

# Syria in Search of a Political Solution: Toward

## Functional Coexistence

*Tatsushi Arai, PhD - TRANSCEND Media Service*

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Introduction: Redefining the focus of diplomatic engagement

The extensive use of chemical weapons in Syria, the commitment and readiness expressed by US President Barak Obama to launch airstrikes against President Bashar al-Assad's regime, and the Russian diplomatic initiative that has led to a US-Russian framework agreement on safeguarding and dismantling Syrian chemical weapons are all important developments in the prolonged war in Syria. The initial steps taken by the Syrian government to join the chemical weapons convention through Moscow's good offices undoubtedly indicate a promising sign of progress. These recent developments, however noteworthy, have very little to do with tackling the root causes of the ever-deepening conflict on the ground. The momentum of diplomacy generated by these recent events must be seized decisively and re-channeled strategically by all parties to the conflict, both domestic and international, to tackle the less visible structural roots of the conflict.

The analysis and proposals that follow shed light on the interlocked nature of relational conflicts underlying the massive violence in Syria. This paper essentially argues that the visibility of the ongoing violence has overshadowed the urgent need to look analytically at the less visible layers of the relational conflicts that gave rise to the violence. The proposals presented here are aspirational in nature and informed in part by concrete experiences in managing and transforming seemingly intractable conflicts in in the Middle East and other parts of the world. These proposals intend to cast a future vision that takes the prevailing view of the polarized reality seriously but seeks to transcend it.

Each of the visions that follow should be seen as an invitation to exploratory inquiry and open-ended dialogue, not as a conclusive, definitive statement that authoritatively prescribes what ought to be done. Yet these visions, when taken together as an integrated whole, will cogently present a possible image of a political future that the Syrian communities of diverse backgrounds may choose to actualize, on their own will, despite many setbacks that are bound to come.

At the heart of these visions is a sustained search for functional coexistence in Syria and its international context. Functional coexistence refers to an adversarial relationship that falls short of direct military confrontation, yet paves the way toward a sustained, evolving process of pragmatic interactions between conflict parties that

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neither trust nor recognize each other. Key questions that frame a search for functional coexistence include how to legitimize a functional social space for iterative, reciprocal interaction - but not necessarily each other as a rightful partner - as a way of enabling a long-term transition from war to peace. A possible vision of the future of Syria under consideration is functional coexistence that proactively builds on pragmatism, political will, and holistic and creative thinking.

With this guiding principle in mind, I will first summarize a bird's-eye view of the forces and counterforces sustaining and deepening the war in Syria, with emphasis on its structure of polarization. I will then outline a possible image of Syria's political future that strategically seeks to manage and transform the growing cycle of violence over time.

In search of a systematic, multi-angled understanding of the conflict

The war in Syria that broke out in the spring 2011 has resulted in the death toll of 100,000 (UN report, June 2013), displaced 4.25 million people internally (UN report, September 2013), and driven 2 million refugees out of Syria (the same UN source). These devastating effects of the war have sharply polarized the relationships among the diverse communities of stakeholders at the national, regional, and global levels.

The past two and a half years of intense fighting has effectively convinced many of the Syrian and international stakeholders that the conflict parties are essentially divided into two camps - the opposition forces and the Assad regime - the former fighting to undermine and ultimately overthrow the Assad regime and the latter fighting to prevail over the rebels, terrorists, and foreign invaders. This deeply entrenched image of polarization has encouraged many parties and observers to internalize and project an oversimplified image of the conflict's underlying structure. This oversimplified image shapes, and is in turned shaped by, the perceived division between Sunni and Shia at the international level, and the division between the privileged Alawite minority and the rest of the Syrian communities, the latter including majority Sunnis, at the domestic level.

Moving forward, we must restore a more nuanced, holistic, and multi-angled understanding of the conflict at the national, regional, and global levels, while simultaneously addressing the undeniable reality of the ever-deepening polarization on

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the ground. To do this, however, we must first grasp the nature of the polarization clearly. One possible way of capturing its image is as follows:

□At the national level, historically, the Syrian regime has been led by a political establishment that builds on the support of the minority Alawite community (about 12 percent of the Syrian population). The regime's constituency also includes a sizable portion of Sunni business communities (with Sunnis making up for 67-70 percent of the total population), the Christian minority (11-14 percent), and diverse other communities. The regime's historical opponents include the banned Muslim Brotherhood and other underrepresented Sunni communities striving for equitable representation and livelihood, marginalized Kurds seeking greater autonomy (with ties extended beyond Syria's northern borders), and diverse other communities whose basic human needs have long been suppressed under state control. A large portion of the Syrian population of diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, from Sunni to Alawite, has historically been secular and non-sectarian and has inter-married frequently, yet it is now increasingly caught in the middle of this sectarian conflict. Because of the growing sectarian divisions, Syrian protesters' largely secular grievances that motivated their uprising in March 2011 - including their search for a more equitable economic system (corruption being one issue), greater political freedom (beyond the 2012 constitutional change), and greater security from state surveillance and from threats to human rights - have been sidelined by the war.

□At the regional level, both Iran (using supply routes of Iraq, another Shia-majority country, to provide logistical support to the Syrian regime) and Hezbollah in Lebanon actively support the Assad government in order to ensure their own national security, identity, and freedom from the perceived threat of Sunni regional domination across their national borders. While the origin of the Syrian civil war is far from religious in nature, the involvement of these regional actors, and their counterforces described shortly, has activated the historical Sunni-Shia tension, imagined or real, through their arms supplies, military interventions, and public mobilization campaigns.

□At the global level, the positions taken by Iran and Hezbollah have been aligned with those of Russia (as a long-term ally of Syria, especially through the use of the Russian naval facility in the Mediterranean city of Tartus, and also of Iran, with Moscow seeking sustained strategic partnership in the region through its ties to Tehran) and China (upholding the principle of nonintervention in domestic matters, with far-reaching implications for China's own nationhood and international standing).

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These international forces, both regional and global, face a set of counterforces:

□At the regional level, Qatar and Saudi Arabia (led by governments upholding deeply conservative Islam) and Turkey (under secular leadership) are all Sunni-majority societies that have been involved in the war, in support of the Syrian opposition forces. Jordan, another Sunni-majority country, plays an increasingly active role in providing arms supply routes and military training ground for the opposition, to meet its own security need and economic survival, in partnership with Amman's allies in the Gulf and in the West. These regional stakeholders are striving to cope with their own domestic and transnational challenges that have been exacerbated by the war in Syria, including the military and political activities of the Kurdish independence movement in Turkey (as much as in Syria, Iran, and Iraq). Turkey, like other countries in the region, are concerned with a possible disintegration of multi-ethnic, multi-national cities such as Damascus, for fear of trans-border domino effects on its major cities, such as Istanbul. A rapid regional and global expansion of the sources and supply routes of weapons and ideologically-motivated fighters, from the Balkans to Libya, exacerbate Syria's inter-communal tension, over which the Free Syrian Army has little control.

□At the global level, these countries hold a strategic alliance with the United States, as well as with the United Kingdom and France, in their effort to deter the Syrian government from further escalating its use of force.

□Israel, as the closest regional ally of the United States, strives to find a way of its own survival in the midst of this growing conflict, as it faces an increasingly united front of its historical adversaries. These adversaries include Syria (with which Israel has a long-standing territorial dispute over the Golan Heights), Iran (over nuclear weapons, among other imminent security issues), and Hezbollah (established to free Lebanon from Israeli occupation and interference).

However authentic the perception of these polarized relationships may be for the parties involved, such an oversimplified image of "us vs. them," "good vs. evil" falls far short of systematically capturing both structural and cultural roots and consequences of the ongoing war, with much needed attention to the potential "fault lines" that Syrian society must transform. These fault lines include, but are not limited to:

□The growing tension around ethnic and national relations (involving majority Arabs, over 90 percent, in relation to Kurds, 9 percent, as well as such other significant minorities as Turkmen, Assyrians, and Armenians)

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□The secular-religious tension (the secular Ba'ath socialist ideology in sharp contrast to long-suppressed Islamist ideologies, especially that of the banned Muslim Brotherhood, with the latter remembering the government-led 1982 Hama massacre of its 10,000-20,000 people, still an unhealed wound and trauma)

□The inter-religious tension (among the Sunni, Shia, Christian, and Druze communities, for example)

□Class differences (conspicuous and pervasive in various forms of “haves” and “have-nots,” as well as “super have-nots,” the latter illustrated by the most marginalized, low-income Alawites, now inadvertently pitted against Sunnis)

□Urban-rural (and thus regional) gaps, with higher population density and more development in the Mediterranean coastal area in the west, at the expense of the less populated, marginalized rest

□Gender-based discrimination that inhibits women’s participation in many areas of social life, from the national parliament to religious institutions.

Ending the war and developing new relationships of nonviolent inter-communal coexistence in Syria requires fostering a culture and structure of good governance that accommodates, transcends, and builds on these differences.

In search of a way forward

A deeply paralyzed United Nations Security Council (UNSC), comprised of the five powerful conflict parties divided into the two polarized camps, is approaching Syria from the viewpoint of their respective national interests – and most probably through their cultural lenses and worldviews that differ from those of the Muslim-majority societies in the region. Their conflicted national interests have so far proven incapable of transcending themselves in favor of the founding principle of the United Nations, an organization established to prevent humanity from repeating the scourge of war. As far as the present war in Syria is concerned, other UN members, together with international civil society, must work in solidarity to keep the role of UNSC’s permanent five in secondary status, or even make its role as politically unessential as possible. In the meantime, these non-UNSC member states do have an option to work together and give greater weight and legitimacy to the broader constituency base of the UN General Assembly. However symbolic and limited such an effort may be in terms of its immediate impact, the point of this collective action is to make a point.

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On the global level, a guiding principle that deserves greater attention is to advocate less interventionist policy by all the five UNSC members, and other global and regional stakeholders, many of whom have so far used the Syrian theater to advance their own national interests and fight a proxy war, overtly or covertly. If there is any role to be played by more self-reflective five UNSC members, it would be to exert their diplomatic influence, out of a humanitarian, noninterventionist motive, and to redouble their genuine commitment to bringing together both the Syrian government and the various opposition groups to dialogue, for deep reciprocal learning.

At the national and regional levels, the overarching goal of the proposed conciliation activities is to foster and deepen functional coexistence, an evolving process of negative peace (or absence of direct, physical violence) sustained by institutional guarantees that prevent conflict parties from returning to open warfare. This process necessarily requires accommodating the reality of active mutual denial, or at least mutual non-recognition, between adversarial parties facing what they view as an existential threat to one another. In Syria, functional coexistence requires accommodating and addressing the divergent realities of national identities (from Arabs to Kurds, Druze, and Turkmen), urban-rural gaps, class relations, religious-secular tension, Muslim-Christian relations, Sunni-Shias relations, gender-based inequity, and more generally, relationships between underrepresented and overrepresented communities of different kinds. Importantly, functional coexistence - as illustrated by the evolution of East and West German relations and the recent trends of Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese confidence-building - has the potential to pave the way toward a more non-threatening, interdependent relationship based on decades - not months or years - of pragmatic, iterative, and reciprocal exchange.

Beyond these general principles, a concrete vision of a way forward is described as follows, starting with steps to be taken in an immediate future:

Initiatives at the international level

□ Given the structural inequity that UNSC represents in relation to the global context of the Syrian war, a more promising platform for conciliation will be found in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), comprised of 57 member states, home to 1.6 billion Muslims including both Sunnis and Shias. While OIC as an umbrella

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organization is unlikely to function swiftly and coherently as a united actor and conflict resolver, it provides a broad-based authoritative platform that is capable of endorsing Muslim-led “coalitions of the willing,” in an effort to address the common challenges its members face in Syrian. The United Nations can support such an OIC-led regional process by using more of its soft power of conciliation than its hard power of coercion, under the good offices of the UN and Arab League special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi.

□A well-facilitated, inclusive multi-year conference, with a multi-faceted, comprehensive agenda, is urgently needed. The proposed Geneva II conference, under US-Russian leadership, may be given a fair chance, if the Syrian conflict parties come to accept such a process. (Or alternatively, Geneva II may be used to manage and transform the deep conflict between the key international stakeholders, especially Russia, on the one hand, and the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, on the other.) It must be noted, however, that Moscow, Washington, London, and Paris – all Christian-majority foreign powers with enduring colonial legacy – seriously lack moral authority to drive such a major initiative in the Middle East, especially from an Islamic perspective, despite the overwhelming military and economic leverage they have at their disposal. These major powers will have their own long-term interest best served by designating themselves a more secondary role. Alternative courses of action these outside powers can choose to take include helping to create a politically impartial pool of resources (for example, within a more effective UN framework) and enabling a more regionally-led peace conference to take place. OIC, among other alternative forums, should be able to serve as a more authoritative convener, under clearly-articulated joint Sunni-Shia leadership. The conference, or at least the functional working groups thereof, must be open to the legitimate human grievances and aspirations of all major conflict parties, including the homegrown Syrian leadership of the al-Qaeda-affiliated al Nusra Front and other religiously-motivated armed groups, for these groups all have their own visions of peace that will play a decisive role in the country’s future.

□Apart from convening a multi-year peace conference, it is important to establish a multi-partial conciliation and mediation team comprised of experienced and trusted OIC-appointed leaders. The proposed team must exhibit moral authority and political influence strong enough to be able to initiate and sustain genuine one-on-one dialogues and skillful shuttle diplomacy among the key parties within Syria, as well as with relevant international stakeholders outside Syria. A multi-partial approach to mediation, when applied to the Syrian context, will center on the joint leadership of trusted Sunni and Shia mediators (or perhaps more specifically, Salafi and Alawite

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leaders, and/or visionary Saudis and Iranians if possible), committed to transcending their own national and ideological backgrounds for a higher end of peacebuilding. This approach represents a decisive departure from a more familiar western approach to mediation led by third-party neutrals.

□The proposed multi-partial approach advocates revolutionary partnership, an improbable yet visionary way of joint leadership, exemplified by the historical partnership between Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Clark, who had worked together to end apartheid in South Africa. Revolutionary partnership intentionally and strategically transcends the very divisions that have kept the conflict alive and intractable. Ambassador Brahimi's contribution to identifying and establishing such a team of credible and influential leaders from within the Arab League and OIC would be invaluable. Such a partnership for conciliation, once established, should be able to cogently demonstrate how to work together despite seemingly irresolvable differences in the eyes of the Syrian conflict parties and their deeply divided international allies. The proposed process seeks to orchestrate and interact with multiple levels of conciliatory dialogue simultaneously, including those of religious leaders, women and youth representatives, business communities, and influential artists, in order to complement high-level official negotiations.

□While the proposed peace conference and other conciliatory activities take place, a credible form of peacekeeping operations must be established and implemented. One possible approach to realize such operations is to invite well-trained peacekeeping professionals from Muslim-majority countries of OIC, as well as from the United Nations, in order to oversee a temporary separation between the fighting forces. The peacekeeping operations carried out in the long-disputed Peru-Ecuador border, led by the international guarantors from the Americas in the late 1990s, suggests a possible model of regionally-based operations. If the international peacekeepers manage to succeed over time in reducing the level of direct violence, multi-communal forces recruited from within Syria, under agreed-upon, well-monitored guidelines, may choose to join peacekeeping operations and gradually take lead.

Initiatives at the national level

1- Consistent with what the Syrian government and Iran proposed in 2012, a political solution to the conflict will need to include free and fair national elections.

□While the possibility of a dignified exit of President Assad can be placed on the

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agenda for open political discussion as a prelude, if not a prerequisite, to such elections, ultimately the president himself and his senior government leadership team will need to make and own their decisions in favor of the long-term future of Syria. The question of transitional justice, in view of grave human rights abuses committed by different parties, must be addressed. But the question of justice can be addressed later, especially after a concrete, constructive image of Syria's future statehood has begun to take shape, and be shared and debated in public. (My own dialogues with Syrians of diverse backgrounds suggest that people on the opposition side are determined to remove President Assad from power, but they tend to view his removal as a means by which to achieve a goal of higher order, that is, to restore peaceful life for themselves and for their families and communities. For them, revenge is not an ultimate goal and it can therefore be set aside in favor of peaceful life they wish to live.)

□The widespread apathy among Syrians for elections, especially on the part of the opposition, must be overcome by organizing broad-based, well-informed public discussion on what concrete institutional assurances must be put in place to enable dissatisfied Syrians to believe that this time, the proposed elections, unlike the previously-held state-controlled elections, would become a credible, decisive departure to build a new Syria.

□Possible institutional arrangements that ensure the credibility of the proposed elections include a robust international monitoring mechanism sponsored by the UN, the Arab League, and OIC, among other actors. Supportive countries of non-Western backgrounds such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Japan may be able to play an important role as credible contributors to election monitoring.

□A fully integrated task of disarmament, international peacekeeping (discussed above), and the handling of disputes and security incidents that will arise in the course of preparing for the elections must be organized under the joint leadership of the United Nations, the Arab League, and OIC.

□The best sequence in which presidential and parliamentary elections (the latter held in May 2012, with a nominal participation of legalized opposition) take place must be carefully determined. One of the most important considerations for determining the sequence will be Syria's institutional readiness to enable all the eligible parties and candidates to contest freely, while removing the restrictions that Ba'ath party leadership has historically placed to prevent democratic opposition from joining and campaigning for elections.

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2- Both Syrian people and their international partners will not need to wait till the completion of elections to initiate substantive public dialogue on the future governance of Syria. Given the nature of the majority-minority relations in Syria, key considerations for facilitating such dialogue include how to ensure legal guarantees of minority rights and constitutional restrictions on majority influence, both as safeguards against aggression for revenge and survival. Concretely, alternative visions of future governance include, but are not limited to:

□A Syrian adaptation of multi-national coalition government, possibly retaining the existing structure of the unicameral parliament but ensuring each of the diverse constituent communities – ethnic, racial, religious, and/or otherwise – to have a fair chance of securing substantive political leadership, up to presidency.

□A “non-territorial federation” comprised of two legislative chambers, one comprised of representatives elected from geographically designated electorates and the other comprised of national representatives of communal (ethnic, racial, religious, and/or other basic) identities that cut across geographic divides. The Swiss federation suggests one starting point of exploration. (This vision is inspired by a proposal set forth by Professor Johan Galtung, a leading peace researcher and an international mediator.)

□An improved application of the current unicameral legislature, with the condition that the government will introduce a drastic reform to ensure open political participation by all eligible constituent communities without prejudice to religion, ethnicity, race, and/or other potential justifications for exclusion. This approach will keep much of the current political system intact but systematically transform the culture of political practice. Myanmar, a war-torn country undergoing self-guided reforms for democratization since 2010, presents a possible model.

These alternative visions are not exclusive of each other. They may work best in combination or in a phased process, depending on the needs of the Syrian people.

3- As mentioned earlier, the crucial question of transitional justice, applicable to leaders of all sides of the conflict, will have to be addressed at a relatively late stage of the political transition, especially after a blueprint of transitional governance has emerged. A compelling vision of Syria’s political future must be introduced in public discussion before the deeply divided Syrian communities confront their traumas and injustices of the past, for such a prospect of political transition would provide a

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constructive meaning to the painful task of truth-seeking.

□Concretely, to facilitate the process of war-to-peace transition, some form of truth and reconciliation processes must be introduced, learning from the best practices in in the Middle East and elsewhere. An effective mechanism of transitional justice must mainstream a restorative function over a punitive one, considering the deeply divided Syrian society in which emphasis on punishment would most likely trigger revenge killing. Emphasis on restorative justice, however, must not preclude advocacy for utilizing an international justice system that will hold violators of international humanitarian law accountable. In addition, a search for economic justice, through appropriate means of reparation for war-related damage, will constitute an essential element of this truth and reconciliation process.

□In order for the proposed mechanism of transitional justice to promote national unity and reconciliation, a broad-based participation of Syrian citizens, especially at the grassroots level, is indispensable. Since Syrian society has historically been unfamiliar with a bottom-up approach to open, democratic dialogue, the way in which a truth and reconciliation process is introduced and implemented must be culturally respectful, accessible in content, and gradual in pace. One way of envisioning such a broad-based process is to organize multi-communal movements of revolutionary partnership (described earlier) in which trusted leaders of previously divided communities (for example, Alawite and Sunni, Arab and Kurdish) work together to jointly facilitate reconciliation dialogues between their respective constituencies. Religious leaders have a vital role to play in facilitating reconciliation among those who took up arms in the name of religion. While the central government must provide political leadership and resources to promote national reconciliation, the whole process must essentially be grassroots-based, for the ultimate test of reconciliation is the transformation of ordinary people's lives. International examples of national reconciliation in such war-torn societies as Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Rwanda suggest potentially useful lessons.

4- The transitional process must also include long-term development initiatives that actively promote inter-communal collaboration, while simultaneously transforming the structural roots of economic inequity that have divided Syrian society. These development initiatives can be strategically linked to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants so as to create employment and alternative livelihood for those who would otherwise return to armed resistance groups for

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economic survival.

5- Repatriation and resettlement of refugees and internally displaced persons, some six million in total (as of September 2013), must be a priority not only for Syria's reconstruction, but also for the security and stability of Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and the whole of the Middle East. A sustainable mechanism of international partnership that provides economic and psychological support and security assurances for the refugees is needed to facilitate their repatriation and provide them with shelter.

6- The Syrian-led process of reintegration and restorative justice must be supported by a credible, well-incentivized, and well-monitored mechanism of regional arms control and mutual nonintervention among Syria's neighbors and other international stakeholders. The fate of Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, which had led to Afghanistan's prolonged civil war, uncontrolled foreign interventions, and a massive arms flow, should never be repeated in the Syrian context.

### Conclusion

To realize the visions of Syria's political future explored in this paper, international civil society must mainstream a systematic, multi-angled assessment of the ongoing conflict in public discussion. It must resist the temptation to reduce a broad range of actors into the two opposing sides of "us vs. them," good vs. evil. Despite the extensive magnitude and intensity of the conflict, civil society actors can still play a decisive role in providing safe social space for diverse conflict parties and stakeholders to meet and learn from each other, both inside and outside Syria. Furthermore, civil society can also play a catalytic role in generating and publicizing a range of alternative political solutions that transcend the narrowly-focused debate over whether to approve or disapprove a military intervention.

None of these visions is easily achievable. Many historical precedents of international conflict resolution, however, suggest that these visions are not out of reach if the parties inside and outside Syria decide to demonstrate their political will and reallocate a small portion of their existing military budgets to prioritize conflict resolution. Alternatives to a negotiated political solution include a very plausible

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scenario of ever-expanding military confrontations throughout the Middle East. The possibility of nuclear warfare, as a possible extension of chemical warfare, cannot be ruled out. Undoing the destructive consequences of these worst-case scenarios would be far more costly and uncertain than embarking on an urgently-needed task of creating a mutually acceptable political solution. Is there any nation, any community, or any leader that is willing to take a courageous and decisive step toward these visions, together with millions of Syrians crying out for peace?

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Dr Tatsushi Arai is a Japanese citizen, an independent peace researcher, and a practitioner of conflict resolution with extensive experience in diverse conflict-affected societies. This working paper is based on a series of interviews and dialogues he has held with Syrian and international stakeholders of different backgrounds. Comments and suggestions are welcome at: [tatsushi.arai@sit.edu](mailto:tatsushi.arai@sit.edu).

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