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## When All Else Fails, Consider 'Public Talks'

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By [John Connolly](#)  
Special to Roll Call

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"All diplomatic options have been exhausted" is a statement frequently made by officials in response to a wide range of unresolved international disputes. Almost without exception, this means that all forms of negotiations have collapsed.

It is in the long-term interests of the United States for leaders in both the Senate Foreign Relations and House Foreign Affairs committees to collaborate on establishing a large-scale conflict resolution process that could be briefly summarized as "negotiating in public — the diplomatic option of last resort."

To that end, the Institute for Public Dialogue proposes "Public Talks," a new form of international dialogue that would only come into play after all other forms of negotiations have failed. The centerpiece of this worldwide communication process is a series of "Challenge Documents," small, magazine-size documents that would be distributed through the media and made available online.

The Challenge Document would feature each side's interpretation of history. It would contain questions to one's adversary, negotiating positions and other content inherent to international conflicts. Successive rounds of Challenge Documents would allow for a full exposition of the competing views of these adversaries and also would allow for a clearer focus of obstacles to an agreement. The two international Congressional committees would determine the most appropriate organizational structure to oversee the necessary rules and terms for this highly structured process.

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The underlying motive for adversaries to engage in this process is not an idealistic notion of goodwill, but rather recognition of the growing importance of public opinion. Once established, either side could unilaterally present its Challenge Document before a worldwide audience without any guarantee of a response in kind. An adversary rejecting that challenge would risk international acceptance of the other side's historical narrative of that conflict. Thus, the motive to engage in this public dialogue would be to head off erosion of support worldwide.

Every one or two weeks, one side would distribute a Challenge Document. If accepted, this dialogue would unfold over two or three months and would engage the international community as never before in the central details of that conflict.

This form of communication, part of the Institute for Public Dialogue's Public Talks, would not replace private or back-channel negotiations, nor will it work in all situations. The widespread acceptance of this platform will make it increasingly difficult for parties of a conflict to reject participation in Public Talks.

Shortly after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, a Pew Research poll indicated that 73 percent of Americans favored hearing both sides of issues, even if it meant hearing directly from enemies. Nevertheless, some will oppose this approach. Yet those who call for the spread of democracy while opposing a greater public understanding of conflicts will be creating an edifice of unsustainable hypocrisy.

Public Talks depends less on personal trust between leaders than private talks. At the culmination of the process, the final signed agreement delivered into the hands of citizens on both sides will increase confidence that the terms will not be reinterpreted in divergent ways. Consider the following objections:

- **Public Talks conflict with the secrecy that advocates of realpolitik insist on.** Public Talks commences only after secret talks have failed. Secret talks also suffer from intrinsic problems as leaders have frequently reinterpreted agreements to sell them to their constituencies, thereby sowing the seeds of a future conflict.
- **Encouraging public opinion to dictate U.S. foreign policy is a bad idea.** Public Talks will most frequently involve the U.S. only as a witness to a dialogue between other nations and societies. When the U.S. chooses to engage in Public Talks, leaders will explain their positions clearly and emphatically. The emerging difference with Public Talks is that we would all experience this direct clash of opinions leading to a greater sense of historical truth behind a given conflict.
- **This proposal is divorced from reality because governments don't care about advertisements or messages, only interests and power.** This ignores the growing importance of public opinion in the calculus of political leaders worldwide. The rise of democracy and the increased access to information is advancing this phenomenon.
- **The public will not be interested in a Challenge Document when they have access to enormous quantities of information from many media outlets.** Predicting what interests the public, as the many publishers who rejected Harry Potter will attest, is not simple. The Challenge Document would be the centerpiece of a worldwide communication process that the public would be anticipating in advance of it becoming available. Millions would see these competing historical narratives, with the leaders of the adversarial party aware that the entire world would be focusing on that same conflict.
- **Nations could censor Public Talks by simply preventing the distribution of a challenge document.** Yes, they could in areas under their control. However, attempts to block this process internally may backfire, as the rest of the world would pay close attention to any banned information.
- **Negotiations could not really take place through documents designed for the public.** Unlike private talks that often begin with small confidence-building agreements, Public Talks would start with the large issues that truly separate adversaries. The contrasting historical narratives surrounding such conflicts are easily understood and if agreement is reached, lesser issues could be negotiated privately. Moreover, a formal Web site could feature relevant details.

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of Public Talks is that it will focus world attention on the compromises and trade-offs required for agreement. In this way, public opinion could become a powerful force in moving parties to agreement.

Amid the "battle of ideas" taking shape today, U.S. support for Public Talks would show the world community that Americans are interested in not just symptoms of international conflicts, but also in underlying causes. An America that does not fear open discussion of these issues is more likely to see its principles embraced around the world.

**John Connolly is the executive director of the Institute for Public Dialogue.**

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