers of this approach often overemphasize differences between cultures, try to “go native,” make extreme efforts to be “culturally correct” and try hard to avoid unpardonable errors.

Both views of culture hold some truth; there are many similarities between cultures, and cultures are unique and precious. However, each view represents an unhelpful extreme; the truth probably lies somewhere in between. Cultural differences are important factors in the success or failure of intercultural interactions, yet there are also many similarities among human beings. We must accept that culture plays an important part in interactions between groups, learn how to identify cultural similarities, build upon them and develop strategies that will help to bridge the important differences.

### **Develop an Awareness of How Cultural Differences Influence Problem Solving and Conflict Resolution**

A framework for analyzing the impact of cultural differences on negotiation and problem-solving dialogue can be useful for understanding both our own and other cultures. The Wheel of Culture map (figure 7.3) identifies cultural factors that shape the ways members of societies bargain for their interests and respond to disputes:

Figure 7.3 The Wheel of Culture Map



*The Hub: Individuals and Groups*

At the center of the wheel are individuals and groups who interact when problems are to be solved, negotiations conducted or disputes resolved. In general, cultures can be defined by how much emphasis their members put on the individual versus the group or collectivity (Hofstede, 1980) with cultures falling along an individualism/collectivism continuum of orientations.

Cultures oriented toward individuals generally value individual autonomy, initiative, creativity and authority in decision making. Those oriented toward collectivism generally value group cohesion, harmony and decision making that involves either consultation with group members before deciding, or consideration of the well-being of the group over that of the individual. Before entering a dialogue or negotiation it is helpful to know whether a culture is oriented toward individualism or collectivism, in comparison to your personal or organizational culture.

*The Outer Rim*

This section of the wheel identifies the broad external factors that influence the development of a specific group's cultural approach to negotiations and conflict resolution. These elements include:

- The natural environment;
- History, events, trends and adaptations that have occurred over time;
- Social structures, both intellectual and physical, that people create to adapt to or survive in their environment.

These three factors continuously interact and influence one another and the members of any given culture. In order to understand why people think and act the way they do, it is helpful to understand how the natural environment and history have shaped their values, views, behaviors and social structures.

*The Inner Rim*

The individuals or groups engaged in conflict resolution each demonstrate:

- Situations, issues or problems that must be addressed;
- Needs or interests they wish to have met;
- Sources of power and influence.

A culture significantly affects how its members define the social situations they face, the problems they encounter and the issues or topics that are or are not discussed. The situations that members of any given culture have to handle are often quite similar: raising or buying food; securing shelter; obtaining work to support oneself or a family; contracting marriages; purchasing other needed goods; and interacting with peers, subordinates and superiors. However, the meanings and importance which members of a culture place on these situations varies greatly. This causes problems when people from diverse cultures attach different meanings or importance to similar situations. An important element of preparation for any dialogue or negotiation is to develop a clear understanding of how the other party defines the situation and the issues to be discussed.

Needs and interests describe what individuals and groups require, expect or desire. They range from those critical for human survival, such as food, shelter, health and physical security, to identity needs such as meaning, community, intimacy and autonomy (Mayer, 2000). In the negotiating process, parties naturally advocate for their interests and needs. At times, the extent and manner of meeting relevant interests may be quite negotiable and flexible. At other times, when an individual or group feels that basic survival or fundamental identity is at risk, it may make rigid demands or intimidating statements.

While all cultures have similar minimum biological needs for survival, they differ significantly as to what they consider to be adequate satisfaction of these needs. All individuals have generally similar identity needs, but they differ

significantly regarding how these can be addressed. Therefore, another critical element of preparation is to develop a tentative understanding or preliminary theory about the needs and interests of the parties (or the other party), and to become clear about your own.

Power and influence have been defined as "the ability to act, to influence an outcome, to get something to happen (or not happen), or to overcome resistance" (Mayer, 2000). Culture influences the preferred forms and sources of power and influence, and how and when they are to be used. It often determines the options available when a party has more or less power than another. A slight to someone's spouse by an unknown person in some cultures may result in giving the commenter the "cold shoulder" or a quick verbal retort. Others may consider it an attack on the spouse's honor that can be righted only by a physical fight or, in extreme cases, the death of the offender. A follower of Gandhi who believes that his or her rights have been violated may respond with *satyagraha*, or nonviolent resistance, a far different reaction than that of Tamil Tiger guerilla fighters in Sri Lanka. Good cultural analysis seeks to identify what forms of power and influence are likely to be used by whom and in which situations.

### *The Spokes*

The spokes of the wheel represent specific culturally based patterns of belief and behavior that influence the interactions between individuals and groups. These factors are strongly influenced by the natural environment, social structures and the history of a cultural group, as well as by the specific situations or problems to be addressed. The spokes include cultural beliefs, attitudes and behaviors concerning:

- *Establishing, building and maintaining relationships:* How are relationships established, with whom, and involving what activities? What factors help build or change relationships?
- *Orientation toward cooperation, competition and conflict:* What are the common patterns of conflict behavior? Is overt conflict acceptable?
- *Appropriate and effective communications:* Should communication be direct or indirect; explicit or implicit; expressed emotionally or nonemotionally; and should it involve only one-at-a-time talk or overlapping talk? What reliance is placed on nonverbal communication?
- *Problem-solving or negotiation processes:* What are the roles of relationships and trust? Is positional bargaining or an interest-based negotiating style assumed? How are the stages of problem solving or negotiation handled?
- *Preferred outcomes to problems or conflicts:* What is the orientation toward "winning" or success? What preferences are there concerning the substantive, procedural or psychological components of outcomes? What other culturally acceptable or sanctioned norms exist about outcomes?
- *Roles and functions of third parties (go-between, facilitator, mediator):* What relationship to the parties is preferred, and what procedures are

normally used? Should the third party be partial or impartial; involved in the substance or just process?

- *Management of time and timing:* What are the expectations concerning duration, timing of activities, and timing allowed for agreements?
- *Use and setup of venue and space:* Should it be a public or private space; indoors or outdoors; formal or informal? How should the space be set up?

The Wheel of Culture is an analytical tool that can be used as a guide. It enables the effective negotiator or mediator to analyze cultural responses that are considered appropriate in his or her own culture in each of the above areas and to begin to identify cultural norms held by the parties or by the counterpart (potential partner, buyer/seller, authority, opponent or ally).

### Educate Yourself about the New Culture

Once you have a general understanding of potential cultural similarities or differences in the context of dialogue or negotiations, it is often helpful to do more detailed research and exploration regarding the other culture. Some things that can be done to prepare for direct interactions include:

- Read a variety of books, magazines, news articles or Internet sources about the culture you plan to engage. Read authors from both the other culture and your own. Compare and contrast the views of different authors. If possible, include novels, which often reveal the most about cultural differences.
- See movies or rent videos about and from the other culture. Visual media can help you anticipate and prepare to operate in diverse settings and situations, acclimate you to hearing another language and present issues, themes and common cultural responses. However, "Hollywood" treatments do not necessarily present real life; documentaries and movies made in other cultures may come closer.
- Find and talk with members of the other culture. One of the best preparations for working with members of another culture is to meet someone from their context prior to conducting negotiations or initiating conflict-resolution efforts. Foreign students or faculty at universities are often very willing to talk, and they often welcome the opportunity to converse with others from another culture. They can be invaluable sources of information and orientation, since they have usually encountered both your culture and their own. Also, look for local cultural events sponsored or attended by the cultural group of interest. Go, observe, meet people and get to know some of their cultural behaviors in social settings.
- Talk with members of your own culture who have lived or worked in the other culture. Focus especially on people who have had experiences with the other culture that are similar to those you expect in the future.

### **Develop a Conflict-Resolution Plan Appropriate to the Situation**

Based on what you have learned in the earlier steps, develop a preliminary plan concerning how you might initiate dialogue or negotiations, and then respond as the situation evolves. Consider how to:

- Establish contacts and build relationships that will be compatible with the other culture and your own;
- Develop appropriate forums and formats for interactions;
- Comply with their negotiation or dispute-resolution protocols in a way that is comfortable for all parties;
- Start discussions or negotiations on substantive issues;
- Conduct information exchanges and mutual education;
- Decide how you might respond to their more positional approaches or demands;
- Develop strategies for encouraging more interest-based approaches;
- Manage timing for the dialogue or negotiations as a whole, including relationship building, substantive discussions and timing of offers;
- Consider the Wheel of Culture spokes related to problems you might encounter and develop possible strategies for addressing them.

### **Flexible Responses**

Following the above steps of preparation, you will need a flexible approach to your interactions with the other party in the midst of negotiations or conflict-resolution efforts:

### **Recognize When Something Different Appears to Be Happening**

Once dialogue or negotiations have begun, participants need to “put up their antennae” to observe possible cultural differences that may emerge. The categories of the Wheel of Culture map should make it easier to identify such differences. Some questions to ask yourself include:

- What is similar or different about the setting of the meetings or negotiations than would be found in your culture?
- How are the situation, problems or issues that are being addressed similar to or different from those that might be common in your own culture?
- What behavioral similarities or differences do you see?
- Based upon what they say, do you have any clues about what their beliefs, attitudes or expectations are about the relationship or process being used?
- Are you interacting with an individual or a group? If the latter, is their behavior concerning who talks, what they talk about, how they express

themselves or how they interact with one another different than what might be expected in your culture?

### Analyze and Interpret What is Happening and Develop an Appropriate Response

Once you perceive that cultural differences are influencing the course of dialogue or negotiations, figure out why the interlocutors might be thinking or acting in a particular manner. Apply insights gained from pre-entry study, research and interactions, and:

- Clarify what is happening;
- Develop a hypothesis about why it is happening and what the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors being expressed may mean to those exhibiting them;
- Decide how to respond and develop two or more strategies to try.

We have identified five basic strategies for conducting cross-cultural negotiations or problem-solving dialogues. The five strategies are based on the variables regarding the first party's willingness or ability to adapt to its counterpart's culture and the counterpart's willingness or ability to do the same. The resulting choices are: *adhering*; *avoiding-contending*; *adapting*; *adopting*; and *advancing*. We will discuss each of these in more detail.

Figure 7.4 illustrates how these choices arise out of interactions between the two parties' approaches. If the first party has a low willingness or ability to adapt to its counterpart's culture, two possibilities result. If the other party is more flexible, the first party can stick to its own way of doing things, the *adhering* strategy. If, on the other hand, the other party is also unable or reluctant to change its approach and the first party wants to persist in its cultural approach, the two parties will engage in an *avoiding-contending* mode. This pattern of interaction is marked either by competition regarding whose way of doing things will prevail (contending), or by the parties' avoiding interaction, with the potential for miscues and misinterpretations.

**Figure 7.4 Strategic Choices in Cross-Cultural Interactions**

Other Party's Ability/Willingness to Adapt to First Party's Culture	High	Adhering	Advancing
		Adapting	
Low	Avoiding- Contending	Adopting	
	Low	High	First Party's Ability/ Willingness to Adapt to Other Party's Culture

In a situation where both parties are somewhat knowledgeable about each other's cultures and are fairly compliant toward each other, they may arrive at a strategy of *adapting*. Each compromises a bit, probably adhering in some areas and adopting the counterpart's ways in other matters, resulting in a mixed set of procedures.

If the first party is willing to adapt to the other culture and knows something about it, a different set of choices presents itself. If the other party demonstrates unwillingness or inability to move toward the first party's way of doing things, while the first party is more flexible, the first party will end up *adopting* the cultural norms of the other. This is the *adhering* strategy with the roles reversed.

An intriguing fifth option is also available. If both parties know each other's cultural norms pretty well and both exhibit real willingness to adapt to another way of doing things, they can move into the *advancing* mode. In this mode the parties invent a third way that is based wholly neither in one culture nor the other. This shares some attributes with the *adapting* model but goes beyond a series of compromises to advance shared norms for interaction that are completely comfortable for both parties.

### Select and Implement a Strategy

Once you have decided on a strategy, try it out. Observe the responses of the other party. See if your strategy is effective. If not, try another strategy or go back to your analysis and see if another interpretation of the situation or difficulty might be more accurate. If so, develop new strategies and try them. Remember to:

- Use a trial-and-error process to develop strategies or responses that help achieve your desired ends;
- Be flexible and consider using multiple possible responses;
- Remain open to doing it their way if it will achieve the results you want and it does not go beyond your comfort level.

Working across cultures can be frustrating and fascinating. We hope the thoughts presented here regarding preparation and flexible response prove helpful and that the road map offered may guide your way to successful cross-cultural interactions.

### Note

1. This chapter is adapted from a paper by the authors in the South African journal *Track Two* 8, no. 1 (July 1999), a publication of the Centre for Conflict Resolution.