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Scientific academies in international conflict resolution

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Abstract

Science and scientists (including scholarship and scholars) have an important contribution to make to the mitigation and prevention of international conflicts. First and foremost, they emphasize the search for the truth, which requires an attitude of openness and collaboration. Second, they can provide evidence and information that can settle differences of opinion or reduce tensions. Third, they can offer independent and unbiased advice on policy matters that involve scientific information or require a scientific foundation. Fourth, they educate a new generation of scientists as well as the wider public, thus increasing the intellectual defensibility and democratic foundation of a society. For many of these contributions, an academy of arts and sciences may be used as a functional vehicle. A further contribution can be made by the organizational sciences through an analysis of the determinants and nature of conflict escalation or de-escalation, thus offering starting points for effective conflict management and prevention. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Science and scholarship have an important and distinctive potential for contributing to a better and peaceful future of mankind. I explore first the role of academies and sciences in this respect. This role is particularly apparent as the academies adhere to two general and central principles, phrased in the 1996 Genoa Declaration on Science and Society [1] as follows:

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Respect for the diversity of cultures within societies and promotion of science as a distinctive and important contributor to bridging such diverse cultures and promoting peaceful coexistence in accord with the principles of freedom, autonomy and rationality.

Mutual cooperation, reflecting the recognition that the production and utilization of scientific and technological knowledge are decisive for the future welfare of humanity and that science, with its universality, is uniquely positioned to serve as a laboratory in which mankind can work together to achieve a better future in accord with the principles of responsibility, solidarity and respect for the rights of individuals and nations.

In addition to discussing the role of science academies, I call attention to the potential contribution by social science to the prevention or resolution of conflict. Social science can play this role through scientific analysis of the conflict process itself and through application of the principles of escalation and prevention of conflicts, as developed in organizational science.

2. The role of academies of arts and sciences

The first academy, founded by Plato in a grove near Athens, was situated outside the center of public life. Rather than a wish for isolation, it was a desire to engage in critical reflection on philosophical theorems and political arguments that made this choice of location appropriate. When Emperor Justinian, almost a millennium later, decided to close this academy because the views developed there were considered damaging to the state, he did not realize that the value and contribution of an academy spring from its search for truth, its independent position, and its freedom to criticize. Later, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was this same spirit of independence and intellectual freedom that caused the revival of the idea of an academy as a place where scholars meet, exchange ideas, and reflect in an environment of absolute intellectual freedom and independence. Of course, the ideas and recommendations produced by these intellectual activities may be used by governments, funding agencies, and institutes of learning, but the academy's primary function is that of a meeting place for independent scholarly and scientific reflection.

Discussion of the impact of scientific cooperation on relations between nations, in my opinion, should be extended to the whole field of learning and scholarship, including the human and social sciences. I will therefore refer to the wider and original concept of 'scientia'. And in particular with an eye on the underlying question of how conflicts and hostilities between nations and regions can be solved or prevented, the inclusion of humanities and social sciences is indispensable. I focus on three main functions of an academy of arts and sciences, and consider to what extent all three may help build bridges and reduce conflicts.

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