

# Grasping the Nettle



# Grasping the Nettle

Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict

Chester A. Crocker,  
Fen Osler Hampson,  
and Pamela Aall



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

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# Foreword

SHORTLY AFTER THE DISASTROUS EVENTS of September 11, 2001, the United States Institute of Peace convened a meeting of scholars and practitioners to focus on the special challenge of ending intractable conflicts. The participants were individuals with deep knowledge of international conflicts and a driving interest in promoting ways to manage and resolve them. Collectively, these specialists had studied or been directly involved in efforts to deal with many—indeed, probably the majority—of the most obstinate conflicts of the past thirty years: Angola, Cambodia, Central America, Colombia, Cyprus, Iraq, the Balkans, Indonesia, Kashmir, Korea, the Middle East, Nigeria, the Philippines, Somalia, Southern Africa, Sri Lanka, and Sudan. Over the next two years, this group grappled with the complexities of mediation in intractable conflicts. Along the way they developed important insights about when and why third-party interventions can help—or hinder—the movement toward peace in such cases.

*Grasping the Nettle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict* gathers the thoughtful and significant lessons that emerged from the deliberations of the experts group. As we examined cases, we saw intractable conflicts trapped—or embedded—in larger geopolitical circumstances. The conflict between the two Koreas, for instance, was reinforced by the clash between East and West during the Cold War. But we also saw that the end of the Cold War did not bring peace to Northeast Asia. The long-running conflict had hardened identities and made reconciliation politically or economically unpalatable or—in the case of the North—a self-destructive option for the leadership.

It became clear that the source of a conflict's intractability was often quite different from the original source of the conflict. We found that the local culture of a conflict could play an important role in sustaining the

confrontation. In the Middle East, for example, antagonists are locked into conflict by virtue of a “culture of revenge” or a “culture of no compromise,” which produces an unending cycle of clash and counterclash. In certain circumstances, the international community and the conflicting parties themselves prefer to manage the confrontation rather than resolve it. In the case of separatist strife in Eurasia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, for instance, self-determination conflicts have brought benefits to the major contestants, and the international community has not mustered sufficient political will and resources to force a resolution of the disputes. Moreover, since 9/11 we have seen a clear link between these intractable conflicts and the global security threat of terrorism. Many of these conflicts have occurred in states such as Sudan, Pakistan, and Colombia that have either failed as effective political systems or are in danger of doing so. These regions of dispute provide safe havens and an army of recruits for terrorists and transnational criminals. 9/11 highlighted for the world the daunting fact that intractable conflicts—even those that take place in remote places—can provide grave threats to the national security of distant states and international order.

It was, however, the relationship between third-party interventions and intractable conflicts that focused the experts group’s deliberations. Given that the members of the group, together with the United States Institute of Peace, are strong proponents of the value of negotiating as a vehicle for conflict management, the topic of how third-party peacemakers might transform a conflict’s intractability was a critical issue. The group thought it was important to recognize the serious damage that could be caused by promoting a peacemaking effort that fails. Mediated accords that are not implemented may lead to cynicism, mistrust, and resistance to future efforts. Such was the case in Angola, Columbia, and Sudan. Prolonged third-party pressure to reach a settlement may inadvertently create resistance to mediation, harden public opinion, and result in the promotion of mutually exclusive preconditions for negotiations. Such has been the case in the Middle East. Poor planning and uncoordinated diplomacy may polarize positions and diminish hopes for a future settlement, such as in the Great Lakes crisis in Central Africa. Inevitably, such failures lead to more bloodshed and human suffering.

While the dangers of exacerbating intractability through third-party intervention are real, they are overshadowed by the dangers of inaction,

which can see a conflict fester in the absence of responsible third-party engagement—a point made by this book's companion volume, *Taming Intractable Conflicts: Mediation in the Hardest Cases*. The experience of the International Commission in Northern Ireland (led by former Senator George Mitchell) points out the invaluable role that mediators can play in helping hostile antagonists become negotiating partners, however reluctant. Equally, the efforts of the Norwegians in Sri Lanka in recent years, the United Nations in El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s and 1990s, the United States in Cambodia in the early 1990s, and the Community of Sant'Egidio in Mozambique from the 1970s into the 1990s support the argument that a helping hand offered by the right intermediary at the right time can change the course of a protracted conflict.

How do we determine when third-party interventions in intractable conflicts are likely to either facilitate a negotiation or create additional obstacles to peace? Only in recent years have diplomats, scholars, and policy-makers begun developing robust theories and methodologies that attempt to deal with ancient hatreds and ongoing conflict. Given the relative infancy of the field of conflict resolution studies and despite advances in other areas of the field, no clear-cut answer yet exists to this strikingly salient question. But by examining this issue both theoretically and through practical case-based analyses, this volume's editors, Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, and its highly respected cast of contributors have created a work that should have an immediate impact on the way third-party interventions in intractable conflicts are conceived, designed, and implemented.

The excellent essays and case studies in *Grasping the Nettle* provide a wealth of material on differing conceptual approaches to understanding intractability and the differing ways that intractability has manifested itself in specific conflicts. Together with *Taming Intractable Conflicts*, this book also provides useful insights into the tradecraft of third-party intervention in such conflicts. *Grasping the Nettle* joins other Institute publications—from tightly focused special reports to dozens of volumes with a broad-ranging, even panoramic, purview—in addressing the causes and dynamics of contemporary violent conflict and in exploring the ways in which such conflict can be prevented, managed, or resolved. For instance, the Institute has published a series of country-specific studies of negotiating behavior spotlighting the bargaining behavior of negotiators from China, Japan,

North Korea, Russia, Germany, and France. The Institute's book catalog also includes two volumes that, like *Grasping the Nettle*, have been piloted by the editorial trio of Crocker, Hampson, and Aall: *Turbulent Peace*, a comprehensive survey of the challenges of managing contemporary international conflict; and *Herdling Cats*, which draws on firsthand accounts by eminent diplomats who explore the problems and opportunities presented by a multiplicity of mediators. *Grasping the Nettle* is a worthy addition to this record of rich experience and accomplishment, furthering our understanding of intractable conflicts while fueling the hope that even the most obstinate confrontation may yield to skillful intervention structured around a combination of invention, wisdom, and pragmatism.

RICHARD H. SOLOMON, PRESIDENT  
UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE

# Preface

AMONG AESOP'S MANY FABLES is one about a young boy who encountered a stinging nettle, a wild perennial that grows in fields and woods in Europe and parts of Canada and the United States. Upon any contact, even of the lightest variety, these nettles can release an acid that irritates the skin and causes a rash. In the fable, the boy runs home to his mother and complains about the pain he feels from just touching the plant inadvertently. The mother answers that rather than brushing the plant, he should seize it firmly and "it will be soft as silk to your hand, and not in the least hurt you." In other words, he should grasp the nettle with all his might.

In reality, however, opinion seems to be divided on whether this is the optimum response. Many claim that the pain is just as bad—if not worse—if you grab and hold the nettle tightly. Others agree with the mother in the fable that a superficial engagement will hurt more than a powerful one. But in the end, most people would prefer not to test these hypotheses, opting instead to avoid the problem altogether.

We thought that this fable provided an apt metaphor for third-party interaction with intractable conflicts. Like nettles, intractable conflicts will cause pain to anyone who touches them. Most potential intervenors would prefer to avoid tangling with these conflicts. They may do this out of a sense that it is not in their national or institutional interest to become involved. Or they may believe that some conflicts cannot be settled politically until the parties are completely exhausted, and that the only way to handle these conflicts is to let them burn themselves out. If potential intervenors do become involved, they often react to the excruciating encounter by dropping the conflict and returning home to nurse the pain. Only a few mediators act with such determined commitment that they are in fact able to help the parties reach a negotiated agreement, or at least another

stage in the journey. Despite the pain, they are willing to grasp the nettle with all their might in order to reach peace.

Grasping the nettle does not mean applying force as part of the peacemaking process. Some who have grasped the nettle have used a gentle approach, as Norway has done in Sri Lanka. Others, such as the United States on the Korean peninsula, have used force and the threat of force to bring order and quell conflict. And still others, such as the United Nations in Cyprus, have tried both approaches, using peacekeeping troops to freeze the conflict while engaging politically with the two parties in order to encourage them to settle their differences. Grasping the nettle does not guarantee success. In many cases, third-party intervention has failed to eradicate the conflict, in spite of the dedication and commitment of the outside party. And in some cases, it seems that the third parties, while trying to act as peacemakers, have in fact added to the conflict's intractability. In other cases, however, this determined engagement has worked. The 1978 Egyptian-Israeli accord brokered at Camp David, the 1992 peace agreement that ended the civil war in Mozambique, and the Good Friday Agreement that transformed the conflict in Northern Ireland, for instance, confirm that third parties can play a crucial role in helping conflicts come to a negotiated end.

In light of these different experiences, it seemed that a hard look at the interaction between outside peacemakers and intractable conflicts would yield some lessons about when third parties could help and when their interventions were likely to fail, become protracted, or even make things worse. To get to the heart of these issues, the United States Institute of Peace convened an intractable conflicts experts group that met periodically from October 2001 to April 2003 to consider the nature of intractability and to examine specific cases of third-party interaction in intractable conflicts. Through the experts group, we were able to gather together in one room a wealth of academic and practitioner expertise. Members included Morton Abramowitz, Pauline Baker, Jacob Berco- vitch, Diana Chigas, Jan Eliasson, Melanie Greenberg, Paul Hare, Bruce Jentleson, Richard Kauzlarich, Louis Kriesberg, Samuel Lewis, Roy Lick- licher, William Nash, Charles Nelson, Joyce Neu, Meghan O'Sullivan, Marina Ottaway, Robert Pastor, Harold Saunders, Teresita Schaffer, Stephen Solarz, Richard Solomon, Paul Stares, Stephen Stedman, and William Zartman. Several members of the group—Jacob Berco vitch, Diana Chiagas, Paul Hare, Louis Kriesberg, Roy Licklider, Tezi Schaffer,

and Bill Zartman—wrote chapters for this book, and all members of the group added to our understanding of the complexities of the topic. In order to gain a fuller sense of actual cases, we asked several outstanding experts—including Cynthia Arnson, Steven Burg, Stephen P. Cohen, Alex de Waal, Charles King, Stephen Morrison, Howard Schaffer, Scott Snyder, Shibley Telhami, and Teresa Whitfield—to reflect on the nature and dynamics of intractability in the specific cases of Angola, the Balkans, Colombia, Eurasia, Kashmir, Korea, the Middle East, and Sudan. The discussion of the experts group, whether centering on theory or on case studies, was always wide-ranging, creative, informed, and inspiring. The outcome of this discussion is reflected in all of the chapters of the book, most specifically in the introduction and conclusion.

*Grasping the Nettle* is a companion volume to *Taming Intractable Conflicts: Mediation in the Hardest Cases*, a book that also emerged from the experts group meetings. Whereas *Grasping the Nettle* attempts to marry theoretical approaches to intractability and the evidence emerging from specific cases, *Taming Intractable Conflicts* has a more practical focus, concentrating on third-party tradecraft in protracted conflicts. Both books add to a long list of United States Institute of Peace publications on third-party intervention.

Many people have helped make this effort a success. First and foremost is Richard Solomon, president of the United States Institute of Peace, whose leadership throughout the project supported and encouraged us, as did his contributions as a member of the experts group. Raina Kim made the meetings happen and handled all sorts of issues with her usual aplomb and grace. Naren Kumarakulasingam shared with us both enthusiasm for the project and wisdom gained from direct experience with the Sri Lankan conflict, helping us capture the essence of the discussions. Jon Alterman, Dipankar Banerjee, Judy Barsalou, Francis Deng, Bill Drennan, Ron Fisher, Roy Gutman, Jeff Helsing, Harriet Hentges, Farooq Kathwari, Nancy Lubin, Philip Mattar, Joe Montville, Martha Olcott, Robin Raphael, Steve Riskin, Daniel Serwer, David Smock, Marie Smyth, George Ward, and Tom Weston all offered valuable perspectives. The publications program, under the leadership of Dan Snodderly and Michael Graham, once again did an excellent job in the production of this book. And, as always, we owe a deep debt of gratitude to Nigel Quinney, gifted editor and wonderful colleague, for his creative and careful work in making this book come to life.



# Contributors

**Chester A. Crocker** is the James R. Schlesinger Professor of Strategic Studies at Georgetown University and former chairman of the board of directors of the United States Institute of Peace. From 1981 to 1989 he was assistant secretary of state for African affairs; as such, he was the principal diplomatic architect and mediator in the prolonged negotiations among Angola, Cuba, and South Africa that led to Namibia's transition to democratic governance and independence, and to the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola. He is the author of *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood*, coauthor (with Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall) of *Taming Intractable Conflicts: Mediation in the Hardest Cases*, and coeditor of *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*; *Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict*; *African Conflict Resolution: The U.S. Role in Peacemaking*; and *Herding Cats: Multiparty Mediation in a Complex World*. He is also an adviser on strategy and negotiation to U.S. and European firms.

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**J. Stephen Morrison** directs the CSIS Africa Program and leads the CSIS Task Force on HIV/AIDS. He served in 2003–4 as executive secretary of the Africa Policy Advisory Board, authorized by Congress and appointed by Secretary of State Colin Powell. Its final report, *Rising U.S. Stakes in Africa: Seven Proposals to Strengthen U.S.-Africa Policy*, includes an analysis of the implementation challenges Sudan will face following the signature of a final negotiated peace accord.

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# The Intractable Conflicts Experts Group

*The following individuals were members of the experts group convened by the United States Institute of Peace to examine intractable conflicts. The group met between October 2001 and April 2003.*

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