SYRIA, SOFT POWER AND RESPONSES TO IMPASSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS SITUATIONS

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The present conflict in Syria presents the USA, Israel and others stakeholders in Europe and the wider world with an apparent impasse. The temptation to intervene more directly has so far been resisted and this is generally considered as a 'good thing'. However, there is a strong argument for assisting the evolution of progressive change in Islamic communities in neighbouring countries and South East Asia, for example.

Turkey presents a special case that may be considered from different points of view. On the one hand it is a Nato member and has a modern, western orientated recent history, but on the other, it is increasingly seen as identifying with a Sunni coalition lead from the Gulf States that has taken an overtly anti Shia position in response to the aggressive activities of Iran as well as more traditional divisions.

Nonetheless other Islamic lead countries such as Indonesia and Bangladesh do offer opportunities for the West to encourage progressive governments and wider societal movements to further develop successfully especially in terms of economic and social development. India also has a very large Muslim community and its development may also be important to encourage especially if it seemed to be lagging behind other sections of Indian society.

One less obvious avenue, especially in the case of Bangladesh and certain areas of other states that have been affected in the recent past, may be to focus on projects that can be presented as responses by the international community to the expected impact of climate change. Such initiatives could also include some neighbouring non-Islamic regions in South East Asia, for example. Overt success in these countries would place more pressure on countries such as Syria and Pakistan, for example, to make more effort to develop and this would strengthen the position of those groups within these countries that advocate a more open, tolerant approach to Islam and towards other faith groups. In addition to climate change related events, generally more generous and sustained responses to disasters and other crisis situations are also recommended.

It was widely considered that one of the most constructive responses to the crisis in the early 2000s was the coming together of the G20 Group of nations. This grouping offers the international community a new channel for the kind of initiatives referred to above. While China and Russia may, for their own reasons, be reluctant to take the lead in some areas of the world, other immerging powers such as Brazil, South Africa, India and so on would probably welcome the opportunity to exhibit their growing international significance.

(THE) COMPLEX (ITY OF) CAUSALITY

Causality is commonly pictured as one event causing another as when a snooker or pool ball impacts on another ball and results in it being potted or not, as the case maybe. However, events that preceded the simple event do influence the intended as well as the unintended following events. Some of these relate to the two balls immediately involved, but others involve balls that are moved in resulting collisions, while still others relate to the conditions that all the different balls are in as well as the cleanliness of the table surface, the humidity in the room and so on. And the above are just the 'objective' influences. In addition the confidence of the player striking the ball, their level of concentration and so on could also be significant. Here focus is confined to the objective conditions!

Assuming the player is concentrating the contact ball will strike the object ball cleanly and head into the pocket. This could more generally be considered as the case of a deliberate cause having the intended outcome. The ball could have been dirty and therefore not responded as the player intended and/or the felt could have been damp and slowed up the balls resulting in the object ball failing to reach the pocket. This could even be a worse case as the other player, assuming there is one, would be handed an easy pot into the pocket. Such failures of sufficiently precise information or misinterpretation of the conditions, can have serious consequences when, for example, rain falls onto already frozen surfaces and turns to ice giving dangerous driving conditions that would be not expected if the forecasters had only focused on the rain or if the driver had failed to recognize the impaired condition of their tyres. If the intended balls failed to impact as anticipated it is quite likely that other neighbouring balls might also react unexpectedly and thus the player, ever if the initial ball was potted could well be placed with a difficult situation. Our driver or drivers, if there should be a collision, might be confronting even more desperate situations even assuming that they survived the initial consequences of the contact. So some of the most seemingly simple events can result in unintended consequences and clearly this would more likely be the case in events that are more complicated, in the sense of involving more people, vehicles, difficult terrain and so on.

If attention now turns to conflict and crisis situation it becomes clear that any intervention whether due to natural disaster such as a flood or an earthquake will have predictable and unpredicted consequences resulting from the initial condition of the buildings and other infrastructure, for example, as well as the strength and timing of the natural event. This conclusion applies equally to human interventions in crisis situations such as those experienced recently in Africa and the Middle East. Past events, such as those relatively recently in Iraq and well as the longer history of interventions in the Israel/Arab conflict, are crucial to an intelligent analysis of how any future intervention might be undertaken if the current dire situation is be ameliorated rather than compounded.

Timing of interventions also needs to take account of the relative positions of the stakeholders directly engaged alongside those that either geographically or politically represent the boundary of the problem analogously, if you like, to the edges of the snooker table. The balls, or stakeholders responses, will depend on their relative positions as well as their location to the boundaries provided by the sides of the table or the geo-political positions of the not immediately involved stakeholders, which in the case of Syria would include China and Russia on one side and the Arab League and its Western supporters on the other as well as geographical neighbours such as Lebanon, Iraq, Israel, Turkey and so on. At present, April 2012, the shifting positions of Russia and China (?) may be the key to the next potentially successful intervention, for example.

So what kind of model might take account of these variations, or in systems language what degree of variety would be required to allow us to engage all the complexity of, say, the situation in Syria in 2012, or a multiple car crash or even two players plus an umpire and an audience committed to one player or the other in a snooker encounter? At first it may seem that the extent of the complexity would require a high level of variety, but the contention here will be that the requisite variety might in fact be relatively easy to generate i.e. a quite simple model on modest dimensions might be at least adequate in enabling a substantial amount of analysis and that this in turn could provide some important insights into how the stakeholders in the Syria situation, for example, might better proceed.

In the classic Friend et al version of a Progress Chart or Commitment Matrix (which may fit better in the current context) the down side of the chart lists the stakeholders while across there is

a combination of actions or research commitments at different points in time from now or imminently to the future. In my own practice I extend the approach by having the immediate future, or next 5 months or years say, and the longer term. The term research also requires some clarification here, as in Friend's usage uncertainty is subdivide into three types. The first is the usual idea of uncertainty arising from lack of or inadequate information, the second to lack of definitions as to what and/or where the relevant boundaries are and the third to the differing values of the stakeholders or their goals. Some of this refinement may well be inappropriate in the simple context of a snooker match or even a car crash, but would clearly be relevant in the case of a conflict situation as in Syria.

In a perfect situation with a perfect player, perfect balls, perfect surface and perfect boundaries the event causes the intended outcome and the game then proceeds to the next shot in a perfectly predicable manner. Even in the simple context of a snooker game, in the real world nothing is perfect however and an apparent simple event acquires complexity: which will be elaborated below, followed by similar treatment of a car crash and then a conflict situation.

Any number of movies or crime series on television have opening scenes of car crashes where the motive behind the apparent accident turns out to be more sinister being designed to conceal a murder or something similar that had taken place elsewhere perhaps. Similarly, the snooker player frequently decides that trying to pot a ball is not the best option and may instead set out to put the other player in a difficult position in the hope that they will then be able to take advantage of the position they face after their opponent's next shot. In snooker this is regarded as defensive play and escape from it usually involves the use of the cushions and other balls being utilized as obstacles. Analogously, one engaged stakeholder in a conflict may try to put the other(s) in difficulty by making a move that the claim is constructive and such moves may also involve boundary stakeholders being forced into reacting in some way or other. Clearly, much of what is going on in Syria in mid-2012 could be seen in this way.

Exactly how the boundary stakeholder might react is unpredictable, however, and may be conditioned by their own internal situation such as an up coming election as by the objective events of the conflict that their ally had anticipated. Furthermore, the player shot in snooker may have the opposite effect to the one intended, if it is not played well enough, and this could also be the same in a conflict situation or even a botched car crash set-up as referred to above. So once the perfect conditions assumed by out earlier model of causality are relaxed all sorts of complexities can arise and require our detectives, or policy analysts even, to consider much greater varieties of responses and further investigations or research!

Such wider engagement may suggest more broadly based meetings between boundary stakeholders as well reviews of relationships between those directly engaged and their assumed collaborated or allies. So new situations can arise that may be taking us beyond the usefulness of our basic snooker analogy. Rather then it might be appropriate now to focus on lessons to be learned from earlier, though perhaps yet still unresolved conflicts, such as those recently in Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.