Talking with the bad guys

Reuters / Mario Anzuoni

'Talking to the enemy is not, in my view, appeasement.' These words were uttered by James Baker, secretary of state in the final year of George Bush senior's administration. It was a courageous statement, because it ran directly counter to the view held by George Bush junior and fellow Republican John McCain, all of whom felt that negotiating is tantamount to appeasement.

Baker was sticking out his neck, because his statement was also a response to the first North Korean nuclear test, seen by many as a brazen violation of international law. North Korea, which unabashedly withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003, had been developing a secret nuclear programme all along. The North's attack on the South's island of Yeonpyeong on 23 November is reiterating the importance of talking to your enemy.

Baker believes the international community should be talking to other countries too, such as Iran and Syria. He comes from the school where 'talking' to hostile regimes does not constitute appeasement. On the contrary, the real issue is whether or not there is a reasonable expectation that negotiations can achieve something.

In the case of North Korea, it concerns talking to another *state*, which means dealing with an equal partner. But in other instances, the question is whether talking to random, armed groups is possible at all, whether it should be condoned or is it even a must?

The most recent example is Afghanistan, where both supporters and opponents of the war are exploring the possibility of ending it more quickly by striking a bargain with the Taliban. Could a similar approach yield results with the Basque separatist group ETA, the Colombian revolutionary organization FARC or the Maoists in Nepal?

By all means, go for it, recommends Teresa Whitfield in a recently published study by the Swiss Henri Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue entitled *Engaging with Armed Groups: Dilemmas and Options for Mediators*. She concludes that the benefits ultimately outweigh the risks, arguing that '[e]ngagement with armed groups carries with it a variety of challenges and risks. Yet, when managed carefully and responsibly, its potential benefits far outweigh the costs of not engaging.

Democracies in particular find it difficult to deny that war pays off and that it is even the most effective trump card during negotiations. This is even more difficult to deny when 'softer' alternatives appear to work as well. This is why some governments are eager to draw encouragement from what already has been termed the 'Sri Lanka option', referring to the government's tough military response against the Tamil Tigers following failed negotiations.

The benefits prevail, however. The imperative to protect local populations from ongoing violence outweighs the moral objection of engaging in dialogue with the devil. Moreover, this objection carries less weight the more sizeable a constituency an armed group has. It is also a way for governments to save face, since talking implies the absence of military clout.

However you look at it, it is useful to open up a channel of communication with an armed group. This sometimes engenders greater understanding of the armed group and its motives for engagement. It also gives mediators an opportunity to build trust with the armed group. And the most compelling argument to sit down and negotiate is that it works. Statistics support this.

The *Human Security Brief 2007* observed that since the 1990s far more conflicts have ended or been stopped through negotiations than military decisions on the battlefield. It notes that '[f]or the first time there were greater numbers of negotiated settlements than there were victories. The numbers of negotiated settlements in the 1990s also increased in absolute terms ... This pattern appears to have continued into the new millennium ... From 2000 to 2005, there were more than three times as many negotiated settlements as victories'. Talking makes sense, even if it sometimes takes place on the sidelines of the battlefield. ■

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