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Conflict Analysis: Understanding Causes, Unlocking Solutions

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BOOK REVIEWS

DO NO HARM

Levinger, Matthew. *Conflict Analysis: Understanding Causes, Unlocking Solutions*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2013. 265pp. \$20

Conflict resolution is often compared to medicine. Both fields pursue research not as an end in itself but to relieve suffering and promote healing. Both have as their first tenet “Do no harm.” Writers on conflict too must display academic rigor yet show sufficient clarity and force to engage a diverse readership. Most importantly, they must offer ideas that will be helpful in real-world situations.

Levinger’s book excels on all these counts. This work, focused on large-scale violence, is intended as a “practical reference and field guide” for diplomats, military officers, development specialists, nongovernment organizations, and corporations operating in conflict zones. Levinger is highly qualified for this task, having held positions in executive education on conflict management at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the United States Institute of Peace, and George Washington University, where he is currently visiting professor of international affairs and director of the National Security Studies Program at the Elliott School.

A three-part structure addresses the nature and causes of conflict, analytical

tools, and a process for transforming analysis into action. Of particular value is the attention Levinger gives to the social dynamics of collaborative analysis, illuminating how interaction among individual and institutional participants can affect outcomes, both positively and negatively.

Levinger begins on a cautionary note, pointing out that while the level of conflict has declined since the Cold War, resource shortages and other factors could reverse that trend. He reviews leading theories on conflict’s causes, offering useful insights into the psychology of escalation and the role of women in reducing conflict as well as sustaining it. A chapter on risk assessment and early warning discusses monitoring systems, including the U.S. government’s Monitoring Progress in Conflict Environments program. Levinger stresses early detection of genocidal violence, which can be “more explosive and extreme than other conflicts.”

The section on analytical tools describes conflict assessment frameworks, narrative analysis, conflict mapping, and scenario analysis. All are

powerful instruments, but Levinger offers caveats. He recommends beginning with a self-assessment to clarify one's own interests, and he cautions that any analysis can only be a "snapshot." Moreover, "in many cases, the interpersonal relationships and the deliberative process established during the conflict assessment will be more valuable than any specific conclusions."

An illuminating chapter on "cognitive minefields" addresses three challenges familiar to many readers: groupthink, "black swans," and psychic numbing. Regarding the latter, Levinger argues that contrary to conventional thinking, emotional response is integral to sound decision making. In the words of psychologist Paul Slovic, the ideal process is "a dance of emotion and reason."

Levinger prescribes five steps for integrating analysis into program planning and implementation: framing the problem, defining objectives, conducting situational analysis, designing a program of action, and monitoring progress. More discussion would have been useful here on specific ways of integrating senior leaders' perspectives into working-level deliberations and on helping them in turn to grasp the dynamic complexity of volatile situations. As Levinger notes, "conflict analysts should not seek to become decision makers, but rather to help decision makers become better conflict analysts themselves."

Levinger offers illuminating case studies, tables, charts, and boxes highlighting key points. The comprehensive appendixes, glossary, and list of resources add further to the value of this book. It should be standard reading in every security-studies program.

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Harrison, Ross. *Strategic Thinking in 3D: A Guide for National Security, Foreign Policy, and Business Professionals*. Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2013. 197 pp. \$29.95

Ross Harrison, a professor at Georgetown University and well-known strategic theorist, takes the novel approach that the basic tenets of strategy are applicable to nearly all human endeavors. Rather than accepting the traditional view that the strategic theory relevant to a national-security professional is inapplicable to a corporate executive, Harrison introduces a multistep approach to identifying and applying what he characterizes as universal strategic principles.

Harrison sees the aim of all strategies, regardless of the field in which they are utilized, as being to navigate a multidimensional external environment to the ultimate benefit of one's chosen endeavor. Whether you are a military officer confronting an asymmetric-warfare challenge or an entrepreneur seeking to expand your product's market share, the underlying principles of sound strategy remain constant. Harrison identifies three unchanging dimensions in any strategy: systems, opponents, and groups.

The author states that systems relate to the external environment confronting all strategies, a "web of relationships where a change in one part has an effect on the other parts." A "system" can be as defined as a formal alliance, like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or as diffuse as the entire Middle Eastern region and its political, economic, and cultural characteristics. Harrison's most subtle and nuanced proposition is that the formulation of strategy in the context of external