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**Beyond Boundaries:
A Report on the State of Non-Official Dialogues on Peace, Security and Cooperation in
South Asia**

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When intergovernmental relations are characterized by tensions and mutual suspicion, often rooted in past rivalries and conflicts, nongovernmental efforts can be useful to keep channels of communication open. A recent example is the proposals made by a group of nongovernmental but influential Israelis and Palestinians who presented a symbolic peace agreement intended as a foundation for any future negotiations. The unofficial Middle East peace plan was presented in Geneva on 12 October 2003. It is the result of a two-year effort led by Yossi Beilin, a former Israeli justice minister and Yasser Abed Rabbo, a former Palestinian Authority information minister. The participants worked closely within the framework of ideas and proposals which Israelis and Palestinians had discussed during the last days of the Clinton administration at Camp David and Taba. The people who drafted the Geneva initiative have reached detailed compromise agreements on all the key obstacles in past negotiations. We will have to see the initiative's impact on official negotiations if and when such official negotiations are taken up.

At other times, nongovernmental dialogues can range more widely from the ideas that have already been discussed by governments in a "brain storming" or "utopian" modes.

This study is an evaluation, partly funded by the Ford Foundation, of non-official dialogues in South Asia with an emphasis on meetings among Indians and Pakistanis. Non-official dialogues can take many forms from formal conferences and workshops to training programmes and networking activities to informal talks on the edge of conferences held for other purposes, such as the annual session of the UN Commission on Human Rights to which come a good number of activists from Asia. While written in an academic report style with a long inventory of some 40 groups sponsoring bilateral or multilateral dialogues and a list of some 250 persons interviewed, all of whom had participated in such dialogues, this study is very useful in knowing who is doing what and where in what is increasingly known as "track two" diplomacy.

In current conflict resolution terminology, "track one" is formal diplomatic negotiations either bilateral, or multilateral as within the UN or regional bodies. "Track two" dialogues provide a second line of communications between states and seek to bridge the gap between official government positions by serving as testing grounds for new policy initiatives - the proverbial trial balloon. These are policy-related discussions which are technically nongovernmental but which often involve the participation of government officials in their personal capacities and have the explicit intention of influencing public policy.

“Track three” is a term increasingly used by NGOs and social activists to refer to activities which focus on contemporary policy issues but which explicitly function apart from or beyond governments. A principal function has been to promote exchange and coalition-building among like-minded individuals operating across borders who share the general goal of building a more peaceful and cooperative South Asia. The best known of the track three dialogues are the Swiss-based World Economic Forum which is run by and for transnational corporations but to which government representatives come to explain their policies, and the newer World Social Forum which has met in 2002 and 2003 in Porto Alegre, an extension of protests held against the modern Trinity of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. The track three view is that the real value of dialogues comes from the involvement of groups outside the formal state structures to create new constituencies to reorder national priorities and to outline alternative policy options.

Predictably, the new constituencies to be mobilized by the two Forums differ. However medium and smaller businesses could be a link between the two. As the report notes “Many feel that until conditions are ripe for stronger connections among top political leaders in the region, it is the business sector that will need to be the leading force in breaking down barriers and promoting regional connections.”

The emphasis in this report is on non-official dialogues held in the late 1980s and the first part of the 1990s. The conference to discuss the findings of the study and on which the book is based was held in Gurgaon, India in December 1996. Events since that date have not lessened the need for such dialogues, but there may be new forums which are not covered in the book. As the report notes “The 1990s have seen the emergence of a large number of non-official dialogues created by the leading citizens of South Asian nations. They are the product of several factors. One is the continuing level of state-to-state tensions in much of the region. A second is the rising significance of new transnational or unconventional security issues related to such problems as environmental degradation, water resource management, and irregular movements of peoples and illicit goods across state boundaries. A third is the growth of robust nongovernmental organizations in the region. A fourth has been the return of a generation of students who have studied abroad and returned home with a stronger commitment to South Asian connections and possibilities. Finally, the success of various non-official dialogues and track two processes in other parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific, has raised fruitful questions about their value and role in a South Asian context. Non-official dialogues and related training and research programmes are not new to South Asia. The idea of a regional community of scholars was first publically articulated by Nehru in 1947 at the Asian Relations Conference, and one of the efforts mentioned in the report is the “old boys network” of the Royal Indian Military College near Dehra Dun which served to train Indian Army Officers before 1947, many of whom went on to hold positions of importance in India and Pakistan. Likewise, there are people in Business Councils and Chambers of Commerce and Industry whose families had connections before Independence and are now active in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. The question is how to structure such contacts and how to have a positive impact on governmental decision-making.

The study underlines three major difficulties in holding such non-official dialogues: - logistics, - limited range of participants, - impact on the governmental decision-making process.

The logistical problems - visas, air connections, adequate meeting places, wide distribution of reports - are real but can be overcome with good will.

More difficult to overcome is the limited socio-economic range of people involved in such dialogues. People who are marginal within national societies will also be excluded or under-represented in dialogues, most of which are carried on by people who can speak English, are educated, and have at least some common references. As the study notes, the most frequent participants in dialogue activities are academics, journalists, retired officials (both civil and military) social activists and NGO leaders. Business men are comparatively recent additions to network building. The large majority of participants are males over fifty.

Most difficult is to have ideas which are developed in non-official dialogues penetrate into the governmental decision-making milieu. Most of South Asia is influenced by the British tradition of a competent and independent civil service which is not directly influenced by political parties or pressure groups. As the report notes "dialogues to date have not yet been able to dispel the distrust that exists between government officials and many in the academy, think-tanks and non-governmental organizations, especially in India and Pakistan...Some policymakers expressed a disinterest bordering on contempt for the involvement of outsiders described in one discussion as 'naive meddlers and amateurs' lacking the skills and information to manage sensitive issues.

Another official spoke of 'well-intentioned people wasting their time and ours'...Many government officials could see no useful role for a proactive approach to track two even as a means for floating trial balloons, exploring policy options, broadening policy inputs, or improving informal relations with their opposite numbers...This was especially the case concerning 'high security' matters related, for instance, to Indo-Pakistani divisions on Kashmir, confidence building, and nuclear weapons."

In addition, as the report notes "there is an unresolved debate about how and under what conditions advocates of hard-line positions should be involved in dialogues. In the words of one analyst 'dove-dove debates lack credibility and are thus not likely to be persuasive'. Others observed that many of the current dialogues were discussions among the converted and that the real challenge is to bring skeptics into the discussion. An alternative view, especially among NGO activists, is that dialogues are relatively new and fragile and, moreover, can measure their success by networks and coalitions built rather than the rate of conversions."

On the whole, those involved in the dialogue process see non-official dialogues as a useful part of the process of managing and transforming regional relations. Nevertheless, there are two competing views. "One is that they can only have relevance at the margins of government policy and will not have major impact until governments themselves decide to take new steps to improve regional relations. The second is that is precisely because governments are fragile and

political institutions are weak that it is necessary for individuals outside of government to build a broad constituency for change which will prepare the ground for governments to act.”

Thus, a key role of dialogues should be to create an assertive and independent civil society so as to influence policy making. As the report concludes “Perhaps the most fundamental challenge for the region is to develop a vision for the future which takes into account the new forces of a more vigorous civil society and nongovernmental associations, and conceives of a way for governments to work with them.