

Negotiating Across Cultures

revised edition

NEGOTIATING ACROSS CULTURES

International Communication
in an Interdependent World

REVISED EDITION

RAYMOND COHEN



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The views expressed in this book are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace.

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For Rivka

The Song of Solomon, iv. 6–7

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Foreword

In 1991, when the first edition of Raymond Cohen's *Negotiating Across Cultures* was published, culture seemed a lot less important to the conduct of international relations than it does today. Experienced diplomats and a growing circle of interested scholars may have recognized the power of cultural norms to influence negotiations and their outcomes, but most observers still understandably viewed international affairs through Cold War lenses, which highlighted the role of ideological differences and the military calculus of deterrence through the policy of mutually assured destruction. Following the demise of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, there was at first a tendency to predict a world in which culture would become ever more homogenized among cooperative, peaceful nations and peoples bound by universal political and economic values.

Today, just half a dozen years later, the Soviet Union is extinct, the Cold War seems like ancient history, and large parts of the world are distinctly uncooperative and burdened with ethnic and religious violence. Furthermore, there is now wide agreement that when it comes to international relations, culture—and, more particularly, cultural difference—matters. In part, this growing appreciation of the role of culture is a consequence of the shrinking importance of ideology on negotiating agendas; with a few notable exceptions, ideological objectives and rhetoric no longer obscure the presence and interplay of other factors, including those based on culture. This enhanced recognition of the impact of culturally distinct modes of thought and behavior also stems from the fact that in so much of the violence of the 1990s, issues of ethnicity and identity—in which culture

plays a large, even a defining role—have been used by political leaders to mobilize their followers for war.

If the first edition of *Negotiating Across Cultures* was thus somewhat ahead of its time in stressing the importance of culture in international negotiating, publication of this revised edition could not be more timely. Cohen offers not only a fascinating and fluent introduction to cross-cultural negotiation for readers new to the subject, but also a wealth of thoughtful commentary on the theory and practice of past and very recent negotiations that is likely to stimulate discussion among experts from both the diplomatic and the scholarly communities. Readers and critics alike responded enthusiastically to the original book; *Orbis*, for example, dubbed it “a masterwork of cultural analysis applied to international politics,” and the edition went through several printings. This new edition is significantly enlarged, updated, and reorganized.

As was the case in the first edition, Cohen here examines the ways in which cultural factors have affected the conduct and outcome of U.S. dealings with five increasingly significant nations: Japan, China, Egypt, India, and Mexico. For this expanded revision, Cohen has extended the already generous number and variety of negotiations that he analyzes with detailed discussions of such recent cases as the Clinton administration's policy toward China; NAFTA; disagreements in the 1990s over human rights and sovereignty; and developments in the ongoing trade talks with Japan. Thus, *Negotiating Across Cultures* now assesses a mixture of high-policy encounters (such as the drawn-out discussions with China that led to the breakthrough in Sino-American relations in the 1970s) and more typical but nonetheless important negotiations (such as air-transport agreements and water-rights disputes) over the course of almost half a century.

Moreover, Cohen goes beyond an examination of cases to present a theoretical framework for his analysis. He argues that there is no single, universal model for negotiation. On the contrary, he describes two quite different models, each equally valid in its own terms. Cohen defines the first model as “low context,” the predominantly verbal and explicit style typical of individualistic societies such as the United States. The second model is “high context,” a style associated with nonverbal and implicit communication more typical of interdependent societies.

For this new edition, Cohen has further refined this theoretical apparatus while also expanding its scope so that, for example, it offers new insights into a negotiation's “middle game” and takes a wholly new look at how different cultures approach the process of implementing an agreement.

Whereas the impact on diplomacy of cultural factors received less attention than it merited at the start of this decade, there is today perhaps a tendency to err on the other side—to assign too much significance to cultural differences. Fortunately, Raymond Cohen puts matters into their proper perspective: “In most cases negotiation failure is more likely to be the result of divergent interests than of subjective misunderstanding. . . . It should not be thought that all international negotiation is a distressing saga of stumbling incoherence.” Nonetheless, cultural factors do “on occasion complicate, prolong, and even frustrate negotiations where there exists an identifiable basis for cooperation.” Cross-cultural disharmony, Cohen remarks, “is neither a trivial nor a negligible phenomenon. It is worthy of attention.”

This is a judgment with which the United States Institute of Peace—mandated by Congress to strengthen the nation’s capacity to promote peaceful resolution of international conflict—readily concurs. Indeed, this new edition of *Negotiating Across Cultures* is part of a wide-ranging research and training effort promoted by the Institute on cross-cultural negotiating behavior. In addition to Cohen’s book, which casts its net widely in terms of countries examined and conclusions drawn, the work sponsored by the Institute currently includes a number of country-specific studies on Japan, North Korea, Germany, and Russia. The volume on Russia, *Russian Negotiating Behavior* by Jerrold Schecter, will be available from the Institute’s press in the first half of 1998.

Like other works published by the Institute, *Negotiating Across Cultures* will significantly enhance our understanding of how to build bridges across, rather than tumble into, cultural divides. As such, it should help to minimize the mutual incomprehension and distrust that often lie behind or fuel heated disagreements and violent conflicts.

Richard H. Solomon, President
United States Institute of Peace

Acknowledgments to Revised Edition

During the course of revising this book I have incurred a number of debts of gratitude. The original idea of a revised edition came from Kay Hechler and Dan Snodderly, and I thank them for their unstinting encouragement. The idea would not have got off the ground if the president of the United States Institute of Peace, Richard Solomon, had not given it his support. During my 1996 return fellowship at the Institute to work on the revision I found the staff, as always, friendly, helpful, and efficient. My special thanks go to Joe Klaitz, who brought me over, Jason Ellis and Frederick Williams, for their conscientious and enterprising research assistance, and Rebecca Caponi, for her thoroughly professional library help. Thanks, too, go to Nigel Quinney for his skill and tolerance as an editor.

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Acknowledgments to First Edition

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