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Considerations on International Negotiations

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Abstract: The present article highlights the complexity of negotiations that have continuously evolved. Although there are many definitions of negotiation in relation to its importance and level, the difficulty of a negotiation process is also determined by conflicting interests and the positions of the negotiating parties. Regardless of the nature of the negotiation process, experience and specific training, ultimately, the professionalism of those who negotiate requires a great deal of discernment between reality and appearances.

Keywords: international relations; war; negotiation; diplomacy; power

1. Introduction

In international relations, negotiations represent their foundation and, at the same time, an “integral factor, and in some cases, they have acquired a continuous or long-term character” (Mautner-Markhof, 1979, p. 2) precisely in harmonizing the interests of actors on the international stage. It is evident that the international society is evolving ever more dynamically, interdependently and complexly, and perhaps that is why at the beginning of this century, “the inherited scenarios for future war were inadequate” (Freedman, 2019, p. 304), which imposes the requirement that negotiations also move away from their classical model, as geopolitical conditions are changing. At the same time, just as “negotiation is situational, so is its study” (Meerts, 2015, p. 19).

From the perspective of international relations, it is appreciated that these “are not in a constant state of war, but in a continuous competition for security, with the possibility of conflict always in the background” (Morgenthau, 2007, p. 584).

It is also a reality of negotiations that their outcome, expressed through an agreement, must not offer opportunities for new disputes. For these reasons, it is necessary to identify “multiple solutions, so that actors may have different preferences for mutually desirable types of agreements. This generates dilemmas for negotiation” (Jeong, 2016, p. 3). A compelling example is represented by Romania’s position of neutrality (1914–1916), explained by diplomat Savel Rădulescu when “negotiations with Romania, which were mainly the responsibility of the Russian Government, progressed only slowly and were not at all fruitful. From their beginning, the Romanian Government (...) adopted an ambiguous position. Refusing to side with the Central Powers, contrary to the insistence of King Carol I, who

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strongly believed in Germany's triumph, Romania demonstrated a lack of frankness, leaving the Allied Powers uncertain for a long time regarding the position it would adopt. Nevertheless, it did not refuse to negotiate with Petrograd on the price Russia might offer for definitively breaking with the Central Powers (Preda, 2025, p. 25).

2. Negotiation – A Process Shaped by Diverse Factors

It is already well known that “the expected outcome of a negotiation is an agreement. However, this is a simplistic statement because not all outcomes are necessarily agreements” (Iragorri, 2003, pp. 93-94).

The specialized literature offers a diversity of definitions depending on the importance attributed to one component of the negotiation process. Therefore, it should be noted, beyond all these definitions, that “it is not so much a combination of conflicting positions, but of conflicting needs reflected in conflicting positions” (Meerts, 2015, p. 20).

Hans Morgenthau emphasizes “the vital importance of diplomacy as an element of national power (...). This is because diplomacy that fails in war has missed its main objective: promoting national interest through peaceful means” (Morgenthau, 2007, p. 551).

In general, “three main stages of any diplomatic negotiation process are recognized: the pre-negotiation stage, identifying a guiding formula and establishing the details. The difficulty of each negotiation stage can vary from process to process, as can its duration and the energy consumed” (Biro, 2013, p. 74). One may argue that the pre-negotiation stage is perhaps even more difficult because it initially involves negotiating to “convince the conflicting parties to enter into negotiations, which represents the agreement in principle to initiate discussions on the disputed issue (Biro, 2013, p. 74).

Given the above, a near-determinant role falls to the negotiators because “the art of politics and negotiation requires those who practice it to constantly adapt to changing circumstances” (Plantey, 2007, p. 13), and “great peace conferences are as important as great battles” (Plantey, 2007, p. 13). In these, specialized preparation and experience - in short, professionalism - in diplomacy are essential, involving keen discernment between reality and appearances, between truth and falsehood and the ability to assess situations without being misled by façades (Anghel & Petrescu, 2009, p. 337). This aspect, although less known in Romania, was evident in negotiations leading to accession to the European Communities and NATO shortly after 1990, where multilateral diplomacy experience proved decisive. Also related to diplomacy, the level of professionalism and high degree of analysis and expertise was evident in the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), regarding which Ambassador Mircea Malița noted that “in international politics, there is no action or decision based on a single explanatory cause: there are a dozen causes dancing chaotically until they converge into a single movement” (Anghel & Petrescu, 2009, p. 337) and it was concluded that there was no intention to trigger a nuclear conflict.

In the current context, “international negotiations are (...) a frequent phenomenon and generally regarded positively. However, they are characterized by their diversity and are not easy to understand” (Devin, 2025) and the international dimension does not alter the logic and objectives of negotiation. From this international perspective, the establishment of the League of Nations (1919–1946) can be seen as the first fully-fledged multilateral negotiation process that resolved territorial issues after World War I (Meerts, 2015, p. 3), when an interdependence of interests among states began to manifest, creating an opportunity for negotiations (Stein, 1988, p. 221).

Each negotiation has its own challenges, but the most important are found in “violence, because it is the main alternative to peaceful conflict resolution; complexity, because it hinders effective management of the negotiation process; bureaucracy, because it slows down the negotiation process; and negotiators’ personal preferences and particularities” (Meerts, 2015, p. 3). In this regard, “national interests will be defined differently for different topics, at different times and by different government units” (Keohane & Ney, 2009, p. 78).

Former ambassador Cristina Aguiar pointed out that within the concept of negotiation, we must distinguish several types: negotiation undertaken directly by holders of political power in the state (direct negotiation), negotiation carried out by state representatives appointed by sovereign state bodies but dependent on political power holders - these are, in the narrow sense, diplomatic agents (diplomacy); and negotiation undertaken by representatives or by the political leaders of a third state serving as intermediaries between two states (mediation) (Aguiar & Nhouyvanisvong, 2010, p. 7), in which negotiating power stands out as a basic constant.

To simplify the negotiation process, especially from an analytical perspective, a negotiation process may “be subdivided into five aspects: the perceived structural relationship between negotiators; the behavior of negotiators in their interactions; the means and ends regarding the adequacy of instruments used to achieve the desired goal; the role of a third party when involved; and finally, the outcome of the negotiation process” (Pfetsch, 2011). The vast body of specialized literature attempts to clarify all aspects of the negotiation process using various variables based on negotiators’ statements, case studies, experiments and different theories. However, the study and understanding of negotiation as a central part of international relations are achieved through any negotiation, which, in fact, represents a particular case of negotiation precisely due to the variables involved. These elements configure the structure of a theoretical negotiation model. For these reasons and more, it is necessary that, in order to understand “the moves and strategies of a particular negotiation, it is vital to understand the grand strategy that governs how an actor analyzes and perceives a political situation, especially when it is one of conflict” (van den Berg, 2021).

The complexity and interdependence of international relations also highlight that “international disputes are not between individuals or organizations but between separate political systems, often very different from each other. Politics determines not only the issue but also how the issue will be resolved” (Bendahmane, 1983), from which it must be understood that trust between parties becomes essential to the evolution of the negotiation process.

Trust is also influenced by leaders through the way they perceive cooperative relationships, whose level “is determined by two factors: one is the interdependence of interests; the other is the quality and value of the relationship” (van den Berg, 2021). Since all “negotiations involve both a rational decision-making process (substantive) and a psychological (emotional) process, a negotiation agreement is just as likely to be the result of psychological elements as it is of rational ones” (Wertheim, 2025), we support the idea that negotiation in international affairs is both a science and an art.

3. Conclusions

The conclusion that can be drawn is that negotiation is the most widespread process in global politics and conflicting preferences are part of every situation, while international changes have occurred both through war and at the negotiating table. However, beyond the complexity of negotiations, it seems that it is often “easier to start a war than to negotiate a conflict.” Also, the statement remains valid that “crises and conflicts are an inevitable aspect of international relations” (Bercowitch, 1989, p. 695). Beyond

theoretical negotiation models, in reality, it is the preparation and experience - in essence, the professionalism - of negotiators that form the basis for reaching agreement at the negotiating table.

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