Risking peace: Comparing mistrust-reducing strategies in the Sri Lankan peace processes

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Lack of trust between parties involved in negotiations to solve an armed conflict has been widely used as an explanation for why some negotiations fail to produce peace. However, we know less about how mistrust can be reduced between belligerents involved in negotiating peace, so that the process does not break down. In other words, why are some confidence-building strategies more successful than others? This paper explores strategies to reduce or manage mistrust in two attempts to negotiate peace in Sri Lanka: in 1994–95 and the current peace process. In this paper, we argue that the parties during the current peace process to a larger extent has been successful in reducing mistrust than in the 1994-95 process, because they have taken measures which has involved deliberately imposing costs on themselves. In this way they have been able to credibly convey their willingness to solve the conflict through negotiations. Using a theoretical framework built on the concept of trust, this communicative signaling process between the parties is analysed.

Key words: Sri Lanka; Peace process; Conflict management; Negotiations; Mistrust