

Book review

The nature of intractable conflict: Resolution in the twenty-first century

Christopher Mitchell* 2014

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The term 'intractable conflict' is widely perceived as an impossible dilemma: a situation with which there is no positive outcome, no solution. These are the conflicts alleged to stubbornly elude resolution despite the use of popular conflict management techniques available. Intractable conflict, a vast area of concern, has often been characterised by the prolonged violent actions of state actors or communities in response to harmful social or cultural hardships. Redress and/or revenge are motivating factors. These conflicts have survived because of deep-rooted and complex attitudes, behaviours and situations which seem to be impenetrable to methods of resolution. Or are they? Christopher Mitchell in his book

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The nature of intractable conflict: Resolution in the twenty-first century, sets out to unpack the nature and behaviour of intractable conflicts of the twenty-first century. The book provides a detailed and intriguing overview of how certain conflicts became intractable, of the reasons for their prolonged survival and possible steps towards their termination. Over all, Mitchell attempts to provide a roadmap, not to lasting peace and security, but towards building a practical understanding of the theoretical issues and applicable techniques.

The book takes us back to the timeless psychological debate concerning nature versus nurture. Chapter one gives reasons for the formation of man's violent aggressive nature which could result in warlike actions and responses. Using examples from primatology, Mitchell is able to suggest how environments impact on later human behaviour. Chapter two explains, using Johan Galtung's triangular model of conflict structure (a constant theme throughout the book), the importance of contending behaviours, issues and attitudes in any conflict. The chapter attempts to explain the nature of conflict formation by examining the basic structure of any conflict and the process which causes conflicts to emerge. Mitchell enlightens the reader about the vast spectrum of conflicts and the many different elements which can cause various kinds of conflict. To best understand the development of conflict, Mitchell clarifies this in chapter three, where he indicates the necessity for organising conflicts into various required categories. These, then, reveal the underlying dynamics and suggest possible solutions depending on the conflict situation. Mitchell identifies specific factors that can perpetuate conflict, such as: growing violence in the region, external support for violence, and continuous polarising confrontations. Using these factors, analysts need to develop strategies to better cope with continuing violent warfare.

Chapter five introduces the concept of conflict prevention. Here, Mitchell presents four preventive approaches to avert an increase of violent conflict. Where prevention strategy occurs at the initial stage of basic conflict formation, it becomes clear that prevention often only stops violence at the surface of the conflict leaving the deep rooted causes of the conflict to

remain present, and often resulting in a relapse or re-ignition of conflict in the future. To prevent this from occurring, Mitchell suggests long-term structural prevention strategies to accompany the shorter-term crises measures. Yet, history has shown us that preventive measures often become effective only after violence has broken out. Does this mean that prevention is successful only once violence ends?

One way of answering this question is through the implementation of the principle of mitigation discussed in chapter six. Mitigation is used in situations which might be immune from the most destructive effects of violence and where times can be established during which the practice of violence will be suspended to protect individuals from the worst effects of violence. This is often seen when humanitarian relief programmes are established, although mitigation practices can take on a number of forms, which are vast and numerous. A high point within the chapter stresses that mitigation most importantly calls for restraint and reciprocity. Often adversaries, in the heat of violent warfare, forego decorum and apply an 'everything goes' approach against one another. Therefore, to maintain civility, mitigation, as stressed by Mitchell, is primarily applied to remind parties that there are limits on behaviour and that a code of conduct should be applied.

Following the use of mitigation as a framework of rules within which conflicts should be waged, chapter seven addresses the specific rule systems and restraints used to regulate behaviours once a conflict has become overt. In this chapter, Mitchell provides the reader with examples throughout history which show that mitigating conflict is not only necessary, but that the examples reveal that rules and systems have always been in place when coping with conflict. In a further effort to limit violent conflict, chapter eight addresses the notion of institutionalisation. Mitchell acknowledges that international society has moved beyond the stage of 'conventional constraint'. However, institutionalising peace accords and legal considerations on the ground has been problematic. For such institutionalising to occur, Mitchell categorises five types of rule systems which could operate according to the structures, characteristics and situation of a state's system of governance.

But, how do we know when a conflict is terminated? Chapters nine and ten both address the issues surrounding the termination of intractable conflict. Chapter nine is concerned with addressing the root causes of a conflict. Mitchell indicates that for a conflict to end once and for all, Galtung's illustrated triangle must be applied through the incorporation of peacekeeping practices. Conflict is understood to be terminated only once violent behaviour has ceased. Nevertheless, Mitchell acknowledged that although violent forms of behaviour could cease, this may do nothing to affect the ways individuals and communities thought and felt about one another. The conflicting goals and contradictions which lead to the violent behaviour still remain in place, which may re-ignite conflict in a near future. Chapter ten addresses issues of resolving the underlying causes of conflict and the reasons that lead to its continuation. In an attempt to terminate prolonged conflict, Mitchell provides possible solutions through expansion, substitution and the concept of sharing through division and distribution. Though Mitchell proposes theoretically positive solutions towards terminating conflicts, whether they are effective in intractable conflicts, remains unknown.

Chapter eleven looks at terminating insolvable conflicts believed to end in a zero sum game as adversaries take up contrary positions that appear to permit only a winner or a loser. Mitchell provides possible ideas on how to deal with conflicts which may not necessarily be intractable, but still seem insolvable. Mitchell suggests possibilities of resolution through creativity: thinking out of the box. He adapts John Burton's theory of basic socio-cultural needs to devise most appropriate ways of satisfying the fundamental needs of the parties in attempts to develop solutions to complex conflicts. However, in a zero sum game, often the adversary's depiction of winning is the total annihilation and extinction of an entire race, culture or identity. Mitchell stresses that unless attitudes, emotions and opinions of one's adversary changes, it is hard to argue that any conflict, intractable or not, has been terminated.

The final chapter, chapter twelve, deals with the concept of reconciliation. What happens towards the end of an intractable conflict? Will there ever be a certain resolution? Mitchell argues that the resolution of intractable

conflicts is not impossible, just extremely difficult. There is the possibility of reforming the mindsets of those involved in the conflict through short-term conciliation techniques followed by a longer-term process focused on different stages of reconciliation. The implementation of demobilisation and reintegration processes, rebuilding and reconstructing society, rehabilitation and arranging the return of displaced persons may become necessary. These techniques aim to reverse the psychological process that enabled the dehumanisation of society into an 'enemy' in the first place. Mitchell strongly advocates openness, transparency, acknowledgement, remorse and apology for restoration and restitution to repair a broken society.

In conclusion, throughout the structure of the book, Mitchell has attempted to answer primary questions. First, how and why conflicts actually arise between individuals, groups and communities. Second, what the sources of human conflict are and what causes humans to engage in aggressive and violent disputes. Mitchell determines that there is no innate biological or neurological reason for human beings to indulge in conflict, and argues that conflict needs to be addressed by all affected parties of the conflict who are impacted by the environment, behaviours and attitudes known to fuel humans' violent expression. As the book progressed, it became clearer that violence, even if stopped for long periods, can reoccur, but if the adversary's cognitive thought and attitudes are reformed, there is a chance for the total cessation of conflict.