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Session7: International Frame - Norway as facilitator - Regional factors - Concept of Co-chairs - Politics of Sanctions and Incentives

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Internationalization of the Peace Process

1.   Background

This paper draws upon research conducted during 2005 and published as a Strategic Conflict Assessment for a group of bi-lateral and multilateral donors. The aim of the study was threefold: (1) to provide an analysis of the structures and dynamics of conflict and peace in Sri Lanka (2) to examine who international engagement has interacted with conflict and peace dynamics (3) to identify how strategies and approaches can best engage with and help strengthen domestic peacebuilding efforts.

The intention here is not to rehearse the principal findings of the report as a whole, but to explore the third objective in the light of current events in Sri Lanka. It has been prepared with the aim of prompting discussion rather than providing polished arguments or policy recommendations.

It is argued in the SCA that international actors have neither the legitimacy nor the capacity to engineer peace in Sri Lanka – and external actors should not have too inflated a view about their role. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan conflict is not, and has never been an 'introverted' civil war and the international and regional dimensions have always been crucial. Arguably this has become even more the case as a result of global trends and changes in the international policy environment. Therefore building peace is not only about domestic actors 'doing the right thing' – getting the external politics right is an important part of the equation.

2.   Looking Backwards: Some Findings from the SCA

One of the most salient changes in the political landscape in Sri Lanka has been the 'internationalization' of peacebuilding. Although the policies and practices of different international actors varied significantly, two broad trends can be identified. Firstly, there has been a more robust and multi-faceted international response to conflict and peace dynamics than has historically been the case. This has included security guarantees, ceasefire monitoring, facilitation of peace negotiations (Tracks One and Two) and humanitarian/development aid provision (Track Three).

Secondly there have been changes in the division of roles between various policy instruments and actors. Reflecting contemporary trends in 'liberal peacebuilding', there has been a blurring of the traditional distinction between the conflict resolution and the economic aspects of peacebuilding.

A range of demand and supply side factors led to the stepping up of international involvement. On the supply side concerns about 'international terrorism', growing support for 'liberal peacebuilding' world wide and the perception that Sri Lanka represented an 'easy

win' were important factors. There was also a strong local demand for internationalization, both the LTTE and the GOSL having different reasons for welcoming a more robust international involvement. International support also helped create the preconditions for the peace talks. This included the security guarantees provided by the US and India to the GOSL, the Norwegian offer of facilitation and international donors' pledges to underwrite the peace process financially.

Some of the key points from the SCA on the different elements of international involvement are as follows:

A.   SLMM

Although it is unprecedented for the ceasefire to outlast peace talks the growing shadow war in the east meant the credibility of the CFA and its monitors became increasingly tenuous. Some of the main questions revolved around the leadership (whether it was appropriate for Norway to have the lead role) the mandate and the operational capacities of the SLMM.

B.   Support for peace talks

Three sets of issues can be highlighted in relation to the track one talks and the role of Norway and the co-chair system

Firstly, there has been criticism that talks were based upon a bi-polar model of the conflict. This and the lack of a clear road map generated anxieties and spoiling tactics from those who felt threatened by or excluded from the process.

Secondly, there was a constant tension between the imperatives of conflict management and human rights concerns. Some felt that neither side was pushed hard enough on questions of transformation – on state reform in the south and democratization in the north east.

Thirdly, a phased approach was adopted in which 'normalization' was to precede political negotiations on the core issues. However it proved impossible to circumvent these core issues as discussions on the ISGA and P-TOMS highlighted.

In parallel with the track one negotiations track two initiatives were supported by international donors and NGOs. Track two negotiations were important in terms of the initiation of peace talks and the sustenance of the peace process when the talks broke down. In many respects Track two became the backbone of the peace process in the absence of any substantive talks at a higher level.

An interesting aspect of international involvement in Sri Lanka has been the emergence, more by default than by design of a *strategic complementarity* between different international actors. For instance the US and India on the one side and the European donors on the other tended to play a 'good cop', 'bad cop' role bringing different sets of (dis)incentives to the table. Each had different approaches, different sets of alliances within Sri Lankan society and consequently different points of leverage. Also domestic actors seek the involvement of particular international actors in order to pursue their own political projects.

C.   International donor assistance

International donors provided support for the whole infrastructure of the peace process. The main aspects of this were: creating a peace dividend through reconstruction efforts in the North East, calibrating funding according to the dynamics of the peace process – in other words applying peace conditionalities – and providing support for track one, two and three activities.

The Tokyo declaration was perhaps the clearest example of the application of peace conditionalities. Its subsequent failure can be interpreted in two ways; either as a failure of aid conditionalities *per se*, or alternatively as a failure to implement conditionalities in practice. In the absence of a counter factual the question is open to debate. And the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

It can be argued that the Tokyo declaration was nothing more than rhetorical posturing – immediately after the event, donors began to undermine their own declared positions. Without any benchmarks or a compliance regime, this was little more than symbolic peacebuilding. Furthermore, the impacts of the peace dividend in the pre-Tokyo period were attenuated because the reconstruction agenda got caught up in the politics of the peace process.

According to this line of reasoning the economization of peacebuilding might have worked if aid donors had more vigorously pursued their policy of using aid (dis)incentives to support the peace process. The alternative interpretation is that peace conditionalities were based upon an inflated view of the leverage of economic incentives. In terms of international experience, it is unusual for there to be a donor pledging conference in the absence of a peace settlement and to some extent this was a case of putting the development cart before the political horse.

Tokyo raised the economic stakes without providing a political or institutional mechanism for deciding how the stakes should be divided. Much of the pressure to apply peace conditionalities came from the diplomats rather than the aid donors – when arguably the former should have been using their political leverage more robustly. In many respects donors were too bullish and the diplomats too timid. Following the tsunami and the massive international response, the idea of peace conditionalities became virtually redundant because of the massive inflows of unconditional aid.

Furthemore, although aid donors did calibrate their aid in order to support the peace process, the bulk of their aid programmes, namely development assistance to the south remained broadly unchanged. One of the unusual features of aid policy in Sri Lanka is its bifurcation between (increasingly) conflict sensitive programming in the north east and conflict blind development programmes in the south. Donors have treated peace conditionalities as an add on, rather than ensuring that *all* of their activities are sensitive to conflict and peace dynamics. Arguably one of the critical factors which undermined the UNF-led peace process was the major reform programme encouraged by the IMF and several other donors. Ultimately it put too much strain on the southern polity to simultaneously negotiate two major structural changes, leading to a nationalist backlash.

Different conclusions may be drawn about degree and type of international involvement in the peace process:

international actors basically did everything they could have done and the 'blame' lies with domestic actors. The implication of this analysis is to continue broadly following the same strategy as before.

the peace process was over-intenationalized, which led to an 'allergic reaction' amongst various domestic political actors. This would suggest a more low key and demand-led approach.

International actors were not forceful enough – they did not follow through on their conditionalities, they did not push a transformational agenda hard enough and could have been more proactive in building alliances with pro-peace actors.

The problems were related to a combination of the degree, type and balance of international involvement. This would call for a more nuanced approach which thinks carefully about the level of westernization versus regionalization, the timing, balance and sequencing of activities and the complementarity between different instruments.

There is clearly a need to think carefully about what kind of internationalization is desirable and possible i.e. internationalization by who and for what purposes? In my view the key is to think more carefully about questions of balance, prioritization, timing and sequencing. However, whilst it is necessary to get the 'external politics right', the Sri Lankan experience is illustrative of the primacy of domestic politics. International actors cannot micro manage complex socio-political changes, even though there is a tendency for both international and domestic actors to inflate the role of external actors; the former because it justifies their existence and the later because it can be a way of avoiding responsibility.

4.   Looking forwards: What should be the international role now?

A number of the bilateral actors have been talking about 'principled exit'. Some appear to be reverting to type in terms of going back to working 'around' conflict as they did in the 1990s. There is a danger that western attention will move on, and maintaining a level of international support and interest appears to be critical. This suggests there is an important lobbying role to be done in western capitals as well as in Colombo.

It is also important that we disaggregate international actors – there is no such thing as an international 'community' and we need to examine the agendas, incentives and capacities of different international players involved with Sri Lanka. Peacebuilding is a collective action problem for international actors as well as domestic actors – problems related to political will and capacities are rooted in the international system as well as the domestic system of governance.

Some of the critical challenges and questions, based on the above analysis are outlined below, firstly for international actors as a whole and secondly for international aid donors.

4.1   International Engagement

The following are some of the critical questions that need to be considered:

How have the demand and supply factors changed in relation to international intervention? What is different about this phase of the peace process and what are the continuities?

What is the optimal degree of internationalization? How demand-led or proactive should international actors be?

What are the immediate priorities for now and what are they in the medium term?

What could enhance strategic complementarity by enhanced?

What are the key sources of leverage? – political/economic/symbolic

How can these various levers be better applied? – optimum timing, balance and sequencing?

What should be the overall strategy? – a phased, incrementalist approach or a big bang approach? More or less inclusive/exclusive?

Are there groups that international actors could engage with more proactively that they are doing at the present? E.g. diasporic communities, southern nationalists, vernacular press.

Two points can be emphasized: firstly the need to strengthen *strategic complementarity* between different international actors and different policy instruments. As already mentioned, this emerged more be default than be design but at certain times in the peace process it has been deployed quite effectively. There is a danger that the stronger EU line towards the LTTE will undercut this strategic complementarity. Secondly, there is also a need to think about *regionalization* as a counterpoint to a perceived over internationalization (and over westernization) of the peace process. This does not only relate to the role of India – though clearly this is a central part of the equation – but also to the potential for drawing more explicitly on regional models of governance, conflict resolution and economic development.

4.2 The Role of International Aid Donors

Key questions for development donors include:

How can international actors engage more effectively with the 'unlike-minded'? Both in the more overtly political arena and in the civil society arena?

Can more be done to create a peace dividend, particularly in terms of reconstruction activities in the north east?

How can humanitarian and protection issues be better addressed?

Can donors develop more conflict sensitive ways of working in the south as well as the north east? – particularly to areas like state reform, economic governance, poverty eradication etc. Should more robust peace conditionalities be applied?

Firstly, a clear lesson on peace conditionalities is that you cannot 'buy peace'. On the other hand as already mentioned peace conditionalities were only attempted in a half hearted way. Arguably Tokyo was about symbolic rather than substantive peacebuilding. There is perhaps a need to think about conditionalities in a different way. They are not necessarily about the application of unilateral ultimatums. They represent an opportunity for building alliances with actors who may have an interest in building peace. Therefore a more nuanced approach to thinking about (dis)incentives and the processes though which conditions are applied, why they are applied and who they target is required. By providing aid unconditionality donors do not render themselves politically neutral; unconditional aid or aid with the wrong kinds of conditions has historically had conflict fuelling impacts in Sri Lanka.

Moreover, conditionality frameworks have the potential to turn the tables on donors and hold them to account for the actions or inactions. Are international actors prepared to make peace their overriding priority? This would mean sacrificing or de-prioritizing certain objectives.

Secondly, the peace dividend has been extremely attenuated and there is a need to explore creative ways of further scaling up reconstruction programmes in the North East.

Thirdly, aid donors should build conflict sensitivity (or peace sensitivity) into all areas of work. Therefore there is a need to re-think approaches in the south of the country towards governance, economic reform and poverty eradication so they more explicitly address the structural sources of conflict.