

Looking for Someone to Talk to

The Weak Power of Dialogue

Alexander Solovyov

“Since Mahatma Gandhi’s demise there’s nobody to talk to.”

Vladimir Putin, 2007.

“That was a joke, of course”

Vladimir Putin, 2016.

In their quest for new instruments that might be useful in an era of instability and help to emasculate the old rules of the game, diplomats and international affairs experts increasingly often resort to dialogue. Apparently, they see dialogue as an effective alternative to a show of muscle in conflict management. Almost everyone practically always vows commitment to addressing issues through dialogue.

Virtually all meetings between heads of state begin with a “probing dialogue.” For example, when George W. Bush met Vladimir Putin for the first time in Ljubljana in 2001, he looked intently in Putin’s eyes, hoping to see “a sense of his soul” and succeeded. In Hamburg in 2017, Donald Trump tried to find a common language with the Russian leader and it looks he was not left disappointed either.

Trump, who has little trust in any institutions (let alone international ones), prefers one-on-one contacts and appears to be an ardent

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enthusiast of dialogue. The recent G20 summit confirmed that such meetings (bilateral and trilateral) receive the greatest attention from the media and pundits because it is there (at least, the media and analysts think so) where all decisions of global importance are made.

The world's top diplomats urge a "conciliatory" dialogue. "It's essential to work for a situation where Syrians will be able to reach an agreement as soon as possible through an inter-confessional dialogue on how they will be living from now on," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said. However, in the current world situation a "precautionary dialogue" is far more relevant: "We need to have some difficult conversations, starting with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states that have funded and fueled extremist ideology," Britain's Labor leader Jeremy Corbyn said. This scheme of things may take us as far as a "preventive dialogue" and—without doubt—"a dialogue of annihilation."

Some skeptical voices, however, are spoiling this perfect harmonious chorus. For instance, Avigdor Lieberman does not see even the slightest chance of settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through bilateral talks and he did not hesitate to say as much in blunt terms to a leading Russia media outlet. It does not belong to a foreign minister (albeit a former one) to call in question the merits of direct dialogue, but obviously Mr. Lieberman knows what he is saying. He views the settlement problem in the pan-regional context and in a historical perspective (Israeli, of course).

A DIALOGUE WITH RULES AND WITHOUT

*– But can you persuade us, if we refuse to listen to you?
– Certainly not.
– Then we are not going to listen; of that you may be assured."*

Plato, *Republic*. Book 1.

Since the time of Plato and Confucius the term 'dialogue' has changed drastically and has expanded to become a synonym of "communication. Due to overuse and extensive content, it is not surprising that 'dialogue' has lost its original meaning.

It is widely believed that before the collapse of the world order, which was a result of several world wars, countries knew how to come to terms. In the 1960s and 1970s, a more or less common system of coordinates and a corresponding vocabulary were formed. To a large extent, consensus relied on the eschatological belief that, in the event of another world war, there would be nobody left to negotiate with and nothing to negotiate over.

Agreements were reached, but with certain reservations. The remaining disagreements were “put on hold” until better times, while the achieved arrangements and the solutions of some pressing problems left both parties “equally dissatisfied” in strict conformity with the best traditions of diplomatic compromise. The international institutions created to make such agreements easier to achieve and to translate them into life made their own contributions to breeding more “dissatisfactions.”

These reservations, uncertainties, and dissatisfactions kept piling up, while the historical models of dialogue underwent “depreciation,” leaving the partakers confronted with new, still more profound problems: the crisis of primary identities, questions about the semantic and functional borders of dialogue, etc. In other words, by stating that it was impossible to conduct politics “as usual,” political actors willingly or unwillingly recognized that it was no longer possible to conduct dialogue “as usual” and entered into a debate over how many centers of power there were in the world.

And then it was like a tornado sweeping through the world. Counting local armed conflicts (three dozen by the middle of the second decade of the 21st century) and terrorist attacks (more than 70,000 since 2000) became daily routine. The export of democracy attacked national sovereignty with the battering ram of “color revolutions” and other revolts (although the number of coup d'états over the past three fifteen-year periods has steadily declined—from 84 in 1970-1984 to 37 in 2000-2015—but that was a poor consolation to those who found themselves in the turmoil). When the potential of the Islamic State had reached its peak, analysts began to talk about the collapse of the very concept of statehood and the risk of “a new

barbarity.” A situation like this requires dialogue, but those calls remained unheard. Possibly, it was even better that way.

Firstly, there is a strong feeling of weariness with dialogue in the anticipation of concrete results. The expectations never materialized because they were wrong from the outset. Perceived as a means of conducting negotiations and an instrument of communication, dialogue was overloaded with utterly inappropriate functions. Any dialogue is a process that is far more complex (and far more risky in some respects) than an open confrontation (physical or informational). The cultural and civilizational impact of dialogue on countries and peoples may equally prove a blessing and a curse.

“A dialogue of equals” based on unconditional mutual respect and selfish interest is rarely seen or heard among individuals, and is practically never observed among institutions, countries, cultures, and civilizations. Dialogues with wise men cannot but be hierarchic: disciples address their teacher to borrow wisdom and its strength is considered infinite a priori (it should not be forgotten that the teachings of Plato and Confucius are above all concepts of governing not a country, but an oikumene).

“The Master wished to go and live among the nine wild tribes of the East. Someone said: ‘They are rude. Now can you do such a thing?’ The Master said: ‘If a superior man dwelt among them, what rudeness would there be?’” (Confucian Analects, Bk. IX, Ch. XIII, 221). If rendered from Chinese into plain English, this means: Will there be any barbarians left? No, they will become civilized. In other words, they will lose their previous identity.

A stronger (developed, rich, strong and dynamic) culture will invariably suppress a weaker (less developed) one until the latter’s complete assimilation. The more active such communication is, the greater the risk “the smaller civilization” will be stripped of its identity and become extinct. For examples one does not have to go as far as China: the history of the emergence of European states (Italy, Germany, and France) can be easily represented as a long martyrology of local cultures and traditions that vanished in the process of nation building.

Formal marks of such confrontation are clearly seen today in the unfolding conflict between Poland and the European Union. Reluctant to unconditionally agree to the EU's unifying institutional principles, Poland keeps insisting on its "selfness." It is hard to say what plays a greater role here—the traditional snobbism and arrogance of the Polish nobility or Mr. Kaczynski's authoritarian ways, but a conflict of culture models is obvious.

The natural reaction of the "weaker one" (isolating oneself, restricting external contacts, and protecting ethnic and cultural identity at any cost, hoping for the sacral power of traditions) will not help. It will merely prolong the agony. Confronted with the power of the West, China, Japan, and Korea had to go through—each at a certain moment in their history—a very painful modernization process, accompanied by the strongest internal turmoil and conflict. This is the real price of the "dialogue of cultures" and it is inevitable when civilizations get in touch with each other.

Such contacts are frequent in the modern "globalized" world. Apparently, they will happen increasingly more often. Globalization itself is a model of dialogue among civilizations, with all of its merits and flaws. Fyodor Lukyanov considers globalization as "a product of the natural development of Western civilization, expansive and messianic by nature." Yet this definition is only partially correct because any civilization is expansive and messianic. Devoid of these properties, a civilization is doomed to collapse and become assimilated by another. Is there just a single civilization in the world that has given up its expansion and mission? Russia, which since the twelfth century has had to repeatedly defend itself from external enemies, expanded its territory many times. The messianic nature of the Third Rome concept is indisputable. Europe, which still carries on in defiance of more than a hundred years of gloomy prophecies of its early demise by philosophers (from Spengler to Dugin), experts' forecasts, and efforts by bureaucrats, keeps expanding eastwards, trying to incorporate Georgia and Turkey. China, too, is laying claim to its own share of the "white man's burden." The New Silk Road project is a means of spreading not

only Chinese businesses (banks and industries), but also Chinese ways of doing business.

Whenever cultures and civilizations get in touch, the conflicting (potentially confrontational) narrative invariably appears as the dominant one. Modern dialogue is largely a means of studying an opponent, identifying his weaknesses, and provoking him into careless steps and statements with the aim of catching him making a mistake and hitting him with a counter-argument prepared in advance.

An ideal constructive dialogue at the level of cultures and civilizations is an extremely long process which lacks explicit pragmatism. Above all it is a communication space (not a communication instrument) with an open-ended and unpredictable outcome. Accelerating it makes no sense: it proceeds at its own pace and rejects or evades any outside influence. Such a dialogue has no means of resisting the current destructive trends. It has no resources to protect itself and there is no reason why it should.

Its results cannot be fixed in any binding documents. They manifest themselves inconspicuously, in the change of cultural and behavioral models, in the collapse of old myths and the creation of new ones. Moreover, any documented records make sense within the framework of dialogue itself, but instantly lose relevance when placed in a different context (attempts to project dialogues by Plato or Confucius onto the modern realities of state governance and international relations make no sense). Such changes may manifest themselves many generations later. Moreover, it is the partners' goodwill that is the sole binding factor in a dialogue, while the readiness and ability to keep negotiating, in other words, the level of mutual interest, is the yardstick of success.

Let me say once again: everything said above is true only of an ideal case—a dialogue of equals. In fact, the realities require addressing very different communication tasks. It is enough to imagine a dialogue between a scientist and a bureaucrat responsible for financing science. The experience of such a dialogue of cultures (and this is precisely a dialogue of cultures where two cultures, two traditions are forced to get in touch and interact) is familiar to an overwhelming majority of readers.

COERCION TO DIALOGUE

*“You can get much farther with a kind word and a gun
than you can with a kind word alone.”*

Attributed to Al Capone

The experience of resolving interethnic and international conflicts proves that the best way to end violence is to bring warring parties to the negotiating table. In reality, though, “coercion to dialogue” may turn out no less violent than “coercion to peace.”

It is not that the talking is done by some people, while the shooting is carried out by others. Or that those who do the talking quite often do not represent the interests of those who do the shooting. What really counts is that a forced negotiating process, launched with the aim of producing a fast solution, is too straightforward. Quite often it leaves issues on the sidelines that do not look crucial at the moment of negotiation. The long-term effects of decisions being made (or, to be more precise, imposed by the peacemakers) are not always foreseen properly, while the root causes of the conflict are either misjudged or ignored altogether.

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who “locked up” the participants in Israeli-Egyptian talks at Camp David, could hardly foresee that by concluding peace Egypt would lose its status as the leader of the Arab world. Thoughts like that surely had never visited Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. The same cannot be said with certainty about Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, although... Whatever the case, the Camp David deal is an excellent example of how a political dialogue, seemingly successful at first, turned out to be the direct or indirect cause of many regional and global problems.

It might seem that a political dialogue successfully eliminated violence in Northern Ireland. But the conflict is still far away from a solution; paramilitary IRA groups are still there and Brexit is capable of actualizing a package of old-time contradictions. It is unnecessary to prolong the list of such smoldering conflicts—there are quite a few of them near Russia’s borders.

U.S.-Russia relations, specifically those in the 21st century, are clear evidence of how unproductive an imposed and forced dialogue can be. The two sides have seen a conciliatory “dialogue of symbols and gestures,” stern warnings, and openly hostile and crude rhetoric. But there has been nothing constructive. It would be quite right to say that the U.S.-Russia dialogue has been steadily degrading.

There are plenty of reasons for this. Yet it is far more difficult to find at least one reason for a positive development in dialogue between the two former adversaries. There is, of course, Russophobia, which has remained one of the dominating narratives in the U.S. establishment since the end of the Cold War, and Russia’s proportionate readiness to see the U.S. as an enemy. Making anti-Americanism part of the Russian national identity took amazingly little time and effort.

Civilizational antagonism and the antagonism of values (real or ostensible) is now complemented with the obviously confrontational interest in the strategic market of hydrocarbons. Communication has not been disrupted altogether (although its channels are increasingly shrinking) by virtue of the tradition of building international relations in general (a bad talk is better than a good shootout) and the technological need to communicate in areas where the parties’ interests overlap (such as Syria).

In this context, the institutionalization of economic sanctions is an extra (and surely not the main) restraint on dialogue (paradoxically, sanctions may give an impetus to dialogue, steering it into a rather abstract and relatively safe haven, for instance, towards a discussion of how widely national legislation can be used to regulate international relations in general). Given the good will and self-reserve on both sides, it is possible to find issues of common interest that do not imply instant confrontation, such as the social rehabilitation of military veterans, migration policy issues, the development of space and energy technologies, etc. Also, one may hope for the emergence of another Samantha Smith, say, in the still rather free space of communication in social networks. However, such goodwill (let alone self-reserve) is nowhere in sight in either country, while instances of “boorishness in aggravating circumstances” occur ever more often.

MY TONGUE IS MY ENEMY

“Telling them ‘How backward you are!’ is politically incorrect. They are very touchy. So, everybody tries hard not to hurt them, but they feel hurt anyway and fling spears on their foes.”

Mikhail Zhvanetsky

International dialogue today has one regular and rather alarming (although very natural) factor—casual (and sometimes obsessional) muscle-flexing that aims to demonstrate that negotiations from the position of strength are futile. This is not a paradox. Nuclear weapons now more often serve as the main argument in a foreign policy dialogue and at the same time as a guarantor that the confronting parties will not annihilate each other in the process. That “the last argument of kings” is not always verbalized is not important—it always remains in place.

Tactfulness and self-restraint are out of fashion today. Timofei Bordachev has aptly described the current state of affairs as a “return of strategic frivolity,” a situation where political players are ready to create risky situations in order to achieve time-serving goals. Adventurist behavior shapes adventurist mentality, which instantly manifests itself in the language of international communication.

Today, traditional gestures of courtesy come hand in hand with invectives that would do credit to a Harlem gangster, or a British chav, or a vagabond in a Moscow suburb. Rudeness and lack of tact are not a novelty in diplomatic practice. What really matters is that this manner of discussion is becoming customary. Subsequently, the shock effect on the opponent is lost, especially as the translation sometimes is unable to fully convey the meaning. A graphic example is the phrase “Look at me when I’m speaking! Don’t look away!” which Vladimir Safronkov, Russia’s deputy envoy to the United Nations, addressed to his British counterpart Matthew Rycroft in a rebuke for deprecating Russia’s efforts to solve the crisis in Syria. In all likelihood, only a Russian-speaking audience could “appreciate” the street slang tonality of this phrase and grasp the dramatism of the situation.

On the other hand, how can one expect to hear something refined and exquisite from a civil servant who, in doing his job, follows the tone of the narrative set at the very top: “When they start talking about our integration in the Eurasian space, some in Europe jump out of their pants: either the pants are too tight or they’ve just pooped their pants.” (Vladimir Putin’s remark about the Eurasian Union at a meeting of the Valdai Club in 2011).

Another distinguishing feature of international dialogue is the gradual formation of the modern equivalent of Orwellian political “newspeak.” For instance, the use of “Western partners” to mean adversaries (for the first time this word combination was used in that sense by Putin in his well-remembered Munich Speech), “competitors” (pronounced with a touch of superpower pride), and “adversaries” equivalent of full-fledged enemies (said in a superpower threatening manner). “Certain forces” or “some forces” have become part of the conspiracy vocabulary. Euphemisms of this sort are mainly meant for the domestic audience, but they have become deeply ingrained in the expert community, as well.

Calling a spade a spade in international affairs may cause trouble. Analysts are curious—and for good reason—if Trump, who in public called Qatar a sponsor of terrorism, thereby gave the Saudis a go-ahead to launch an offensive. Populism is good to woo the electorate, but it is not very suitable for a constructive dialogue. It is good for communicating not so much with a conversation partner as with the public at large. Dialogue implies a degree of intimacy after all.

The latest “hit” in the international scene that increasingly looks like a theater of the absurd was surely the verbal duel between Washington and Pyongyang. As they dished out propaganda punches, calling each other “rocketman” and “a mentally deranged U.S. dotard,” Trump and Kim were most likely driven by domestic narratives, but immediately made the international public the major audience. A battle like this could look amusing (cartoons drawing parallels between Trump and Khrushchev, who staged quite an emotional show at the United Nations, were quick to appear), except

for the nuclear missiles standing behind the quarreling politicians. So, what is happening by no means resembles “a kids’ quarrel in a sandbox,” as Sergei Lavrov put it light-heartedly.

It seems the time is ripe to take a deep breath and start choosing words with more caution. Those eager to start a dialogue may find the traditional Chinese experience quite useful. One of the basic concepts of the Confucian philosophy Zhengming (“rectification of names”) postulates that names (terms) must accurately reflect the essence of the matter they denote (“If names are not right then speech does not accord with things; if speech does not accord with things, then affairs cannot be successful...” (Confucian Analects 13:3)). This approach leaves no room for euphemisms and allegories, and considerably facilitates communication; in other words, governance (incidentally, Plato too reflected on this theme).

Deserving of close attention, the “rectification of names” is a very practical approach deeply rooted in China’s philosophical tradition and political practice. Such an approach may also help solve the main problem of modern dialogue, which can doom it to failure from the very beginning. I mean the conflict between the demand for “common rules” (understandable for all, simple and exhaustive) and “local interpretations” of both the rules and of what should serve as such rules. The sad experience of clashes of civilizations and cultures that humanity has accumulated (and it is far greater than the positive experience of their mutual enrichment) makes many look with sarcastic pessimism at intellectual and ethical constructs, such as “universal values.” In modern political science it has become customary to contrast “the policy of Western liberal values” with the new “pragmatic” policy. This makes Realpolitik the main opponent of dialogue, because its space is largely determined and limited by the understanding of values and traditions.

Cultures and civilizations have different traditions constituting fundamental (as it might seem) notions and ideas. Some cultures do not have any at all. “Justice,” “mercy,” and “law” are interpreted differently. One sees democracy as a value in its own right, while others regard it only as a tool, just like monarchy, dictatorship, or a parliamentary

republic. The same is true of applied terms, like sovereignty, the balance of power, etc.

The “rectification of names” can provide a better understanding of “local” interpretations and values, and identify the borders of the “zone of comfort” for a potential dialogue. As they enter into dialogue within such zones, partners can develop mutual trust and respect towards each other (Timofei Bordachev in his article *The Guns of April, or the Return of Strategic Frivolity* legitimately complains about the absence of such trust) in a bid to extend communication to more delicate matters.

This model was used in the inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue in the 1970s and the 1980s: redefinition of the basic terms and revision of the hierarchy of values on a mutual basis. Its participants had already identified a common thesaurus and worked on a new syntax within the framework of inter-cultural (inter-religious) communication.

At a time when the very notion of ‘values’ has been degraded to a point where it seems to exist for the sole purpose of enabling opponents to rebuke each other for violating them and using “double standards,” dialogue becomes senseless. In a situation like this, professional negotiators face great problems finding a common language. And when they are unable to reach accord, their “dialogue” overflows into the public space to spark a confrontation of such intensity that everyone is happy that humanity has not yet acquired the ability to turn emotions and ideas into something material.

PUBLIC DIALOGUE ON SCORCHED LAND

“The people who work there are very emotional and not informed well enough about what is really happening.”

Vladimir Putin about journalism, 2013.

Science has not yet established if the collective unconscious is capable of generating constructive ideas. As for destructive ones, it surely can produce them and even seems predisposed to do so. The modern

means of communication have turned the masses into participants in political processes—even though 99 percent of such participation is confined to the multiplication of meanings in social networks.

Policy-making in the 21st century is public, even when it comes to foreign policy. The sacred boundary between a diplomat and a house manager is wearing thin. “Amid the diktat of communications, complete transparency, and inter-dependence, the borderline between the internal and external is being erased. External factors turn into components of domestic life regardless of whether some try to consciously use them to attain certain goals or the impact of the environment is spontaneous and casual,” Fyodor Lukyanov has said quite correctly.

The potential of the mass media (including social networks) to influence society in the Internet era seems to have been thoroughly explored. But this potential is used mostly in a destructive way. The fabulous panic in the U.S., triggered by *The War of the Worlds* radio drama in 1938, is a classic example. Other such cases number in the dozens, if not hundreds (take, for example, the media row over Ronald Reagan’s soundcheck blunder—the U.S. President declared he had signed legislation to outlaw Russia forever and promised to begin bombing it in five minutes).

If only such incidents were exceptions to the rule, it would be half the trouble. The real problem is the media (in combination with the audience that has eagerly joined the business of generating the content) that are taking the most active part in creating and keeping up the information chaos. It took the Russian media just a couple of months to turn Turkey from a strategic ally into an enemy, and then almost instantly into an ally again. During a span of six months Turkey was portrayed alternately as Russia’s reliable friend and an irreconcilable enemy.

U.S. media are no less effective. If they are to be believed, international relations are a game, a competition where victory is a must. CNN President Jeff Zucker has said more than once that from the standpoint of the mass media politics is a sport. Strategy is pushed into the background or fades out altogether next to the news of who has gained the upper hand.

Jen Psaki's article devoted to the results of the Trump-Putin meeting at the G20 summit is a perfect illustration. The CNN commentator criticized the poor U.S. media preparation for the presidents' meeting. In her opinion, the Russians gained points on each item of the agenda they had announced in advance ("They scored on all three," while Trump "fell into Putin's trap.") Psaki noted that diplomacy seldom gives a chance to put pressure on an opponent and expressed regret that "after you've let your adversary off the hook, you certainly don't get to apply that pressure again." Reluctance to emphasize the topic of "Russian hackers" and Trump's consent to accept Putin's explanations were, no doubt, used against the U.S. president. The "crafty" Russians' *coup de grace* was that they were the first to publish a photo of the two leaders during the meeting. Naturally, no intelligible analysis of the items on the agenda of where exactly the Russians outperformed the Americans was presented.

It is noteworthy that Psaki used the same trick Trump employed widely during his presidential campaign: she emphasized the strength of the external opponent, the quality of preparations made, and his professionalism in order to highlight the weaknesses of the internal opponent.

Of course, it would be naïve to expect CNN to say something decent about Trump, but such an approach to covering international affairs downgrades them to the level of street football. And if it is a professional who demonstrates such an approach, then what can one expect of a wider audience, emotionally involved in current events, poorly informed, eager to make fast and sharp conclusions, and practically unable to listen.

Indeed, the ability to listen (and hear) is essential for making a dialogue constructive.

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Dialogue (in its original meaning) can hardly be regarded as an effective instrument for handling urgent political crises "right here and now." Nevertheless, the "strategic," communicative potential of dialogue, though in little demand today, remains significant. Relying

on tradition (which, on the one hand, provides a solid basis and, on the other hand, has a transformation potential), dialogue allows for making an in-depth analysis on a civilizational and meta-cultural scale, and for shaping a perception of the world. If started within the “zone of comfort,” it can bring us closer to devising such models of conflict settlement that cannot be achieved by “conventional negotiations.” But this will apparently require a “leap of faith” of which very few are capable.

In any case, dialogue remains the sole decent mode of existence for those people, cultures, and civilizations that want to master the skill of seeing chances for reconciliation in conflicts, sources of mutual enrichment in disagreements, universalities in particularities, and hope in dismay.