Transformative Dialogue in an Era of Constricting Civic Spaces

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Summary

As authoritarian strategies reshape the United States' social and political institutions, entities that make up the nation's peace infrastructure, including the ISCT, face mounting existential threats. The erosion of rights, evidenced by the politicization of core protections and the accelerating constriction of civic spaces, marks a threshold of sociopolitical conflict at the national level that calls for critical reflection. Within this evolving landscape, the ISCT's Transformative Dialogue model offers a distinctive contribution to social cohesion, as well as civic resilience and resistance.

Yet, in keeping with the ISCT's theoretical commitments, this moment also exposes a gap: an underdeveloped engagement between micro-level dialogue practices and the broader sociopolitical forces currently reshaping the nation. Drawing on experiences of dialogue under more advanced authoritarian conditions, this proposal invites ISCT thought leaders and practitioners to examine the model's current positioning and consider how it might respond to intensifying dynamics of suppression, co-optation, and threat, including that of the Institute's own strategic obsolescence.

Stopping short of prescribing outcomes, this essay invites readers to reflect upon whether or how the ISCT can adapt and advance its transformative mission amid deepening constraints, understanding dialogue as a politically aware and power-conscious practice in an increasingly hostile terrain.

Introduction

Across the United States, democratic institutions are not just eroding, they are being methodically re-engineered. Under the veneer of legality and electoral mandate, civic dissent is increasingly criminalized, institutional oversight mechanisms meticulously dismantled, and the rights to expression, association, and participation strategically suppressed. The result is not incidental dysfunction, nor the reliable messiness of a participatory democratic system. It is the intentional realignment of norms and imposed expectations that mirror the early strategies of more advanced authoritarian regimes.

This shift has been visible across multiple and intersecting domains: expanded surveillance, politically motivated prosecutions, the erosion of judicial independence, and explicit amassing of power by the executive, including for purposes of personal enrichment. State apparatus once meant to safeguard rights and public interests is increasingly weaponized against the very people they have been designed to serve and protect, including journalists, activists, educators, students, and civil society actors that, whether individually or institutionally, are being cast as threats and punitively targeted. The emerging terrain is one of escalating sociopolitical tension, imbued with a normalizing discourse of intimidation and threat, and enabled by algorithmic disinformation that cultivates polarization and control. The nation's highest officials now patently extort, punish protected forms of dissent, while blatantly disregarding due process.

US Peace Infrastructure under Threat

Beyond those in recent headlines, in the quieter crosshairs of the actions being undertaken by elected authority, lies another victim: the country's national peace infrastructure[1], or the formal and informal networks, systems, individuals, and institutions that help prevent and manage social and political conflict. This less evident, though increasingly vulnerable system encompasses a range of actors, starting with national organizations, most notably amongst them the United States Institute of Peace or USIP, and Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, both of which have been effectively eliminated by fiat. Beyond these, the national peace infrastructure includes community non-profits focused on violence prevention and mediation programming, as well as research hubs that buttress positive peace pillars such as public health and education. This collective infrastructure, though not coordinated or centrally orchestrated, remains key for sustaining social cohesion and effective, nonviolent approaches to conflict transformation. Its unique and combined contributions to sociopolitical peace may only become fully visible the hindsight, particularly in the wake of its fragmentation or absence.

Organized civic spaces, meanwhile, are at risk for shrinking even further amidst the particular targeting of those advocating, amongst other things, for racial, social, and economic justice, gender equity, and environmental consciousness and protection. The narrowing of these spaces is not incidental; they represent the connective tissue of national cohesion and democratic life itself.

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[1] Peace infrastructure is a term that generally refers to the *"dynamic network of interdependent structures, mechanisms, resources, values, and skills which, through dialogue and consultation, contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in a society",* which encompasses institutions, processes, policies, as well as the means and mechanisms by which to foster and sustain constructive relationships. For more information, see https://www.peaceinfrastructures.org/thematic/infrastructures-peace

Dialogue and ISCT at risk
As part and parcel of the US's national peace infrastructure, organizations like ISCT and its network of practitioners face unique and existential challenges. Where resources like Transformative Dialogue at once hold intrinsic value for the work of preserving open civic engagement and sociopolitical peace, they are also squarely in the crosshairs, amongst the most at risk, by the evidenced pathway of authoritarian expansion.

Beyond this, the Transformative Model itself faces another dilemma, one found at the crossroads of the model's core assumptions and the emergent dynamics and conditions shaping the sociopolitical container in which dialogue and decision-making unfolds. Founded in a context where the premises of an open society, civic spaces, and institutional commitments based on constitutional rights enabled the T-model to exist, evolve and flourish, these qualities of the sociopolitical 'container' are today, undergoing fundamental alteration in normative and practical ways. Perhaps the most startling of these is the increasingly number of cases in which *habeas corpus* has been suspended.

These new norms shift the environment in which dialogue occurs, with strong potential to actively alter the decision-making calculus surrounding its purpose, use, and associated risks and benefits. In a context where self-censorship and self-protection are already (rational) responses to the specter of punitive threats, the practice of free expression and assembly -both *central* to dialogue- may become increasingly risky for facilitators and participants alike. As a result, the nature of participation in core civic activities like dialogue could quickly be weighed against the very real threat of retributive actions already undertaken by the highest authorities in the land. This possibility exposes a fundamental tension between the model's normative assumptions and the realities now unfolding, problematizing key premises on which the model was built. It also reveals the potential for a growing theoretical incoherence, as the power inherent in dialogue as a sociopolitical practice of resistance or resilience, remains largely unexamined and unaddressed in a context of shrinking civic spaces.

Operationally speaking, this suggests an increasingly precarious position for practitioners and the practice itself. Little methodological guidance is found for applying tools like Transformative Dialogue in contexts where these core premises and assumptions are being *actively* eroded. This matters because the implications of this erosion, by extension, render dialogue work and its practitioners susceptible to new risks and unintentional harm-*doing* by virtue of doing business as usual, should they become exposed to efforts or attempts at process manipulation, co-optation, or obfuscation. As authoritarian actions impose a new social contract that increasingly delimits US residents' basic ability to exercise foundational rights, the ISCT must consider what role it and Transformative Dialogue can or should play in relation to these highly concerning and existentially relevant outcomes for the organization and its network.

As a practice built upon liberal democratic assumptions of pluralism, accountability, and agency, the T-model has nevertheless evolved in a sociopolitical construct under which its foundational tenets worked symbiotically with the presumed rights of free association, assembly, and expression, serving a dual role for the management and transformation of conflict. Today, as control over these basic rights is aggressively asserted, and where institutions and oversight mechanisms are being effectively gutted or captured, the repertoire of transformative non-violent activism tools *including* Transformative Dialogue

may, as vehicles for manifesting those rights, soon, too, become perceived as threatening to amassing authoritarian power.

As the sociopolitical context shifts, the ISCT and its network of dialogue practitioners may find themselves, if reluctantly, acquiring unintended sociopolitical power simply by virtue of doing their work. In an evolving authoritarian environment, dialogue itself can become politicized, particularly when dialogue is used by targeted groups or to engage themes deemed to be politically disloyal, subversive, censored, or even criminalized. This, in turn, may expose ISCT and practitioners to heightened scrutiny, politicization, or even direct threat.

This sudden and unintended, if potentially reluctant acquisition of sociopolitical power by virtue of a changing context provides for the real possibility that the ISCT and Transformative Dialogue itself could face increasing scrutiny as it becomes increasingly positioned as a *political* act, especially if used by targeted sectors to address hemes, including civic engagement. That, in turn, could see the ISCT and/or its members facing a new *politicized* role, by means of this newfound exposure or associated threat.

As a hub for Transformative Dialogue within an evolving authoritarian system, the power and positionality of ISCT alongside the macro-level implications of its role as part of the broader US peace infrastructure, has yet to be fully grappled with by the Institute's thought leaders. A subsequent gap can also be identified with regard to practitioner guidance, which remains largely context *agnostic* when it comes to sociopolitical dynamics. While this relative agnosticism has heretofore enabled the pragmatic application of dialogue across diverse settings, applying the very same transversal approach uncritically may come to reproduce power asymmetries, foreclosing on opportunities for genuine empowerment and recognition and ultimately delegitimizing dialogue, while also heightening risk of harm to participants and facilitators.

Learning and Reflection
One point of departure for critical and reflective thinking about dialogue in these unfolding conditions comes from experiences of how dialogue has been used in more advanced authoritarian contexts. Such an examination can illuminate ways in which dialogue interacts with dominant sociopolitical power dynamics, and influence dialogue's (and practitioners') purpose or contributions to both resilience and resistance in a society. On the surface, evidence suggests that these experiences have generated both harmful but also virtuous outcomes. Seen in that light, Transformative Dialogue's current framing of *pro-social interaction* as a transformative outcome may require additional scrutiny in relation to any broader sociopolitical contributions that dialogue can or might make in view of supporting genuinely transformative processes and outcomes.

Experiences from places like Hungary or Nicaragua demonstrate how dialogue can, on the one hand, become easily imposed, co-opted, or misused in ways that legitimize unequal power structures and their enablers, distorted to create façades of inclusion while suppressing genuine dissent and free exchange. As elsewhere, participants' use of such spaces to assert harmful or supremacist narratives, pacify dissenting voices, and/or reinforce dominant power under the guise of otherwise palatable civic virtues, present

formidable challenges. In this regard, practitioners who remain context-agnostic or power-blind when using or promoting dialogue can inadvertently contribute to grievous implications. On the other hand, practitioners and groups who use or call for dialogue's use in the face of prevailing authoritarian perceptions may invite delegitimization, surveillance, defunding, co-optation, or in some cases, even worse.

Despite these challenges, also abound are optimistic examples of strategies of dialogue that avoid reproducing *violences*, including efforts to use dialogue in ways that intentionally sustain everyday practices of civic engagement, sectoral exchange, or active forms of resistance against the imposition of authoritarian directives or control. In the face of expanding authoritarian power in the US, this spectrum of possibilities reveals an opportunity to imagine and engage with ideas about the ISCT's orientation and how the T-model's non-dominant power orientation can, or perhaps should, provide a more intentional contribution to nonviolent societal resilience and the prevention and transformation of sociopolitical conflict dynamics, its resulting societal harms and divisions.

ISCT's Survival and Strategic Relevance

To these ends, we invite thought-leaders to consider the following questions, which are presented to consider issues of both ISCT/network survival and adaptation, while also helping to generate theoretical and political clarity about the role of the ISCT -as a strategic civic actor- operating in constricting civic space.

1. Power, purpose, and positioning

- ≡ What role does, or could the ISCT play amidst the emerging dynamics and the shrinking or capture of civic space? How can it strategically leverage Transformative Dialogue to engage with de-escalating sociopolitical divisions and the strengthening of civic resilience?

- ≡ How can ISCT cultivate a sociopolitical power-aware, yet nonpartisan stance that preserves the Transformative ethos of dialogue? What shifts in understanding and guidance are needed to account for how Transformative Dialogue interacts differently with dominant versus non-dominant power structures?

2. Strategic adaptations

- ≡ In contexts where dialogue risks *legitimizing* dominant power, how can ISCT practitioners reframe and adapt Transformative Dialogue as a tool beyond a context agnostic, pro-social orientation, to use dialogue as a means for proactively empowering non-dominant civic actors or sectors without abandoning its foundational tenets or principles?

- ≡ Given current trends, what practical steps can ISCT begin to take to safeguard its networks' strategic relevance and its own operational resilience within an increasingly authoritarian environment that has threatened or siphoned off public funding for non-profits and research?

3. Risks & responsibility

- ≡ How should ISCT weigh the risks of visibility and threat perception against the existential need to preserve and expand civic space through dialogue or mediation practices?

- ≡ In what ways could ISCT prepare its network to face both direct (e.g., funding cuts, surveillance) and indirect (e.g., emotional and trauma related challenges, reputational attacks, isolation) targeting, and what minimum standards of political and operational resilience might it adopt?

4. Strategic capacity reinforcement

- ≡ How can ISCT better leverage its existing membership and peer networks to foster strategic reflection and learning about power, build mutual protection frameworks, and innovate operationally under these emerging challenges and constraints?

Clarifications & FAQs

The questions and responses in the table below endeavor to provide clarity around issues raised by early feedback about the essay.

Question	Response
1. What is the essay's intent regarding the T-model's principles and relevance?	The essay does not presuppose that explicit changes to the theory or principles of the T-model are necessary. At once, it does raise a serious question about the ISCT's (evolving?) role under current sociopolitical conditions. Likewise, it does not suggest that principles should be discarded or redefined, but that they may not be fully operative in certain high-risk environments such as democratic-to-authoritarian transitions. Essentially, the essay asks whether those principles, applied uncritically or without adaptation, might risk practical irrelevance or unintended harm. The essay calls for reflection on whether treating the T-model solely as a static resource is sufficient in a context where its application could be distorted or co-opted. It emphasizes that critical engagement with relevance is not a rejection of integrity, but rather an act of ethical stewardship.
2. Does the essay advocate for a formal or political position to be taken by ISCT?	The essay does not call for a public nor partisan position from the ISCT. Rather, it invites internal reflection about the Institute's strategic posture. The aim is not to disrupt or politicize the Institute, but instead to clarify how it understands its values, boundaries, and civic role amid deepening sociopolitical constraints and *national-level* conflict indicators. Rather than predict or presume that future, it raises questions about the ISCT's orientation and role as part of the national peace infrastructure. Thus, it attempts to distinguish between strategic clarity and political alignment, aiming to position the ISCT as a principled actor that can navigate complexity *without* compromising a non-partisan stance. The essay encourages ISCT thought leaders to recognize that silence and inaction also carry risk, and that positioning can be both mindful and consistent with long-standing commitments to both theory and members.
3. How does the essay address outcomes, constraints, and the risks involved in practice?	The essay affirms that the T-model prioritizes process over outcome and does not advocate for dialogue facilitators to define *right* or *wrong* results. However, it does raise the complex issue of what happens when process itself is threatened by external constraints, be they legal, political, or sociocultural.

	It does not resolve this dilemma but rather invites dialogue about how to navigate situations where TD practices could (eventually) be surveilled, criminalized, or manipulated, not unlike in other authoritarian contexts. It therefore encourages thoughtful adaptation without sacrificing core commitments, particularly when free speech and civic engagement have now clearly come under manifest threat.
4. How does the essay engage with power, context, and the tension between relevance and integrity?	The essay introduces the concepts of "context-rich" and "power-informed" dialogue without prescribing exact definitions. The omission intentionally leaves these terms open for further development by ISCT thought leaders. The essay recognizes that adapting to context does not mean abandoning principles, and that relevance and integrity are not mutually exclusive. Akin to the metaphor of spotting a "crack in the hull of a boat" as you set off to sea, it suggests that ignoring contextual threats for the sake of model fidelity may lead to greater damage than a well-considered adaptation. Ultimately, it calls for discernment and responsible evolution to identify what such an adaptation, if at all, would mean and look in practice.
5. What shifts does the essay suggest in strategic, theoretical, or methodological terms, and how are they framed?	The essay does not prescribe specific changes, but it frames a set of open questions about ISCT's direction and impact. It suggests that both strategic and methodological evolution may be needed to preserve the T-model's relevance in the face of emerging conditions, particularly in increasingly authoritarian or repressive environments. At once, it does not see these shifts as betrayals to the core T-model or ISCT role, but rather as a form of *sensible and ethical responsiveness*. The essay also observes the lack of explicit attention to such challenges within the current model, inviting ISCT to consider what contributions it can credibly make in this moment, given its legacy, network, and theoretical foundations.