

Review – The Negotiators

Written by Felicia Yuwono

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FELICIA YUWONO, APR 19 2023

The Negotiators

By Foreign Policy, hosted by Jennifer Williams

Podcast, Season 1, 2021

Crisis, negotiation, compromise, implementation, resolution: a linear path usually expected in conflict resolution. But most conflicts can hardly be reduced to a linear path – they need to be understood in all their complexities. *The Negotiators*, a production by Foreign Policy and Doha Debates, offers a preview of “people working to resolve some of the world’s toughest conflicts”, as the opening of the show suggests. Its first Season features notable events in the twenty-first century.

Each episode typically starts with an overview of the issue under negotiation, which ranges from multilateral climate negotiations, plurilateral negotiations of Iranian nuclear agreement, national peace agreements, to local hostage situations. This is followed by one or two interviews to reflect the negotiators’ accounts of the negotiation processes, and a brief post-negotiation epilogue. Some episodes also provide expert reviews which explain or analyse the case in more detail. The podcast is in general well-delivered, using simple language which does not take away from the richness of perspectives. Overall, it can be seen as an attempt to create online resources on matters of foreign policy and International Relations (IR), which have flourished since the pandemic era.

What the show has to offer

The show is largely effective in making political processes that are traditionally very exclusive and closed from the public view accessible to listeners. First-hand negotiation accounts on recent and sensitive topics are particularly hard to come across. In so doing, the podcast manages to keep sight of the need for balance in reviewing the cases. The richness of perspectives in Episode 3 on the Iran nuclear deal, for example, exposes the misperception in the United States around Iran’s nuclear program and reveals how far Iran actually is from the ability of developing nuclear weapons. Likewise, the show successfully captures the complexity of not only the negotiation processes, but also the nature of conflict. Episode 8 explains how democratic processes are beyond benchmarks of democracy, and that elections are not the ultimate solution to all problems. In almost all episodes, the background of conflict is succinctly summarised.

Further, the podcast steered clear from using dichotomies of representation that are often used as power resources. For example, it refrains from easily ascribing the labels of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’, or ‘moderate’ versus ‘extremists’ to resurgent groups such as the Taliban (Episode 7), Boko Haram (Episode 9) or ISIS (Episode 10). Instead, *The Negotiators* strives to understand the complexity in the background. Episode 8 on Libya’s elections emphasises how it is often easy to identify those holding the weapons as “thugs”, whereas arguably “the more odious characters were the militia in the suits” – that is, the corrupt politicians and business interests behind them.

Besides deliberating aptly on the nuance, the podcast also familiarises listeners with widely used terms in negotiations, such as “constructive ambiguity” (Episode 5). This is one of the most important concepts in understanding the processes and products of negotiations, as it denotes that language produced by negotiations is laden with history. Ambiguity of language is often a part of interpretive tactics to achieve particular negotiation

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outcomes, where texts are to some degree open to interpretation (Hamidi, 2020, p.550). This means that negotiations themselves aim to create a momentum for cooperation and hope to produce a more conducive environment to resolve challenging issues. In a way, they are setting the tone in which the future will be shaped. This also means that negotiations are never a one-off event – they are intended “to listen and find the common and then build on that” (Ameena Matthews, Episode 6).

On the role of women, the podcast comes out with enough emphases to normalise the idea of women as negotiators and to increase their participation in peace and security settings. This is one of the main features of Women, Peace and Security agenda of the United Nations (UN).

Another strength of the podcast is its entertainment value: it can be quite enjoyable to listen to.

Additional concepts

There are some additional concepts and lessons, not explicitly elaborated on, but that can be observed from Season 1. First, *symbolic capital* is essential in making things possible. Simply put, symbolic capital is a type of resource derived from social legitimacy which gives an agent the power to be listened to, to speak with authority and therefore to influence or mobilise others (Bourdieu, 1989, p.23). In Episode 1, a UN agency needed to enlist the help of powerful public and private figures to convince governments to present their best endeavours in achieving an agreement in the Paris climate change negotiations. In Episode 6, an interrupter succeeded in preventing violence from being recognised and respected in the streets of Chicago. Episode 9 shows how the symbolic capital of a barrister, a constitutional lawyer and member of the ruling party in Nigeria, could make the government take the Chibok kidnapping case seriously. In the same vein, the Swiss government could get access to groups which other actors could not, due to the wide recognition of their neutrality and willingness to talk to anyone.

Second, *power needs legitimacy*, and one way to acquire legitimacy is by following the rules of the game. This is true even for the likes of the Taliban, which in Episode 7 is pictured as seeking legitimacy by being “wildly different” in 2017 than in 2009, and by acting more like what a legitimate government would do in terms of delivering public education and healthcare.

Limitations

The podcast is naturally not without limitations. First, the podcast at times goes overboard and casts an overwhelming focus on agencies – on what actors do in a negotiation. As a consequence, negotiations were represented as single moments, and were hinted as being successful or unsuccessful on account of how the product of that particular moment was implemented (for instance in Episode 1 and Episode 2). This approach tends to overestimate the role individuals can have on the course or outcome of negotiations. In Episode 1, Christina Figueres may have been portrayed as heroic in single-handedly deciding that the Paris negotiations should continue despite potential security threats to the safety of delegations. However, this actually raises serious ethical and procedural questions on her role as a facilitator, as the episode suggests that she did so without reporting to the President of the conference or the States Parties.

Secondly, the podcast lacks a central message that gives meaning and importance to the show. By trying to cover different levels and many aspects of negotiations, the concept of negotiation becomes generic and reducible to single, sporadic attempts at stopping violence and crisis situations detached from their politics. Does it want to educate listeners on the art of dealmaking? Does it want to ‘bring negotiations down’ to the level accessible to everyone? Or does it merely seek to expose ‘behind the scenes’ accounts of the negotiators in the forms of audio quasi-biographies? Depending on what it attempts to deliver, the podcast could have been more structured under specific themes.

Lastly, the series focuses its episodes on what they see as dramatic negotiations. While serving its entertaining purpose (as any good podcast should), this review argues that an insightful show does not have to rely on a dramatic element. It runs the risk of perpetuating a belief that politics, including international politics, are defined by these

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sensational events. In so doing, it deprives the audience of the more important picture of how relations and conditions of possibility are built.

Negotiations that do impact the world are often not one-time events, or contingent upon one or several actors' agency. Peace negotiations, by their very nature, are multi-faceted, multi-phase and sometimes continuous. They produce and are reproduced by history and context, within cultures that shape conditions of possibility (see Hansen, 2006; Sending et al., 2015). One of the most important – albeit underappreciated – elements of conflict resolution actually lies in the daily routine, the investment of relations manifested in the mundane practices that shape world politics. I may refer here to the recent 'practice turn' in IR, whose insights can be unexpected yet enlightening. Analysing the mundane can be equally important and entertaining without resorting too much to dramatic effect.

Conclusion

The Negotiators shows that there is more to negotiations than a linear path. In each negotiation, there are complexities that must be appreciated and deserve their own title. Episodes include explanation of certain methods and agencies in managing conflicts, focusing on accounts not only from people directly involved, but also from experts who offer a balancing perspective of the process. The show is excellent in making negotiations accessible and providing the necessary balance in substance as well as gender representation. It should be noted, however, that its overwhelming focus on agency and reliance on dramatic effect could lead to the belief that politics, including international politics, are defined by these dramatic events. Nevertheless, it can be an interesting supplementary resource for IR lectures or case studies, or for entertaining purposes in general.

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