

DO NOT SHOOT, A PERSONAL NEGOTIATION

Human interaction and negotiation are relatively simple actions to describe, but consist of complex components. Throughout history, people have negotiated over human and civil rights, personal freedom, land, salaries, and other resources and commodities. Sometimes there is mutual understanding and an agreement is made quickly, but more often there are a series of interactions that require sacrifices and concessions in order to come up with a solution. In this paper I will discuss a situation that occurred seven years ago at Bagram Airfield (BAF), Afghanistan, involving United States Army Soldiers, local Afghans, and a loaded 9mm Soviet-made pistol. The participants were from different cultures and countries, spoke different languages, and interacted in a situation that almost resulted in a firefight. At the end, we were all supporting a common mission – destroy the enemy and make Afghanistan a safe and viable country.

I was the instigator and negotiator in this incident. The events that pertain to this paper and negotiation unfolded on one early Friday morning in February 2003. There were a few “houses” located about 150 meters past the control point (CP) outside the Bagram Gate and some Afghan security forces resided in those buildings. On our way to the local bazaar, which was held about ¼ mile west of the edge of BAF, my fellow Soldier, then US Army Staff Sergeant Daved Smith, and I passed the buildings and waved to the inhabitants. This particular morning a young boy was on the porch with what I presumed to be the local Afghan leadership. The Afghan boy, who was about 12 years of age, came running out to the street waving a black pistol over his head. The first thing I thought was, “What have we just encountered – a terrorist action or something else?” As my situational awareness was limited off the base, I was unaware of the operations in the neighborhood and the surrounding buildings. My first thoughts were “Is he a terrorist?”, “Why me?”, and “Why so close to the BAF gate?” Understanding the enemy in

theater sometimes would use children to conduct operations, I did not know if the boy was the enemy, victimized by the enemy, or not the enemy.¹

Forces assigned to Bagram were required to maintain a ten round magazine in the magazine well of 5.56mm ammunition for the M16/M4 rifles, but without a round in the chamber. Staff Sergeant Smith quickly chambered a round once he perceived a threat from this boy. I tried to diffuse the situation without violence, as I was the senior person present, standing between two armed individuals who could not verbally communicate with each other. Within seconds a US Army Military Police (MP) gun truck arrived with a loaded M240B machine gun pointed in my direction. I quickly became a negotiator.

Being concerned for my own safety, I flagged off the MPs and told SSG Smith to lower his weapon. With all the commotion several older Afghans came running out of the home to check on the situation. Almost all male “adults” carry weapons in that region of Afghanistan, in particular the AK-47 rifle. My first instinct was to disarm the child. This would remove the threat and possibly resolve the situation, as Zartman says the goal of negotiation is to prevent or resolve a violent conflict.² I reached up, grabbed the pistol, and took possession of the weapon. I then attempted to clear the weapon and remove the magazine. Unfortunately, the weapon, an older Russian 9mm pistol, was rusted and my attempt to clear the chamber was unsuccessful.

At the same time three older Afghans met us on the road. They kept their AK-47s slung across their back and posed no threat to us. As the boy was yelling in Pashtun, two elder males picked up the boy and quickly ushered him back into the house, approximately 100 feet from the road. Another Afghan male, I assumed was a leader based on his appearance, dress and the respect he was offered by of the other Afghans, came up to me with a piece of paper. This paper

was about six inches by eight inches and colorfully written on with multiple stamps and signatures. It appeared to be some kind of diploma or certificate.

One of the interpreters came forward and told me the boy was a police officer in the local village and wanted to show us his weapon – as he was armed and helped protect his country just like us. As my heart rate slowed, I realized that this ordeal could have turned out quite differently. Fortunately, deadly force was not necessary and a little use of common sense thwarted a potentially deadly situation. This conflict revolved around miscommunication – visual miscommunication.

Based off of Ho-Won Jeong's "Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis," I believe the source of this situation (from the boys' perspective) stems from three items – social acceptance, identity formation, and nationalism³. The boy wanted to be accepted by coalition forces and he presented himself in a manner that he thought was acceptable. From our standpoint, we were presented with a possible paramilitary action and a potential military target. When his credibility as a police officer was established, it became apparent that we possessed a common bond as persons wanting to help the country of Afghanistan. I never learned his identity or citizenship, but he was willing to share his purpose and job with us.

The negotiation in this example was forced and physical in nature. Once the elder arrived with an interpreter, things were settled and mediated in a way that resulted in no casualties or detainments. While utilizing force is not a recommended negotiation style, in combat military operations some techniques need to be adopted and executed in a manner that may or may not be thought of in a traditional sense. Often in war the biggest weapon wins. In this case, firepower was to our advantage. I am sure the young boy and the local men did not want to start a firefight.

I believe there were several factors that resulted in a successful negotiation. First and foremost, the boy did not have a chance to respond or communicate. This was a one sided concession. Also, my relative age to the other parties (other United States Soldiers and the young boy) gave me an advantage with real life experience and cognitive thought. Being older (and wiser) and having some negotiation training, I needed to be in charge of the situation. Additionally, my military and tactical experience contributed to my action and the overall success of the negotiation. Having worked with law enforcement, I was taught that removing the immediate threat, while utilizing the element of surprise with limited physical force, will often negate the need to use deadly force.

Looking back at the situation, the reconciliation was important to not only resolve the issue, but also to ensure cooperation between coalition forces and the local populace. Brecke and Long suggest that reconciliation is important in improving relations between parties.⁴ The Afghans were obviously upset with the situation and did not want it to disrupt our relationship. Ting-Toomey and Oetzel discuss that “conflict, when managed competently, can bring about positive changes in a relationship.”⁵ I feel this situation resulted in a mutual understanding with our local neighbors that coalition forces were not “cowboys” and Afghanistan was not the “wild west,” a common perception held by some Afghans. By this I mean the opinion that American forces were “trigger happy” and willing to shoot at the first available opportunity. This concession yielded an opportunity for us to be international diplomats rather than initiate an international incident.

What I thought was interesting was that the negotiation was followed up with a meeting between me, the elders, and the Military Police officers. The only real interaction was the elders justifying the boys’ possession of the weapons. Not knowing the relationship of the elder male

to the boy, the Afghan society is hierarchal and the authority and legitimacy of the leadership is not questioned. Cohen discusses in detail how communal-minded societies accept order and status.⁶ I believe this supports Lebanese anthropologist Fuad Khuri's opinion that "men of honor and prestige in the Middle East do not bargain."⁷ With respect to Afghan type cultures, Cohen further states that "conflict is resolved not by resort to formal processes of law, but by mechanisms of communal conciliation, concerned less with abstract principles of absolute justice than with the requirements of continuing harmony."⁸

I believe the Global War on Terror (GWOT) can be seen as a negotiation, to some extent. While our country and its coalition partners are destroying the terrorist cells and freeing the world of terrorism, outside of our national borders the US is working with other entities to fight the GWOT. Cooperation and success with negotiation efforts are required between national and international agents, such as the United States, Afghanistan, Iraq, United Nations and ISAF in order to help achieve our objective.⁹ It is in this diplomacy and non-kinetic warfare that the United States must work with both the host nations, such as Afghanistan, and other coalition partners, and the local populace to combat the violent organizations and individuals that we are currently fighting around the world. Hopefully, the international security community can mitigate future armed conflict. Today these international communities can help eradicate the activities of Al Qaeda, fight terrorism, and destroy terrorist cells that are located throughout the world.¹⁰ Additionally, beyond our deployments to help free the world of terror, it is necessary for numerous civilizations and cultures to coexist and help strengthen and maintain cooperative relations.¹¹

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- ¹ Assaf Moghadam, "Conclusion." In *International Security Studies AY10 Coursebook*, (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, August 2009), 130-131.
- ² William Zartman, "Negotiation and Conflict Resolution" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association 48th Annual Convention, Hilton Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA, Feb 28, 2007), 1.
- ³ Ho-Won Jeong, *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis*, (London, UK – Sage Publications, 2009), 43-59.
- ⁴ Peter Brecke and William J. Long, "War and Reconciliation" Consortium on Negotiation and Conflict Resolution, (A Consortium of Georgia Universities for the Advancement of Conflict Resolution Theory and Education Working Paper Series #98-1, September, 1998), 21.
- ⁵ Stella Ting-Toomey and John G. Oetzel, *Managing Intercultural Conflict Effectively*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 3.
- ⁶ Raymond Cohen, *Negotiating Across Culture*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 31.
- ⁷ Fuad I. Khuri, "The Etiquette of Bargaining in the Middle East," *American Anthropologist*, 70,(1968), 700.
- ⁸ Cohen, 31.
- ⁹ US Department of Defense. *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*. (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 2008), 2.
- ¹⁰ Dietrich Fischer, "Invulnerability without Threat." *Journal of Peace Research*, 19, no. 3, (1982): 207-212.
- ¹¹ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" In *Regional and Cultural Studies AY10 Coursebook*, (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, March 2010), 24.

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