

# THE POWER OF RESTRAINT IN STRATEGIES OF CONFLICT AND PEACE

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I am grateful to President Shimon Peres for bringing us here celebrate 60 years of Jewish national life restored in Israel.

Beyond all other scientific advances, now we need advances in the science of peace-making. Sharing our planet's limited resources and building global prosperity will be impossible unless we can maintain peace throughout the world.

To show the world how to make peace, this is a challenge with which Israel has truly wrestled in our time. Israel must not fail, for both its own sake and the world's. If there is a secret key to making peace that has been overlooked, we must find it.

As a game theorist, I have devoted my professional life to studying problems of conflict. A game theorist's method is to logically analyze incentives in conflict, taking into account how the situation is viewed by all parties. From this perspective, let me try to clarify some general lessons from history that we can apply in any country.

One lesson is the danger of appeasement. In the twentieth century, we all learned that appeasement of a militant adversary can be a disastrous mistake. Our concessions may simply encourage our enemy's ambitions. Our appeasement today may invite further intimidation or destructive invasion of our community tomorrow.

Another lesson is the need for armed vigilance. To deter aggression, our nation needs adequate military strength, and our leaders must demonstrate the resolve to use it when necessary. Nonviolence is a philosophical ideal that is not permitted to our national leaders.

These lessons of history seem clear, but they contain a latent contradiction. The response to our armed vigilance that we seek from our adversaries is, in a word, appeasement. We want them to respect our strength and accommodate us, to appease us. But why should they not fear that concessions to us could encourage our greater ambitions, inviting further invasion of their community? If the demand for armed vigilance on each side is matched by a fear of appeasement on the other side, how can we escape from a long war of attrition?

The key is that a nation's security depends, not only on its resolve to maintain and use strong military forces, but also on its reputation for restraint. If others see us as lacking resolve,

they may be tempted to attack or intimidate us. But if we lose our reputation for restraint, they may fear to make peace with us. So an effective deterrent strategy must combine both a threat to retaliate against aggression and a promise to reciprocate in cooperation. Our forceful resolve makes our threats credible, but our restraint is equally essential for the credibility of our promises. If our neighbors believed only our resolve but not our restraint, they would fear to appease us, and for protection against us they would seek stronger militant leaders.

So a military action that we intend as retaliation against aggression may instead provoke our adversaries to greater militancy, unless we credibly communicate the limited scope and precise preconditions of our action. Deterrence is a process of strategic communication with our adversaries. Both sides must try to find some shared view of justice in this process, so that one side's acts of deterrent retaliation should not be misinterpreted by the other side as new provocations that require further military response.

The power of demonstrating restraint with resolve is at the core of Gandhi's concept of *satyagraha* (truth-firmness), which he specifically distinguished from *ahimsa* (nonviolence). Whether our punitive actions are nonviolent or violent, they are more likely to positively influence our adversary if we consistently match them with credible costly signals that show that we are ready to restrain our ambitions in an agreement where all sides can find justice. Thus, when Gandhi demonstrated against an unjust law, he took great care to demonstrate also his willingness to obey the government in other matters of law.

Restraint is not demonstrated by general proclamations of high moral values, nor by listing the past abuses that our people have suffered. Manipulating our adversaries' choice of leaders is a form of invasion which can undermine our reputation for restraint. Declarations of good will that are aimed at a domestic audience are unlikely to earn our adversaries' trust. Everyone knows that aggressors may try to mask their intentions with honeyed words of peace.

We can effectively signal our restraint by articulating clear strategic limits that verifiably constrain our actions in the conflict, and by showing real understanding and respect for justice as our adversaries see it. The point is not to convince ourselves of our own moral purity; the goal is to convince our adversaries that they can safely make peace with us.

These ideas apply equally to all sides in a conflict. Our adversaries should also be urged similarly to demonstrate their restraint to us: to show us that they can be restrained law-abiding neighbors even when we lay down our arms. But to offer firm commitments, they need effective

leadership and government.

In a democracy, when voters evaluate a leader's contribution to their national security, they often focus only on the leader's resolve to maintain their nation's military power. Why do people so often neglect a leader's equally essential role in maintaining their nation's reputation for restraint?

People's ability to live together in any community or nation depends on basic social agreement about principles of justice and legitimate authority in the nation. So we promote harmony with our neighbors by affirming that our local social order is compatible with all higher law, as indeed the highest universal law is manifest in our nation. But this affirmation predisposes us to assume that the basic values and judgments of our nation should be universally recognized by good people everywhere. Thus, citizens of any nation tend to assume that the justice and moderation of their national aspirations should be automatically evident to the whole world, without any need for their leaders to demonstrate restraint continually. Alas, since the Tower of Babel, universal law has manifested itself differently in different nations.

But for two nations or communities to live beside each other in peace, they must develop a common vision of justice to cover the land and the history that they share. If the resolution of their conflict is not total conquest of one by the other, then this shared view of historical justice must be stitched together from the traditions of both communities. This hard process of negotiation can only begin when each side acknowledges the other's side of the story.

I have argued that a balance between forceful resolve and manifest restraint is essential for effective deterrence in international conflict. I have put more emphasis on restraint here only because I think that people regularly underestimate its importance. I have spoken as a theorist, with no attempt to identify such biases on either side of the conflict in this region.

But let me say a few words about my own nation, because the importance of restraint is greatest for the world's most powerful nation. In this decade, American leaders have expressed forceful resolve to pursue terrorism into any nation, but without letting anyone else judge the limits of this pursuit. Such unrestrained exercise of military power can stimulate fears of more American interventions, which can increase demand for militant anti-American leadership in many parts of the world. Thus, without restraint, bold resolve in American foreign policy can actually make America less secure.

Nobody wants a return to the chronic dangers of global military rivalries among great

powers. But if a global system of American military superiority is to endure without proliferating challenges, Americans must reassure the world that our use of this unrivaled military power will be subject to some constraints that can be judged by the international community.

I feel very privileged to discuss theory of conflict resolution here in Jerusalem. The great traditions of all Abrahamic faiths have been taught here as systems to help people to solve the problems of living together in peace. When people here find a way to share Jerusalem in peace, the accomplishment should be recognized by the world as a fulfillment of all religious traditions, not as a compromise for any of them. So I look to you in Jerusalem for a lesson in how to make peace.

<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/shalom08.pdf>

#### *RELATED PAPERS*

*For a fuller development of these ideas with some use of basic game theory, see:*

*"Force and Restraint in Strategic Deterrence" (<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/restrain.pdf>).*

*In game-theoretic analysis of international relations, the great seminal classic is Thomas Schelling's Strategy of Conflict (Harvard U. Press, 1960). Many of the ideas that are expressed in this talk may be recognized as straightforward applications or extensions of his ideas. See also:*

*"Learning from Schelling's Strategy of Conflict" (<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/stratofc.pdf>).*