

Peace Mediation in an Era of Normative and Institutional Collapse

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Introduction

For the best part of 30 years, international peace mediation has been carried out within a framework of conflict management norms and institutions established in the aftermath of the Second World War and consolidated in the 1990s following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.¹ Among these norms are the prohibition on the use of force, the peaceful settlement of disputes, the prevention of genocide, the requirement for conflict parties to distinguish between civilians and combatants, and nuclear non-proliferation. Many are recognized as jus cogens norms,² meaning they have peremptory status under international law, recognized as fundamental, universally accepted principles that override conflicting treaties and customary rules, creating non-derogable obligations for all states. In times of international tension and conflict, the existence of this normative and institutional framework informed a widely held set of assumptions about how states and non-state parties to conflict should behave and what their expectations should be of the other side, both during conflict and when making peace, providing a critical framework for conflict mediation and peacemaking. In addition to outlawing the use of force and the targeting of civilians, this helped create an international

¹ United Nations General Assembly, “Strengthening the role of mediation in the peaceful settlement of disputes, conflict prevention and resolution”, A/66/811, 25 June 2012. Available at <https://docs.un.org/en/A/66/811> (accessed on 24 November 2025); Sara Hellmüller, Julia Federer and Mathias Zeller, “The role of norms in international peace mediation”, swisspeace, April 2015. Available at https://www.eip.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The_Role_of_Norms_in_International_Peace_Mediation.pdf (accessed on 24 November 2025); Philipp Kastner, “Promoting professionalism: a normative framework for peace mediation”, in *Rethinking Peace Mediation*, Catherine Turner and Martin Wählisch, eds. (Bristol, Policy Press, 2021).

² Mark Eugen Villiger, *Commentary on the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties* (Leiden/Boston, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2009). Jus cogens norms are core, universally recognized principles of international law that take precedence over conflicting treaties and customary rules. These norms establish non-derogable obligations for all states – for example, prohibitions against genocide, slavery and torture – embodying the highest ethical standards of the global legal system. They function as “compelling law”, meaning they are binding even without a state’s consent and invalidating any agreements that oppose them.

environment in which peace mediation was seen as a legitimate process for intervening to de-escalate conflict and facilitate the development of proposals to resolve the dispute.

This normative and institutional framework is now in extreme jeopardy. The number of armed conflicts is higher than at any time since the end of the Second World War. Violence and mass atrocities against civilians in conflict have reached record or near-record levels, with 2024 and 2025 being particularly devastating. Grave violations against children reached unprecedented levels in 2024, increasing year-on-year by 30 per cent to the worst level ever recorded.³ Three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council are actively subverting core norms and institutions, undermining the global consensus against the use of force and hollowing out the system of rules and norms that protects civilians and provides a framework for peace diplomacy and mediation.⁴ A broad consensus has emerged among global experts, UN agencies, major aid organizations and academics that norms prohibiting the use of force and the targeting of civilians are collapsing,⁵ and the global order is at a critical inflection point regarding multilateral cooperation against conflict.⁶

The Origins of the Normative and Institutional Framework

These norms and institutions are rooted in liberal internationalism, the idea that relations between states should not be determined simply by military power, but by principles, rules, institutions and interdependence, which dates back to the Enlightenment and the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century age of democratic revolutions. In the early twentieth century, fuelled by widespread revulsion against the unprecedented destruction wrought by the Great War, a broad international movement advocated for collective security, peaceful resolution of conflict and the establishment of international institutions such as the League of Nations. However, it took the horrors of the Second World War, estimated to have killed more than 50 million civilians and 25 million military personnel, to convince leaders to come together and put in place an international system to manage peace and security in an effort to prevent a repeat of the devastation. Representatives of the US, UK, USSR and China met in a series of conferences in 1943 in Moscow and in 1944 in Dumbarton Oaks, where they adopted a Joint Four-Nation Declaration in which they “recognize[d] the necessity of establishing at the earliest practicable date a general international organization,

³ Thea Charlotte Andersen, Gunver Knag Fylkesnes and Alvhild Strømme, “Stop the war on children: security for whom?” (Save the Children International, 2025). Available at <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/stop-the-war-on-children-security-for-whom-2025> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

⁴ Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, “Might unmakes right: the catastrophic collapse of norms against the use of force”, *Foreign Affairs*, 24 June 2025. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/might-unmakes-right-hathaway-shapiro>; Patrick Wintour, “Willing states must act to save international legal order, warns top academic”, *The Guardian*, 11 November 2025. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2025/nov/11/willing-states-must-act-to-save-international-legal-order-warns-top-academic> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

⁵ Alex de Waal, “The return of the starvation weapon: the collapse of global norms fueling the catastrophes in Gaza and Sudan”, *Foreign Affairs*, 3 October 2025. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sudan/return-starvation-weapon> (accessed on 24 November 2025); Agnès Callamard, “Gaza and the end of the rules-based order: what the Israel-Hamas war means for the future of human rights and international law”, *Foreign Affairs*, 15 February 2024. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/gaza-and-end-rules-based-order> (accessed on 24 November 2025); Oona A. Hathaway, “War unbound”, *Foreign Affairs*, 23 April 2024. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/war-unbound-gaza-hathaway> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

⁶ Richard Gowan, “The twilight of international peacemaking institutions?” International Crisis Group, 24 July 2025. Available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/twilight-international-peacemaking-institutions> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all peace-loving States, and open to membership by all such States, large and small, for the maintenance of international peace and security”.⁷ The following year, on 26 June 1945, the United Nations Conference on International Organization was held in San Francisco, and the UN Charter was signed by representatives of 50 countries, including the USSR, China and the US. Over the following years, the rules-based international system was constructed progressively around the UN and other key institutions and norms, to preserve peace and security, foster cooperation and protect human dignity.

Core Norms and Institutions

Core norms were established by the UN Charter, including the prohibition on the use of force, the principle that all member states are equal in sovereignty and must respect one another’s territorial integrity, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, codified for the first time a comprehensive set of fundamental human rights to be universally protected. The 1949 Geneva Conventions became the bedrock for international humanitarian law (IHL), establishing crucial legal standards for protecting civilians and other non-combatants. These norms and institutions constitute a normative framework that guides the conduct of mediation and the content of peace agreements, ensuring that they reflect commonly held values and align with international legal obligations and principles.

Prohibition on the Use of Force

The UN Charter mandates the Security Council to maintain international peace and security, granting it unique powers to issue binding decisions, impose sanctions and authorize the use of force, and requiring all member states to accept and implement its resolutions. The normative underpinning of the charter is the prohibition on the use of military force to seize another state’s territory. This fundamental principle of modern international law, set out in Article 2(4), reflects the core values of state sovereignty, territorial integrity and peaceful dispute resolution: “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.” UN resolutions and court opinions have consistently affirmed it as a peremptory norm of international law, and scholars have described it as “the archetypal example of a *jus cogens* norm”.⁸ Prior to 1928 and the adoption of the General Treaty for the Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy (the Kellogg-Briand Pact), war was a legally recognized means by which states could conquer other countries’ territory to resolve disputes, annex territory, change national borders by force or impose exploitative terms of trade. This changed with the signing of the UN Charter and the adoption of Article 2(4).

Peaceful Settlement of Disputes

The UN Charter also established the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to settle legal disputes between states (contentious jurisdiction) and provide advisory opinions on international

⁷ United Nations, “Preparatory years: UN Charter history”. Available at <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/history-of-the-un/preparatory-years> (accessed on 22 December 2025).

⁸ James A. Green, “Questioning the peremptory status of the prohibition of the use of force”, *Michigan Journal of International Law*, vol. 32, No. 2 (2025).

legal questions (advisory jurisdiction). It continues to be the principal judicial organ of the UN, with a mandate to settle legal disputes between states. Decisions in contentious cases are legally binding and not subject to appeal; advisory opinions are non-binding but carry significant legal authority and moral weight. Recent years have seen a surge in states referring conflict-related cases to the ICJ: 39 cases have been brought to the court in the past ten years, accounting for 20 per cent of all cases ever filed. These include South Africa's genocide case against Israel (2023–2024), Ukraine's cases against Russia following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the invasion of 2022, cases between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the war in Nagorno Karabakh, and Gambia's case against Myanmar alleging genocide against the Rohingya.⁹

Prevention of the Crime of Genocide

On 9 December 1948, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, in Paris, France, during its third session, making it the first human rights treaty codified into international law. The convention paved the way for the establishment of the International Criminal Court in 1998 by establishing genocide as a crime under international law and calling for a national or international penal tribunal to prosecute it. The ICC's founding treaty uses the definition of genocide set out in Article II of the convention, making genocide a core crime for the court.

Universality of Human Rights

A day later, on 10 December, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the UN General Assembly with the express intention of protecting against future atrocities. It codified the principle of universality, which holds that human rights are inherent to all individuals simply by virtue of their existence as human beings. A foundational norm of international human rights law, universality affirms that all human beings are endowed with human rights equally, no matter who they are or where they live, and all lives have equal value.

The distinction between civilians and combatants in conflict

The devastation of the Second World War also provided the momentum for the agreement between states on the need to impose legal limits on the barbarity of war. In 1949, the Swiss government organized a major diplomatic conference in Geneva, where delegations from 63 governments convened from April to August 1949 to debate drafts of four distinct treaties establishing universal rules for protecting victims of war: the wounded and sick in the field and at sea, prisoners of war and civilians. The Geneva Conventions established the principle of distinction as one of the cardinal rules of international humanitarian law, requiring parties to an armed conflict to distinguish between civilians and combatants and also between civilian objects and military targets. Together with the principles of humanity and prohibition of unnecessary suffering, the principles of proportionality and precaution (both codified in 1977 in Additional Protocol I) collectively require restraint in the use of force,

⁹ Alexander Wentker, "More and more cases on war and genocide are being litigated at the ICJ", Chatham House, 4 September 2024. Available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/09/more-and-more-cases-war-and-genocide-are-being-litigated-icj> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

forming a universal legal framework that is binding on all parties to an armed conflict.¹⁰

Limitations on nuclear proliferation

Proposals to limit nuclear proliferation were first made by Ireland at the United Nations in the late 1950s. Since then, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which was negotiated in the 1960s and has been joined by 191 states, has become the centrepiece of a non-proliferation regime, a global framework of treaties, norms and practices designed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and promote peaceful nuclear energy and disarmament.¹¹ The treaty established a safeguards system to verify compliance with its terms through inspections conducted by the International Atomic Energy Agency, an autonomous, intergovernmental organization that was officially created as part of the UN system on 29 July 1957.¹² It also provides for a review of the operation of the treaty every five years, with the next Review Conference scheduled for April–May 2026. Eighty years after the first and only use of atomic weapons, the treaty has been remarkably successful in limiting the number of nuclear-armed states to only nine.¹³

An Era of Normative and Institutional Collapse?

The rules-based system has proven remarkably resilient. There has been no repeat of the catastrophic world wars that killed over 100 million people between 1914 and 1945. This long period of relative stability is an extraordinary achievement. Nuclear weapons have not been used since August 1945, and it has been 80 years since the last open war between the great powers. The framers of the UN Charter never believed that the prohibition on the use of force would eliminate conflict forever, and it was never going to be possible to impose full compliance given the wave of post-colonial transitions underway and the ideological divisions already festering between the liberal West and the communist Soviet bloc. But the catastrophic human and economic costs of both the First and Second World Wars generated a consensus that new measures were needed, and adhering to the letter of the law was less important than the collective commitment to protect the world from the devastation of great-power wars by rejecting the use of force to change borders or seize another state's territory. Deterrence depended less on total compliance or the punitive measures set out in the UN Charter than on building a consensus about how United Nations member states should behave.¹⁴

The return of great-power competition and the impact on peace mediation

Today, that consensus is crumbling. The possibility of great-power war is once again on the

¹⁰ Marco Sassòli, Antoine A. Bouvier and Anne Quintin, *How Does Law Protect in War?* (Geneva, International Committee of the Red Cross, 2011); Hathaway, "War unbound".

¹¹ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons". Available at <https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/weapons-mass-destruction/nuclear-weapons/treaty-non-proliferation-nuclear-weapons> (accessed 30 December 2025).

¹² Elisabeth Roehrlich, "The cold war, the developing world, and the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), 1953–1957", *Cold War History*, vol. 16, No. 2 (2016), pp. 195–212.

¹³ Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar, Ernest J. Moniz, and Meghan L. O'Sullivan, "The proliferation problem is back," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 September 2025. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/proliferation-problem-back> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

¹⁴ Hathaway and Shapiro, "Might unmakes right".

table, and security competition among the great powers is fuelling record levels of armed conflict and undermining multilateral conflict management and fundamental norms.¹⁵ For 25 years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US was the sole great power on the planet, with its political, economic and military might far exceeding that of any other country. The unipolar world order ended around 2017, with China's meteoric rise propelling it to peer status with the US,¹⁶ and Russia reasserting sufficient economic and military capabilities to return to great-power status.¹⁷ We are now in a multipolar world, with numerous competing centres of power.¹⁸ Previous priorities such as international cooperation, sustainable development, multilateral conflict management and collective problem solving are being shunted aside by competition for relative gains – whether in the form of access to natural resources (critical minerals,¹⁹ rare earths or oil and gas),²⁰ geostrategic land corridors and waterways, or control over chokepoints.²¹

This new dispensation has huge implications for conflict management and peace mediation. In 2024, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program – considered the global standard for defining and studying armed conflict – recorded the highest number of state-based conflicts since 1946. According to analysis by the Peace Research Institute Oslo, the years 2021 to 2024 have been the most violent since 1989, with 61 conflicts recorded across 36 countries.²² Overall, the number of armed conflicts is higher than at any time since the end of the Second World War. In 2024, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, 204 million people lived in areas under the full or contested control of armed groups, up from 175 million in 2022.²³

¹⁵ United States, Office of the President, “National security strategy of the United States of America” (Washington, DC, White House, December 2017).

¹⁶ Jennifer Lind, “Back to bipolarity: how China's rise transformed the balance of power”, *International Security* 49, No. 2 (2024): pp. 7–55. Available at https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00494 (accessed on 24 November 2025).

¹⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, “The inevitable rivalry: America, China, and the tragedy of great-power politics”, *Foreign Affairs*, 28 October 2021. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-19/inevitable-rivalry-cold-war> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

¹⁸ Emma Ashford and Evan Cooper, “Yes, the world is multipolar,” *Foreign Policy*, 5 October 2023. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/05/usa-china-multipolar-bipolar-unipolar/> (accessed on 24 November 2025); Amitav Acharya, Antoni Estevadeordal, and Louis W Goodman, “Multipolar or multiplex? Interaction capacity, global cooperation and world order,” *International Affairs* 99, No. 6 (2023), pp. 2339–65. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad242> (accessed on 24 November 2025); Gordon Brown, “A new multilateralism,” *Foreign Policy*, 11 September 2023. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/11/us-china-russia-multilateralism-diplomacy-alliances-trade/> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

¹⁹ J. Zhou and A. Månberger, “Critical minerals and great power competition” (Stockholm, Stockholm International Peace Research Initiative, 2024). Available at https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/critical_minerals.pdf (accessed on 24 November 2025).

²⁰ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map. Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations* (New York, Penguin USA, 2020).

²¹ John J. Mearsheimer, “War and international politics”, *International Security*, vol. 49, No. 4 (2025), pp. 7–36.

²² Siri Aas Rustad, “Conflict trends: a global overview, 1946–2024”, PRIO Paper (Oslo, Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2025). Available at <https://cdn.cloud.prio.org/files/31b69202-0728-4852-94e9-a08bdf662fe9/Rustad%20-%20Conflict%20Trends%201946-2024%20-%20PRIO%20Paper.pdf?inline=true> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

²³ International Committee of the Red Cross, “ICRC humanitarian outlook 2026: a world succumbing to war”, 3 December 2025. Available at https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/LR_4909_002_ICRC_Humanitarian_Outlook_2026_A_World_Succumbing_to_War.pdf (accessed on 24 November 2025).

Violence and mass atrocities against civilians in conflict have surpassed record levels, with 2024 and 2025 being particularly catastrophic. Grave violations against children reached unprecedented levels in 2024, increasing year-on-year by 30 per cent to the worst level ever recorded,²⁴ while sexual violence in conflict zones is also rising sharply.²⁵ Shocking scenes of violence against civilians have been video-streamed most notably from Gaza and Sudan,²⁶ yet governments continue to provide weapons and political cover for the perpetrators. Global experts, UN agencies, major aid organizations and academics have repeatedly sounded the alarm that norms prohibiting the use of force and the targeting of civilians are being abandoned, resulting in headlines around the world but little timely action to stop the slaughter of innocent men, women and children.²⁷

The ban on the use of military force to seize another state's territory is being challenged by three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.²⁸ The norm has been repeatedly tested over the past decade by China and Russia, but a series of developments in 2025 and 2026 suggests that the US is now withdrawing its support for the norm. On 3 January 2026, US President Donald Trump announced that US forces had conducted a "large scale strike against Venezuela, and its leader, President Nicolás Maduro."²⁹ In an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council held two days after the attack, UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated that the US military action against Venezuela sets 'a dangerous precedent' and expressed deep concern that the rules of international law have not been respected: "I have consistently stressed the imperative of full respect, by all, for international law, including the Charter of the United Nations, which provides the foundation for the maintenance of international peace and security. I remain deeply concerned that rules of international law have not been respected with regard to the 3 January military action. The Charter enshrines the prohibition of the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity

²⁴ Andersen, Fylkesnes and Strømme, "Stop the war on children".

²⁵ United Nations Security Council, "Conflict-related sexual violence: report of the Secretary-General", S/2025/389, 15 July 2025. Available at https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/389?_gl=1 (accessed on 24 November 2025).

²⁶ Janine di Giovanni, "Documenting war crimes in Sudan begins now," Foreign Policy, 21 November 2025. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/11/21/sudan-war-crimes-osint-documentation-genocide/> (accessed on 24 November 2025); Pankaj Mishra, "How Gaza shattered the West's mythology," Foreign Policy, 7 February 2025. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/07/pankaj-mishra-world-after-gaza-book-israel-war-global-order-history/> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

²⁷ See for example: Callamard, "Gaza and the End of the Rules-Based Order", Hathaway, "War Unbound: Gaza, Ukraine, and the Breakdown of International Law", Hathaway and Shapiro, "The Catastrophic Collapse of Norms Against the Use of Force", de Waal, "The Collapse of Global Norms Fueling the Catastrophes in Gaza and Sudan", Gowan, "The Twilight of International Peacemaking Institutions", Hathaway and Patrick, "Is the Prohibition on the Use of Force Collapsing?", Wintour, "Willing States Must Act to Save International Legal Order", and Walt, "Collective Security' Is on Life Support".

²⁸ Wintour, "Willing states must act to save international legal order, warns top academic"; Hathaway and Patrick, "Is the prohibition on the use of force collapsing?".

²⁹ Hamish Mackay et al., "Venezuelan leader lands in New York after capture – as it happened," *The Guardian*, 4 January 2026. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2026/jan/03/caracas-explosions-venezuela-maduro-latest-news-updates-live?page=with%3Ablock-6958dcca8f087b8b68f60673> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

or political independence of any state.”³⁰ The US Administration has also threatened to use military force to take over Greenland and the Panama Canal,³¹ as well as floating a proposal to take over Gaza and turn it into a “Riviera of the Middle East”.³² In February 2025, the US voted alongside Russia, North Korea and Belarus against a UN General Assembly resolution that supported Ukraine's territorial integrity.³³ Experts also fear that US efforts to pressure Ukraine to cede 20 per cent of its territory to Russia as part of a settlement with Moscow also undermines the prohibition on conquest.³⁴

China's artificial island-building and subsequent militarization in the South China Sea are widely viewed as violating international law and norms, using force to revise maritime boundaries and assert sovereignty over disputed features and waters.³⁵ China's claims of historical rights are echoed by Russia's assertions that Ukraine has no claim to legal statehood because it never existed as a state but was only a historical part of Russia until the creation of the Soviet Union.³⁶ Nevertheless, legal experts have made it clear that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 constitutes an aggression against the territorial integrity and political independence of a sovereign state and is a flagrant violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter.³⁷

The global order is clearly at a critical inflection point regarding multilateral cooperation to prevent conflict. In recent years, major institutions supporting the peaceful resolution of disputes have been sidelined, undermined and weakened. The UN Security Council is frequently deadlocked, often blocking efforts to advance political negotiations in some of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history. Western governments' failure to take meaningful action to prevent genocide and protect Palestinian civilians following Hamas's 7 October attack on Israel has also undermined the principle of distinction – a cardinal

³⁰ United Nations, “Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council - on Venezuela,” Secretary-General, 5 January, 2026. Available at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/2026-01-05> (accessed on 24 November 2025); John Haltiwanger, “Trump's attack on Venezuela prompts an identity crisis at the U.N.,” *Foreign Policy*, 5 January 2026. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/01/05/trump-venezuela-attack-maduro-united-nations-security-council-international-law/> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

³¹ Tom Long and Carsten-Andreas Schulz, “A man, a plan, and a long history of overplayed hands,” *Foreign Policy*, 17 July 2025. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/07/17/trump-panama-canal-military-mulino-china-history/> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

³² Kelebogile Zvobgo, “Trump's proposal to ‘take over’ Gaza would put Americans at risk of prosecution,” Brookings Institution, 27 February 2025. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/trumps-proposal-to-take-over-gaza-would-put-americans-at-risk-of-prosecution/>; Hathaway and Shapiro, “Might unmakes right”.

³³ Andrew Roth, “UN General Assembly backs resolution condemning Russia for Ukraine war,” *The Guardian*, 24 February 2025. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/24/un-general-assembly-russia-ukraine-war> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

³⁴ Loqman Radpey, “A US concession to Russia on Ukraine would usher in a new world order,” *LSE Blogs*, 13 October 2025. Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2025/10/13/a-us-concession-to-russia-on-ukraine-would-usher-in-a-new-world-order/> (accessed on 24 November 2025); Hathaway and Shapiro, “Might unmakes right”.

³⁵ Hathaway and Shapiro, “Might unmakes right”.

³⁶ Björn Alexander Düben, “‘There is no Ukraine’: fact-checking the Kremlin's version of Ukrainian history,” *LSE Blogs*, 1 July 2020. Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2020/07/01/there-is-no-ukraine-fact-checking-the-kremlins-version-of-ukrainian-history/> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

³⁷ Oona Hathaway, “How Russia's invasion of Ukraine tested the international legal order,” Brookings Institution, 3 April 2023. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-tested-the-international-legal-order/> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

rule of IHL requiring parties in armed conflict to always differentiate between civilians and combatants – and violated the norms of humanity, proportionality, precaution and the prohibition of unnecessary suffering.³⁸ In a preliminary order issued on 26 January 2024, the ICJ found that the Palestinians in Gaza have a “plausible” right to be protected from acts of genocide and that there was a “real and imminent risk” of irreparable harm to those rights. Western states continued military, financial, and diplomatic support for Israel, as well as their inaction in the face of alleged war crimes and a “plausible” genocide, has also weakened the norm of universality – the idea that all human beings are endowed with human rights equally, no matter who we are or where we live – and undermined belief in a system struggling to keep up with epochal change.³⁹

In 2023, Russia suspended its participation in the New START treaty, the last remaining bilateral agreement with the US governing strategic nuclear arsenals. At the time of publication, prospects for an updated treaty when New START expires in February 2026 seem poor.⁴⁰ With the end of collective security, an increasing number of countries are exploring the possibility of nuclear sharing or acquiring their own nuclear arsenal.⁴¹ This bodes ill, not only for the risk of nuclear war, but also for efforts to develop guardrails around artificial intelligence and cyberweapons.

The corrosive impact of these developments on peacemaking and mediation efforts is evident. Without the belief that most states, particularly the most powerful and influential, will adhere to these norms and restrictions, the system of post-war conflict management will be completely delegitimized, and prospects for limiting violent conflict and resolving disputes peacefully will be very bleak indeed.

The World Mediation Report

The analysis presented in the following chapters testifies to this reality, documenting the experience of conflict management and peace mediation experts in some of the most critical contexts, surveying practice and analysing challenges to stimulate a wide-ranging debate on how to re-frame peace mediation approaches in this rapidly evolving environment. Our goal is to contribute to a better understanding of how peace mediation needs to adapt to remain effective. It presents a critical overview of developments in the sector alongside updated analysis of peace mediation efforts in some of the world’s most conflict-affected countries. The chapters explore the challenges facing peace mediators in the context of a sharp decline in

³⁸ Nimer Sultany, “A threshold crossed: on genocidal intent and the duty to prevent genocide in Palestine”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, May (2024), pp. 1–26.

³⁹ Henry Foy, “Rush by West to back Israel erodes developing countries’ support for Ukraine”, *Financial Times*, 18 October 2023. Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/e0b43918-7eaf-4a11-baaf-d6d7fb61a8a5> (accessed on 24 November 2025); Azmi Bishara, *Denying Genocide through Terminological Hairsplitting* (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 20 March 2025).

⁴⁰ Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar, Ernest J Moniz and Meghan L O’Sullivan, “The proliferation problem is back”, *Foreign Affairs*, 25 September 2025. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/proliferation-problem-back> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

⁴¹ Naade Ali and Marvin G. Weinbaum, “Pakistan’s strategic defense pact with Saudi Arabia: A new security architecture in the wider Middle East”, Middle East Institute, 2025. Available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/pakistans-strategic-defense-pact-saudi-arabia-new-security-architecture-wider-middle> (accessed on 24 November 2025); Sophia Besch and Anna Bartoux, “Can Europe build its own nuclear umbrella?”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2025. Available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/04/can-europe-build-its-own-nuclear-umbrella?lang=en> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

respect for foundational principles relating to sovereignty, territorial integrity, humanity and collective conflict management. From a range of perspectives, mediation experts, political scientists, conflict analysts and peacebuilders assess the extent to which conflicts are being fuelled by the return of great-power competition and how the shift away from multilateral conflict management norms and institutions is impacting the practice of mediation. The report also reviews emerging mediators in an effort to advance inclusion and contribute to the debate about sustaining principled mediation in a fragmenting world order.

Structure of the Report

The report is divided into four parts. Part 1 comprises two chapters that explore the challenging context for peace mediators in a rapidly evolving world order. Part 2, *Mediation in Practice*, presents three case study chapters analysing conflict dynamics and peace mediation efforts in the Middle East (Syria and Israel-Palestine), the Horn of Africa and the African Great Lakes/Democratic Republic of the Congo. Part 3, *The Mediators*, is composed of two case study chapters examining the roles played by China and Qatar as third-party mediators, hosts and facilitators. It also includes a chapter on women mediators, assessing progress and challenges 25 years after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 which, among other things, called for the adoption of a gender perspective to consider the needs of women and girls both during and post-conflict. Part 4, *Mediation Trends and Prospects*, is comprised of two chapters that take a broader look at recent developments in peace diplomacy and mediation practice in response to global developments in an effort to identify emerging trends and prospects for the future.

Conflict Management in a Transforming World Order

Chapter 2, by Comfort Ero and Alan Boswell, addresses the shift in US foreign policy in response to the return of great-power competition, noting the deep concern provoked by the US withdrawal from global leadership and multilateral conflict management under the second Trump Administration. The impact on the US role in norm setting in the international system also emerges, for example through the US disregard for the norm of non-aggression in Ukraine and in deadlocked multilateral mechanisms and bilateral peacemaking attempts that prioritize short-term stabilization deals. The chapter also examines how changes in the global order are affecting Africa, where conflicts have almost doubled since 2013,⁴² and a growing number of overlapping crises are threatening to spin out of control. The chapter analyses what this means for the mediation field and concludes with some thoughts on the way forward.

Globally, violent conflict is at near record levels, as Dan Smith and Ian Davis highlight in Chapter 3, increasing steadily since 2010 to 177 separate violent conflicts in 2024 according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. The program reported approximately 128,400 battle-related deaths in 2024, driven by the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel-Gaza, with increased violence against civilians and non-state actors. War deaths in the decade 2011–2020 were around twice the number recorded in the previous decade. The 2020s have already exceeded that toll, with some of the worst violence being perpetrated on civilians in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Gaza, Myanmar, Sudan and Ukraine. Global military spending has never been higher, with the global total increasing by a record 7 per cent

⁴² Peace Research Institute Oslo, “New data shows record number of armed conflicts”, 10 June 2024. Available at <https://www.prio.org/news/3532> (accessed on 24 November 2025).

in 2024 to \$2.7 trillion.⁴³ The unprecedented rise is another strong indicator that security competition is intensifying, a direct response to escalating geopolitical tensions, ongoing conflicts and heightened threat perceptions.

Mediation in Practice

In Chapter 4, Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salayme examine how the return of great-power competition has further entrenched deep-rooted conflicts in Syria and Israel-Palestine, rendering them impossible to resolve. In both cases, great-power support has encouraged conflict parties to prioritize military victories over political negotiations, leading them to repeatedly reject mediation efforts because the adversary is a “terrorist group” and thus cannot be recognized or negotiated with. The chapter highlights the challenges faced in Syria by the multilateral conflict management system, where Russia blocked 18 Security Council resolutions between 2011 and 2023. It also illustrates how this can lead to the collapse of norms such as the norm against the use of starvation as a weapon of war, in Gaza, for example, where the US repeatedly vetoed proposed resolutions calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, thereby preventing the international community from delivering lifesaving assistance to civilians under relentless bombardment.

In Chapter 5, Alex de Waal calls for a reassessment of the “real politics” of conflict and its resolution in the Horn of Africa where leaders operate a “political marketplace” trading in oil, foreign aid and military assistance to sustain their rule. Instead of state-building or democratic change, peacemaking is concerned with short-term political survival. He foresees a future in which commercial dealmaking may become a primary driver in political pacts. The chapter first charts peace efforts across the region since 2000, analysing in turn the experience of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan, before zooming out to consider the region as a whole during this period. Four critical developments are identified: the expansion and subsequent contraction of multilateral peacemaking; the integration of the Horn within the Red Sea Arena as a strategic periphery of the Gulf states; the entrenchment of the political marketplace; and changes in the norms and processes of peacemaking.

In Chapter 6, Richard Moncrieff and Kseniya Oksamytna analyse the 30-year regionalized conflict in the DRC, assessing the US-Qatari mediation between Kigali and Kinshasa, the mediators’ motivations and rationale, and the prospects for the tenuous agreement. Echoing findings from Hellmüller and Salayme and conclusions drawn by Comfort Ero in Chapter 2, the authors find that a major obstacle to the process and a principal cause of the faltering implementation of the US-facilitated agreement is the belligerents’ belief that they can better advance their interests through military force than negotiation. Among the key factors driving M-23’s reluctance to cease fighting is the belief that it has more to gain by continuing to prosecute the conflict, a result of the weakening of the norm prohibiting the forcible annexation of territory: “Furthermore, the erosion of norms of territorial integrity by Russia and Israel, and Trump’s pronouncements has encouraged Rwanda to pursue de facto annexation of Congolese territory, and to simply face down the pressure coming from Angolan and then Qatari and American diplomats.”

⁴³ By way of comparison, the entire global humanitarian system’s appeal for \$50 billion fell short of that target. See ICRC, “ICRC Humanitarian Outlook 2026”.

The Mediators

In Chapter 7, Yun Sun presents a comprehensive overview of the thought and practice of Chinese conflict mediation. The chapter covers China's motivations for engaging in conflict mediation in the context of its expansive global investments and its rapid rise to great-power status. Beijing has traditionally avoided intruding in other countries' internal affairs, including their domestic conflicts, but geography, border stability (China has the longest land borders in the world, spanning over 22,000 km and shared with 14 countries) and economic interests are important considerations. The chapter also analyses the criteria China uses to determine which conflicts it will mediate, and explores the background, roles and functions of the special envoys and representatives assigned to specific conflicts. The concluding section considers China's experience to date as a cautiously ambitious player in global mediation and asks what the outcomes of its most successful engagements tell us about future prospects.

In Chapter 8, Sansom Milton situates Qatar's leading role in mediation within the context of deteriorating conflict management and peacemaking norms and the weakening influence of multilateral institutions. Since the end of the Cold War, Qatar has emerged as an important actor in peace mediation, reflecting the changing dynamics of global mediation, the growing influence of regional mediators and the needs arising from the shift to a more multipolar power distribution. In recent years, Doha has become a new global hub for dialogue and peace diplomacy, alongside Geneva and Oslo. Qatar has been increasingly drawn into efforts to resolve disputes in the DRC and Somalia in Africa, in Colombia and Venezuela in Latin America, and over Taliban rule in Afghanistan in Central and South Asia. The chapter also analyses Qatar's role in the multiparty mediation between Hamas and Israel and in de-escalating the Iran-Israel "12-Day War".

The year 2025 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which recognizes the critical role of women in conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, and urges their greater participation in decision-making. In Chapter 9, Sanam Naraghi Anderlini assesses progress towards commitments made over the years to provide support for women mediators and to enable their inclusion in formal mediation roles and their deployment to peace talks. Today, although 109 states have adopted national action plans to implement key parts of the agenda, and there is a burgeoning body of evidence demonstrating the positive impact that women's peace movements have on the substance and processes of peacemaking, women peacebuilders face greater exclusion and increased risk. The chapter demonstrates how the erosion of fundamental norms and the weakening of multilateral institutions is exacerbating obstacles to inclusion at all levels and undermining protections in conflict situations.

Mediation Trends and Prospects

In Chapter 10, Achim Wennmann assesses the state of the peace diplomacy sector and how it can adapt to a transforming strategic landscape, examining a range of issues including sectoral overcrowding, competition for funding and fitness for purpose in the context of future conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The chapter highlights the challenges faced by the peace diplomacy sector, trapped in a cycle of constant crisis diplomacy because of the sharp increase in the number and complexity of violent conflicts. Reflecting the sidelining and undermining of major institutions supporting the peaceful resolution of conflicts,

the chapter traces the shift away from the United Nations to government- or NGO-led processes. The UN, however, remains indispensable, as do IHL and the norms binding state behaviour. The chapter also highlights the sector's unique assets, consisting of deep technical knowledge and a wealth of relationships and access to political spaces that are crucial for conflict resolution and crisis management. It concludes with a call to action to construct a global peace diplomacy movement that builds momentum towards a stronger shared foundation of the vision, principles, approaches and means for peace diplomacy.

In Chapter 11, Isak Svensson contrasts the urgent need for mediation with the decline in peacemaking effectiveness, against the backdrop of the highest number of active armed conflicts recorded since the end of the Second World War. He references data from the Peace Observatory demonstrating that the number of negotiations in intra-state conflicts has been decreasing since 2014, and negotiations in inter-state conflicts became less frequent from 2022 to 2023. The chapter identifies key global trends that affect mediation, including the impact of increased security competition as seen in increased internationalization of conflict and the erosion of norms against forcible annexation, and the breakdown of consensus in the Security Council. It concludes with a look at peace processes that have made some progress during recent years and a reminder that the past experience of great-power competition is replete with valuable lessons for today's mediators.