Complex and challenging negotiation settings have plagued the conflict management sphere for many years. Whether it is parties becoming more comfortable in their conflict situation or it is harder to get parties to talk together, the fields of diplomacy and negotiation require clear and straightforward tools to tackle these issues. With the backdrop of the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the recently published Global Power of Talk: Negotiating America's Interests, the Conflict Prevention & Resolution Forum presents a discussion on the different ways “Talk” can be used to accomplish foreign policy purposes that military might can never reach.

Diplomacy, Negotiation, and Common Ground

A lot of diplomacy and negotiation is elegant, strongly structured, but not intelligible. There is a multitude of tools in diplomacy that can be used, rather than simply employing rhetoric. Importantly, specific tactics for the use of each of these tools must be clear and thought out.

The panel began with the sharp statement that we can talk to terrorist. As a simplified policy approach, we can say with one hand ‘stop the violence’ and with the other ‘show an alternative to terrorist action’.
In such circumstances, the mediator has to be involved in moving the parties, rather than just getting them to talk. This also requires getting parties to outcomes that are mutually satisfying. This may involve getting together a number of parties and rivals in regional conflict. Those parties may oppose one another, but share common interest in resolving the conflict. It is this common ground that can be the starting point for negotiations.

At the same time, talking with friends and allies was emphasized as a basis of cooperation in keeping relationships moving forward. Engagement with allies as well as perceived adversaries will permit new ideas and new twist on the problems with old regimes. To do this, although a number of methods exist, excluding empty talk will be needed, such as UN diplomacy without firm support.

The panel identified fourteen forms of negotiation. Such negotiation tools included “Straight Talk”, which involves telling things in realistic terms the way that they are, such as the methods used during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Another is “Safe Talk”, where protective tactics take negotiator out of the spotlight and involves greater secret diplomacy. A mediator's special tactics presides in Safe Talk with parties separately, typically over drinks in a hotel room or elsewhere. If the mediator does not have the mandate to use Safe Talk, it can be dangerous in certain circumstances to “take a walk in the woods.” However, in today’s current state of 24-hour media, internet news, and social media it can be extremely difficult to engage in backroom deals and diplomacy.

In the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the negotiations could be kept quiet and without media knowledge. The panel pointed out that this could not be done today. Furthermore, if media were to have knowledge of the 1962 Missile Crisis during those thirteen days, it would have compressed the time span of communications and diplomacy, leading possibly to war. Media, in its relationship to diplomacy and negotiations, is caught in the conundrum of their first amendment responsibilities and getting people killed or saving lives.

With all the tools and methods presented by experienced professionals and experts, diplomacy and negotiation is not just talking, or making nice, or appeasement. It is testing the other side and seeing where they are in order to solve the most intractable domestic and international conflicts. Ultimately, the new world of diplomacy has a telescoped time period to use Talk and make decision.