

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/54c1169d>

Journal

POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY, 135(1)

ISSN

0032-3195

Authors

Min, Eric

Mastro, Oriana Skylar

Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.1002/polq.13016

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime by Oriana Skylar Mastro.
Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2019. 216 pp. \$39.95.

Wars begin when diplomacy fails. And in most cases of interstate conflict, wars end after diplomacy resumes. Research on war has made tremendous progress in understanding why states abandon the bargaining table and resort to fighting even when a peaceful and less costly deal theoretically exists. Much less has been said about when and why belligerents choose to return to that table. We consequently have limited capacity to understand conflict resolution or to offer practical counsel to policymakers.

In *The Costs of Conversation*, Skylar Oriana Mastro takes a significant step forward in addressing these issues and in challenging a common yet empirically dubious view in international relations scholarship that wartime diplomacy is “cheap talk.” Mastro outlines what she calls the Costly Conversations Thesis (CCT), which explains why belligerents adopt an open or closed diplomatic posture during war—that is, whether or not they are willing to engage in direct and unconditional negotiations. The key claim of the CCT is that states may refuse to negotiate while fighting because they fear that it is costly in signaling one’s weakness and a reduction in one’s war aims.

Two factors guide this calculation. The first is the risk of adverse influence: the likelihood that the opponent infers weakness from observing an open diplomatic posture. The second is the opponent’s strategic capacity: the opponent’s ability to exploit one’s apparent weakness by prolonging, intensifying, or escalating the conflict. Importantly, battlefield activity can dynamically influence perceptions of one’s toughness in absorbing and deflecting costs (what Mastro calls “resilience”) as well as a one’s strategic capacity. Belligerents are likelier to

adopt open diplomatic postures when they sense low adverse influence and an opponent with relatively low strategic capacity.

Mastro evaluates the CCT through qualitative analyses of four belligerents' diplomatic postures in three conflicts on the Asian continent: China in the Korean War, both China and India in the Sino-Indian War of 1962, and North Vietnam in the Vietnam War. Beyond their immediate substance, these studies serve as excellent examples of archival scholarship. The case selection process is thoughtful, and the evidence is compelling—in large part due to a truly impressive use of numerous primary source documents and interviews that track elite decision-making. With each case, Mastro methodically demonstrates the CCT's superior explanatory power compared to other predominant theories of war. One unmentioned alternative, however, might be the most obvious: Zartman's ripeness theory, which asserts that belligerents seek negotiations when they face a mutually hurting stalemate. The CCT likely outperforms ripeness theory, but an explicit discussion would have been beneficial.

Mastro correctly states that the CCT only explains why states choose to seek negotiations, but not the specific content of their proposals or whether they genuinely seek peace. Indeed, many anecdotes, including some in this book, suggest that negotiations can be abused to stall for time, which permits rearming and regrouping. If this occurs frequently, then the start of negotiations may sometimes be worse for conflict termination than no negotiations at all. Mastro's work therefore highlights the importance of and lays the groundwork for an essential avenue of future inquiry. Understanding belligerents' incentives to negotiate in either good or bad faith is crucial in developing richer theories of conflict, bolstering the significance of intra-conflict diplomacy, and generating meaningful guidance for negotiating settlements that end wars rather than settling for negotiations that may exacerbate them.

The CCT is an intuitive and direct argument backed by extensive data, which makes the underappreciation of its ideas in previous research even more conspicuous. *The Costs of Conversation* merits substantial attention from international relations scholars, diplomatic historians, policymakers, and anyone who appreciates robust qualitative and archival research.

Eric Min

University of California, Los Angeles