



Conclusion: Alternative Theory and Practice of Peacebuilding in Asia

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this volume is to highlight shortcomings in the practical application of hybrid peacebuilding. A typology of mid-space actors is presented to function as a bridge for the existing gap between theory and practice. Insider-partial mediation is put forth as a suitable medium for addressing the blockage between academic knowledge and operationalisation on the ground without compromising the premises of complexity

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and hybridity. This assumption is then tested in two case studies from an insider perspective, highlighting additional key factors to be considered when engaging with mid-space actors. Identity was explored through the case of Cambodian Buddhist monks whilst the case study of Mindanao analysed the role of civil society. The case studies of China and Japan provided perspectives of outside intervenors focusing on their peacebuilding endeavours in Asia. The aim of this closing chapter thus is to integrate these findings and conclude whether or not the gap between hybrid peacebuilding theory and practice has been bridged.

COMPLEXITY AND HYBRIDITY

Chapter 3 assessed hybrid peacebuilding from a complexity perspective, highlighting crucial takeaways for the successful operationalisation of hybridity. Adaptive peacebuilding (de Coning 2018) was further discussed as an approach which engages well with complexity. Both adaptivity and hybridity address the concerns of a complex systems approach to peacebuilding, though the sites of their emphasis vary. An adaptive methodology of peacebuilding that emphasises flexibility marries well with a hybrid epistemology for which inclusion and openness is paramount. The contentions of this chapter served as the theoretical foundation upon which Chapter 4 developed hybrid peacebuilding into a practical application via constructing a typology of mid-space actors.

Complexity theory provides a deeper understanding of how dynamic and multifaceted systems like societies can lapse into conflict. Social systems must be self-sustainable and resilient so that they can respond and adapt to external or internal impulses. Resilience manifests within social institutions that are rooted in the unique contexts of a society; power structures, cultural practices etc. are important sites to ensure robustness in the face of pressure. Thus, peace must be built upon the internal strengths of a conflict-affected society in order to ensure its sustainability (de Coning 2016). It is therefore imperative that local peacebuilders are active participants in the peacebuilding process so as to foster resilience and achieve sustainable peace. The role of outside intervention is to facilitate the process of societal transformation through supporting the capacity of local mid-space actors to initiate and nurture long-lasting relationships.

Adaptive peacebuilding proposes a complexity-informed approach that can respond to shifting dynamics on the ground, including inter-actor

relations. Hybrid peacebuilding underlines the significance of paying attention to the idiosyncratic context of each conflict-affected society and advocates for the inclusion of a broad array of representatives in the peacebuilding process (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). The primary concern for adaptive and hybrid peacebuilding is the centrality of dynamism in the relations between actors; how they constantly influence one another, how their interactions influence them, and how such feedback affects the peacebuilding process over time and space (Richmond and Mitchell 2012).

A complexity-informed approach illuminates the varying capacities of participating actors and highlights the implications of these capacities for peacebuilders. Chapter 5 demonstrated that identity can be mobilised for a dual capacity of connector and divider. Identity itself is further part of complex emergence and intersectionality, thus transforming over time. Chapter 6 amplified this finding through its discussion of the role of civil society in Mindanao. It stressed that use of oversimplified binaries—‘liberal’ and ‘illiberal’ actors—can block pathways to relationship building to actors on the ground. Chapter 6 further accounted for the omission of support for certain actors and found that their inclusion or exclusion has a direct impacting on a peace process by destabilising local power balances. A complexity-informed approach cautions prospective interveners that the social context in which actors exist must be taken into account and that intervention may lead to unpredictable outcomes. Actors are not inherently trapped in a single, fixed identity such as ‘illiberal’. Rather, their identity is subject to change and is influenced by their position within relationships and surroundings.

The premise of complexity and hybridity lies in the careful consideration of all dynamics whilst maintaining adaptivity to change. Consequently, how can one conceive of a practical approach that would navigate through constantly evolving complexity, emerging relations, and unpredictability? Chapter 4 addressed this question by discussing a typology of mid-space actors, which could be used by outsiders when extending their support to a conflict-affected society.

MID-SPACE ACTORS AND HYBRIDITY

Mid-space actors are defined as local leaders who are equipped with unique social attributes that support their function as gatekeepers for their respected communities. To fulfil this role, they encompass the ability

to tap into various sources of power, both formal and informal, while possessing a deep cultural and normative understanding of their locality. They can develop distinctive capacities that enable them to connect with actors beyond their immediate sphere of influence. These capacities include (1) *transformative relationships* (the ability and willingness to interact with key stakeholders outside one's immediate domain), (2) *locally grounded legitimacy* (a collective trust of the constituency in their leadership, which is generated and justified through leaders' access to power, cultural norms, and other information and resources), and (3) *laissez-passer* (a special access to idiosyncratic information and resources that are unattainable to strangers). Because outside intervenors usually do not possess these critical capacities, it is essential that they identify and collaborate with these mid-space actors in order to create positive impacts on the peace process.

The empirical studies of this volume demonstrated that mid-space actors emerge as either bridge-builders or spoilers depending on their relational positionality in time and space regarding the conflict and peace process. This suggests that acts of spoiling committed by mid-space actors should not be linked to their inherently 'illiberal' nature or selfish motives. Instead, they may obstruct access of other stakeholders simply because they wish to protect their community from unknown outside intervention, or to draw attention from and deliver messages to outsiders. Their act of spoiling may be a side-effect triggered by other efforts to bridge a different gap (Newman and Richmond 2006).

In Chapter 5 Cambodian Buddhist monks served as an example of mid-space actors who succeeded in bridging horizontal gaps among different communities yet failed to establish a needed vertical bridge to reach the top/national stakeholders. It was argued that the identity of these monks functioned in both ways: it facilitated the horizontal bridge-building while hindering the vertical bridge-building. Identity is intertwined with the three capacities as the consciousness of self and others can (1) influence the decision (or perceived ability) to approach outsiders, (2) help create intra-community bonding that grants legitimacy, and (3) deny the access of outsiders to internally shared knowledge. The case study of Cambodian monks indicated that recognising the disposition of mid-space actors' identity was key to appreciating the bridge-building prospects in this particular context. It also suggested that the identities of mid-space actors influenced the perceived relations between them and other stakeholders at different levels or spheres and

shaped the ability of mid-space actors to connect stakeholders and created access-points for dialogue.

Chapter 6 discussed how civil society organisations in Mindanao contributed to the establishment of a shared identity among different actors, especially between international actors and local communities, including marginalised groups who were initially excluded from the state-led peace process. The case study demonstrated the dichotomisation of commonly employed narratives in peacebuilding, as was done for local vs. international. By exposing these polarised spaces of interaction, it became clear that the concept of ‘illiberal’ actors is a phenomenon imagined by ‘liberal’ actors. ‘Liberal’ actors’ domination of the discourse led to the ultimate classification of ‘illiberal’ actors. Such a classification reinforces an oversimplified binary of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, hindering equal and inclusive participation of all relevant stakeholders in the peace process. While this can be seen as a negative effect of the local-liberal binary, through adopting the international (or liberal) norm frameworks mid-space actors have marshalled resources from outside of their immediate social realm and translated their needs into the narratives of international actors.

By functioning as cross-cultural translators, civil society representatives in Mindanao established a diagonal bridge between the local/bottom and international actors, channelling external resources and aid toward the grassroots. They also succeeded in connecting horizontal gaps between different communities by building *transformative relationships* to cut across social cleavages on the ground. Yet, the biggest challenge they faced was the lack of effective vertical links to the top/national level, which prevented them from realising a more inclusive approach to peacebuilding.

Chapters 7 and 8 demonstrated how the identity of an outside intervenor would affect the ability of outsiders to engage with mid-space actors. Chapter 7 revealed that due to its state centric focus and elite-driven modality, the Chinese peacebuilding approach lacks connections with potential mid-space actors who can articulate the grassroots reality regarding the subaltern needs on the ground. China may have to diversify its own peacebuilding agencies beyond conventional state actors to include Chinese State-Owned Enterprises or expand its partnership with non-state actors in the recipient country to overcome this limitation. In addition, the lack of a critical stance against authoritarian regimes has given Chinese endeavours a reputation of supporting illiberal peace, although China refrains from meddling in the internal affairs of other

states. While strict adherence to the Westphalian principle helped establish trusting relationships between the two Asian donor governments and aid-recipient governments, such a practice may induce negative repercussions from the Western donors as Asian ‘pragmatic’ approaches can undermine Western ‘dogmatic’ approaches. Japan has succeeded in projecting its efforts as complementary to those of the Western donors, given that Japan’s fundamental polity is democracy. On the other hand, China, as a non-democracy, faces difficulties convincing Western donors that its efforts are complementary in the same way as Japan. The question of how China and Western donors can find a way to coordinate with each other without converting their fundamental polity and identity remains.

Chapter 8 revealed that Japan maintained a dual identity as a successful example of modernisation and post-WWII recovery, which helped Japan to function as a bridge between the West and Asia. This dual identity provided Japan with the necessary access and expertise to engage with mid-space actors in a meaningful manner. As Japanese aid functions within frameworks set out by a recipient government, Japanese peacebuilders have been able to build connections to actors that might be blocked for Western donors. At the same time, unlike China, Japan identifies itself as a civilian power and is unable to offer military aid and sanctions to warring factions, thus it lacks leverage over recalcitrant mid-space actors. Nevertheless, Japan’s grassroots-based and community development projects have been operated by Japanese NGOs often in partnership with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and/or the Japanese embassies in the respected countries, which has given Japan an extensive reach and commitment to actors on the ground. With this Japan was able to create a unique access point for communication and point of interaction with mid-space actors. The type of interactions are various, such as capacity-building, community development and facilitating discussion.

The two cases jointly illustrated that the identity frames of outside intervenors have shaped their approaches to peacebuilding and influenced their engagement with mid-space actors in the aid-recipient societies.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO PEACEBUILDING

Chapters 7 and 8, which examined the efforts of two leading peacebuilders in Asia, China and Japan respectively, illustrated two alternative approaches to peacebuilding. These approaches, whilst sharing some similarities, are distinct and both represent a considerable deviation

from conventional Western-style peacebuilding. Chinese ‘developmental peace’ approaches focus on large infrastructure and thus resemble the economic peacebuilding approach discussed in Chapter 2. Unlike the Western liberal peacebuilding, Chinese approaches are not liberal value-driven, foregoing concerns for democracy and human rights and focusing instead on technical construction projects. Both Chinese and Japanese approaches respect the sovereignty of the aid-recipient country and retain the decision-making power of national governments. Whereas Japanese approaches include bottom-up feedback mechanisms to involve on-the-ground beneficiaries, Chinese endeavours lack such a dynamic and thus face a significant inclusivity gap.

The lack of sufficient bottom-up projects that encourage local ownership and participation of grassroots communities means that Chinese approaches miss an imperative aspect of hybrid peacebuilding. Chinese approaches further lack the capacity to build trusting relationships and diagonal bridges between international and grassroots actors as they do not engage sufficiently with the hinterland. These deficits prevent China from functioning as a truly hybrid peacebuilder. However, due to the size and magnitude of aid capacity China possesses, the influence of Chinese approaches on the conventional peacebuilding endeavours cannot be underestimated. Unless guided in a more inclusive direction, Chinese approaches threaten to dismantle the nuanced understanding of interactive processes of peacebuilding developed by hybrid peacebuilding theory. As proposed in Chapter 7, peacebuilding actors such as Japan could collaborate with China to supplement the shortcomings of Chinese approaches by relying on trust-relationships with mid-space actors who have access to the communities at the grassroots level.

Chapter 8 discussed strengths and weaknesses of Japanese peacebuilding by examining three cases of Japan’s involvement in Asia in which Japanese actors attempted to engage with mid-space actors in conflict-affected areas without compromising their positive relationships with the respective national governments. As an integral member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Japan can operate within the framework of the OECD standards and when appropriate it can influence the behaviour of Western donors, ensuring their efforts to support mid-space actors in building horizontal, vertical and diagonal bridges across societal cleavages.

Both China and Japan enjoy unique positions that allow them to engage and work with ‘illiberal’ actors who are side-lined by Western

peacebuilders. Japan's strength lies in its ability to remain within acceptable parameters that exist between local norms/customs and Western standards/principles, whilst China's strength stems from its immense material power, enabling it to formulate and finance numerous development projects. Japan could assist China in identifying acceptable parameters, although their geopolitical rivalry may hinder cooperation. Collaboration between these two Asian leaders has a potential for constructing a new innovative and effective alternative to Western liberal peacebuilding on the ground.

KEY FINDINGS

This study sought to bridge contemporary gaps between hybrid peacebuilding theory and practice so as to achieve its effective operationalisation. It explored how engagement with mid-space actors and their accumulated local understanding might aid intervenors in supporting on-the-ground peacebuilding. Guided by the insights of complex system theory and the mid-space actor typology, four empirical studies were conducted: two from an insider's perspectives (Cambodia and Mindanao), and two from outsider's perspectives (China and Japan).

This study was based on the premise that theory and practice should work hand in hand to enhance each other's advantages. Theories provide general guidance on what and how to analyse but they need to be complemented by analytical lenses such as complexity and hybridity so that the outcomes can be adapted to fit into the contextual reality. In practice, these analytical lenses help peacebuilders visualise a shared and systemic understanding of the local situation, allowing them to stay flexible and adaptive, and thus tuned.

Hybrid peacebuilding theory demands consideration of the inherent complexity of social systems and inclusivity of all relevant stakeholders. The scope should therefore not be fragmented by limiting it to individual elements of system. It is important to pay attention to the micro relationships among actors in a local context, and the macro field of these actors and their environment. Conflict-affected societies should not be seen as static structures. Rather, they are dynamic possesses and constantly emerging relationships, highlighting that outsiders can only be relevant if they remain open and responsive to such changes in the environment of intervention.

This volume tackled the question of how to connect the altruistic motives of external interveners to both national elites and grassroots actors through engaging with mid-space actors. It is the contention of this book that external interveners can assist the emergence of a hybrid peace based on locally grounded legitimacy by engaging with grassroots stakeholders alongside the national elite. This in turn can be achieved through the mobilisation of mid-space actors who themselves have legitimacy grounded in their interactions with local constituencies. These mid-space actors can provide access points for wider society, acting as bridges between the international community, national governments, grassroots organisations and local communities. These mid-space actors can be sourced from a plethora of locations. They may be cultural leaders, religious leaders, of NGO members. The Bangsamoro People's Consultative Assembly (BPCA) and the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), discussed in Chapters 6 and 8 respectively, are some good examples of a mid-space agency introduced in this book. Both institutions were established by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as a forum for discussion and a site of engagement with local populations. The BPCA was instrumental in providing inputs and evaluating policies regarding the negotiated autonomy between MILF and the Philippine government. The BDA offered a venue for international actors to engage with sub-national communities and the beneficiaries on the ground to formulate responsive development plans. Mid-space actors such as the BPCA and the BDA provide the essential function of network-creation, acting as an entry-point and mediator between international or national bodies and those communities most affected by conflict. The relationships built by mid-space actors are able to be utilised to build trust within local communities for peacebuilding efforts and confer commitment downstream from top-level to bottom-level participants. Collaboration between local, national and international actors creates deeper understanding, streamlines communication and aids in information-sharing and norm diffusion. This means that national-level efforts are going to be more amenable to local conceptions of peace and justice, while simultaneously managing expectations to strengthen against spoiling.

Conclusively, this study demonstrated that mid-space actors could provide a viable focal point for encouraging the establishment of self-resilient social institutions from within without dictating the content of such emergences. It also showed that the conceptual framework of hybridity could improve current models of peacebuilding. Ultimately, this

volume highlighted the need for an understanding of local peace narratives in the context of complex post-conflict societies. It also emphasised the need for a commitment to responsiveness and trust-building from outside actors to their insider counterparts. Overall, it contributes to the growing literature on peacebuilding by underlining the significance of awareness for change from within, which would lead to sustainable and resilient institutions of peace.

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