REPORT NO. 2
THE RATIONALIZATION OF CONFLICT:
A CASE STUDY

Paper given at the CIBA Foundation

3 June 1966

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Background

The series of meetings to which these notes refer arose from the concern of a political scientist, Dr. John Burton, that political science could not advance unless it had an active involvement in international conflict. He had in mind the kind of involvement practiced by the Tavistock Institute. Because of Dr. Burton's personal contacts, we decided to tackle the confrontation between Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. At the time this situation was deadlocked. The conflicting parties agreed to meet with a small group under the auspices of the Tavistock Institute. These meetings continued over a period of months. At the point where substantial areas of agreement were reached, the representatives of two other nations were involved. These were nations that would be directly concerned in the solutions. The following notes are a personal interpretation of the scientific issues involved in this case study. They are based on notes made during the design phase and throughout the study. As little reference as possible is made to the content of the discussions.

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As a social scientist I am a member of an Institute committed by its primary purpose to 'the mutual advancement of the social sciences and the significant affairs of men'. International conflicts rank amongst the most significant of men's present affairs. Our failure to be involved in such conflicts until now has, on our side, been due to doubts about how and where to usefully apply lessons learnt in other sub-national areas of conflict (concerning persons, families, class grouping, minorities, institutions, sectors of the economy). We have not been waiting until we are ready to move in with theories of great power and efficacy. We have, however, learnt the hard

way that very special conditions of support, forbearance and protection are required to nurture social scientific knowledge in a virgin field. Until now these conditions have not been offering in the international sphere, at least for us. The conditions I have mentioned cannot be stably based on the character and perspicacity of leaders involved in international conflict. If these conditions are to be achieved, then social scientists must offer to enter into certain obligations. If these conditions are to be sustained, the social scientists must be seen to fulfill these obligations. At least this is how my colleagues and I interpret our experience.

Together with C. West Churchman, I have, in the context of an international conference of operational researchers and social scientists, tried to spell out the basic obligations. From these two different backgrounds of experience we concluded:

a. that if one acts simply within the framework of the obligations that one has to his scientific discipline, then there is little chance either that he will adapt his theory to the realities of conflict, or that what he has to say will find any hearing and hence any test out from those who bear the burden of the conflict;

b. that if one acts as if obligated to one of the conflicting parties, then he can act only to effect the means of conflict; he will be powerless with respect to the conditions determining the conflict;

c. that one can accept obligations to the parties of a conflict only insofar as these are obligations to which they are similarly committed because the obligations are to some human grouping that includes all parties and the would be researchers.

Finding the larger community of interest can be a serious research problem. It is dangerously misleading to refer the conflict to such a high level of abstraction as mankind at large. In our past experience we have found it best to take the next higher level of social organization as the common reference point. In this particular instance we took the regional entity that these parties had themselves earlier identified as Maphilindo. This was not achieved simply by clever analysis and foresight. As I recollect, we had only half grasped the answer before it emerged in conferences. For the social scientists this meant that they had to discipline their own tendencies to think as Britishers, Australians, etc. It is, however, not easy nor even pleasant to contemplate that one might be acting in ways that would be judged treasonable by one's own nation. Perhaps a social scientist should be above such matters; I don't think so. For myself I took the position that if the solutions to the regional problems tended to create conflict with Australian interests, then after helping them arrive at their best solution, but not before, I would feel free to explicitly discard my obligations to the region and if necessary contest those solutions within the context of Australian interests. This is not a fully thought out solution.

The problems of value orientation are only one aspect of getting to grips with international conflicts. There are two other aspects that need discussion: (1) the

protection required if the parties in conflict are to be able to explore positions, attitudes, etc. which are not directly helpful, and which may in fact hinder the pursuance of their conflict; (2) the positive contributions that may be made by the social scientists.

Let me start with the positive contributions. These seem to be threefold and all stem from the independence and objectivity of the social scientists qua social scientists and their professional knowledge and competence:

1. Helping to conduct a joint exploration or search and to sustain it in the face of hostile attitudes between the conflicting parties. That the parties were willing to come together was evidence of some forces toward cooperation but at a number of points their ambivalence emerged and had to be contained. The broad principles for conducting a search with conflicting parties include:

   (a) the direction and the pace of the search must be guided by the wishes of the parties and the relative strength of their momentary tendencies toward and away from subject areas. Whether the social scientists are active or passive should depend on these wishes and tendencies;

   (b) when the tendency is to dwell on and even exacerbate conflicts, the social scientists must adopt the passive role of a sounding board. By not rushing in to seek rationality in the partisan arguments and by avoiding immoderate expressions of concern they will enable such outbursts to be more readily contained and passed by;

   (c) active help can be given when the social scientists sense a willingness to explore matters on which the parties have not got prepared public positions. However, sudden, too strong, or persistent urgings away from the public positions can reflect on the genuineness of the scientists' concern with the national interests of the conflicting parties. Because he is not burdened with these national interests, the social scientist must take a cautious step-by-step approach. Each step will probably be less than he wishes would be possible.

   From our notes on the conference proceedings it is possible to detect a number of occasions where mistakes were made about each of these principles. In each case time was lost in recovering rapport. The mistakes were particularly frequent in the first meetings when rather too many social scientists were present, with the consequent incitement to play to the scientific gallery. Amongst the mistakes were attempts to lead the parties into areas that they did not wish to discuss.

2. Helping to shape the emerging views and perceptions into a 'theory' of the conflict. This theory should constitute an argument about the objective content of the conflict and hence provide the essential framework for the next stage. The social scientists should be able to guide this task with their knowledge of what

constitutes a scientific exploration. The more knowledge they have of the area, the more they are potentially able to guide the process toward an objective theory. It is essential, however, that the theory be not only basically true but also accepted as such by the conflicting parties. Without their acceptance, no theory could provide a framework for investigating solutions. However, a theory is not only a most potent instrument for revealing possible solutions but is potentially dangerous in that it may commit one or both parties to 'cures that are worse than the disease'. We had one very angry scene when it was felt that some scientists wanted to build in the communal problem as part of the basic theory of the conflict. In this as in the other tasks, the scientists must be guided by the conflicting parties.

3. Guiding the conflicting parties toward solutions that offer the greatest convergence of interests. While this is the fruitful stage there is no question of simply working through the first two and then concentrating on finding solutions. It is most likely that the discussions will continually shift back and forth between stages. There is a basic principle that should guide the search for solutions. This has been formulated by Kurt Lewin in the social sciences, and Liddell Hart in military theory as the principle of indirect approach: "Its fulfillments seem to be the key to practical achievement in dealing with any problem where the human factor predominates, and a conflict of wills tends to spring from an underlying concern for interests. In all such cases the direct assault of new ideas provokes a stubborn resistance, thus intensifying the difficulty of producing a change of outlook. Conversion is achieved more easily and rapidly by unsuspected infiltration of a different idea or by an argument that turns the flank of instinctive opposition." (p. viii) In practice this principle has to be supplemented with another. It clearly warns against a bull at the gate assault on those areas that have been publicly defined as the focus of the conflict. One may even start as we did with explicit recognition that these particular conflicts may be unavoidable. However, if one does not start with these areas, where amongst all the others does one start? The supplementary principle which we formulated during the design of this series of conferences was to search for a fulcrum (or key link) in the most relevant area closest to the conflict areas. Two concurrent judgements were required – relevance and proximity. Relevance was to be assessed in terms of the convergence of the interests of the conflicting parties. This is not an entirely novel principle. It is implicit in Wertheimer's discussion of 'recentring' as the key to productive problem solving (in human as well as cognitive problems). By finding such an off-centre area, we hoped to get some creative thinking and to effectively restructure the way the contestants looked at the prime conflicts. With this change the prime conflicts might well be susceptible to resolution. In fact, this is what occurred. Despite the principle, some of the social scientists attempted to tackle directly the key conflict area of Sabah and Sarawak. As could be expected, that evoked strong attempts to justify the public positions taken by each nation. Progress was made only when the focus of discussion was shifted to the problems concerned with the presence of the British Strategic Reserve based

on Singapore and Malaya. This effectively re-centred the problem and led quite quickly to a resolution of the conflict. In the new context, the parties have had little difficulty in agreeing to a solution to even the apparently insoluble confrontation over Sabah and Sarawak. In this stage also it is necessary to be guided by the tendencies of the conflicting parties. One social scientist attempted to hasten convergence by a tour de force that would have had each party list its pay-offs, as in bargaining. This was firmly rebuffed.

At this point we can turn from the positive ways in which the social scientists can contribute to conflict resolution to the conditions needed in order to make the contribution. We have already discussed the question of values; beyond that there are at least two main conditions that must be met if effective search is to occur:

    (i)   protection from public perusal;
    (ii)   freedom from decision making.

The reasons for the first condition are probably obvious. Positions taken in public are a major factor in mobilizing political support and opposition. Once mobilized, these forces cannot be readily shifted to support new positions. Even to be seen questioning one's position in public can have serious political consequences and in a conflict situation will invite one's opponents to exploit the temporary weakness. To enable free and flexible exploration we felt it necessary to enforce conditions of secrecy and to prepare a cover story in case of any breach of secrecy. These had to be seen as adequate by the conflicting parties.

The reasons for the second condition may be a little less obvious. Our past experience with designing and running search conferences had convinced us that if people discuss with a view to themselves reaching agreed decisions then they will restrict discussion to those matters which are seen to have a significantly probable contribution to the decision. If they are to be led to explore 'mere possibilities', then decision making must be firmly exported to some other setting. The only decisions left to the meetings were agreements about what to explore and when. Even decisions about what should be communicated to the governments had to be left to the personal discretion of the participants.

The points made above do not need to be summarized. However, in considering them it should be borne in mind that they reflect a very small portion of the social scientific knowledge and experience that could theoretically be brought to bear on international conflicts. Further, such participative case studies would seem to be the most hopeful way of testing and extending our knowledge and of course the ability of social scientists to be even more helpful. One last issue should be raised. How can such exercises as this aid political science? As can be seen from the above notes, the key theoretical matters do not specifically concern political science. However, participation with politicians in constructing a theory of a conflict in which the latter are deeply involved can provide an acid test for

political science theories and a gold mine of serendipitous observations and hypotheses.

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