Peace Mediation in an Era of Normative and Institutional Collapse

World Mediation Report 2026

Edited by Seán Deely

Produced by the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies

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List of Acronyms

ADF	Allied Democratic Front
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AMR	Antimicrobial resistance
APSA	African Peace and Security Architecture
ARCISS	Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nation
AU	African Union
AUPD	AU High Level Panel for Darfur
CENTCOM	United States Central Command
COP	Conference of Parties
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
DPA	Darfur Peace Agreement
DPPA	Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EDF	Eritrean Defence Force
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Force
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EU	European Union
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FDLR	Rwandan Democratic Liberation Front
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
GBF	Global Biodiversity Framework
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GoS	Government of Sudan
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
LAS	League of Arab States
LJM	Liberation and Justice Movement
M23	March 23 Movement

MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
New START	New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
NGO	Non-governmental organization
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
TMC	Transitional Military Council
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
UIC	Union of Islamic Courts
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSG	United Nations Secretary-General
US	United States
WIPNET	Women in Peacebuilding Network
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

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FOREWORD

This volume appears at a moment when the conditions that made peace mediation credible are rapidly eroding. The international system that sustained mediation practice after the Cold War is fragmenting. Power politics has reasserted itself. Legal restraint has weakened. Civilian protection has become negotiable. Mediation has not disappeared, but it has become more fragile, more contested, and more exposed to forces that actively undermine negotiated outcomes.

The World Mediation Report has been created to interrogate mediation practice and contribute to a better understanding of how it needs to adapt to remain fit for purpose. Across the cases examined here—Gaza, Sudan, the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes—mediation efforts unfold amid mass violence, fragmented authority, and external actors who profess support for diplomacy while systematically obstructing it. These are not marginal cases. They represent the dominant terrain of contemporary peacemaking.

The report situates mediation within the broader collapse of normative and institutional constraints on the use of force. The chapters demonstrate that mediation outcomes cannot be understood independently of the paralysis of the UN Security Council, the selective application of international law, the erosion of prohibitions on territorial conquest, and the rise of purely transactional diplomacy. In several conflicts examined here, parties calculate that continued warfare carries fewer costs than compromise. Mediation becomes an exercise in managing violence rather than resolving it.

As the international order fragments, mediation increasingly operates in an environment where assumptions quickly become obsolete. The return of great power competition, the changing role of middle powers, the turn towards non-Western mediators, the emergence of new norms and institutions—all demand continuous scrutiny. An annual publication enables cumulative analysis, captures patterns that episodic studies miss, and holds the field accountable to empirical reality rather than professional habit.

The volume does not shy from uncomfortable questions. What does legitimacy mean when mediation processes coexist with mass atrocities? How far can pragmatism stretch before mediation loses ethical coherence? Is neutrality meaningful in asymmetrical conflicts shaped by impunity? These questions are not resolved here, but they are posed with intellectual discipline.

The report also examines mediators themselves. The growing prominence of regional and middle powers signals a durable shift in global peacemaking. Rather than characterizing these actors as either saviors or spoilers, the volume analyzes how mediation authority

is constructed through access, credibility, leverage, and political risk. Qatar's mediation role, examined here, reflects a world in which influence is exercised through proximity, persistence, and strategic positioning—not inherited institutional weight.

The Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies has committed to producing this report annually because the mediation field requires more than technical refinement. It requires sustained critical reflection, data, historical awareness, and honesty about failure as much as success. This report does not offer a template for peace. It offers a structured, comparative, and critical account of how mediation is being reshaped by the most profound global changes since the mid-twentieth century.

If mediation is to remain meaningful, it must confront these realities directly. The World Mediation Report is a contribution to that debate—not as a verdict, but as an ongoing inquiry into what mediation is becoming, what it is losing, and what it must reclaim.

Ghassan Elkahlout

CHAPTER 1

Peace Mediation in an Era of Normative and Institutional Collapse

Seán Deely

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]

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[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/iiad242 (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.

CHAPTER 2

A Conflict Management System in Crisis

Comfort Ero and Alan Boswell[1]

Introduction

International Crisis Group (ICG) was established in 1995 at the height of the post-Cold War transition, a period that saw a sharp rise in civil wars and left the international system reeling from conflicts in Rwanda, the Balkans, Somalia and Sierra Leone. It was in that context that various diplomats and officials working in international relations – among them Lord Mark Malloch Brown (later Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations under Kofi Annan) and Mort Abramowitz, a former US diplomat – came together to found an organization with the aim of preventing humanitarian disasters.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 had left the United States unchallenged as the sole great power in the international system, a unipolar order with America ascendant. National interest and security competition were replaced by cooperation and collective security, and the international community worked together on the basis of a belief in progress and the benefits of a system loosely based on liberal norms. It was also a time of liberal interventionism, and despite the failures of the early and mid-1990s, a period of confidence in the international peace and security architecture and the idea that the UN was the primary international body to address conflicts.

This confidence in the international community and the principle of collective security started to change on 11 September 2001. The Al-Qaeda attacks on the US marked the beginning of the end of liberal internationalism and the era in which the West played a role akin to that of a world policeman. Over the past decade, the return of great power competition has led to increased geopolitical tension, a surge in military spending and a new global strategic environment characterized by competition in economic, technological and cyberspace domains. Gone are the days when a confident West was able to lead or dictate the way forward; today, competition increasingly overrides cooperation.

[1] This chapter is based on a conversation between Alan Boswell (Crisis Group Horn of Africa Director) and Comfort Ero (Crisis Group President and CEO) in September 2025. International Crisis Group, "Dr. Comfort Ero on the future of peacemaking", *The Horn*, podcast, 12 September 2025. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/dr-comfort-ero-future-peacemaking (accessed on 24 November 2025).

A Major Shift in American Foreign Policy

In this context, the US withdrawal from global leadership and multilateral conflict management under the second Trump Administration has provoked deep concern and apprehension in Western capitals.[2] Shocked by the trade and migration aspects of its "America First" agenda, a patently transactional approach to alliances and questions over security guarantees, Europe has initiated a strategic shift towards greater self-sufficiency.

While some observers find President Trump's variety of transactionalism refreshing, many also worry about the unpredictability and uncertainty of US policymaking. ICG has heard arguments that his administration is better than those of previous presidents, the most immediate being the Biden Administration, which were seen as hypocritical, heavily moralizing about democracy and human rights, but only when it concerned the particular interests that they were pursuing. A number of leaders welcome President Trump's less moralistic approach. His efforts at peacemaking and pronouncements about ending wars – between India and Pakistan, in the Great Lakes, Gaza, Ukraine – are difficult to assess. It remains uncertain whether there has been a genuine change on the ground in all cases. Many of these arrangements will require follow-through if they are to succeed, and it is unclear whether this administration is ready to make that investment. At the same time, the norm of non-aggression is being disregarded in Ukraine and sometimes treated with disdain by the US Administration.

For now, a large number of world capitals are still in reaction mode, finding their own ways to engage with President Trump. Some of them are currying favour or fawning over him, and some of them are willing to accommodate some of his policies, for example, by agreeing to take in migrants from the US. But there are also a number of states that clearly see they have agency, a choice, and are not going to bend to his will. We are seeing this in tensions between India and the US. It remains unclear whether Prime Minister Modi will halt imports of Russian oil, despite the imposition of a 50-per cent tariff on US imports, as he pursues what he sees as India's national interest, but the potential consequences of this coercive US policy are becoming increasingly clear. As noted by ICG's senior research and advocacy advisor Ali Wyne," Even if one were to accept that China, Russia, and North Korea are 'conspiring' against the United States, the greater challenge for its foreign policy is that major allies and partners at the core of its diplomatic network increasingly seek to de-risk from it as well."[3] American allies worry that President Trump seems willing to sacrifice some long-held friendships for the sake of what he defines as an America First policy and are re-evaluating their own partnerships with the US.

Middle Powers in a Multipolar Order

Peacemakers are also having to deal with an increasingly multipolar world. A growing number of capable and dynamic middle powers have emerged, turning economic wealth into political leverage, using natural resources, energy markets, media networks and investment diplomacy to increase their influence and power. This diffusion of power brings both benefits

[2] This chapter was drafted prior to the US operation in Venezuela and does not, therefore, reflect the ensuing implications.

[3] Ali Wyne, "Even if one were to accept that China, Russia, and North Korea are 'conspiring'…", X (formerly Twitter), 3 September 2025. Available at https://x.com/Ali_Wyne/status/1963336480337834018 (accessed on 24 November 2025).

and challenges. Big states and middle powers view conflicts very differently. As the crisis in Sudan illustrates, a growing number of middle powers are no longer satisfied to remain on the sidelines and are adopting assertive foreign policies and becoming more actively involved in their regions. Some are engaged in multilateral and regional diplomacy, while others are actively involved in conflicts, as a direct or indirect party. Some engage in both. The number of internationalized civil conflicts – where one or more external governments are contributing or deploying combat personnel – has increased significantly over the past decade. [4]

The idea of promoting peaceful outcomes is now under significant strain. Conflict parties are more willing to use force to define the end of a conflict, rather than agreeing to negotiated solutions and outside mediation, which means there are fewer openings for peacemaking. This is evident in a growing number of conflicts, including those in Ethiopia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Myanmar and Sudan, where ICG works intensively. Peacemakers are spending more time dealing with the various interests of external players in a conflict, as opposed to actually resolving conflicts. Major, comprehensive peace agreements are a thing of the past.

This new geopolitical landscape is changing the way ICG operates. The organization was established to focus on conflict prevention, and its core tenets remain unchanged. However, it is increasingly challenging to find decisive resolutions to conflicts. As a result, today's policy focus is centred on pursuing incremental change in conflict. This sometimes involves improvising, managing the consequences of wars, preventing escalation or spillover, or buying time to achieve peace. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each situation calls for a different approach. ICG also spends a great deal of time in non-Western capitals engaging with rising powers where decision makers have increasing influence or are the main actors in shaping facts on the ground. To be relevant, to be influential and to move the policy dial, ICG has invested heavily in the Gulf states, as well as in places like Addis Ababa, Pretoria, Bogota and Asian capitals.

Challenges to Peace and Security in Africa

As ICG has reported elsewhere, Africa is particularly impacted by the fragmentation of the old global order. A series of overlapping crises is threatening to spin out of control. Although few Africans mourn the end of an era of Western hegemony, the changes in the global order pose both opportunities and perils. The number of conflicts on the continent almost doubled between 2013 and 2023.[5] In 2024, Sub-Saharan Africa remained the region with the most armed conflicts, with Sudan accounting for a quarter of all conflict-related fatalities.[6] Cuts to US aid and assistance are also causing hardship in the short term, even if a surprising number of Africans welcome them in the long term as a way to reduce dependence. As ICG's Africa Director, Murithi Mutiga, said in a recent conversation, we are no longer in an era of empathy and compassion. The African Union cannot expect the same level of international

[4] Siri Aas Rustad, *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview*, 1946–2024 (Oslo, Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2025).

[5] 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).

[6] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2025).

attention, aid and support for the continent as it had previously received.[7] In this context, the AU – the pivotal multilateral organization on the continent – needs to take ownership of its own crises, because nobody else will do it for them.

Similarly, with regard to Sudan, the Sahel, Great Lakes, Central African Republic and other situations, there is a real question mark about the continent's ability to deal with its own peace and security challenges. Although criticism of the UN and the lack of international attention towards various conflicts in Africa is valid, what is most jarring is that more than 20 years after the founding of the AU, in the name of African solutions to African problems, fundamental questions remain about the willingness of African leaders to invest in conflict prevention and crisis management responses to new conflicts on the continent.

The Sudan Crisis: A Failure of Crisis Management

Sudan is on the brink of collapse, facing de facto division after almost three years of savage conflict that is metastasizing across borders to destabilize an already war-torn region. It is one of the clearest examples of the failure of our crisis management system.[8] The crisis illustrates how multilateral diplomacy and Western influence can no longer move leaders towards peace in the way they used to. The international community, drained by the crises in Ukraine and Gaza, and unable to gather, coalesce and build a consensus to deal with this conflict, have deprioritized it. This has enabled the main belligerents – the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces – to continue to fight and destroy what is left of Sudan's social fabric. It also demonstrates how much more difficult it is to convince the leaders of warring factions that it is better to achieve their goals peacefully rather than continue hostilities. Sudan's leaders have yet to feel real pressure not to pursue their goals militarily.

The crisis follows a global pattern of regional and middle powers playing increasingly assertive roles. The Gulf states, Ethiopia, Eritrea and other neighbours are all involved in the war at some level. This constellation of actors makes it more difficult to resolve the war or even undertake humanitarian diplomacy. The key to a solution to the war is for those regional powers with the most influence on the parties inside Sudan to realign their interests. Unless there is an alignment between the core interests of the key external actors in the conflict, it will be very hard to secure a pathway out of conflict for Sudan.[9] Sudan is also a perfect example of how challenging it is to deliver the type of comprehensive peace deals that were prevalent in the 1990s. This is all the more devastating because 20 years ago, it was still possible to focus world attention on saving Darfur and delivering an independent South Sudan. It is a travesty. Beyond Gaza and Ukraine, Sudan is an illustration of the state of crisis management.

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[7] ICG, "Eight priorities for the African Union in 2025", Crisis Group Africa Briefing No. 205 (Nairobi/Brussels, 2025). Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/african-union-regional-bodies/b205-eight-priorities-african-union-2025 (accessed on 24 November 2025).

[8] Alan Boswell, "Sudan's war is the shape of things to come", *Foreign Affairs*, 2 October 2025. Available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sudan/sudans-war-shape-things-come (accessed on 24 November 2025).

[9] Since this interview was recorded, the US, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and UAE made some progress towards a common position on ending the war. Alan Boswell, "In breakthrough, three Arab powers agree on Sudan peace roadmap," ICG Analyst's Notebook, 16 September 2025. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sudan/breakthrough-us-and-three-arab-powers-agree-sudan-peace-roadmap (accessed on 24 November 2025).

What Future for Crisis Management?

Today, as middle powers compete in the Horn of Africa, the question is, can they develop new mechanisms, new norms, new ways of doing peacemaking and of managing their competition? Are we entering a very bloody new era of wars and anarchy, or is this a new normal with major disruption and fragmentation, but where peacemaking is still possible? What would peace look like in this new, more fragmented world?

Amid the discourse about the breakdown of the international order and a fragmenting world that is more chaotic, disruptive and conflict-affected, it is difficult to find reasons to be hopeful. A new international order cannot emerge without some accord between Beijing and Washington, as well as Moscow, European capitals and regional heavyweights. Unfortunately, such a consensus will be much more difficult to build than the one that emerged following the end of the Cold War, which was contingent on a confident unipolar power, with the US driving and shaping the agenda. Although ICG has put forward ideas about how to reduce risks in Europe, the impasse over Ukraine makes it difficult to see how to negotiate a new European security order.[10] Globally, given what we have seen in Gaza, it is hard to imagine how we are going to build a transformative crisis management framework.

The phrase "never again" has been repeated by so many leaders in countless places. Not long after ICG was founded in Sarajevo in 1995, leaders said "never again" in relation to the horrors of Srebrenica, borrowing a phrase that the Jewish people have long used with respect to the Holocaust. Leaders said "never again" after Rwanda, and again after Darfur, and in countless other places. Thirty years later, conditions in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine provide little hope for a new geopolitical order. Nevertheless, although the deep interests of countries will make it difficult to cultivate the kind of empathy and compassion between nations that we would like, no leader wants to see a Third World War. And nobody – including President Trump – wants to see a return to the forever wars that characterized the last years of the post-Cold War era.

[10] ICG, "Ukraine and beyond: shaping Europe's security future", ICG Europe Report, No. 272 (Brussels, 2025). Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine-russia-internal-united-states/272-ukraine-and-beyond-shaping (accessed on 24 November 2025).

Trends in Armed Conflicts, Militarization and Global Insecurity

Dan Smith and Ian Davis

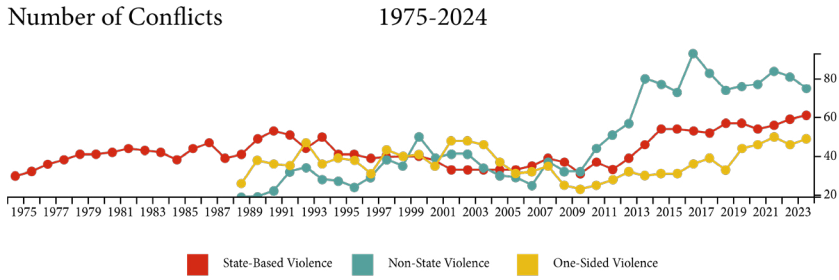
Introduction

The global landscape of armed conflict has darkened in the 2020s. The number of people dying, injured, displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance because of armed conflict is higher than at any time this century. Recent years have seen large-scale conventional inter-state war in Europe, cross-border aggression in the Middle East, major civil wars in Ethiopia and Sudan, and continuing conflicts with fluctuating levels of violence in, among others, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Sahel region and Myanmar. In Haiti, gang violence has led to the virtual collapse of the state. On too many of these battlefronts, peacemaking has been ineffective. The most recent actual peace agreement – one that terminates a conflict by agreement rather than through the military superiority or victory of one party – was in 2016, in Colombia. In the past decade, overall, the international capacity for peaceful conflict management has been unable to meet its extraordinarily challenging tasks.

Violent Conflict

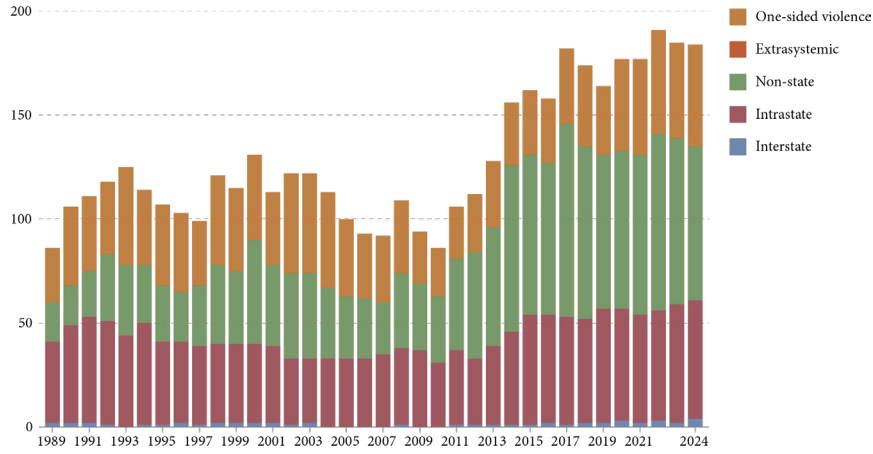
According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Project, as Figures 1 and 2 show, these diverse forms of conflict and systematic violence amounted to 177 separate violent conflicts in 2024. With fluctuations from year to year, there is, as the figures also show, a significant rise in the incidence of violent conflict since approximately 2010, coinciding with the fallout from the 2008–2009 global economic crisis and the events that were, at the time, known as the "Arab Spring".

Figure 1. Armed Conflicts 1975-2024



Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program, https://ucdp.uu.se
Definitions:
Armed conflict: An armed, active, contested incompatibility about government and/or territory, in which at least one party is the government of a state, with at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year
State-based: A conflict in which at least one state is involved
Non-state violence: The use of armed force between two organised non-state armed groups
One-sided violence: Armed force deliberately used against civilians by government or non-state group

Figure 2. Armed Conflicts 1989-2024



Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program, https://ucdp.uu.se; revised by Our World in Data, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/number-of-armed-conflicts?time=earliest..2023
Definitions: See Figure 1

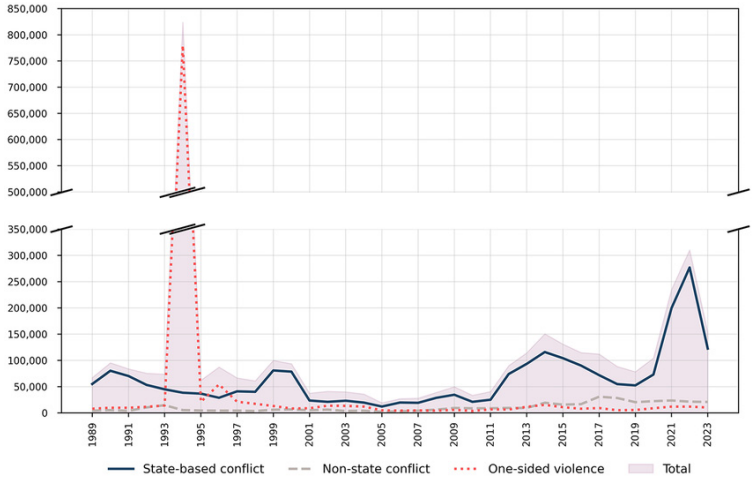
The high number of armed conflicts today is a key marker of a deteriorating security horizon. Among them is Russia's war in Ukraine, launched in 2014 and escalated in February 2022 with a full-scale invasion. Russia's aggression is a clear violation of the UN Charter, Article 2 of which binds member states to "settle their international disputes by peaceful means" and "refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state". Similarly, the war in Gaza is characterized by systematic violations of international humanitarian law.[1] While Israel's initial war aim following the incursion, atrocities and hostage-taking by Hamas on 7 October 2023 –

[1] Vincent Chetail, "Did humanitarian law die in Gaza?" Geneva Graduate Institute, 16 May 2025. Available at https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/communications/news/did-humanitarian-law-die-gaza (accessed on 23 November 2025).

to remove Hamas from political power and destroy its military capabilities – fell within the legitimate boundaries of self-defence, its conduct of the war has long since exceeded the bounds of proportionality.[2] Israeli forces have blocked humanitarian access, attacked civilians seeking emergency aid, used starvation as a weapon of war, forced almost the entire population of Gaza from their homes and inflicted indiscriminate death and destruction.[3] In June 2025, Israel attacked Iran without due cause when facing no immediate threat, an illegal act of aggression that the United States supported with its own airstrikes.[4]

The human toll of war has climbed in each succeeding decade this century. While war-death data are always unreliable, usually contested, and sometimes pure propaganda, the general trend is clear. According to Uppsala University, war deaths approximately doubled in the decade 2011–2020 compared to the previous decade (see Figure 3). Making allowances for irreducible data uncertainties, in the current decade, the world has already surpassed the 2011–2020 war death toll, with the most recent four years (2021–2024) among the five deadliest in the last 35 years. Only 1994, the year of the Rwandan genocide, was more lethal.

Figure 3. Fatalities by Type of Violence 1989-2024



Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program, https://ucdp.uu.se

[2] Bailey Ulbricht and others, "There is nothing left': jus ad bellum proportionality and Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza", Stanford Public Law Working Paper (Stanford, CA, Stanford Law School, 2025). Available at https://ssrn.com/abstract=5283689 (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[3] United Nations General Assembly, "Report of the special committee to investigate Israeli practices affecting the human rights of the Palestinian people and other Arabs of the Occupied Territories", A/79/363, 20 September 2024, p. 2; United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UN Special Committee finds Israel's warfare methods in Gaza consistent with genocide, including use of starvation as weapon of war", press release, 14 November 2024. Available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/un-special-committee-finds-israels-warfare-methods-gaza-consistent-genocide (accessed on 23 November 2025)

[4] Marko Milanovic, "The illegal Israeli-American use of force against Iran: a follow-up", EJIL:Talk!, 23 June 2025. Available at https://www.ejiltalk.org/the-illegal-israeli-american-use-of-force-against-iran-a-follow-up/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

Among the most violent ongoing conflicts are those in DRC, Gaza, Myanmar, Sudan and Ukraine. In mid-2025, estimates of Ukrainian war deaths by independent observers ranged from 70,000 to 100,000 (plus 300,000 injured), while on the Russian side, estimates were as high as 250,000 troops killed and 750,000 wounded.[5] This war, in which approximately 250,000 Ukrainian troops confront about 400,000 Russian and 11,000 North Korean troops along a frontline of some 1,600 km, with intense activity throughout but little change in the frontlines since late 2022,[6] is very different from most other current armed conflicts. More typical is the less structured violence of the wars in eastern DRC, Myanmar and Sudan. By March 2025, wars were responsible for the displacement of 7.4 million Congolese,[7] the expulsion of 1 million Rohingya from Myanmar into Bangladesh coupled with the displacement of 2 million people inside Myanmar,[8] and the forcible displacement of more than 12 million Sudanese.[9] In a different kind of war, Israel's land and air offensives on Gaza since the Hamas incursion on 7 October 2023 had killed some 64,000 people by June 2024[10] and displaced over 1.9 million (90 per cent of the population) by March 2025.[11] The death toll has continued to climb as Israel persists in attacking targets in Gaza despite orders to the contrary from the International Court of Justice in May 2024[12] and in violation of the ceasefire agreed in January 2025. [13]

In these conflicts and others, two points in common stand out: human suffering and the extreme difficulty for regional or global institutions to do anything about it.

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[5] Pjotr Sauer, "One million and counting: Russian casualties hit milestone in Ukraine war", *The Guardian*, 22 June 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2025/jun/22/one-million-and-counting-russian-casualties-hit-milestone-in-ukraine-war (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[6] See the Russian Offensive Campaign Assessments by the Institute for the Study of War. Available at https://understandingwar.org/analysis/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment (accessed on 23 November 2025); BBC, "Ukraine in maps: tracking the war with Russia", 13 March 2025. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60506682 (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[7] UNHCR, "DR Congo emergency". Available at https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/democratic-republic-congo-situation (accessed on 15 March 2025).

[8] UNHCR, "Myanmar emergency". Available at https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/myanmar-situation (accessed on 15 March 2025); S. Naing, "Myanmar's war-torn Rakhine faces famine with 2 million people at risk, UN says", Reuters, 8 November 2024. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmars-war-torn-rakhine-faces-famine-with-2-million-people-risk-un-says-2024-11-08/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[9] UNHCR, "Sudan situation". Available at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation (accessed on 15 March 2025).

[10] Z. Jamaluddine and others, "Traumatic injury mortality in the Gaza Strip from Oct 7, 2023, to June 30, 2024: a capture–recapture analysis", *The Lancet*, vol. 405, No. 10477 (8 February 2025).

[11] UNRWA, "UNRWA situation report #162 on the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem", 9 March 2025. Available at https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-162-humanitarian-crisis-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[12] *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), Request for the Modification of the Order of 28 March 2024, Order of 24 May 2024, I.C.J. Reports 2024, p. 649.*

[13] Middle East Monitor, "Israel kills over 150 Palestinians since ceasefire, including 40 in past two weeks: Gaza Media Office", 15 March 2025. Available at https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250315-israel-kills-over-150-palestinians-since-ceasefire-including-40-in-past-two-weeks-gaza-media-office/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

Peace Activity

The increasing level of armed conflict and its human costs might give the impression that little peace-oriented activity is underway worldwide, but as Table 1 shows, this would be a serious misapprehension. Including ceasefires and agreements on humanitarian access, process, implementation and next steps, an average of 35 agreements have been reached annually during the 2020s thus far. Nevertheless, this falls far short of an annual average of just under 100 in the previous two decades. (It should be noted that the PA-X database, on which these figures are based, uses a broad definition of peace agreement. These are largely process agreements, steps along the way towards peace, often starting journeys that have not been completed.)

Table 1. Number of Peace Agreements, 1990-2024

Conflict type	*1990-94*	*1995-99*	*2000-04*	*2005-09*	*2010-14*	*2015-19*	*2020-24*
Inter-state	14	32	7	8	4	7	10
Inter-state/intra-state	70	46	30	22	44	27	17
Intra-state	300	272	229	186	173	134	119
Intra-state/local	12	7	12	40	54	201	31
Total	**396**	**357**	**278**	**256**	**275**	**369**	**177**

Source: Political Settlements Research Programme, University of Edinburgh, "Peace agreements database", PA-X database, https://www.peaceagreements.org (accessed 8 June 2025).

There were several noteworthy developments in peace processes in 2024. Following a four-year military standoff, India and China struck a deal in October to help defuse tensions along the disputed border, agreeing in December to work towards a resolution of the conflict.[14] China and the Philippines also agreed to set up new lines of communication to improve their handling of maritime disputes,[15]while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan resolved a long-standing border dispute in December 2024 that had flared into deadly violence in 2021–2022.[16]

Important developments in 2025 include the June agreement between DRC[17] and Rwanda,

[14] V. Pandey, "India and China agree to de-escalate border tensions", BBC, 21 October 2024. Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckg0gwy0nlyo (accessed on 23 November 2025); K. Moritsugu, "China and India agree to work on solution to their border dispute in the Himalayas", Associated Press, 19 December 2024. Available at https://apnews.com/article/china-india-border-dispute-d808afcdb6eb7a5deab3babea425bc6f (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[15] Reuters, "China, Philippines agree on 'provisional arrangement' for South China Sea resupply missions, Manila says", 21 July 2024. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-resupply-ship-south-china-sea-shoal-without-us-help-2024-07-21/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[16] C. Putz, "After 33 years, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan announce border agreement", The Diplomat, 4 December 2024. Available at https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/after-33-years-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan-announce-border-agreement/ (accessed on 23 November 2025)

[17] Gershwin Wanneburg, "Turning point or pointless turn: will DR Congo-Rwanda deal bring peace?", Al Jazeera, 1 July 2025. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/1/turning-point-or-pointless-turn-will-dr-congo-rwanda-deal-bring-peace (accessed on 23 November 2025).

achieved with US backing, to end the fighting in eastern DRC.[18] While Nobel Laureate Denis Mukwege criticised the deal as a "scandalous surrender of sovereignty" that validated foreign occupation and exploitation of the people and mineral resources of the DRC, it is uncertain whether the agreement will indeed end the fighting. (Whether President Trump deserves credit for achieving peace is a separate question.[19]) M23, the main militia force in eastern DRC, was not a party to the agreement and fighting has continued.[20] In August 2025, Armenia and Azerbaijan, again with US backing, concluded an agreement (Joint Declaration on Future Relations) in which they committed themselves to signing the Agreement on Establishment of Peace. The final draft of the latter accord had been hammered out in March, facilitated by memoranda of understanding with the US on future economic partnerships and possibilities,[21] as part of efforts to settle remaining contentious issues between the two countries after three decades of intermittent warfare ended with Azerbaijan's victory in 2023. The March agreement, however, has not yet been formally signed and ratified because Azerbaijan is insisting that Armenia must first amend its constitution.[22]

The problem, then, is not a lack of activity. There has been plenty – albeit less than in the previous two decades – but without the results to show for it. It is the contention of this chapter that the explanation for this lack of impact does not lie with the mediators, nor with their tools and techniques. These are well-established now, with several decades of experience that goes far beyond traditional inter-state diplomacy. It is undoubtedly true that errors and missteps have occurred and continue to occur in implementation processes, among them the persistent tendency to underplay, on the one hand, important dimensions of cultural differentiation and, on the other, the importance of inclusivity – especially but not only on gender lines – in achieving sustainable agreements. Nonetheless, those who are engaged in supporting peace processes have access to a variety of flexible instruments that

[18] Gershwin Wanneburg, "Turning point or pointless turn: will DR Congo-Rwanda deal bring peace?", Al Jazeera, 1 July 2025. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/1/turning-point-or-pointless-turn-will-dr-congo-rwanda-deal-bring-peace (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[19] Nimi Princewill, "As two African nations sign a peace deal, Trump wants credit. But some fear peace may still elude them", CNN, 27 June 2025. Available at https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/27/africa/trump-drc-rwanda-peace-deal-intl (accessed on 23 November 2025); Arab News, "Trump confirms DR Congo-Rwanda peace deal, gripes about Nobels", 21 June 2025. Available at https://www.arabnews.com/node/2605240/world (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[20] UN News, "DR Congo: rising insecurity in the east impedes diplomatic progress, Security Council hears", 22 August 2025. Available at https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165707 (accessed on 23 November 2025); Jospin Mwisha, "DRC's latest peace deal is breaking down and it isn't the first – what's being done wrong", The Conversation, 2 September 2025. Available at https://theconversation.com/drcs-latest-peace-deal-is-breaking-down-and-it-isnt-the-first-whats-being-done-wrong-264064 (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[21] M. Abrahamyan, "A fragile framework for lasting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan?", International Center for Transitional Justice, 10 October 2025. Available at https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/fragile-framework-lasting-peace-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan (accessed on 23 November 2025); Thomas de Waal, "Armenia and Azerbaijan's major step forward", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 March 2025. Available at https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/03/armenia-azerbaijan-peace-deal-next-steps?lang=en (accessed on 23 November 2025); Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Publication of the initialed agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan", 11 August 2025. Available at https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2025/08/11/Initialed%20Arm-Az%20Peace%20Agreement%20text/13394 (accessed on 23 November 2025); US Department of State, "United States publishes documents from historic Armenia and Azerbaijan meeting", press release, 29 August 2025. Available at https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/08/united-states-publishes-documents-from-historic-armenia-and-azerbaijan-meeting (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[22] Lucy Papachristou and Nailia Bagirova, "Azerbaijan, Armenia publish text of US-brokered peace deal", Reuters, 11 August 2025. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/azerbaijan-armenia-publish-text-us-brokered-peace-deal-2025-08-11/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

can be and are used in relation to diverse conflict types and peace processes in local, national and regional settings.[23]

As real as the constraints in process may be, the core explanation for the limited record of achievements lies elsewhere, in a broader context of insecurity. The high incidence of armed conflict today is but one deficiency in the world order. In general theoretical terms, the concept of world order refers to the arrangement and conduct of international relations institutions, treaties, laws and norms, and the full range of dealings between states. Looked at more closely, the whole can be broken down into a set of different orders dealing with economic relations, questions of peace and security, the natural environment, human rights, health, cultural heritage and more. Some aspects of the world order are formalized, some not; some are more or less universally acknowledged, some not. Among other consequences, this means that world order is both contested and constantly evolving. In reflecting on how to strengthen peace mediation and conflict management, it is essential to assess these broader issues of global institutional performance and the ways they interconnect.

Military Spending

Trends in global military spending offer a useful starting point for understanding how the changes in the international order are affecting global peace and security. Global military spending is the product of decisions made by all governments in response to perceived security threats and opportunities. As the sum of all those decisions, spending is an interesting indicator of the overall perceived level of security. Other things being equal, when domestic and external security conditions are under control and threat perceptions are low, military spending will be lower than when the prevailing sentiment is one of insecurity and a high risk of conflict. It is therefore worth noting that global military spending has never been higher. It has increased every year for the past decade – the longest run of annual increases recorded in the definitive database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). In 2024, the global total increased by a record 7 per cent to its highest ever level, exceeding $2.7 trillion.[24] This overall pattern of increase masks quite wide variations. East Asia, Europe (including Russia) and North America show the highest increases; China's military spending has risen each year for 30 years, a uniquely long run. By contrast, military spending in sub-Saharan Africa and Central and South America is stable or declining.

"Global military spending has never been higher. It has increased every year for the past decade — the longest run of annual increases recorded in SIPRI's definitive database."

Although global spending is at an all-time high, that does not mean it has peaked. Today's global economic burden of military spending is not especially large by historical standards. In 2024, military expenditures accounted for 2.5 per cent of global GDP. A World Bank estimate using SIPRI data indicates that comparable figures were 4.2 per cent in 1984 and 5.4 per cent in 1964.[25] Increasing military spending will doubtless be politically contentious

[23] Julia Cournoyer, Leena Badri and Marion Messmer, "Conflict prevention under pressure", International Security Programme Research Paper (London, Chatham House, 2025).

[24] SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2025), Table 3.1.

[25] Ibid., Table 3.2; World Bank Group, "Military expenditure (% of GDP)", World Bank database. Available at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS (accessed on 12 March 2025).

in many countries, with adverse social effects if other needs go unmet, but further increases in military spending are both feasible and likely. In June 2025, NATO announced plans for significant increases in military spending, with the aim of bringing member states' expenditures up to 5 per cent of GDP by 2035.[26] In summary, there is no evidence to suggest that perceptions of insecurity and the inclination to address them through increased military strength will diminish in the near future.

Nuclear Risk

Indicators of equally profound problems are to be found in the nuclear field. On the one hand, there is good news. The world's nuclear stockpile has been shrinking for almost 40 years, from approximately 64,000 bombs and warheads in the mid-1980s to 12,240 at the start of 2025.[27] While some of these munitions are held in storage waiting to be dismantled and disposed of, others are stored ready for use or are deployed as missile warheads and are immediately available to be loaded onto bombers.

That was the good news; now for the bad.

In the last few years, the number of deployed nuclear weapons has begun to increase. Thus far, this is confined to China and, on a much smaller scale, India. Combined, the estimated increase by these two states from 2024 to 2025 amounted to 102 warheads – just under 1 per cent of the world's total stockpile, and fewer than the number that were retired and dismantled. As small as the figure is, it is one sign that the era of nuclear weapons reductions has come to an end.

The second sign lies in nuclear diplomacy. Bilateral nuclear arms control between Russia and the US is almost over.[28] The only remaining bilateral US-Russian nuclear arms control agreement is the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). The treaty was signed in 2010 and came into force in 2011, with a ten-year term that can be extended for five years by mutual agreement. It was extended in 2021, but there has been no further action. New START is scheduled to expire in early 2026. There are no signs of negotiations to renew or replace it, and neither side has shown much interest in doing so. President Putin suspended Russia's participation in the treaty in February 2023, though he affirmed that Russia would continue to abide by the treaty's numerical limits, and in September 2025, he offered to continue with that voluntary constraint for one year if President Trump would agree to the same.[29] For his part, President Trump has long regarded New START as "one-sided" and

[26] Paul Kirby, "Trump says Nato's new 5% defence spending pledge a 'big win'", BBC, 25 June 2025. Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj4en8djwyko (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[27] E. H. Dyvik, "Number of nuclear warheads worldwide from 1945 to 2024", Statista, 4 July 2024; H. M. Kristensen and R. S. Norris, "Global nuclear weapons inventories, 1945–2013", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 69, No. 5 (2013); on the numbers at the start of 2025, see *SIPRI Yearbook 2025*, chapter 6.

[28] SIPRI, S*IPRI Yearbook 2019: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019), chapter 1, pp. 4–9.

[29] President of Russia, "Presidential address to Federal Assembly", transcript, 21 February 2023. Available at http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565 (accessed on 23 November 2025); A. Osborn, V. Soldatkin and J. Landay, "Putin offers Trump one-year extension to nuclear weapons treaty", Reuters, 23 September 2025. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-offers-trump-temporary-nuclear-arms-control-deal-that-would-extend-status-2025-09-22/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

"just another bad deal that the country made".[30]

The third sign that the nuclear good news story is coming to an end lies in the reluctance of nuclear-armed states to pursue further reductions. This has generated huge impatience among many of the strongest advocates for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. Successive review conferences of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty seem only to produce disagreement over disarmament.[31] The risk is that the process might reach breaking point. Since the end of the Cold War in 1989–1991, three new states have acquired nuclear weapons: India, Pakistan and North Korea. Compared to fears in the 1970s about nuclear proliferation,[32] three additional states going nuclear counts as a relative success for the non-proliferation regime. But in Europe, the Middle East and Northeast Asia, there is clear potential for more states to join the nuclear club,[33] possibly including Iran, especially after the Israeli and US bombing of its nuclear energy facilities in June 2025.[34]

At the same time, a new nuclear arms race is gearing up. Compared to the last one, the risks are likely to be more diverse and more serious.[35] In part, this is because it is a triangular arms race – three great powers, not two superpowers. It is also because key arenas of competition will include cyberspace, outer space and ocean-space. Thus, the arms race may be more qualitative than quantitative, and the idea of who is ahead will be even more elusive and intangible than it was last time. Consequently, the old, largely numerical formulas of arms control will no longer suffice.

Eighty years into the nuclear age, there are no credible circumstances in which it would make rational sense to launch a nuclear war. To do so would be an obvious act of self-destruction, even if facing defeat in a conventional war, whatever happens in the technological competition and even if one side thinks it has a comprehensive advantage. But the risk of a nuclear war occurring inadvertently persists, occasioned, perhaps, by a technical glitch that is compounded by human fallibility against a background of hostility and mutual suspicion.

[30] S. Holland, "Trump wants to make sure U.S. nuclear arsenal at 'top of the pack'", Reuters, 24 February 2017.

[31] Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, "10th NPT review conference: why it was doomed and how it almost succeeded", Arms Control Today, October 2022. Available at https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-10/features/10th-npt-review-conference-why-it-was-doomed-and-how-it-almost-succeeded (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[32] Robert G. Gard, Jr., "JFK's nuclear proliferation warnings: up to 25 countries with nuclear weapons", Council for a Livable World, 11 May 2012. Available at https://livableworld.org/jfks-nuclear-proliferation-warnings-up-to-25-countries-with-nuclear-weapons/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[33] Cienski and W. Kość, "Poland seeks access to nuclear arms and looks to build half-million-man army", Politico, 7 March 2025; G. G. Chang, "Japan's new leader wants nuclear weapons", *Newsweek*, 13 October 2024; J. Borger, "Crown Prince confirms Saudi Arabia will seek nuclear arsenal if Iran develops one", *The Guardian*, 21 September 2023. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/21/crown-prince-confirms-saudi-arabia-seek-nuclear-arsenal-iran-develops-one (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[34] Julian Barnes, "After U.S. strikes, Iran may be determined to build a nuclear weapon", *The New York Times*, 22 June 2025. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/22/us/politics/iran-nuclear-weapon.html (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[35] See J. T. Mathews, "The race that can't be won", *The New York Review*, 17 October 2024.

Ecological Risk and Insecurity

In the background – usually far too far into the background – of this discussion, the ecological crisis continues to worsen. On 22 July 2024, the Earth experienced its hottest day on record.[36] On some days in that month, the temperature in the Antarctic winter was around 28°C warmer than normal.[37] Overall, 2024 was the warmest year on record.[38] Likewise, the period from 2015 to 2024 is the warmest ten-year period on record.[39] The 2015 Paris Agreement set the goal of limiting global warming to "well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels" (defined as the period from 1850 to 1900), while trying to stay below a 1.5°C increase.[40] A decade later, 2024 marked the first year on record in which the average global temperature was clearly more than 1.5°C above the pre-industrial average. As the World Meteorological Organization noted, the Paris goal is "not yet dead but in grave danger".[41] The current trajectory of warming is towards approximately 3°C above the pre-industrial average.[42] Among the distressing consequences of this is the increasing frequency of deadly humid heatwaves, which bring a combination of high temperatures and high humidity that the human physiology cannot survive.[43]

The argument that climate change is a driver of human insecurity and conflict risk was, at one time, contested but the evidence has become clearer with each passing year.[44] The challenge of climate change can only be fully addressed through international cooperation. There is a shared interest in responding to it and joint action is a necessary part of the solution. This lesson is ignored by far too many politicians and opinion-makers today, yet climate change is but one part of the current ecological crisis.

Some other aspects of ecological disruption are on the international political agenda, but outcomes are little better than they are on climate action. The world is currently experiencing the sixth mass extinction of species, losing biodiversity and biomass at an unprecedented

[36] European Commission, Copernicus Programme, "New record daily global average temperature reached in July 2024", 25 July 2024. Available at https://climate.copernicus.eu/new-record-daily-global-average-temperature-reached-july-2024 (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[37] D. Gayle and D. Noor, "Antarctic temperatures rise 10C above average in near record heatwave", *The Guardian*, 1 August 2024. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/01/antarctic-temperatures-rise-10c-above-average-in-near-record-heatwave (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[38] European Commission, Copernicus Programme, "Global climate highlights 2024", 10 January 2025. Available at https://climate.copernicus.eu/global-climate-highlights-2024 (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[39] World Meteorological Organization, "WMO confirms 2024 as warmest year on record at about 1.55°C above pre-industrial level", 10 January 2025. Available at https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/wmo-confirms-2024-warmest-year-record-about-155degc-above-pre-industrial-level (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[40] T. di Liberto, "What's in a number? The meaning of the 1.5-C climate threshold", Climate.gov, 9 January 2024. Available at https://www.climate.gov/news-features/features/whats-number-meaning-15-c-climate-threshold (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[41] World Meteorological Organization, "WMO confirms".

[42] United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Emissions Gap Report 2024* (Nairobi, 2024).

[43] C. M. Powis and others, "Observational and model evidence together support wide-spread exposure to noncompensable heat under continued global warming", *Science Advances*, vol. 9, No. 36 (September 2023).

[44] K. Tarif and others, "Insights on climate, peace and security", Climate, Peace and Security Research Paper (Stockholm, SIPRI, 2023).

rate.[45] Up to 1 million species of animals and plants are at risk of extinction; this may be close to one eighth of all species on the planet.[46] In 2022, the Conference of Parties (COP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity agreed on the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), a set of radical measures to slow the losses.[47] Two years later, the next Biodiversity COP ended in clamorous disunity.[48] A February 2025 extension of the COP did manage an outline agreement on financing to support the GBF, but a decision on a new fund will only be taken in 2028, if then, leaving almost no time to achieve the GBF targets, which were set for 2030.[49] The loss of biodiversity has potentially profound consequences for health and food security.

Similarly challenging for food security are microplastics, which hinder photosynthesis in plants, significantly reducing food production.[50] Appropriately, plastic pollution has received international political attention; in March 2022, the UN Environment Assembly agreed to develop a legally binding international instrument on plastic pollution by the end of 2024.[51] The deadline came and went, however, without agreement, and in August 2025 the extended talks collapsed with fundamental issues of what to include in the treaty text unresolved.[52]

At least climate change, biodiversity and plastic pollution are established on the international political agenda, even if the record so far leaves much to be desired. Other issues are well-established on the scientific agenda and equally serious yet have no political platform for discussion and possible action. One example is antimicrobial resistance (AMR). It is estimated that antibacterial resistance, a subset of AMR, is likely to contribute to 10 million premature deaths annually by 2050, and will lengthen recovery times from illnesses that, since the large-scale manufacture and provision of penicillin and other antibiotics began,

[45] E. Kolbert, The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History (Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2014); World Wildlife Fund, "What is the sixth mass extinction and what can we do about it?" Available at https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/what-is-the-sixth-mass-extinction-and-what-can-we-do-about-it (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[46] Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (Bonn, 2019); C. Mora and others, "How many species are there on earth and in the ocean?", *PLoS Biology*, vol. 9, No. 8, August 2011.

[47] UNEP, "Conference of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, 15th meeting, Part II, Kunming–Montreal global biodiversity framework", CBD/COP/15/L.25, 18 December 2022.

[48] P. Greenfield and P. Weston, "COP16 ends in disarray and indecision despite biodiversity breakthroughs", *The Guardian*, 3 November 2024. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/nov/03/cop16-ends-in-disarry-and-indecision-despite-biodiversity-breakthroughs (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[49] A. Chandrasekhar and others, "COP16: key outcomes achieved at the resumed UN biodiversity conference in Rome", Carbon Brief, 28 February 2025; P. Weston, "COP16 nature summit agrees deal at 11th hour but critics say it is not enough", *The Guardian*, 28 February 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/feb/28/cop-16-climate-nature-funding-agreement (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[50] R. Zhu and others, "A global estimate of multiecosystem photosynthesis losses under microplastic pollution", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 122, No. 11 (10 March 2025).

[51] UNEP Environment Assembly, Resolution 5/14, 2 March 2022.

[52] Karen McVeigh and Emma Bryce, "Plastic pollution talks fail as negotiators in Geneva reject draft treaties", *The Guardian*, 15 August 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/aug/15/plastic-pollution-talks-geneva-treaty (accessed on 23 November 2025).

have generally been straightforward to treat.[53] Another example is air pollution, which, wwaccording to the World Health Organization, affects well over 90 per cent of the world's population. Robust research links it to increased aggression among children and to violent crime.[54]

The natural foundations on which all social and economic life is based are changing and weakening. Though all the connections and interactions have not yet been identified, it is clear that this has serious and significant implications for peace and security.[55] Choosing effective response strategies will both influence and be shaped by geopolitical alignments, as well as by governments' choices about where to stand on the spectrum between all-inclusive international cooperation and the erection of barriers against all comers. As the global security situation worsens, it will likely complicate ecological cooperation and make it more difficult to achieve. And as the ecological crisis intensifies, it will exacerbate challenges for regional, national and global security.

Conflict Management and Mediation in an Insecure World

To summarize, failures in international institutions, cooperation and system dynamics are adding to the challenges of conflict management and peace mediation. Global institutions tasked with international stability and human security are not only currently unable to manage conflict, but they are also deficient in responding to the ecological and nuclear proliferation crises. Neither the UN and its various agencies, nor regional organizations like the African Union and European Union, nor international financial institutions like the World Bank, nor the great powers and their alliances are handling these major, epoch-defining challenges well.

Among the operational implications of this are, first, that stakeholders in dialogue and mediation cannot rely on international institutions to come in and underpin initial achievements in a peace process. Assistance from these institutions should not be spurned, but they are no longer dependable. If new major peace agreements can be concluded, they should be crafted in ways that do not depend for their viability on, for example, international peace operations. These may serve a supporting role, but until their health improves, they will not take on the core role. Additionally, any assumption that generous international financial assistance will be available to support the implementation of peace agreements is unlikely to be borne out in practice. The current level of global insecurity and the resulting increase in military spending mean that international financing will be limited compared to

53 J. O'Neill and others, Tackling Drug-Resistant Infections Globally: *Final Report and Recommendations* (London, Review on Antimicrobial Resistance, 2016); World Health Organization, "Antimicrobial resistance", 21 November 2023. Available at https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/antimicrobial-resistance (accessed on 23 November 2025); M. Naghavi and others, "Global burden of bacterial antimicrobial resistance 1990–2021: a systematic analysis with forecasts to 2050", *The Lancet*, vol. 404, No. 10459 (2024).

54 World Health Organization, "Air quality database: update 2022". Available at https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/air-pollution/who-air-quality-database/2022 (accessed on 23 November 2025); A. Reuben and others, "Association of air pollution exposure in childhood and adolescence with psychopathology at the transition to adulthood", *JAMA Network Open*, vol. 4, No. 4. (2021); J. Burkhardt and others, "The effect of pollution on crime: evidence from data on particulate matter and ozone", *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*, vol. 98 (November 2019), 102267; M. Bondy, S. Roth and L. Seger, "Crime is in the air: the contemporaneous relationship between air pollution and crime", *Journal of the Association of Environmental and Resource Economists*, vol. 7, No. 3 (2020).

55 R. Schoonover and D. Smith, "Five urgent questions on ecological insecurity", SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, No. 2023/05 (Stockholm, SIPRI, 2023).

the turn of the century.

Opportunities to foster dialogue and peace mediation are also increasingly shaped by global and regional geopolitics. It is evident, for example, that President Trump's various ceasefire proposals and offers to negotiate or mediate in DRC, Gaza, Israel-Iran, Russia-Ukraine and others are driven by prospects for US geopolitical and economic advantage. The same is also true in other cases – the UAE in Sudan, for example, or China in the case of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Activities on the margins of these larger processes are also part of an overall geopolitical equation. That is not necessarily negative, but risks being so if those facilitating dialogue are unaware of the broader ramifications.

CHAPTER 4

The Middle East: Syria and Israel-Palestine

Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh

Introduction

The world is changing rapidly, and mediation is evolving as a result. Two conflicts in the Middle East, Israel/Palestine and Syria, lie at the geopolitical heart of these changes.[1] Both conflicts have not only pitted the direct conflict parties against each other, but have also involved the great powers. As parties to the conflict themselves, these states have leveraged peace processes to advance their own geopolitical interests in their competition over status, influence and military power. This has further entrenched the conflicts, leading to the most devastating humanitarian crises in recent history with appalling death tolls and unspeakable human suffering. What place is there for mediation in such contexts?

The space for mediation has drastically changed since the end of the Cold War. The 1990s provided a favourable environment for mediation, marked by a notable shift towards negotiated settlements that reflected an emerging norm of prioritizing negotiated outcomes over military victories. The change was facilitated by a unipolar global environment dominated by the United States and its promotion of liberal democratic values.[2] However, the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent "War on Terror" proclaimed and fervently fought by the United States led to a re-evaluation of stabilization over democratization, with profound consequences on the Middle East in particular. This drastically changed the global environment for mediation, serving to diffuse the norm that some conflicts – notably those with "terrorists" – can only be resolved through military means. Conflicts involving these proscribed actors were thus placed outside the realm of mediation.[3] As wars end more frequently in military victories rather than political settlements, mediation initiatives have

[1] This chapter covers the two cases as they developed until August 2025.

[2] Lise Morjé Howard and Alexandra Stark, "How civil wars end. The international system, norms, and the role of external actors", *International Security*, vol. 4, No. 3 (2017–2018), pp. 122–171; Richard Gowan and Stephen J. Stedman, "The international regime for treating civil war, 1988–2017", *Daedalus*, vol. 147, No. 1 (2018), pp. 171–184; Sara Hellmüller, "Peacemaking in a shifting world order: a macro-level analysis of UN mediation in Syria", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 48, No. 3 (2022), pp. 543–559.

[3] Julia Palmiano Federer, "We do not negotiate with terrorists: navigating liberal and illiberal norms in peace mediation", *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 12, No. 1 (2019), pp. 19–39.

subsequently declined,[4] which is also reflected in the declining number of comprehensive peace agreements.[5] Thus, while force was never absent as a tool for resolving disputes – as seen in the Gulf War (1990–1991) and Kosovo (1999) – it has re-emerged more visibly, including in the Middle East.

In both the Syrian and Israel/Palestine conflicts, belligerents and their international and regional allies have pursued military victories and prioritized them over political agreements. In both contexts, external actors (be it Russia in the case of Syria or the United States in the case of Israel/Palestine) have supported conflict parties in pursuing military strategies, and both situations have been framed as conflicts where negotiations are impossible because the "other side" is not recognized by their adversary and is often labelled as "terrorist groups". This has rendered a multilateral approach to mediation difficult, if not impossible. However, it has not resolved conflicts and led to sustainable peace but has suppressed and contained violence only for it to resurface periodically. Researchers have long distinguished between negative and positive peace.[6] It has also been widely acknowledged that negative peace, although extremely important for reducing human suffering as a direct consequence of military action, does not create the conditions for a durable end to conflict. Seeing a seeming military victory by President Assad between 2016 and 2024 in Syria and the absence of large-scale escalations between 2021 and 2023 in Israel/Palestine, many observers assumed that the conflict was petering out. This silencing of the weapons – or negative peace – gave a deceptive impression of calm, but both cases clearly show that conflicts cannot be solved by military means *alone*. Negative peace is not enough.

While military interventions can be instrumental in stopping violence and preventing massacres, a political process is indispensable for articulating lasting political structures that can bring long-term positive peace. Indeed, as demonstrated by over 13 years of civil war in Syria involving widespread and systematic attacks against the civilian population, the use of chemical weapons and other atrocity crimes, and eight decades of conflict in Israel/Palestine, culminating in forced starvation and genocide in Gaza, political solutions are urgently needed. While Syria recently moved towards a potential political transition, Israel/Palestine is still trapped in violence.

Mediation involves engaging with all actors who can contribute to the resolution of the conflict, including so-called terrorists. While this may sit uncomfortably with some leaders who have used these labels to push forward their political agendas, conflicts have never been durably resolved through military means or political exclusion. They may go silent for a while, but unresolved disputes over political status, territory and other core issues resurface and violence resumes, often with shocking human costs.

This chapter analyses mediation efforts in Syria and Israel/Palestine and shows important trends in both cases: a focus on military solutions over political ones, deadlocked multilateral

[4] Magnus Lundgren and Isak Svensson, "The surprising decline of international mediation in armed conflicts", *Research and Politics*, vol. 7, No. 2 (2020), pp. 1–7.

[5] Jan Pospisil, "Dissolving conflict. Local peace agreements and armed conflict transitions", *Peacebuilding*, vol. 10, No. 2 (2022), pp. 122–137; Monalisa Adhikar and others, "Disaggregated mediation: the localization of peace processes amid global and domestic fragmentation", *European Journal of International Relations* (2025). Available at https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661251331519 (accessed on 24 November 2025).

[6] Johan Galtung, "Violence, peace, and peace research", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 6, No. 3 (1969), pp. 167–191.

mechanisms and bilateral peacemaking attempts that prioritize short-term stabilization deals. It discusses what they mean for the mediation field and concludes with some thoughts on the way forward.

Syria

Until 8 December 2024, the situation in Syria was tacitly or openly interpreted as a military victory for Bashar al-Assad. Many saw his takeover of Aleppo in December 2016 as the death knell for the revolution that had started in 2011, and backed by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, he subsequently retook control of the majority of the country's territory. An apparent calm set in with a sharp decline in direct violence, although tensions continued to simmer beneath the surface. The revolution, however, was not dead. Around the world, observers watched in amazed disbelief in late November 2024, as an opposition military coalition led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched a major offensive in the north-west, rapidly capturing the country's second-largest city, Aleppo, from government forces before advancing southwards to overrun the capital, Damascus, overthrowing Assad in less than a week. This outcome followed 14 years of conflict and repeated failures to reach a negotiated political solution.

The lack of a political settlement in the Syrian conflict prior to the HTS-led takeover was partly attributable to the regime's entrenchment and consistent refusal to engage meaningfully in political dialogue. The regime often framed its position around a "military solution" to eliminate "terrorists", not distinguishing between political and military oppositions. The coalition victory clearly shows that military victories, such as the one proclaimed by Assad, do not endure; political transitions are needed. At the same time, Syria exemplifies the limitations of international mediation efforts, as the strategies, mechanisms and tools employed by the international community failed to produce a viable pathway towards peace. The result was continued conflict and the loss of over 600,000 lives, the destruction of the country and the displacement of half its population, including almost 7 million refugees.[7]

The following section discusses the three aforementioned challenges to contemporary mediation in Syria: the conflict parties' belief in a military solution, deadlocked multilateral (UN/LAS) mechanisms and bilateral peacemaking attempts that prioritize short-term stabilization deals.

Military over political solutions

Both conflict parties, the Syrian regime and the opposition, pursued military victories to solve the conflict. External parties supported this approach. In particular, the Syrian conflict included the United States, which supported the opposition, and Russia, which supported Assad. This support strengthened the conflict parties' belief in their capability to defeat the other side militarily and reduced their motivation to engage in talks. Convinced that Assad would be overthrown soon – if need be, through a US military intervention – the opposition initially refused to engage in negotiations. The US intervention did not happen, however, despite Assad crossing the red line of chemical weapons use drawn by President Obama. Russia's deployment of forces and anti-aircraft systems into the Syrian theatre in

[7] Alex Bellamy, *Syria Betrayed: Atrocities, War, and the Failure of International Diplomacy* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2022); Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Transactional peacemaking: warmakers as peacemakers in the political marketplace of peace processes", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 46, No. 2 (2025), pp. 312–342; Hellmüller, "Peacemaking in a shifting world order".

2015 emboldened Assad, who subsequently refused any meaningful engagement with the opposition, engaging instead in endless stalling tactics to delay negotiations.

Regional actors were also heavily involved. However, rather than investing in collective conflict resolution frameworks, they intensified their involvement in the war, viewing it as a means to expand their strategic influence. This was particularly the case for Iran and Saudi Arabia, with their long-standing competition for regional influence and power. Iran aimed to extend its influence by consolidating a land corridor from Tehran to Beirut, referred to as the "Shia Crescent", and providing a vital link to its ally, Hezbollah, widely considered the most powerful non-state group in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia sought to counter this extension of Iranian influence and reinforce its claims to regional leadership.[8]

Paralysed multilateral mediation

At the same time, the multilateral mechanisms that could have promoted political solutions were blocked. The UN Secretary-General appointed four mediators on Syria between 2012 and 2024, none of whom succeeded in brokering a political agreement. The UN was largely deadlocked on Syria because even though Russia rhetorically supported the UN-facilitated mediation, it used its position on the UN Security Council to undermine the mediators' mandate by repeatedly vetoing UNSC resolutions in order to provide diplomatic cover for the Assad regime.[9] A record number of 18 resolutions on Syria were vetoed between 2011 and 2023.[10] This represented a key structural impediment to effective multilateral mediation, preventing the UNSC from giving the UN Special Envoy's efforts the support they needed.

By 2024, the Syria peace process had stalled, exacerbated by intensified US-Russian rivalry. Backed by Russia, the Syrian government refused to engage meaningfully with the Office of the Special Envoy and declined to resume negotiations on the Constitutional Committee that was supposed to convene in Geneva. Meanwhile, Russia, under heavy sanctions following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and amid increased tensions with the West, accused Switzerland of aligning with EU sanctions and actively undermined efforts to hold meetings in Geneva.

The UNSC dysfunction was compounded by the absence of a comprehensive regional peace architecture: regional actors were divided, and the League of the Arab States (LAS) was not in a position to mediate in the conflict. In the first year of the Syria crisis, the Arab League prioritized negotiation and mediation, proposing a peace plan in late 2011 that called for an end to violence, the withdrawal of military forces from cities and political dialogue between the Assad regime and the opposition. It deployed an observer mission to monitor compliance, but the effort failed due to continued violence and restricted access, as well as disagreement among LAS member states on Assad's future. Consequently, the LAS supported the UN-

[8] Jubin M. Goodarzi, "Iran and the Syrian civil war", in *The War for Syria: Regional and international Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, Raymond A. Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli eds. (London, Routledge, 2019), pp. 138–155; Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (Oxon, Routledge, 2013); May Darwich, "Saudi policies in the Syrian crisis", in *The War for Syria.*

[9] Russia notably feared a repetition of the 2011 Libya scenario where Moscow perceived that the responsibility to protect (R2P) was misused by France, the United Kingdom and the United States to justify military intervention and regime change under the guise of humanitarianism.

[10] These vetoes were cast on 4 October 2011, 4 February 2012, 19 July 2012, 22 May 2012, 8 October 2016, 5 December 2016, 28 February 2017, 12 April 2017, 24 October 2017, 16 November 2017, 17 November 2017, 10 April 2018, 19 September 2019, 20 December 2019, 7 July 2019, 10 July 2019, 8 July 2022 and 11 July 2023.

facilitated mediation, appointing the two first Special Envoys to Syria jointly with the UN. However, as regional rivalries intensified, the LAS became increasingly paralysed.

Efforts to revive Arab mediation in 2023 through the Arab Ministerial Contact Group on Syria, primarily driven by the stalemate in the UN process, failed to generate meaningful change. While Arab states pursued bilateral engagements with the Syrian regime, Damascus did not deliver on key demands, such as curbing Captagon trafficking and creating a safe environment for the return of Syrian refugees.

Bilateral peacemaking attempts

The peace process was increasingly shaped by bilateralism, which sidelined multilateral efforts led by the UN.[11] External allies frequently sought to channel accrued leverage from their military involvement into their own bilateral peace initiatives. Key negotiations and decisions were driven by US-Russia deals, illustrating how bilateral consensus between major powers is a precondition for progress. However, when US-Russia relations deteriorated – particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – bilateralism no longer complemented multilateralism but displaced it. The emergence of the Astana process in 2017, driven by Russia, Türkiye and Iran, institutionalized this shift.

These bilateral processes were marked by interest-based and exclusive approaches that marginalized broader political reform. While the UN advanced a value-based, inclusive framework focused on democratic transition and civil society participation, Astana prioritized military de-escalation and power-sharing between external actors. Civil society and women were largely excluded, and opposition representation was symbolic. The emphasis on short-term military deals, such as the creation of de-escalation zones, failed to translate into sustainable peace, as most zones were recaptured by the regime. Even the creation of the Constitutional Committee under UN auspices – born out of Astana's Sochi Conference – narrowed the agenda, sidelining key elements of the original UN-led framework.

Ultimately, the peace process became transactional, reinforcing a political marketplace in which warmaking and peacemaking were conflated.[12] In recent years, regional actors also re-engaged with the Syrian regime, normalizing relations within a "step-for-step" framework. This process culminated in Syria's readmission to the Arab League and President Assad's participation in the LAS summit. However, this normalization, while symbolically significant, remained transactional in nature. It failed to produce meaningful progress in stabilizing Syria, let alone advancing a comprehensive peace.

Israel-Palestine

For more than three decades, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has been monopolized by the US, with the UN relegated to the background, providing mainly humanitarian support and advocating for adherence to international law. However, the US has "clearly fallen short of its objectives of ending the conflict between Palestinians and Israel and replacing hostility

[11] Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Multiparty mediation in a changing world: the emergence and impact of parallel processes to UN peacemaking in Syria and Libya", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, vol. 35, No. 1 (2023), pp. 129–149.

[12] Hellmüller and Salaymeh, "Transactional peacemaking".

with peaceful relations".[13] Although the Oslo Accords – notably not mediated by the US – offered a framework for peace and the conflict underwent a notable transformation in the 1990s,[14] the promises were never fully implemented as agreed. By the 2000 Camp David Summit, the process had effectively stalled, with no substantial progress in the negotiations. This stalemate became entrenched with the Second Intifada, escalating violence and the Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank. Meanwhile, the two-state solution grew further out of reach.[15] In place of a comprehensive peace process, ad-hoc and temporary military arrangements emerged, effectively maintaining the status quo in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. These arrangements have served mainly to reproduce and reinforce the asymmetric power relations between Palestinians and Israelis, in favour of the latter.

The following section examines the three challenges to contemporary mediation as illustrated by the conflict in Israel/Palestine: the belief in a military solution, as shown in the failure of a negotiated two-state solution; the prioritization of short-term, bilateral stabilization deals; and stalled mediation efforts.

Military over political solutions

The two-state solution gained popularity in the 1990s, amid a broader rise in international mediation efforts and growing optimism about the potential for a political settlement. Its origins can be traced back to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 (1947), better known as the Partition Plan for Palestine. Despite the progress made in the 1990s, this optimism was severely challenged when Israeli-Palestinian negotiations reached a deadlock at the Camp David Summit in July 2000, followed shortly afterwards by the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September of the same year. The subsequent Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank and the siege of Yasser Arafat's compound in Ramallah in 2002 pushed the prospect of a peaceful settlement further out of reach. As such, political engagement and mediation were replaced by military action, a resurgence of violence and unilateral steps, exemplified by Sharon's disengagement from Gaza in 2005.

These developments unfolded alongside a reconfiguration of the regional order following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which spurred the greater militarization of the region. While the US promoted democratization and pushed for elections in Palestinian politics in 2005 and 2006, Hamas's landslide victory in legislative elections in 2006 placed an armed group – considered by Israel, the United States and the European Union to be a terrorist organization – in charge of Palestine's political future. This unexpected outcome was not internationally recognized.[16] The situation was further complicated by the violent Hamas-Fatah conflict in 2007, which entrenched internal Palestinian divisions. The political and geographical division significantly weakened the Palestinian capacity to negotiate and provided the Israeli side with a pretext to claim that there was no unified Palestinian partner

[13] Ghassan Khatib, "American mediation in the Israel-Palestine conflict: a house built on sand", in *Conflict Mediation in the Arab World*, Ibrahim Fraihat and Isak Svensson, eds. (New York, Syracuse University Press, 2023).

[14] Louis Kriesberg, "Mediation and the transformation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 38, No. 3 (2001), pp. 373–393.

[15] Padraig O'Malley, The Two-State Delusion: *Israel and Palestine – A Tale of Two Narratives* (New York, Penguin Publishing Group, 2016).

[16] Tareq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* (Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2018).

for negotiations. During the same period, Israeli politics shifted steadily to the right, a trend consolidated by the 2009 election of Benjamin Netanyahu, who firmly opposed the two-state solution and the establishment of a Palestinian state, and who has remained in power until today.

Subsequent attempts to reinitiate the negotiation between the two parties, such as the Taba Talks (2001), the Road Map for Peace (2003), the Annapolis Conference and Talks (2007–2008), or the Kerry Talks (2013–2014), did not result in any agreement. Disagreements on the core issues remained, including over the negotiation framework. Meanwhile, shifting dynamics in the internal politics of Israel and the Palestinian Authority negatively impacted the negotiations and helped prioritize military means over political engagement. Following the collapse of the last Israeli/Palestinian talks in 2014 during the Obama Administration's second term and the subsequent election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, the peace process and direct negotiations came to a halt.

With Trump's first presidential term, the focus shifted from brokering a political agreement between Israel and Palestine to regional normalization (as proposed by the Arab Peace Initiative in 2002) between Arab states and Israel, effectively glossing over the Palestinian issue. Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy further deepened the impasse, along with his unilateral and unlawful decisions to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and to acknowledge Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.[17] On the ground, this trend empowered militarized political visions; the realization of the two-state solution was becoming impossible with deepening Israeli occupation and the multiplication of settlements in the West Bank, as well as the radicalization of public opinion, mainly in Israel.

Meanwhile, other political visions failed to attract attention, despite voices calling for an inclusive single state in Israel/Palestine or a federal/confederal state. These solutions seem unrealistic given the many challenges they would face, including the difficulties of defining equal legal and political rights,[18] the lack of a negotiation framework and the absence of political will reinforced by a dominant belief in the primacy of military solutions. As a result, the space for political negotiation and resolution has eroded, giving way to the predominance of military occupation and the normalization of violence as the governing logic on the ground.

Bilateral peacemaking attempts

Parallel to the paralysis of the multilateral political peace process and the two-state impasse, there was a shift towards bilateral arrangements. This shift was largely driven by the erosion

[17] Muhittin Ataman and Bilal Salaymeh, "Trump's decision recognizing the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights: a clear violation of international law", SETA Perspective, March 2019. Available at https://media.setav.org/en/file/2019/04/trumps-decision-recognizing-the-israeli-annexation-of-the-golan-heights-a-clear-violation-of....pdf (accessed on 24 November 2025).

[18] Leila Farsakh, "The one-state solution and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Palestinian challenges and prospects", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 65, No. 1, pp. 55–71.

of the role of multilateral institutions such as the UN, the Quartet (UN, US, EU, Russia),[19] the LAS and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which have become increasingly viewed as ineffective, particularly in addressing the recent humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Additionally, the fragmentation of the Palestinian political landscape contributed to this trend. Attempts by various actors, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Algeria, Russia and, most recently, China, to unify Palestinian factions have consistently failed. As such, in Gaza, negotiations were conducted mainly with Hamas and centred around easing the siege and managing periodic escalations, facilitated by regional states, mainly Egypt and Qatar.

In the West Bank, Israel engaged with the Palestinian Authority on day-to-day security coordination and economic issues, further entrenching the political divide. The resulting ad-hoc arrangements lacked a political framework or road map. Absent any attempt to address root causes and political aspirations, they aimed solely at containing the conflict instead of resolving it. Several ceasefire agreements have been mediated between Palestinian factions (mainly Hamas in Gaza) and Israel, typically following major rounds of violence, particularly after the Gaza wars of 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2021. The content of these deals was largely limited to Hamas promises to halt rocket attacks on Israel in exchange for Israel's commitment to easing its blockade on Gaza. The outcome was often a short-lived negative peace with fragile ceasefires and deepening grievances, as clearly shown by the sudden eruption of violence on 7 October 2023.

This shift was also reinforced at the international level. President Donald Trump facilitated the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and Gulf states such as the UAE and Bahrain. These agreements bypassed the multilateral framework of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and sidelined the Palestinian question altogether, effectively consolidating a bilateral modus operandi. Much like the bilateral arrangements in Gaza and the West Bank, they did not contribute to the peaceful settlement of the conflict and instead further marginalized Palestinian aspirations. Nevertheless, these agreements opened space for regional actors to assume a more prominent role in mediation. In addition to Egypt, which has traditionally played an important role in peace mediation due to its geographic proximity to the Gaza Strip and historical weight within LAS, Qatar has also emerged as a key mediator. Both states, though more notably Qatar, have leveraged their contacts and working relations with Hamas, which Western countries lacked (except for Switzerland until Bern's 2024 designation of Hamas as a terrorist group).[20]

Stalled mediation

Alongside the breakdown of official dialogue and the sidelining of the United Nations and its Special Coordinator's office, the last two years of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been marked by further deterioration of mediation frameworks, which have failed to broker a lasting ceasefire or to halt the war on Gaza, which has been described as

[19] The Quartet was formed in 2002 to promote negotiations for the Middle East peace process. It was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 1397 (2002) after the Second Intifada. The Quartet's leaders – the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, Russia's Foreign Minister, the UN Secretary-General and the US Secretary of State – met 54 times to advance their Performance-based Road Map to a Permanent Two-State Solution. United Nations, "Question of Palestine: the Quartet". Available at https://www.un.org/unispal/the-quartet (accessed on 24 November 2025).

[20] See chapter 8 on Qatari mediation.

constituting genocide.[21] The UNSC was repeatedly blocked by the US, which vetoed four proposed resolutions calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, thereby preventing the international community and the UN from mounting a meaningful response to the unfolding crisis.[22]

During this period, regional mediators – particularly Qatar – played a crucial role in attempts to de-escalate the violence. A breakthrough occurred in late November 2023, when Qatar, Egypt and the United States brokered a temporary ceasefire that facilitated a prisoner exchange and allowed for the increased flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza. Yet, the ceasefire lasted only one week. In late March 2024, Hamas announced its acceptance of a ceasefire proposal put forward by the three mediators, but Israel rejected the offer. Mediation came to a near standstill in the second half of 2024, but the election of President Trump for a second term surprisingly created a momentum that facilitated a three-phase ceasefire in mid-January 2025.

While the regional actors (Egypt and Qatar) played an important role in facilitating the mediation, the US was vital for the realization of the ceasefire, revealing the limitations of regional actors. Nevertheless, despite cautious optimism and what seemed to be a structured and detailed plan, the ceasefire collapsed in early March 2025 with the Israeli resumption of attacks on the Gaza Strip. By April 2025, Egypt and Qatar had proposed a more comprehensive ceasefire plan, aiming for a five- to seven-year truce. This proposal included provisions for an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, international guarantees and the release of hostages and Palestinian prisoners. Hamas expressed conditional openness to the deal, while Israel insisted on the dismantling or exile of Hamas as a prerequisite. Overall, mediation shifted gradually from a two-state solution towards addressing smaller issues that help maintain the stalemate, rather than break through it.

Moreover, the negotiation framework was effectively depoliticized, shifting attention solely towards humanitarian access and the coordination of aid, rather than addressing the root causes of the conflict. The recent push by some countries to recognize the State of Palestine at the UN General Assembly and the High-Level International Conference held from 28–30 July 2025 have yet to generate meaningful momentum for resuming negotiations on a two-state solution. Additionally, this recognition has, in some cases, been instrumentalized for narrower objectives. Certain countries, most notably the UK and Canada, have leveraged the move primarily as a means of pressuring Israel to facilitate humanitarian aid to Gaza rather than as part of a broader political strategy. As a result, the political framework of the two-state solution has become secondary to addressing urgent humanitarian needs, further undermining prospects for a comprehensive peace process. In this context, regional actors and mediators found a space for intervention, yet lacked the leverage over Israel that is needed to transform the conflict, which is solely in the hands of the US.

[21] This is central to South Africa's claim against Israel at the International Court of Justice. See also United Nations General Assembly, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967", A/79/384, 1 October 2024.

[22] The US has cast four vetoes at the UNSC, on 18 October 2023, 8 December 2023, 20 February 2024 and 4 June 2025.

Discussion

What are the implications of these developments for the future of mediation in the region? Based on the above analysis and given the prioritization of military action over political engagement to resolve conflicts, the blockage of mediation mechanisms and the dominance of bilateral, and in some cases unilateral, mechanisms prioritizing stabilization over long-term peace, we can perceive clear trends in mediation.

First, we see a narrowing space for political negotiation with an increasing focus of negotiations on securing access to basic human rights and humanitarian aid – rights that are supposed to be guaranteed under international law and international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions. Fundamental rules and laws are being violated, with the deployment of inhuman methods like siege starvation.[23] Mediators thus often attempt to secure even minimum respect for guaranteed rights.

In Syria, this trend was reflected in the debates over the renewal of UN Security Council Resolution 2165, which authorized the delivery of cross-border humanitarian aid. From 2020 onwards, Russia increasingly leveraged the renewal of the resolution to push for greater international recognition of the Syrian government's sovereignty over aid distribution. Finally in 2023, Russia vetoed the resolution to extend humanitarian access through the Bab al-Hawa crossing. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, this shift towards negotiating over basic humanitarian needs and rights was even more pronounced. Successive Gaza-Israel ceasefires have largely revolved around the lifting of the blockade and facilitating the movement of people and goods in and out of the Gaza Strip. More alarmingly, humanitarian aid, including access to food and water, has been weaponized, becoming a central point of negotiation during the ongoing Gaza war.[24] Negotiations over the supply of food and clean water continued even as the hunger crisis in Gaza reached alarming levels, with a third of the population going without food for multiple consecutive days, according to the World Food Programme.[25] The increasing focus on basic humanitarian demands has diverted attention away from core political issues, thereby undermining the ability of mediators to engage meaningfully in conflict transformation and peaceful settlement.

Second, we see a trend towards a preference for regional mediators, driven by the declining effectiveness of multilateral mechanisms, including the UN, and the accumulated experience of these regional mediators. This trend has been further reinforced by the relative trust that conflict parties place in regional mediators, particularly in the context of increasingly fragmented conflicts. In the case of Syria, Türkiye and Iran, partnering with Russia, leveraged their direct involvement on the ground to establish the Astana process as an alternative to UN-led mediation. In the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, Egypt and Qatar championed mediation, leveraging their geographic proximity, in the case of Egypt, and working relations with the different conflict parties, in the case of Qatar. However, both Syria and Israel/Palestine show the limitations of regional mediators and mediation processes. The involvement of Russia,

[23] Tom Dannenbaum, "Siege starvation: a war crime of societal torture", *Chicago Journal of International Law*, vol. 22, No. 2 (Winter 2022), pp. 368–442.

[24] Rebecca Sers, "The weaponisation of water", *The Lancet*, vol. 406, No. 10507 (2025), pp. 992–994.

[25] UN News, "People dying from lack of aid every day in Gaza: WFP official", 21 July 2025. Available at https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/07/1165454 (accessed on 24 November 2025).

a leading Syrian ally, was key to the viability of the Astana process, while in Israel/Palestine, no ceasefire was reached without US pressure, despite honest and continuous commitment to mediation by the regional mediators.

Third, against the backdrop of these developments, the UN became less relevant to shaping the mediation processes. It was sidelined in both contexts. The political role of the UN is thus diminishing, and it is likely that in mediation, it will take on more of a supporting role, especially when the great powers are involved. Supportive roles include being the guarantor and the advocate of the normative framework that member states have agreed on, such as international law. In both Syria and Israel/Palestine, for example, the Secretary-General and special rapporteurs have called out violations of human rights and humanitarian law. Supportive roles also include technical support for operations such as ceasefire monitoring, confidence-building measures and civil society inclusion. In Syria, the role of the UN and its Special Envoy Office was vital in empowering Syrian civil society and including women, both of whom became important actors in Syrian politics. In Israel/Palestine, UN Secretary-General António Guterres offered in September 2024 to help monitor a ceasefire in Gaza. In the same vein, the humanitarian role of the UN remains vital and must be safeguarded, particularly at a time when it is being undermined by private contractors such as the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, which has been accused of violating international humanitarian law and basic humanitarian standards.

Conclusion

Mediation – particularly by the UN – is at a crossroads, as illustrated by its failure to bring the conflicts in Syria and Israel-Palestine to a negotiated end. While Syria has finally embarked on a political transition, the prospect of peace in Israel/Palestine seems very distant. The two cases highlight how a declining space for political negotiation is producing a shift in the UN's role towards a focus on non-political and primarily technical issues and curtailing its political role as a mediator. If the UN wants to remain relevant, it should embrace this new role: providing technical expertise and humanitarian aid while remaining resolute in denouncing violations of international law. In a fragmenting world order, effective mediation still needs a world body to support states in fulfilling their responsibility to uphold the legal norms at the heart of international peace and security.

CHAPTER 5

Peacemaking in the Horn of Africa: From Democratic Change to Political Survival

Alex de Waal

Introduction

The Horn of Africa is the location of some of the world's most intractable and catastrophic conflicts. This reflects both long histories of conflicts in each of the major countries (each of which has, not coincidentally, undergone secessions, whether de jure or de facto) and the region's position as a strategic hinterland of the Middle East. Commensurate with a complicated array of armed conflicts, there is a rich tapestry of peacemaking. Many peace processes, especially in the Sudans, have been the focus of intense scrutiny in the academic and policy literature. Others, notably in Ethiopia, have been less accessible to researchers.

This chapter provides a succinct overview of peace efforts in these countries in the twenty-first century. Guided by the injunction of President Thabo Mbeki, that "the first duty of the mediator is to define the problem",[1] this history outlines how different processes have defined, explicitly or implicitly, the problems they seek to solve. It deals only with peace efforts at the national or inter-state level, not local initiatives, which would require a different and more extended treatment. Each of these peacemaking exercises has a theory of change, usually unstated, drawn from the interests and perspective of the leading protagonist and the political moment. Earlier peacemaking was explicitly or implicitly based on a programme of development and democratization. Today, the priority is simply political survival.

One key theme is that even as the political-economic context has been transformed, multilateral mediators have not adapted their theories of change. If there are to be prospects for more effective peacemaking in the region, rethinking is in order, based on a candid assessment of the "real politics" of conflict and its resolution.[2] As the prospects for liberal peacemaking fade, several alternatives are being practiced. We have not yet seen fully fledged illiberal or authoritarian peacemaking in the Horn because the states are too weak to impose that, so the actual practice is cutting security pacts labelled as peace agreements. We have also seen "populist peacemaking", which is characterized by a "rejection of 'peacemaking

[1] Alex de Waal and Abdul Mohammed, *Defining the Crisis in the Sudans: Lessons from the African Union High-Level Panels for Sudan and South Sudan* (Johannesburg, Thabo Mbeki Foundation, World Peace Foundation and US Institute of Peace, 2024).

[2] Cf. Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008); Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge, Polity, 2015).

elites' and their established rules and practices, including international norms, a refutation of context-specific knowledge, and a clean-slate approach that disregards past peacemaking attempts and alienates other international mediators."[3] The dominant logic is dealmaking in the "political marketplace" in which the key component is political payout, usually cash or licenses, to leaders who sign.[4] Instead of aspiring to democratic change, peacemaking is now concerned with short-term political survival. In this vein, commercial dealmaking may soon emerge as a primary driver in political pacts.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, it provides an analytical narrative of peace efforts across the region since 2000, taking in turn Ethiopia and Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan.[5] It then steps back and examines the region as a whole over this period. Four strands stand out, namely: (1) the expansion and contraction of multilateral peacemaking; (2) the integration of the Horn within the Red Sea Arena as a strategic periphery of the Gulf states; (3) the entrenchment of the political marketplace; and (4) changes in the norms and processes of peacemaking.

It will be helpful to define three key concepts. One is the *African peace and security architecture* (APSA). This is the construction of a complex multilateral system of peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding structures, including the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the UN, supported by the US and the European Union. This APSA was the centrepiece of the AU agenda at its creation over years spanning the millennium.[6]

The second is the *Red Sea Arena*.[7] This refers to the maritime and onshore spaces around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, including the nine littoral countries, as well as countries at one geographical remove that have commercial or strategic interests in that space, notably Ethiopia, the UAE, Qatar and Türkiye. It is an arena in two senses: first, unlike a region, which is bound together by shared interests and institutions, it is a zone of contest, and second, it has concentric circles of actors and active spectators.

Third is the *political marketplace*, the operating system for transactional politics, whereby political office, allegiance and services, including national sovereignty, are treated as commodities and are traded. The most powerful actors are those able to dispense the largest political budgets with the greatest freedom.

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[3] Dana Landau and Lior Lehrs, "Populist peacemaking: Trump's peace initiatives in the Middle East and the Balkans", *International Affairs*, vol. 98, No. 6 (2022), p. 2002.

[4] Alex de Waal, Benjamin Spatz and Aditya Sarkar, "Situating the contribution of the political market framework to peace processes" (Edinburgh, Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, 2022). Available at https://peacerep.org/publication/contribution-political-marketplace-framework-peace-processes (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[5] Many important places and issues are hereby neglected, including Djibouti and Somaliland.

[6] Mulugeta G. Berhe, "The norms and structures for African peace efforts: the African peace and security architecture", *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 24, No. 4 (2017), pp. 661–685.

[7] Alex de Waal, "Pax Africana or Middle East security alliance in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea?" Occasional Paper (Boston, World Peace Foundation, 2019). Available at https://worldpeacefoundation.org/blog/pax-africana-or-middle-east-security-alliance-in-the-horn-of-africa-and-the-red-sea/ (accessed on 25 November 2025); US Institute of Peace, *Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena, Final Report and Recommendations* (Washington D.C., 2020).

Ethiopia and Eritrea

Every peace process involving Ethiopia has unfolded on the terms laid down by the Ethiopian state. Jealous of protecting its sovereignty, Ethiopia has always insisted on defining the problem. Having taken this first step, it has determined the processes and largely dictated the outcomes – or in one instance, invited a former enemy, Eritrea, to do so. Successive peace processes reflect how Ethiopia functions as a state and how it is positioned in the regional and international order. Under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Ethiopia was an illiberal peacemaker at home, though less so abroad. On assuming power in 2018, Abiy Ahmed enjoyed a brief flourish as a populist peacemaker, quickly superseded by cutting partial deals to manage conflicts and consolidate power.

The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea of 1998–2000 was ostensibly a conflict over a disputed boundary, but arose from other factors, notably a contest over which would be the predominant power in the Horn. Fighting ended in June 2000 when Ethiopia's army overran Eritrean positions and advanced into Eritrea and called a ceasefire. Negotiations were held under the auspices of the Organisation of African Unity, with Algeria and the US as facilitators.

Ethiopia imposed the terms.[8] Prime Minister Meles Zenawi defined the problem as Eritrea's aggressive policy towards its neighbours. He overruled others in the EPRDF leadership who saw the problem as Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki and disregarded many Ethiopians who wanted to reverse Eritrea's independence. Ethiopia successfully isolated Eritrea diplomatically and economically, but Isaias remained in power. The dispute festered, with each country destabilizing the other. During the period when Meles was in office (he died in 2012) and continuing to a lesser degree under his successor Hailemariam Dessalegn, this peace served Ethiopia's national security doctrine, which prioritized economic development.[9] Meles's theory of change was that Ethiopia needed to be on good terms with its neighbours for its development strategy and that if Eritrea could not participate in that regional order, it should be isolated.

Ethiopia's political transition of 2018 marked the demise of the EPRDF and the ascent of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. His dream of making Ethiopia great required him to win personal recognition. A new style of peacemaking was heralded at a bilateral meeting in Asmara in July 2018, at which Isaias and Abiy publicly declared the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship.[10] This single-page statement was followed by further meetings in Abu Dhabi and Jeddah at which more details were fleshed out, though little was made public. The core agreement – a security pact between the two – was kept secret, though Isaias repeated his line, "game over, *weyane*" (referring to the Tigray People's Liberation Front, TPLF).[11]

[8] Agreement between the Government of the State of Eritrea and the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (the Algiers Accords), 12 December 2000. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag221_57349afd3b144.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[9] Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, *Foreign Affairs and National Security Strategy* (Addis Ababa, 2002).

[10] Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, 9 July 2018. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2097_5be56376d02e8.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[11] Eritrean Center for Strategic Studies, "President Isaias Afwerki: Weyane have committed four major mistakes. The TPLF has come to the end of the road. The game is over!" 17 February 2018. Available at https://www.ecss-online.com/president-isaias-afwerki-weyane-have-committed-four-major-mistakes-the-tplf-has-come-to-the-end-of-the-road-the-game-is-over/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

Destroying the TPLF was Isaias's agenda, and on this occasion, Isaias defined the problem and allowed Abiy to take the plaudits. Isaias got Ethiopia to implement Eritrea's security agenda, and Abiy got the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Asmara pact led directly to joint military efforts by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) along with special forces and militia, and the Eritrean Defence Force (EDF) against Tigray in November 2020. The EDF was fully committed to the war, but neither Isaias nor Abiy publicly admitted its presence. The war lasted two years and was ended by the Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities between the Federal Government and the TPLF, signed in Pretoria.[12] This could be called a "fast-track peace process".[13] The negotiations were hasty,[14] and the ungainly title of the final accord points to the fact that the aim was a truce, not a political resolution of the conflict, a weakness that has become more apparent over time.

During the war, which included weaponized mass starvation, neither party had been ready to talk peace, and the US, the sole external party with leverage, chose not to use it. Addis Ababa appears to have made its peace offer for public relations purposes, but the TPLF and the US seized the opening to attend talks. The TPLF agenda was to stop the war before the total destruction of the Tigrayan people. Abiy sought better relations with the US. He was in a position to define the overall crisis facing the country, but used that strategic opportunity to pursue tactical advantage. At the time of writing, the only provision of the Pretoria agreement that has been implemented fully and fairly is the truce between the two armies. As the government in Ethiopia has regressed from being an institutionalized state to the court of a "big man", Tigray has become one of the arenas in which the carousel of transactional bargaining is played out.[15]

Eritrea was excluded from the Pretoria talks and is mentioned only obliquely in the text of the agreement (as "non-ENDF forces"), although it was a principal belligerent. Regular and irregular forces from Amhara region were also not represented. This reshuffled the political deck, leading to a volatile militarized standoff between Ethiopia and Eritrea and an insurgency in Amhara region, and the mutation of the truce into a security pact between the signatories.

Somalia

In Somalia, top-down peace processes have been the product of power projection by key regional actors. In turn, those efforts have suffered from tensions between the objectives of external sponsors and from the brute fact that those objectives rarely enable the Somalis

[12] Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2443_63e011138623e.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[13] Mark Freeman, "'Fast-track negotiation': a white paper" (Paris, Proceedings of the Paris Institute for Advanced Study, 2025). Available at https://ifit-transitions.org/publications/fast-track-negotiation-a-white-paper (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[14] Concerned Pan African Scholars, "Assessing the peace accord for Tigray", The Elephant, 26 November 2022. Available at https://www.theelephant.info/documents/assessing-the-peace-accord-for-tigray/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[15] Mulugeta G. Berhe, "The story of Ethiopian governance: from a centralized public service monopoly to 'big man' politics" (Edinburgh, Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, 2025). Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.7488/era/5664 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

to define their own problems, let alone seek their own solutions. In the decade after the collapse of the central government in 1991, more than a dozen attempts were made.[16] In all cases, attention was focused on who would lead the process, allowing that actor to define the problem. Peace processes for Somalia have been subsidiary to the neighbouring states' security agendas, especially counter-terrorism, and the international community's state-building agenda.

Most policy briefings on Somalia identify the origin of the crisis as the collapse of the state in 1991. This is a rudimentary error. It mistakes a problem (the Somali state) for a solution.[17] The kleptocratic tyranny of President Mohamed Siad Barre provoked a civil war that collapsed the state. Somalis understand this well and prefer managing a balance of power within their political marketplace over a return to the status quo ante of potential dictatorship. Once initiated, Somali peace conferences tend to become more inclusive due to the pressure of numerous people clamouring to be heard. This means that at crucial moments, external parties' priorities were subverted by Somalis' democratic culture. No one has succeeded in imposing an illiberal peace on Somalia.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Ethiopia and Egypt sponsored rival political processes. Each process was an alliance-building exercise intended to construct a state favourable to the patron's interests. Ethiopia invested more diplomatic and military resources and used the IGAD to build a coalition, notably including Kenya, to legitimize its projection of power and solicit international resources.[18] Ethiopia preferred a federal governance model built around provincial political-military formations based on the clan units that had emerged in the civil war,[19] leading to a formula of power sharing among the four major clan family units, with an additional half allocated to minorities. This also opened the door to widespread participation of Somali clan elders, women and diaspora groups, with the unanticipated outcome that political conferences in Eldoret and Mbagathi (in Kenya) expanded from becoming power-sharing negotiations into something more akin to a national dialogue.[20] The international donors financing the Mbagathi talks complained of the large number of delegates and the expansive and often inconclusive nature of the talks. The bill was, however, likely a fraction of the cost of even a minor military deployment and much more productive than sending troops. The outcome was the 2004 Transitional Federal Charter, which led to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) eight years later. The dialogue this entailed helped forge a Somali political community.

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[16] Ken Menkhaus, "Governance without government in Somalia: spoilers, state building, and the politics of coping", *International Security*, vol. 31, No. 3 (2006), pp. 74–106; Ibrahim Farah and Sekou Toure, "Engineering peace in Somalia: a call for a re-examination of the Somali peace processes", *Development*, vol. 60 (2017), pp. 183–189.

[17] De Waal, *The Real Politics*, chapter 7.

[18] Seyoum Mesfin and Abdeta Dribssa Beyene, "The practicalities of living with failed states", *Dædalus*, vol. 147, No. 1 (2018), pp. 128–140; Abdeta Dribssa Beyene, "Sovereignty preservation attenuating it elsewhere: the political and security dimensions of Buffer Zones", PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 2017.

[19] Alex de Waal, "Somalia's disassembled state: clan unit formation and the political marketplace", *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 20, No. 5 (2020), pp. 561–585.

[20] Maimuna Sheikh Abdulle Mohamud, "Peace negotiations and remaking political community in Somalia", PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2020.

Excluded from this process was the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). This was a locally initiated governance initiative, building on the business community's need for local security and a system for adjudicating civil disputes, including commercial law. Islamic law and courts were legitimate through custom, understood and respected by all, swift and predictable, with low levels of corruption and their decisions enforced through the courts' militia.[21] Many Somalis preferred the intolerance and brutality of the Islamic courts to the lawlessness of the warlords. The regional powers and international community nonetheless excluded the possibility of negotiating with the UIC. Ethiopia intervened militarily, with US support, to enforce this exclusion and impose a political settlement that in due course became the FGS. As feared, this radicalized UIC members. The militia became Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, known as Al-Shabaab, which affiliated itself with Al-Qaida, and carried out terrorist attacks in Kenya as well as Somalia. In response, regional states (except Eritrea) mounted the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) with support from the US and European Union that backed the FGS for reasons of counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, regional stability, state-building and development. This assemblage faced the problem that fighting a war against Al-Shabaab overshadowed all else, undermining the legitimacy of the state it was intended to protect.

Conflict resolution between Somalia, the self-declared Republic of Somaliland and Ethiopia constitutes another overlay of negotiations, bilateral and mediated. The same features of turbulent transactionalism have been repeated at the regional level. In January 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding, the contents of which are still not public, whereby Ethiopia would obtain access to the sea. This enraged Somalia. Subsequently, Türkiye has mediated talks that restored relations between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa, leaving the status of the MoU uncertain.

Since the 1980s, Somalia has been a paradigmatic case of a deregulated political marketplace, consisting of a "security arena" in which central military and security organs are only one contender among many[22] and diverse channels of political finance. Somalis' political business skills have been demonstrated in their ability to navigate the rivalries of Middle Eastern powerbrokers without becoming the locus of proxy wars. The test of these skills will be negotiation with Al-Shabaab, which is not only undefeated but which consistently demonstrates its capacity to administer a state-like entity with efficiency and resilience. There is no institutionalized state on the horizon. Somalia is manageable only by consensus among a broad and dispersed political elite.

[21] Aisha Ahmad, "The security bazaar: business interests and Islamist power in civil war Somalia", *International Security*, vol. 39, No. 3 (2014), pp. 89–117.

[22] Alice Hills, "Security sector or security arena? The evidence from Somalia", in B*uilding Security in Post-Conflict States*, Ursula Schroeder, ed. (London, Routledge, 2017), pp. 43–58.

Sudan and South Sudan

Nowhere has had a richer experience of peace processes than Sudan and, since its independence in 2011, South Sudan. Mediation efforts in the Sudans are distinguished by a high degree of international engagement and, relatedly, documentation, analysis and theorizing.[23] It is a leading exemplar of efforts to achieve a liberal peace, which have too often been reduced to either buyouts or partial deals that function as security pacts.[24]

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in January 2005,[25] is the lodestar of these efforts. It is an exemplary case of an internationally mediated agreement to end a long-running civil war, the outcome of three years of talks between the principal belligerents, resulting in a paradigmatic template for a "liberal peace", with the three pillars of power sharing, wealth sharing and security arrangements instituted as steps in a transition to democracy and post-conflict development. The chief mediator was from IGAD, supported by the "troika" of the US, the UK and Norway. It resulted in a major multi-mandate UN peacekeeping mission. Less studied but no less important were the previous 16 years of peace efforts, most of them Sudanese domestic initiatives, that led to partial agreements and a "literature of accord", which framed the substantive agenda for the peace talks, including defining what could be considered a legitimate outcome in the eyes of Sudanese citizens.[26]

Although the war was hurting the population, there was no stalemate. Both sides anticipated that they could withstand any onslaught by the other and that events could reconfigure to their advantage. The GoS was using oil revenues to rearm, and the SPLM was fomenting insurrections in Darfur and eastern Sudan. The agreement was made possible by several other factors. Among them were the unipolar moment in world history, including the unique context of the US's recent declaration of a "global war on terror" that put Sudan, as a former host of Al-Qaeda, in the sights for potential regime change, alongside a high-level decision in Washington to seek a negotiated settlement. Sudan experienced a fast-growing economy during an oil boom, which made a share-out of resources politically feasible. There was international readiness to invest in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. The agreement postponed the most explosive issue, namely southern Sudanese secession, for a later date – an example of the Sudanese practice of 'tajility'.[27] The CPA promised that the SPLM, then led by John Garang, would work for unity. That promise did not survive Garang's untimely death.

During the six and a half years from the signing of the CPA to the independence of South Sudan, a series of peace talks tried to emulate the CPA formula and buttress the CPA itself.

[23] Sarah Nouwen, Laura James and Sharath Srinivasan, eds., *Making and Breaking Peace in Sudan and South Sudan: The Comprehensive Peace Agreement and Beyond* (London, British Academy, 2020); Sharath Srinivasan, *When Peace Kills Politics: International Intervention and Unending Wars in the Sudans* (London, C. Hurst, 2021).

[24] De Waal, Spatz and Sarkar, "Situating the contribution", p. 15.

[25] Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Sudan People's Liberation Army. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag337_5616aeb31cf24.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[26] Alex de Waal, "Concluding reflections: Sudan's comprehensive peace agreement and theories of change," in *Making and Breaking Peace*, Sarah Nouwen, Laura James and Sharath Srinivasan, eds. (London, British Academy, 2020).

[27] From the Arabic *ta'jil*, meaning delay.

The 2006 Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement[28] was a fast-track negotiation between the GoS and Eritrea, the external sponsor of the Eastern Front armed groups. The principal goal was amity between Khartoum and Asmara, which was achieved, though the underlying issues remained unaddressed.[29]

By contrast, the Darfur peace talks replicated the CPA in their protracted, detailed and wide-ranging scope and structure. Darfur was the site of a vicious war that the US characterized as genocide, and there was a high level of international interest and engagement. The African Union led the mediation effort. The structure was cumbersome and unable to adjust to the reality that the CPA's promise of national unity had evaporated. The rationale of the negotiations was also compromised by the American prioritization of dispatching a UN peacekeeping mission, which meant that the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA)[30] was ancillary to an international peace operation rather than the other way around.[31] The failure of the DPA led to an initiative convened by Qatar and run mainly by UN technical experts. The fragmentation of the armed groups meant that much effort was devoted to forming a rebel delegation sufficiently coherent to sit across the table from the GoS. A group known as the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM) was constituted for this purpose. The process became one in which the mediators polished a Doha Document for Peace in Darfur[32] and then invited the parties to sign on to it, with the promise of material rewards in the form of government positions and development funds.[33] The GoS signed, as did the LJM. Civil society groups were invited to discuss the document, not to shape the agenda. The war was not resolved.

The AU High Level Panel for Darfur (AUPD) was created to seek a solution to the challenges of justice, peace, reconciliation and democratization in Darfur. The panel chairperson, Thabo Mbeki, began by posing the question: how do the people of Darfur define their problem? On learning that they had not been consulted, the AUPD held 40 days of town-hall-style meetings, seeking answers.[34] The outcome was that the AUPD report distinguished between issues that the Darfurians could and should resolve among themselves and the wider "Sudanese conflict in Darfur" that needed to be resolved through nationwide democratization, involving an inclusive political process.[35] Fearful of a unified Darfurian political bloc, Khartoum set out

[28] Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement, October 2006. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag373_5630e1c2b7f69.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[29] Munzoul Assal, "Six years after the Eastern Sudan peace agreement: an assessment", in S*udan Divided: Continuing Conflict in a Contested State*, Gunnar Sørbø and Abdul Ghaffar Ahmed, eds. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 141–160.

[30] Darfur Peace Agreement, May 2006. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag350_562f511bbfb5c.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[31] Alex de Waal, "Darfur's elusive peace", in *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*, Alex de Waal, ed. (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 366–388.

[32] Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, May 2011. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag853_5630ed637d2b6.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[33] Rosalind Marsden, "Peacemaking in Darfur and the Doha Process: the role of international actors", in *Making and Breaking Peace in Sudan and South Sudan: The Comprehensive Peace Agreement and Beyond*, Sarah Nouwen, Laura James and Sharath Srinivasan, eds. (London, British Academy, 2020), pp. 230–257.

[34] De Waal and Mohammed, *Defining the Crisis in the Sudans.*

[35] African Union High-Level Panel on Darfur, "Darfur: the quest for peace, justice and reconciliation, report of the African Union High-Level Panel on Darfur (AUPD)", October 2009.

to block this. The US and UN also did not concur and instead pursued the Darfur-only track in Doha.

The AUPD was reconstituted as the AU High-Level Implementation Panel for Sudan, and its principal activity was facilitating negotiations between the GoS and SPLM over the independence of South Sudan and its consequences. The panel identified the joint challenge as establishing "two viable states". However, the two parties were too rancorous and their leaders too weak to make the necessary strategic decisions to achieve this goal. The panel also insisted that the split did not create an "African" state and an "Arab" one but rather two African states, each characterized by diversity. The GoS was reluctant to acknowledge this, resulting in a new conflict in the "two areas" of the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile at the time of South Sudan's independence. This new war prevented the normalization of relations between Sudan and South Sudan, leading in turn to a dispute over payments for pumping South Sudan's oil through Sudan for export, in response to which South Sudan shut down its oil production. This was followed by an inter-state conflict over their common border in 2012. The AU, acting in close coordination with the UN, IGAD, the League of Arab States and the US, was able to prevent this from escalating. The AU Peace and Security Council adopted a communiqué that included a road map,[36] which then became, almost unchanged, the text of UN Security Council Resolution 2046.[37] This, in turn, led to negotiations that resulted in a package of nine cooperation agreements.[38] It was a model of how the APSA was intended to work, cutting through a generalized deadlock at the UNSC to generate a consensus that all international actors would coordinate to de-escalate the crisis. Multilateral engagement prevented the two states taking the shortcut to hell, but it could not take them off that path in the longer run.

Civil war erupted in South Sudan in December 2013. The internal political conflict was rooted in rivalries among contenders for the presidency, in anticipation of elections, and was accentuated by a demand from Sudan to determine the composition of the South Sudanese cabinet as a quid pro quo for reopening the oil pipeline. The cash flow squeeze from the oil pipeline shutdown limited the government's scope for managing the crisis.

When the political dispute turned violent, the neighbours and the international community responded rapidly. Within days, IGAD pressed for a ceasefire and return to political dialogue. These efforts did not succeed, and the war developed its own dynamic. At this point, with a switch from fast-track negotiations to a protracted process, it would have been appropriate for the mediators to have reassessed their framework and what they expected to achieve. This they did not do, so that the proposed formulae for a settlement did not correspond with the changed military and political realities. Only under extreme pressure was the Government of the Republic of South Sudan ready to sign the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCISS),[39] and the provisions of that agreement were almost impossible to

[36] AU PSC, "Communiqué: on the situation in Sudan and South Sudan", 22 April 2012.

[37] UN Security Council Resolution 2046, S/RES/2046, 2 May 2012.

[38] The Cooperation Agreement between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan, September 2012. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag860_5627e93f8523c.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[39] Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, 17 August 2015. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag1357_562e4ff19c7b1.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

implement. ARCISS was criticized as an imposed deal[40] and as a "payroll peace" based on material incentives for the belligerents, which required external aid flows that were never in prospect.[41] After the violent breakdown of ARCISS, the governments of Sudan and Uganda stepped in to facilitate a Revitalized ARCISS that was based on a sounder assessment of political realities;[42] however, neither Sudan nor Uganda had the resources or political focus to follow through on implementation. The R-ARCISS quickly became a shadow of peace and a cover behind which the government consolidated power, ultimately leading to a new conflict in 2025.[43]

Post-secession, the Sudanese state also faced a crisis of viability, and in due course economic and political crisis brought about a revolutionary situation. A non-violent civic uprising brought down the government of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019. Following this, conditions were uniquely auspicious for a domestic process towards resolution of Sudan's crises. But the regional and international context was less propitious. Having devoted huge effort to isolating and punishing Sudan over decades, foreign powers did next to nothing to support the prospects for democracy when the Sudanese people succeeded in effecting a civic revolution.

In all Sudanese and South Sudanese negotiations, the US was a key protagonist, whether or not its envoys were in the room. In the 1990s, the US had imposed a raft of sanctions on Sudan and listed it as a state sponsor of terror. Lifting those sanctions and withdrawing the threat of regime change were top priorities for the GoS under President Al-Bashir. Repeatedly, Washington promised to lift sanctions if Sudan took specific steps (signing the CPA, allowing UN peacekeepers into Darfur, permitting South Sudanese independence). Each time, Sudan met the requirement. But in the meantime, it had committed another transgression (atrocities in Darfur, obstructing humanitarian aid), and sanctions remained. It was only after Sudan agreed to join the Abraham Accords in 2020 that the Trump Administration removed sanctions.

At a structural or systems level, the unipolar world order of the first decade of the 2000s was replaced by a multipolar order in which an increasing number of middle powers were competing for influence. The first Trump Administration delegated policy over the Red Sea Arena to Israel, Egypt and the Gulf monarchies, a stance sustained by the Biden Administration.[44] Qatar and Türkiye also played roles. The regional powers' style of engagement was also different: they openly played the regional political marketplace. This sidelined the UN and AU, which accepted their diminished roles without complaint.

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[40] Jok Madut Jok, "South Sudan's elusive peace: between local drivers of violence and the actions of external actors", in *South Sudan: Post Independence Dilemmas*, Amir Idris, ed. (London, Routledge, 2018), pp. 74–91; Zach Vertin, *A Poisoned Well: Lessons in Mediation from South Sudan's Troubled Peace Process* (New York, International Peace Institute, 2018).

[41] Alan Boswell and Alex de Waal, "South Sudan: the perils of payroll peace" (London, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics, 2019).

[42] Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, 12 September 2018. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2112_5be57be98faf9.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[43] Joshua Craze, "Is this the end of the peace process?" African Arguments, 28 March 2025. Available at https://africanarguments.org/2025/03/is-this-the-end-of-the-peace-process/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[44] US Institute of Peace, *Senior Study Group*; Charles Dunne, "US Middle East policy: the Trump-Biden doctrine in action", Arab Center Washington DC, 23 March 2023. Available at https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/us-middle-east-policy-the-trump-biden-doctrine-in-action/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

The strengths of the multilateral organizations lay in agenda setting, which would have required a sharp analysis of the problem, using their institutions to translate this analysis into an agenda and providing proactive diplomatic resources. The efficacy of this had been amply demonstrated by the AU Panel in 2010–2012. However, multilateral leaders focused on technical and tactical issues, turning the UN and AU into errand runners for the powerbrokers, rather than convenors and agenda-setters.

Following the non-violent revolution in April 2019 and the failed attempts by the generals of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) to suppress ongoing demands for democracy, the TMC and the civilians of the Forces for Freedom and Change agreed to engage in talks. This took the form of a fast-track process. Hard bargaining was done by the Quartet (US, UK, Saudi Arabia and UAE), with African mediators providing a public face and claiming the credit.[45] This led to the Khartoum constitutional declaration that heralded power-sharing between the generals and a civilian cabinet.[46] The document resembles a midpoint between the positions of the contending parties. It postponed most of the key issues including how to bring the armed movements into the political process and how to dismantle the military sector's capture of the greater part of the economy, a delay that enabled the generals to consolidate economic and military power and to control the negotiations with the provincial armed movements. The generals got most of what they wanted. Eager for a quick win, the AU mediator went along with it. The civilians signed without having obtained robust promises of economic assistance and a process of dismantling the kleptocratic "deep state".

The Juba Agreement,[47] signed in 2020 with several of the armed movements, did not build a platform for democracy but instead entrenched the military. Implementation of the Juba Agreement required major inflows of money to pay for all the positions allocated to the rebels and the ambitious programme of integrating their fighters into the national army.[48] Given that the needed budgetary expansion was never in the cards, the implicit pact was that the leaders of the signatory parties would obtain the resources they sought either by joining Khartoum's military kleptocracy or by looting the general populace, or both.

Following the outbreak of war in April 2023 there has been a succession of mediation initiatives in Sudan. They began with a joint effort in Jeddah co-chaired by Saudi Arabia and the US. Had this succeeded in reaching a ceasefire it would have been counted a success. It did not. Its sole achievement was a "declaration of commitment" by the belligerents to protect civilians,[49] which has not been honoured. Nonetheless, the mediators persisted and thereby filled the diplomatic space, bringing in the AU in an ancillary role, making other initiatives

[45] Institute for Security Studies, "Mohamed El Hacen Lebatt: a new doctrine for African-led mediation", PSC Insights, 12 December 2020. Available at https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/mohamed-el-hacen-lebatt-a-new-doctrine-for-african-led-mediation (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[46] Political Agreement on Establishing the Structures and Institutions of the Transitional Period between the Transitional Military Council and the Declaration of Freedom and Change, 17 July 2019. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2243_5e32b42be6ffb.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[47] Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan between the Transitional Government of Sudan and the Parties to Peace Process, 3 October 2020. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2325_603fc8e9cece1.PDF (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[48] Nils-Christian Borman and Ibrahim Elbadawi, "The Juba power-sharing peace agreement: will it promote peace and democratic transition in Sudan?" Working Papers, No. 1490 (Cairo, Economic Research Forum, 2021).

[49] Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan, 11 May 2023. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2543_6463560cdc612.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

less viable. There were other efforts by IGAD, Egypt and in Bahrain, none of which made progress. US support was necessary for any initiative to gain traction. But Washington could not decide whether to pursue an Africa-centred multilateral process, which required a much broader diplomatic effort including the UN, or a Middle East-centred transactional bargain, which would have required elevating the issue to a high level in Washington to ensure that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi took it seriously. The Biden Administration did neither. It handed an intractable conflict to the incoming Trump Administration. Secretary of State Marco Rubio took the Middle East-focused approach, trying to bridge the differences between Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE at a high level. His first effort, in July 2025, foundered on the regional powerbrokers' unreadiness to compromise. Rubio's second effort, in September, yielded promising results in the form of a joint statement by the "Quad" of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE agreeing to refrain from providing military support to the belligerents and to work for a unified, civilian-led government. This opens the door to peacemaking among the Sudanese themselves.

Implications

The last quarter-century has seen a number of important developments in the Horn of Africa that have transformed the landscape of conflict resolution. As elsewhere, peacemaking practice informs theory – or should do so.[50] Let me draw out four implications from the above.

First, we have seen the *expansion and contraction of multilateral peacemaking.* The APSA was designed, partly built and collapsed. It was the most concerted and coherent assemblage of norms, practices and institutions for peace and security in the region, and it held out much hope.[51] It is gone. The AU surrendered strategic leadership. The UN, which had some of its largest and most ambitious peace missions in the region, shifted from proactive partner to passive spectator, partly citing the notion of subsidiarity and the slogan of "African solutions". The UN is fully aware that the AU is not capable of finding solutions, not least because the solutions require the middle powers of the Middle East. Ethiopia has surrendered its role as the anchor of regional peace and security.[52]

Second, *the Horn has been integrated within the Red Sea Arena as a strategic periphery of the Arab Gulf states.* This is a reconfiguration of older patterns from the colonial era and the Cold War, with the new factor that the middle powers of the Middle East have become the drivers of political and military outcomes. Yemen was the first crucible of this new arrangement, and the same pattern of engagements has been extended across the Red Sea to the Horn. The political budgets dispensed by the Arab states sustain client regimes and insurgencies, insulating the recipients from the political and economic constraints of their

[50] Eileen Babbitt and Fen Osler Hampson, "Conflict resolution as a field of inquiry: practice informing theory", *International Studies Review*, vol. 13, No. 1 (2011), pp. 46–57.

[51] World Peace Foundation, *African Politics, African Peace: Report of the World Peace Foundation to the African Union* (Boston, WPF, 2016); Alex de Waal and Rachel Ibreck, "A human security strategy for the European Union in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea", in *EU Global Strategy and Human Security*, Mary Kaldor, Iavor Rangelov and Sabine Selchow, eds. (London, Routledge, 2018), pp. 103–119.

[52] Harry Verhoeven and Michael Woldemariam, "Who lost Ethiopia? The unmaking of an African anchor state and US foreign policy", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 43, No. 4 (2022), pp. 622–650; Sonia Le Gouriellec, "Regional power and contested hierarchy: Ethiopia, an 'imperfect hegemon' in the Horn of Africa", *International Affairs*, vol. 94, No. 5 (2018), pp. 1059–1075.

own, increasingly ravaged countries. Israel's capacity for projecting military power will likely drive the next reconfiguration of alliances. The contestation across the Horn must also be seen as intersecting with other key arenas, including the Sahara-Sahel and the Indian Ocean.

Third, the *dominant logic is the political marketplace*. This is the logic of monetized transactionalism as the operating system for politics, and as a consequence, for conflict resolution.[53] This in turn poses some questions that the would-be mediator needs to address before engaging with a conflict. Those questions include whether the political market is in a boom or a bust, and how political rivalries are structured, specifically whether there are two parties or many, and whether the parties will fragment during or after the negotiations. The mediator needs to ask whether the outcome of negotiations is a *political settlement*, akin to a proto-constitution or treaty, or a *political pact* – namely, a deal in a turbulent political market that is only good as market conditions prevail. The logic of the political market requires substantial material rewards for signatories, opening the door to a model of peacemaking in which the political settlement is ancillary to a commercial deal, for example, contracts for minerals or construction. Mediators will need to ask whether they are ready to embrace this model.

The current configuration across the Horn appears paradoxical. While the real economies that sustain the populations are collapsing, with obvious symptoms such as famine, mass displacement and the contraction in essential public services, the funds available for political leaders to spend on claiming or consolidating power, including waging war, are resilient or expanding. This is because of external sponsorship by Middle Eastern powerbrokers. Those patrons have the resources to fund inclusive buy-in, should they collude in doing so, but show no interest in that. In the absence of a grand bargain, domestic politicians within the Horn are reduced to cutting deals that either license theft of public funds or expropriation from the populace (or both), or making "peace" deals that function as security pacts and merely shift the battlefield elsewhere.

Fourth, there have been *radical changes in the normative and processual character of peacemaking*, including a possible collapse in confidence in mediation as such. During the period in which the liberal order was consolidating, it was valid to assume that aspirational norms would, in due course, become political facts and that empirical and ethical tensions over normative practices such as inclusion and gender equity would be resolved over time.[54] This implicit theory of change no longer holds. Protracted, complex and ambitious processes that aspired to democratic transformation and developmental peacebuilding no longer occur. Instead, there are, at best, fast-track negotiations aimed at securing immediate outcomes[55] and, at worst, security pacts or commercial deals in a turbulent political marketplace. There is no theory of change, but rather a theory of political survival for regime leaders. In the past, we might have hoped for formalized political *un*settlements – agreements that stabilized conflicts and created the context for moving beyond irresolvable issues.[56] Today, we face only *informal* political unsettlements, namely context-specific bargains and pacts. Norms

[53] De Waal, Spatz and Sarkar, "Situating the Contribution".

[54] Alex de Waal, "Inclusion in peacemaking: from moral claim to political fact", in *The Fabric of Peace in Africa: Looking beyond the State*, Pamela Aall and Chester Crocker, eds. (McGill, Queen's Press, 2017), pp. 165–186.

[55] Freeman, "Fast track negotiations".

[56] Christine Bell and Jan Pospisil, "Navigating inclusion in transitions from conflict: the formalized political unsettlement", *Journal of International Development*, vol. 29, No. 5 (2017), pp. 576–593.

of inclusion, human rights, humanitarian principles and democracy are vanishing. While discreet payouts and secret military and business pacts have long played a part in peace processes, they were relegated to the background; now they are becoming the main event, with the barest pretence otherwise.

The erstwhile champions of principled mediation, notably the UN and AU, have become largely quiescent in the face of attempts to silence, co-opt or bypass them. Past advocates of peacemaking as the protection of human rights and the promotion of democracy and development have passively surrendered to a model of peacemaking concerned only with belligerent leaders' political survival.

CHAPTER 6

Regional and International Mediation in the Great Lakes Crisis

Richard Moncrieff and Kseniya Oksamytna

Introduction

The crisis in the Great Lakes region started in late 2021 as a flare-up of long-simmering regional tensions. Fighting has pulled in non-state armed groups in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and several neighbouring countries, primarily Rwanda but also Uganda and Burundi. The M23 insurgent group (named after a failed peace deal signed on 23 March 2009) is a Rwanda-backed Tutsi Congolese armed group that has recently occupied large swaths of territory in eastern DRC, including lucrative mining sites and the major cities of Goma and Bukavu. From 2022 to 2024, Angolan president João Lourenço served as an AU-appointed mediator between Kigali and Kinshasa in the so-called Luanda Process. Despite being a credible and trusted mediator, Lourenço's diplomacy failed as the parties disagreed on sequencing, overloaded the negotiation agenda and stalled for time as their forces clashed on the ground.

Following advances by M23 and the Rwandan army in early 2025, Qatar took over the mediation process between the Congolese government and M23 after Kinshasa yielded to pressure for direct negotiations with the rebels. In parallel, the US facilitated the Washington Agreement between Rwanda and the DRC in June 2025, which entailed a commitment to a ceasefire and disengagement of forces. However, the agreement did not silence the guns or restore Congolese control over its territory, and the Doha track faced delays. The difficulties encountered by Angolan and Qatari mediators, as well as the faltering implementation of the US-facilitated agreement, are caused by the belligerents' belief that they can advance their interests through military force, their reluctance to undertake confidence-building measures, regional and international divisions, and the lack of pressure on the parties to commit to a workable deal.

In the past, successful mediation in the Great Lakes has worked in two contexts. First, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, significant international engagement saw all parties come under sustained pressure to work towards an agreement, with a substantial financial peacebuilding package serving as an incentive. Second, after the establishment of constitutional rule in the DRC in 2006, mediation worked when Kigali, Kinshasa and Kampala engineered unofficial deals through backroom channels and then invited international actors to give a

seal of approval. None of these conditions currently applies, and the latest talks have been accompanied by public posturing but little progress on the ground. Given this, following the Washington deal, it is likely that mediators will place less emphasis on achieving M23's withdrawal from the areas it has conquered and will instead focus on the narrower goal of trying to achieve fragile ceasefires.

This chapter presents an analysis of regional and international mediation in the African Great Lakes crisis in four main sections. The first section outlines the background of the crisis, tracing the conflict from the Rwandan genocide to the re-emergence of M23 in November 2021. Section two traces the Luanda Process and efforts by Angolan President João Lourenço to mediate between Kinshasa and Kigali, and examines a series of obstacles that ultimately led to the failure of the process and Lourenço's withdrawal in 2024. The third section distils developments in 2025, including the emergence of Qatar and the US as the key mediators in the crisis, the signing of the Washington Agreement in June and the Doha Declaration of Principles a month later, before analysing the rising challenges of implementation. The concluding section draws critical lessons from the process and considers prospects going forward.

The Contested Background to the post-2021 Great Lakes Crisis

Conflict parties, diplomats and observers all have widely differing interpretations of the "root causes" of violence in eastern DRC since the 1990s. These differences sow confusion and underlie antagonisms between diplomats and officials, complicating mediation efforts.[1] Different parties and observers alternately emphasize external factors and the nefarious role played by neighbouring countries or failures and neglect by governments in Kinshasa. Some interpretations focus on localized disputes over land or customary authority. Other observers and many Congolese citizens emphasize more distant actors such as Western governments and companies that seek, with the complicity of the DRC's neighbours, to pillage the DRC's mineral wealth. When echoed by warring parties, whether Congolese or foreign, these narratives serve to underline victim status and focus attention on specific grievances, while diverting attention from the more material motivations behind the fighting.

Despite these differences, analysts generally take as their starting point the influx of Rwandan refugees and militias into the DRC following the civil war and genocide in Rwanda in 1994.[2] The situation in the DRC was already fragile, as President Mobutu, in power since 1965, attempted to buttress his regime by playing the ethnic card, fuelling tensions between the many communities that call eastern DRC home. In 1996, frustrated by the continued presence of extremist Rwandan militias near its border, Kigali deployed its army into the DRC, while also creating and supporting proxy armed groups. Two subsequent wars pitted first Rwanda and its Congolese allies against the government of Mobutu, and then Rwanda, Uganda and their allies against their erstwhile Congolese partner and now Congolese president, Laurent Kabila. The latter was backed up by an array of African armies in what

[1] Jason Stearns and Archie Macintosh, "Rwanda-RD Congo. La guerre des récits", AfriqueXXI, 21 August 2024. Available at https://afriquexxi.info/Rwanda-RD-Congo-La-guerre-des-recits (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[2] The principal sources used for this review of the background to violence in eastern DRC are successive reports of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC; authors' interviews with civil society, security experts, former rebels, diplomats and officials in Goma, Kigali, Kampala, Kinshasa and western capitals over many years; and the excellent single volume account by Jason Stearns, *The War That Does Not Say Its Name* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021).

became known as Africa's First World War. These conflicts created fertile ground for other disputes, including between allies fighting over the spoils of their victories, most infamously, Rwanda and Uganda, who fought each other at various points in the protracted war for control of the Congo. Non-state armed groups proliferated, and the army collapsed.

In 1999, Laurent Kabila was assassinated by a bodyguard and succeeded by his son Joseph. The latter's more conciliatory stance towards Kigali and Kampala and their various Congolese proxies created an opening for Western and African efforts to end the war. This resulted in the Sun City peace agreements of 2002 and 2003, which led to a new constitution and elections in 2006, won by Joseph Kabila.

Since 2006, the DRC has seen 20 years of constitutional rule but also persistent and often widening violence, a seeming contradiction that lies at the heart of the country's current predicaments. Although plagued by incoherent decision-making and corruption, the state has in some ways strengthened over time. Increasing revenues from industrial mining have bolstered government finances. Even the corruption and violence of the poorly governed state have their own stability as elites find advantages amid the disorder and remain largely insulated from instability. The strength of the Congolese state, often underestimated by diplomats and observers confronted with the day-to-day chaos of Kinshasa, marks a fundamental shift from the peacebuilding era of the 1990s and 2000s, during which time international actors accompanied a wider state-building project. By other metrics, however, the country continues to slide into chaos. Armed violence in the east (in the South Kivu and North Kivu provinces and Ituri) has increased since the end of the war.[3] The army, still divided between the different factions that merged following early 2000s peace deals and beset by rent seeking and corruption, is extremely weak and predatory.[4]

During Kabila's presidency, Kinshasa's relations with Uganda and Rwanda oscillated. At times, these two neighbours supported rebel groups fighting against the Congolese army. But at other times, they cooperated with the Congolese authorities in hunting down cross-border armed groups – in Rwanda's case, the Rwandan Democratic Liberation Front (FDLR in French, led by former genocidaires from Rwanda), and in Uganda's case, the Islamist rebels, the Allied Democratic Front (ADF). In any case, despite the end of the regional war, both Uganda and Rwanda saw eastern DRC as an area of vital concern, whether to boost their economies through licit and illicit trade or secure their borders against perceived threats.

In the first two years of his presidency, Félix Tshisekedi – who succeeded Kabila in 2019 following controversial elections – also cooperated with Kampala and Kigali to allow them to track down cross-border armed groups on Congolese territory. In 2021, this on-off cooperation ruptured.[5] According to several sources and as indicated in speeches by Rwandan leaders at the time, Kigali was angered at Kinshasa's deal with Kampala which saw Ugandan troops and contractors enter the DRC to build and protect a new road network,

[3] See the short summary, based on data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, in Pierre Jacquemont, "Les conflits dans l'est de la République Démocratique du Congo", Etude (Paris, Fondation Jean-Jaurès, 2025).

[4] See, for example, Judith Verweijen, "Soldiers without an army? Patronage networks and cohesion in the armed forces of the DR Congo", *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 44, No. 4 (2018), pp. 626–646.

[5] International Crisis Group, "Easing the turmoil in the eastern DR Congo and Great Lakes", Crisis Group Africa Briefing, No. 312 (Nairobi/Brussels, 2022). Available at https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/b181-dr-congo-great-lakes.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

thus undermining Rwanda's place in regional trade.[6] Determined to push back on what it saw as a threat to its dominant position in North Kivu province, Rwanda decided to re-activate the M23 insurgent group.

M23 is the latest in a long line of Kigali-backed insurgent groups, which have voiced concern over the treatment of Congolese Tutsis while fighting both for their own enrichment and influence, and on behalf of the Rwandan state. M23 briefly occupied Goma, North Kivu's capital, in 2012 before being pushed back by a combination of military action by UN peacekeepers and diplomatic pressure on Rwanda. M23 then re-emerged in November 2021 when it attacked Congolese border posts. From there, the rebels advanced into North Kivu with fighting increasing throughout 2022. Relations between Kinshasa and Kigali deteriorated, and regional actors stepped in to mediate.

The Luanda Process 2022–2024: Unable to Break the Deadlock

As violence worsened and Kinshasa pointed the finger at Kigali for supporting M23, the presidents of the DRC and Rwanda met in Luanda in July 2022 in an attempt to normalize relations. President João Lourenço of Angola hosted the talks in his capacity as an AU-appointed mediator. Kinshasa and Kigali signed the Luanda road map, committing to a ceasefire, the withdrawal of M23 from occupied positions and action against the FDLR. The road map contained additional provisions on disarmament and the repatriation of foreign fighters, hate speech, refugee returns and the prevention of illicit exploitation of natural resources. It established a role for Angola in verifying mutual accusations by Rwanda and the DRC concerning respectively their support of M23 and the FDLR.[7]

M23, however, immediately rejected the road map and, along with Rwandan troops, pressed home their advantage on the ground. The group claimed that any agreement signed by Rwanda did not represent them and requested direct negotiations with Kinshasa.[8] Kigali simply denied its troops were present, despite growing evidence. M23 took over the towns of Rutshuru and Kiwanja in October 2022, followed by the capture of the town of Kitshanga in January 2023, thereby gaining control over supply routes to Goma, the capital of North Kivu with a population of 2 million. M23 then expanded into Lubero territory, which is considered the Ugandan zone of influence. As M23 strengthened positions for the early 2025 takeover of Goma and Bukavu (discussed below), it received support from Rwanda in the form of weapons, technology, logistics and the deployment of thousands of troops.[9] Boosted by its advances and seeking to leverage them for a role in Congolese politics, in late 2023 M23 formed a political wing, Congo River Alliance (AFC in French), formulating demands for the replacement of Tshisekedi's government.

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[6] Initial Rwandan motivations for backing M23 are derived from the authors' interviews of security specialists and diplomats in 2023 and 2024. See also President Kagame's speech to the Rwandan parliament, video 8 February 2022. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuI8L44PDHU (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[7] Road Map on the Pacification Process in the Eastern Region of the DRC, 6 July 2022. Available at https://www.peaceagreements.org/agreements/2538/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[8] TV5 Monde, "RDC/Rwanda: le M23 déclare ne pas 'être engagé' sur un cessez-le-feu", 7 July 2022. Available at https://afrique.tv5monde.com/information/rdcrwanda-le-m23-declare-ne-pas-etre-engage-sur-un-cessez-le-feu (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[9] For details of Rwandan support for M23, see annual reports of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC. This analysis also relies on the authors' interviews with diplomats, security specialists and direct witnesses to M23 recruitment within Rwanda in 2023 and 2024.

As relations between Kinshasa and Kigali soured, diplomatic initiatives multiplied. In late 2022, the East African Community, which DRC had joined the preceding year, deployed a peacekeeping force headed by a Kenyan force commander.[10] This came in addition to Kenya's role, since 2022, in hosting talks between Kinshasa and armed groups (the Nairobi Process). However, the relations between the DRC and Kenya grew strained as Tshisekedi accused the East African Community force of ineffectiveness and even collusion with M23.[11] To replace it, he invited another regional mission, this time led by the Southern African Development Community, which he hoped would take the fight to M23 in place of his dysfunctional army. In addition to the regional force and the UN peacekeeping operation (MONUSCO), Kinshasa relied on the pro-government Wazalendo militia, international mercenaries, Burundian troops and the FDLR. All these forces did not prevent M23 from expanding: for example, the rebels captured the lucrative Rubaya mining site in April 2024.[12]

As M23 advanced, Angola attempted to keep the Luanda Process alive. Several meetings of Congolese and Rwandan foreign ministers and intelligence chiefs recommitted the parties to the ceasefire and joint action against armed groups. M23 continued rejecting ceasefires agreed by Kinshasa and Kigali. Faced with the breakdown of the Kinshasa-Kigali diplomatic relations, Lourenço pursued shuttle diplomacy between the two capitals. Tensions deepened, however, and public rhetoric grew increasingly hostile. Following the May 2024 attack on a displacement camp on Goma's outskirts implicating Rwandan troops, the Congolese foreign minister appealed to the UN to take action against Rwanda and accused Kigali of preparing a genocide of Congolese Hutus.[13] Angola brokered a two-week humanitarian truce in August 2024, which provided only a temporary respite.

The implementation of the Luanda Road Map was hampered from the outset by disputes about sequencing. Kigali insisted on the "neutralization" of the FDLR before lifting its "defensive measures" (a euphemism for its support for M23 and Rwandan troop deployments). Kinshasa demanded the withdrawal of M23 and Rwandan forces first, arguing that Kigali instrumentally exaggerated the FDLR threat to justify its presence.[14] In August 2024, Congolese and Rwandan foreign ministers agreed in Luanda on a plan for the "neutralization" of the FDLR and "disengagement" of the forces. Neither side hurried to implement its end of the bargain. In September 2024, under international pressure, Congolese forces attempted to capture the FDLR commander. In a botched operation, which observers suspect was sabotaged from within the Congolese army, soldiers mistakenly attacked one

[10] International Crisis Group, "Regional powers should drive diplomacy in DR Congo as M23 surrounds Goma", 30 November 2022. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/democratic-republic-congo/regional-powers-should-drive-diplomacy-dr-congo-m23-surrounds-goma (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[11] Jenna Russo, "East Africa's troops are leaving the DRC: what went wrong and what comes next", The Conversation, 11 December 2023. Available at https://theconversation.com/east-africas-troops-are-leaving-the-drc-what-went-wrong-and-what-comes-next-219500 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[12] UN Security Council, "Letter dated 27 December 2024 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council", S/2024/969, 27 December 2024.

[13] Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Coopération Internationale, Francophonie et Diaspora Congolaise, "Bombardement du camp des déplacés de Mugunga: la RRD saisit le Conseil de Sécurité de l'ONU", 9 May 2024. Available at https://diplomatie.gouv.cd/2024/05/09/bombardement-du-camp-des-deplaces-de-mugunga-la-rdc-saisit-le-conseil-de-securite-de-lonu/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[14] For insight into the positions of both sides, see declarations by the permanent representatives of the DRC and Rwanda in debates at the UN Security Council in 2023 and 2024.]

of the Wazalendo groups.[15] Overall, the hoped-for trade-off between tamping down on the FDLR and Rwandan withdrawal was difficult to achieve on the ground.

Efforts to press ahead with the implementation of the Luanda Road Map continued until the end of 2024. In early November, Congolese and Rwandan foreign ministers launched the reinforced verification mechanism with Angolan and MONUSCO facilitation. They also agreed on a joint concept of operations (CONOPS) to tackle the FDLR.[16] Despite these encouraging signals, President Kagame pulled out of the planned December 2024 summit in Luanda. During the preparatory ministerial meeting the day before the summit, Kigali blindsided Kinshasa by demanding that it engage directly with M23, which Tshisekedi continued to oppose.[17] Kinshasa felt that Kigali was shifting goalposts for the withdrawal of its "defensive measures" instead of reciprocating Congo's attempts to go after the FDLR. In March 2025, Angola formally ended its role in the Luanda Process under the pretext of devoting its energies to its rotating chairpersonship of the AU, while in reality acknowledging the lack of progress and the entry of Qatar as a new mediator.[18]

The Luanda Process faced several significant obstacles. First was the pre-eminence of developments on the battlefield over those around the negotiation table. Kinshasa consistently overestimated both its army's ability to hold ground and the advantages given by mercenaries, local auxiliaries, regional forces and MONUSCO. Faced with M23's advances, Tshisekedi had little choice but to enlist the support of all available allies, creating huge problems of trust and coordination.[19] M23, on the other hand, could request capable back-up from Rwanda every time it came under military pressure. For M23 and Rwanda, it made little strategic sense to engage in negotiation in good faith while they were ascendant on the ground.

The second obstacle was the overlooked interests of the warring parties. The occupation of mineral-rich areas of eastern DRC provided tangible economic benefits to Rwanda and M23 cadres. For example, the occupation of the Rubaya mining site increased the export of coltan through Rwanda, enriching M23 in the process.[20] In contrast, the Luanda Road Map offered no tangible benefits that could entice M23 to relinquish positions, such as amnesties or integration of security forces. On the other side, the negotiations failed to take sufficient account of Kinshasa's domestic constraints. Tshisekedi felt politically obliged to take a hard line against M23 and Rwanda rather than engage in the sort of backroom dealing that led to

[15] Jeune Afrique, "En RDC, l'armée cible des FDLR...et touche un de ses alliés", 7 September 2024. Available at https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1614251/politique/en-rdc-larmee-cible-des-fdlr-et-touche-un-de-ses-allies/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[16] UN Security Council, "Letter dated 27 December 2024".

[17] Radio France Internationale, "DR Congo, Rwanda peace talks in Angola cancelled after hitting 'deadlock'", 15 December 2024. Available at https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20241215-dr-congo-rwanda-leaders-hold-peace-talks-in-angola (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[18] Africa News, "Angola ends mediation role in the DRC-Rwanda conflict amid failed talk," 24 March 2025. Available at https://www.africanews.com/2025/03/24/angola-ends-mediation-role-in-the-drc-rwanda-conflict-amid-failed-talk/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[19] Authors' interview, senior UN security source, Goma, June 2024.

[20] UN Security Council, "Letter dated 27 December 2024".

imperfect peace deals in the past.[21]

The third obstacle was the lack of clarity of the negotiating agenda. The initial Luanda Road Map presented the steps the parties needed to take as mutually beneficial measures aimed at stabilizing the region, improving the humanitarian situation and revitalizing trade. Over time, this changed, as mediators began framing the demands for the "neutralization" of the FDLR and the M23 withdrawal as mutual concessions. This led to disputes over sequencing, as described above. Both demands were also imprecise and difficult to verify. Rwanda shifted from denying its support for M23 to acknowledging "defensive measures". It also shifted from prioritizing demands for the FDLR defeat to insisting on direct talks between Kinshasa and M23. The lack of clarity and sincerity in the parties' positions prevented Angola from making progress.

The fourth obstacle came in the form of regional tensions and wider international divisions. The Angolans invested significant diplomatic effort into their mediation and were careful to maintain a neutral position and avoid public mudslinging. Yet despite the formal AU mandate, Lourenço did not enjoy unified political backing from African powers. Several African countries value their relations with Kigali and do not wish to challenge Rwandan actions. In turn, the DRC's relations with a number of African nations were complicated. Kinshasa fell out with Kenya when it expelled the East African Force. It also strained relations with South Africa when it prevaricated on cutting off the FDLR. Uganda played an ambivalent role in the crisis, allowing M23 free passage and access to refugee camps for recruitment.[22]

In terms of international divisions, many Western countries failed to exercise the leverage they had over Rwanda. Donors did not introduce significant sanctions or cut aid until early 2025 due to economic and security partnerships they had developed with Kigali, such as the Rwandan counter-terrorism deployment in Mozambique that was partly funded by the EU, or the EU's 2024 critical minerals deal with Rwanda. Kinshasa had overestimated the international outrage over Rwanda's violation of its neighbour's sovereignty. Without the willingness of either Western or regional actors to pressure both sides into concessions, the Luanda Process faltered.

After Goma's Fall, Doha and Washington Take the Mediation Baton

In the course of 2025, as the Luanda Process floundered and fighting surged on the ground, Qatar and the US became the key mediators in the Great Lakes crisis. This development poses important questions about the possibilities and limits of international facilitation of the Rwanda-DRC talks, including whether the introduction of powerful but more distant mediators could help overcome the obstacles faced by the AU's Angolan-led efforts. It seems that Doha and Washington have, in fact, encountered very similar problems to those faced by Luanda. As the Rwandans and M23 continue to fight the Congolese army and its allies on the ground, despite signing peace agreements, mediators are lowering their ambitions, which will likely now focus more on establishing and achieving or maintaining fragile ceasefires than on negotiating the insurgents' withdrawal.

[21] International Crisis Group, "DR Congo: a full plate of challenges after a turbulent vote," 26 January 2024. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/democratic-republic-congo/dr-congo-full-plate-challenges-after-turbulent-vote (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[22] International Crisis Group, "Easing the turmoil".

On 27 January 2025, M23, heavily supported by Rwandan troops and weaponry, took over Goma, the largest city in eastern DRC. [23] The fighting pitted the insurgents against the Congolese army, Wazalendo, several hundred mercenaries, MONUSCO and the Southern African mission, as noted above. The move was undoubtedly initiated in Kigali. According to diplomatic sources, Rwanda was emboldened by the expectation that the new US administration would view the takeover more favourably than its predecessor administration would have.[24] Once M23 secured Goma at the end of January, the insurgents took over Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu province, at the start of February. Over the subsequent two months they expanded their footprint, meeting little organized resistance as the Congolese army had retreated in disarray. Diplomats, observers and some Congolese politicians were concerned that the insurgents might advance further into the country, forming alliances with other disgruntled armed groups and opposition politicians, and destabilize the government in Kinshasa.[25]

Since the end of March, however, M23's expansion has slowed. To the north of M23's positions on the border between North Kivu and Ituri provinces, the Ugandan army had deployed troops with Kinshasa's consent, officially to fight the ADF, but also to protect its economic interests, creating an obstacle to M23's expansion.[26] M23's push south has met fierce, if highly disorganized, resistance from the Congolese and Burundian armies and Wazalendo fighters around Uvira city in South Kivu. Finally, the attention brought by the Washington and Doha mediation efforts likely helped curb Rwandan enthusiasm for expanding M23's footprint.

Western countries reacted to M23's takeover of Goma by calling on M23 and Rwanda to withdraw their forces. Notably, the UN Security Council strongly condemned M23's actions and named Rwanda as an aggressor, a step that both Western powers and the UN had previously baulked at. European donors suspended or delayed some aid packages to Rwanda and imposed individual sanctions on Rwandan army commanders, reflecting this new firmer position.[27] The country's biggest donor, the World Bank, however, did not change its spending plans.

The fall of Goma and Rwanda's advance into DRC territory raised tensions among African powers. Southern African countries, especially South Africa, which formed the bulk of the force that fought Rwandan troops around Goma, were initially furious at Kigali's actions. Other countries were more circumspect, wary of alienating Kigali, especially as Rwandan troops play an important role supporting governments and armies in the Central African Republic and Mozambique. The result was confusion: Angola first pulled out, then called for

[23] The fall of Goma was well covered in international and national media. For a good summary, see Paul Nantulya, "Risk of regional conflict following fall of Goma and M23 offensive in the DRC", Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 29 January 2025. Available at https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Risk-of-Regional-Conflict-1.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[24] Authors' interviews of diplomats with insight into the thinking of the Rwandan leadership, March 2025.

[25] Authors' interviews with diplomats and experts, March and April 2025.

[26] Kristof Titeca, "Uganda's chess game in eastern DRC: with or without M23?" Egmont Policy Brief, No. 345 (Brussels, Royal Institute for International Relations, 2024); Kristof Titeca and Giovanni Salvaggio, "Understanding Uganda's (ambiguous) actions in eastern DRC: military interventions to protect roads and trade?" Egmont Paper, No. 134 (Brussels, Royal Institute for International Relations, 2025).

[27] Romain Gras, "L'UE sanctionne des généraux rwandais à l'aube d'une semaine décisive", Jeune Afrique, 17 March 2025. Available at https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1668824/politique/lue-sanctionne-des-generaux-rwandais-a-laube-dune-semaine-decisive/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

more talks in Luanda, only to withdraw again when the presidents of Rwanda and the DRC appeared in Doha without Luanda's prior knowledge.[28] The African Union then decided to create a new panel of mediators headed by Togolese President Faure Gnassingbé, backed up by five former presidents, each with a thematic lead.[29] This move, and the composition of the panel itself, was intended to merge the different, largely moribund African initiatives and seemed more oriented to calming African tensions by balancing different regional groups than to making headway on the peace process itself.

With the African response floundering, other mediators stepped in, namely Qatar and the US. On 18 March, Kagame and Tshisekedi met in Doha. The resulting communique contained little new, committing the parties again to stop the fighting, but the meeting itself took both observers and African diplomats by surprise. Qatar is an important investor in both the DRC and Rwanda, and Kigali regards relations with Doha as important to offset pressure from Western donors. While clearly a welcome initiative, reactions to the Doha meeting pointed to emerging rivalries between African and non-African mediators.[30] Nevertheless, the Qatar/US initiative continued to gather pace. In early April, President Trump's Africa advisor toured the region. US officials then invited Rwandan and Congolese counterparts to a series of meetings in Washington to hammer out a deal.

For three months, the Congolese and Rwandan officials gathered in Washington differed on familiar issues but came under growing pressure. Disagreements focused mainly on Congolese and US demands that the Rwandan army withdraw from Congolese soil. While the US mediators accepted that M23 would not disband quickly, they did press Rwanda to pull its troops out without conditions. Rwanda resisted this by arguing that they should withdraw only once talks between Kinshasa and M23 had advanced, and only once Kinshasa took clear action against the FDLR. US officials recognized these as delaying tactics and continued to pressure Rwanda to withdraw.[31] In parallel, American officials attempted to spur US private sector investment in the mining sector in eastern DRC, hoping to create conditions for a "winning peace" in which both Kinshasa and Kigali could benefit from the legitimate minerals trade.

The Qatari initiative and American follow-up eventually bore fruit in the Washington Agreement on 27 June. The agreement committed Rwanda and the DRC to cease hostilities, respect territorial integrity and discontinue support for non-state armed actors. Less than a month after the Washington Agreement, the DRC and M23 signed the Doha Declaration of Principles, agreeing on a ceasefire, the restoration of state authority in rebel-held areas, a prisoner exchange and technical points on refugee returns and a joint monitoring

[28] Romain Chanson, "Est de la RDR: des médiations, une fusion et beaucoup de confusion", Jeune Afrique, 13 March 2025. Available at https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1667931/politique/est-de-la-rdc-des-mediations-une-fusion-et-beaucoup-de-confusion/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[29] Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, former South African President Kgalema Motlanthe, former President of the Central African Republic Catherine Samba Panza and former Ethiopian President Sahle-Work Zewde. Jeune Afrique, "Est de la RDC: la SADC et l'EAC remanient leur équipe de facilitateurs", 25 March 2025. Available at https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1671855/politique/est-de-la-rdc-la-sadc-et-leac-remanient-leur-equipe-de-facilitateurs/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[30] Africa Press, "Angolan president surprised by Qatar initiative on DRC conflict", 21 March 2025. Available at https://www.africa-press.net/angola/all-news/angolan-president-surprised-by-qatari-initiative-on-drc-conflict (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[31] Authors' interview of a US diplomat, June 2025.

mechanism. Qatari mediators have also proposed that M23 form a joint force with the Congolese police, an idea that will likely meet little enthusiasm in Kinshasa. The parties declared their intention to conclude a comprehensive peace deal in mid-August, a deadline they repeatedly missed.

Several months after the Washington Agreement, and despite the impressive fanfare around its signature, there has been no progress towards any of the main stated aims of the deal, while fighting continues on the ground. This suggests that mediation between Rwanda and the DRC has faced similar obstacles to those encountered since 2022. Both sides seem willing to sign agreements, which they then reinterpret according to their interests, blaming the other party when fighting resumes. For example, divergent understandings of the Washington deal emerged almost immediately, again focused on sequencing Rwandan withdrawal relative to the DRC's commitments.[32] As before, Kigali argued that it would only fully pull out if the FDLR insurgents were "neutralized" (i.e. killed), and its troops have since remained on Congolese soil. Despite committing to an immediate ceasefire in Washington, the DRC government was already deploying extra troops to South Kivu in anticipation of more fighting. Kinshasa also continues to buy new arms, hire mercenaries and carry out drone attacks on M23.

The Washington and Doha negotiations took place in an evolving international environment. The Trump Administration's foreign policy efforts focused on fast-paced negotiations leading to agreements that the US president could present as successes to fulfil his electoral promise to "end wars". The difficult questions of follow-up, implementation schedules and guarantees were not always at the forefront. Furthermore, the Trump Administration showed a wavering commitment to the norms of territorial integrity and inviolability of borders, making the Rwandan occupation of its neighbour's territory seem more acceptable. At the same time, amid deepening geopolitical tensions, mediators like Qatar sought to facilitate pragmatic but limited deals that could temporarily ease civilian suffering.

While American mediators have attempted to tie talks to mineral sector investments, the linkage between mineral deals that could benefit US business and the actual peace process has never been fully clarified. US interest in DRC minerals is hardly new, and President Trump's predecessor also took a keen interest via the Lobito Corridor infrastructure project. Several well-financed US investors are eyeing opportunities, though they will necessarily work on a far longer time frame than American diplomacy. Nevertheless, while President Trump does seem motivated to turn the Great Lakes peace process into business opportunities, it is not clear if such investment provides mediators with actual leverage over the parties, given widespread global interest and existing Chinese investments in the DRC.

Conclusion

As of September 2025, the Washington Agreement was facing implementation difficulties, and the Doha track was experiencing delays. Like Angola before them, the US and Qatar have run into hurdles, including continued fighting, disagreements over sequencing, proliferating agendas, public posturing and blame games, complicated regional geopolitics, lack of international pressure and the reality of consolidating and expanding territorial control by

[32] Jeune Afrique "Est de la RDC: 'la levée de nos mesures défensives est conditionnée par la neutralisation des FDLR', insiste le Rwanda", 30 June 2025. Available at https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1702112/politique/est-de-la-rdc-la-levee-de-nos-mesures-defensives-est-conditionnee-par-la-neutralisation-des-fdlr-insiste-le-rwanda/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

M23 that delivers tangible economic benefits to the rebels and their Rwandan backers.

On the ground, a new power structure is emerging, bearing scant relation to diplomatic discussions. On 14 September 2025, M23 paraded 7,000 new fighters, many recruited from defeated Congolese military units, and announced plans to train an additional 12,000.[33] M23 is consolidating control and may be in the process of shedding its previous dependence on the Rwandan army. Meanwhile, the military and administrative reforms that would be needed to tip the balance of power back to the Congolese government are formidable challenges that seem beyond Kinshasa's squabbling political elite. Whatever motivates Rwanda – security, economic gain, territorial expansion – Kigali seems determined to gain control of large areas of North Kivu and will back up its M23 allies if needed.

The obstacles faced by successive mediators illustrate the broader difficulties of crisis management in an international environment where the norms of territorial integrity and non-interference are weakening, and diplomatic attention is limited. Some diplomats may have seen the fighting in the Great Lakes as relatively amenable to mediation, yet resolving entrenched conflicts, even if they are between small or donor-dependent states, is never straightforward. The era of sustained mediation backed by substantial aid packages, as was the case in the early 2000s, seems long past. 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. Mediators' requests to Kinshasa – to respect a ceasefire and stop collaborating with the FDLR or other armed groups – have similarly seen little progress. Elites in Kinshasa, unthreatened by violence in the east, are under insufficient pressure to enter negotiations in good faith and understandably resist any compromise on what they see as Kigali's and M23's real objectives of territorial control.

The gap between mediators' objectives and the reality on the ground ultimately stands as the most important lesson from the Great Lakes crisis. In the past, international efforts have borne fruit when the countries of the region have chosen to resolve their differences and work together against armed groups, and have sought international backing to fund and legitimize their political alignment. Such alignments have been short of trust and have not lasted, but they nevertheless brought respite for the suffering people of eastern DRC. Currently, relations between Kigali and Kinshasa seem to offer little opportunity for fruitful mediation on the overarching issues of territorial integrity, while M23 shows no willingness to negotiate away its gains. Consequently, mediators will have to focus on achieving working ceasefires and limiting conflict spillover to prevent a broader regional conflagration, as well as reducing civilian suffering and displacement. Such a pragmatic approach can keep the parties talking and ensure the conflict remains in the international spotlight.

[33] Radio France International, "Est de la RDC: l'AFC/M23 exhibe un nouveau contingent de 7000 hommes malgré les négociations en cours à Doha", 6 September 2025. Available at https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20250916-est-de-la-rdc-l-afc-m23-exhibe-un-nouveau-contingent-de-7-000-hommes-malgr%C3%A9-les-n%C3%A9gociations-en-cours-%C3%A0-doha (accessed on 25 November 2025).

CHAPTER 7

China and Conflict Mediation

Yun Sun

Introduction

China has not been a traditional actor when it comes to conflict mediation. By definition, Beijing's ability to involve itself in other countries' conflicts is limited by its own non-interference principle.[1] However, in recent years, China has been a rising player in the global conflict mediation landscape, with two distinct successes: the 2023 Saudi-Iran peace deal[2] and the 2024 Beijing Declaration among 14 Palestinian factions.[3] Yet, despite China's expanding role in conflict mediation, few studies have focused on the motivations, approaches, criteria and effectiveness of China's mediation.

This chapter analyses the underlying thought and practices of Chinese conflict mediation. The first section examines China's motivations for engaging in conflict mediation against a backdrop of its expanding overseas interests and its rapid rise to great-power status. Section two analyses how China reconciles its international mediation activities with its principle of non-interference. Beijing has traditionally avoided intruding in other countries' internal affairs, including their domestic conflicts, but geography and necessity are important considerations in China's evolving approach. The third section examines the criteria China uses to determine which conflicts it will mediate and when, and how these have been applied in recent cases where Beijing has engaged or declined to intervene. Section four explores the backgrounds, roles and functions of special envoys and representatives who are dedicated full-time to specific conflicts. Section five presents a detailed analysis of China's approach

[1] For example, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated in 2018 that "China has always adhered to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs [of other countries]". This is "China's diplomatic tradition" and had "won the international community's universal praise". See: People's Republic of China, State Council, "王毅：中国坚持不干涉内政——其他国家也不得干涉别国内政 [Wang Yi: China adheres to non-interference in internal affairs: other countries should not interfere in other countries' internal affairs]", 27 September 2018. Available at https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2018-09/27/content_5325606.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025)

[2] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint trilateral statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran", 10 March 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367487.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[3] See People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Palestinian factions sign Beijing Declaration on ending division and strengthening Palestinian national unity", 23 July 2024. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202407/t20240723_11458790.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

to conflict mediation, its preference for dialogue and diplomacy over force, its emphasis on local solutions rather than ideological formulas and its engagement with regional bodies and mechanisms. Section six examines China's evolving roles as a mediator, analysing its evolution from convenor and facilitator in deference to local solutions to its increasingly ambitious role in the Saudi-Iran agreement and more coercive approach in Myanmar. The concluding section considers China's experience to date as a relatively new and increasingly ambitious player in global mediation and asks what the outcomes of its most successful engagements tell us about future prospects.

Motivations

Why does China involve itself in conflict mediation? Since 2000, the world has witnessed a significant expansion of China's mediation activities. Although no single factor can explain this shift, there can be no doubt that the interests China aims to serve through its mediation have also expanded.

To begin with, it is clear that the more geographically proximate a conflict is to China's border, the more deeply involved in conflict mediation it is likely to be. The logic is simple: when an ongoing armed conflict poses a direct challenge to border stability, China – like any other country – sees an innate need to intervene to protect its security. This reasoning is evident in the various multilateral negotiations convened by China, such as the Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear program, its increasingly hands-on approach to the civil war that erupted in response to the military coup in Myanmar and the conflict between the Taliban and the previous government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. China's top concerns in these cases have included inflows of refugees into China, spillover of Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists, bombing and shelling of Chinese territory from across the border and, in the case of North Korea, potential nuclear contamination. The closer the conflict is to China's border, such as in Myanmar and Afghanistan, the more intense have been Chinese efforts to mediate its resolution or de-escalation.

China is also compelled to involve itself in the domestic politics of conflict-affected countries when it needs to protect its own interests on the ground, whether commercial (e.g. its involvement in Venezuela's ongoing crisis to safeguard its investment in the country's oil industry[4]) or reputational (e.g. its mediation with the Sudanese government to accept the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur for stabilization[5]). China has extensive investments in natural resource extraction and businesses in politically unstable countries, and its assets and personnel inevitably become entangled in domestic conflicts when they break out.

It is also interesting to consider why China mediates in some of these conflicts but not in others. For example, China was not involved in mediation efforts during the Libyan or Syrian civil war, and it has not directly engaged in mediating the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Given China's global economic interests and the growing number of regional and domestic

[4] US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "Chinese engagement in Latin America in the context of strategic competition with the United States: R. Evan Ellis testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission", 24 June 2020. Available at https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/Ellis_Testimony.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[5] For example, see Gioia Serena Wang, "What motivates Chinese foreign policy in Sudan? A discourse analysis of Chinese official statements on the Darfur conflict from 2004 to 2023", *Grimshaw Review of International Affairs*, vol. 1, No. 2 (2024).

conflicts worldwide, it is reasonable to assume that China's economic engagement in conflict countries is a universal variable. This raises interesting questions about the criteria China uses for deciding to engage in mediation.

As China becomes a great power and faces higher expectations in its actions abroad, projecting a great power image and building its reputation as a responsible leader that plays a constructive role in resolving conflicts has become a top foreign policy priority. In his Global Security Initiative, President Xi Jinping pointedly singled out conflict mediation as a distinct category, noting that China will make an enhanced effort to pursue cooperation to:

> … promote political solutions to international and regional hotspot issues; encourage relevant parties to seek solutions to hotspot issues through honest dialogue and communication and resolution of their differences; support the international community to constructively participate in the political resolution of hotspot issues under the precondition of non-interference in internal affairs through the promotion of peace and dialogues as the primary approach, and with fairness and pragmatism as the primary attitude, and addressing both the root causes and symptoms; support the political resolution of hotspot issues, including the Ukraine crisis, through dialogues and negotiations.[6]

Chinese involvement in mediation has been increasingly motivated by the positive image it can gain from mediating conflicts for two reasons. First, Beijing is beginning to realize that, due to its relatively neutral position in many cases and its extensive interests with the parties to the conflicts, it occupies a unique position, one that gives it a distinct influence over those parties. Even if China cannot persuade the parties to adopt a peace plan, it can still encourage them to engage in dialogue. Beijing has also been quick to learn that while political solutions are the ultimate goal of most mediation efforts – though most fail to realize it – the process itself can be considered a major achievement. China thus has much to gain and little to lose by positioning itself as a mediator, even if a political solution is not ultimately achieved.

Second, Chinese engagement is increasingly motivated by great power competition. In the cases of Afghanistan and the Israel-Palestine conflict, China's involvement has clearly aimed to succeed where the United States has failed. The narrative is that while the US foments war, conflict and instability,[7] China brings peace, development and security.[8] The sharp contrast China tries to highlight between its convening of dialogues and US military intervention is believed to be particularly beneficial for China's efforts to strengthen relationships with

[6] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "全球安全倡议概念文件（全文）[Global Security Initiative concept paper (full text)]", 21 February 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbxw_new/202302/t20230221_11028322.shtml (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[7] For example, see comments on the US approach to Afghanistan in People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The hypocrisy and facts of the United States foreign aid", 19 April 2024. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202405/t20240530_11344003.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[8] For modern remarks on the Five Principles, see People's Republic of China, State Council, "习近平在和平共处五项原则发表70周年纪念大会上的讲话 [Xi Jinping's speech at the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence]", 28 June 2024. Available at https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202406/content_6959889.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

countries in the Global South.

Countries' actions are rarely altruistic, and China's efforts at mediation are no exception. Whether to mitigate the direct impact of conflict on its national security or its overseas commercial interests, or to enhance its reputation and build its image as a great power, China's motives for mediating conflicts are strong and diverse.

Reconciling International Mediation with the Non-Interference Principle

Non-interference in other countries' internal affairs is one of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the guiding norms of Chinese foreign policy.[9] The principle stipulates that China should refrain from interfering in another sovereign state's domestic situation and decision-making, in line with the maxim of do unto others. As the Chinese Communist Party has always been sensitive to criticism and efforts by other countries to influence its domestic politics, especially its one-party system, Beijing has historically avoided taking a more forward approach to other countries' internal affairs, including their domestic conflicts.

There is also a cultural tendency in Chinese political culture to avoid "meddling" in other countries' affairs. The Chinese believe that all internal conflicts originate from the history and reality of the countries themselves and that outsiders are unlikely to make better judgments about the merits of each party's positions than the parties themselves. Outsiders' judgments, from the Chinese perspective, also reflect their values and convictions, as, for example, in the case of Western mediators' views on the responsibility to protect (R2P), democratic elections and federalism. Since China does not identify with such Western values, there is no inclination to adopt the traditional views and methods of conflict mediation that follow the Western approach.

The balance between China's non-interference principle and its conflict mediation strategy is determined by its initial motivation to engage in conflict mediation. China has the longest land borders in the world, spanning over 22,000 km and shared with 14 countries with which China maintains important trade, diplomatic and security relations. As China's border stability and economic interests become increasingly affected by conflicts in other countries, its interpretation of "interference" has started to shift. When the internal affairs of other countries begin to threaten its interests on the ground, they indirectly become China's affairs, and thus its involvement in resolving the conflict becomes justifiable.

A second Chinese logic that justifies its mediation efforts focuses on the result of the mediation. In the Chinese view, as long as the mediation results in the mitigation of tensions and tangible improvement of the situation on the ground, the ends justify the means. Even if China involves itself in conflict resolution in another sovereign country, the reduction of tension justifies China's interference.

Last but not least, the Chinese have in the past made the distinction between interference, intervention and influence. While interference implies a unilateral imposition undesired by the parties to the conflict, intervention, especially UN intervention, with a UN Security

[9] For modern remarks on the Five Principles, see People's Republic of China, State Council, "习近平在和平共处五项原则发表70周年纪念大会上的讲话 [Xi Jinping's speech at the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence]", 28 June 2024. Available at https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202406/content_6959889.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

Council mandate and host country consent, is seen as legitimate. Influencing another country's decision, especially through diplomatic persuasion rather than the threat of military intervention or economic sanctions, is also considered a normal and legitimate diplomatic manoeuvre, at least in the context of conflict mediation. Another term that Chinese scholars have deliberated over is "creative involvement". In his book Creative Involvement, Wang Yizhou from Peking University defined China's approach as a "realistic and updated" reading of the non-interference principle. In his view, because circumstances have changed, China must "enrich" and "innovate" its non-interference principle to promote the positive role of "emerging powers" in building a "more rational international order".[10]

Chinese Criteria for Mediation

China's shifting approach to noninterference raises the question of how it chooses which conflict to mediate. Presumably, China has a global economic presence, and its need for diplomatic prestige is also broad. So why would it involve itself in some cases but not others? A close examination of Chinese involvement in mediation reveals some patterns.

The first is that China's mediation is predicated on the consent of the parties to the conflict. If one or more parties reject external mediation, Beijing does not impose itself. The most striking case in this regard is Russia's rejection of China's public offer to mediate in the Ukraine crisis as a unique and constructive player.[11] Chinese interlocutors have repeatedly emphasized that, without Russian consent, China will not impose mediation on Russia, nor would it be successful if it did.[12] Even more preferable on the Chinese side is an explicit invitation by parties to the conflict for China to play a role. Indeed, China first became involved in brokering the peace deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia after a direct request from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during President Xi Jinping's state visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022.[13]

The second pattern is that China is obviously more inclined to mediate in conflicts where it has a high stake in the outcome. In cases impacting its border stability, China has been actively involved in mediation in Afghanistan, Myanmar and North Korea. China has also played a role in resolving Sudan's Darfur conflict and Venezuela's ongoing crisis, partly due to its investments in oil assets. Similarly, China's mediation efforts in the Middle East –

10 See Wang's lecture on his book, "Creative involvement: a new direction in China's diplomacy", PowerPoint presentation, October 2019. Available at https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Lecture-11-Creative-Intervention-PD-Theory-in-China.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

11 China has consistently maintained that it would play a positive role in promoting peace and dialogue in the Ukraine crisis. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, speaking in 2023 ahead of Xi's meeting with Putin in Russia, said that it would be a "journey of peace". Similarly, on a call with Zelensky the following month, Xi noted that China would make its own efforts to end the fighting and restore peace as soon as possible, highlighting China's dispatch of its special representative for Eurasian affairs to Ukraine and elsewhere to discuss a political solution to the crisis. People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs "2023年3月17日外交部发言人汪文斌主持例行记者会 [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's 17 March 2023 regular press conference]", 17 March 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202303/t20230317_11043865.shtml (accessed on 25 November 2025); People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "习近平同乌克兰总统泽连斯基通电话 [Xi Jinping speaks with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy on the phone]", 26 April 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202304/t20230426_11066754.shtml (accessed on 25 November 2025).

12 Private conversation with Chinese analysts, Beijing, October 2024.

13 Yun Sun, "孙韵：中国——新的"中东和平缔造者？[Yun Sun: China—New 'Middle East peacemaker'?]", Voice of America, 15 March 2023. Available at https://www.voachinese.com/a/sun-yun-on-chinese-policy-on-middle-east-20230315/7006180.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

focused on the Israel-Palestine issue and Saudi-Iran relations – appear primarily motivated by diplomatic considerations: strengthening China's ties with the Muslim world and the broader Global South and building a strong Chinese role in the Middle Eastern region. China's special envoy diplomacy in Africa also largely follows this pattern, the aim being to showcase China's status as a great power and responsible stakeholder. By comparison, China is noticeably absent from other conflicts in Latin America, South Asia and other countries in the Middle East and Africa, where its interests are less significant.

Where China is not directly involved or related to the parties of conflict, the recommendation within the Chinese policy community appears to favour later involvement after other mediators have already tried and failed, as is the case of the Red Sea crisis and the Houthis. The logic is that China will reserve its mediation efforts until others have failed, so that the expectations placed on China as a new mediator will be more realistic.

Special Envoy Diplomacy

China's primary approach to conflict mediation has focused on the role of special envoys and representatives who are dedicated full-time to specific conflicts. Currently, China has special envoys for Asian affairs, the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, Syria and Afghanistan, and special representatives for African affairs (focused on Darfur), Korean Peninsula affairs (focused on North Korea) and Eurasian affairs (focused on the Ukraine crisis). According to Chinese official narratives, long-term special envoy offices designated to global crisis issues are a relatively new phenomenon, emerging after 9/11. It began with the appointment of the first special envoy on the Middle East in September 2002.[14] Below is a list of when each special envoy and representative office was first established:

- Special Envoy on the Middle East Issue: September 2002[15]
- Special Representative for African Affairs: May 2007[16]
- Special Representative on Korean Peninsular Affairs: February 2010[17]
- Special Envoy for Asian Affairs: February 2013[18]

[14] Public Diplomacy Network, "揭秘我国特使外交：他们既是"临时工"，也是"特种兵"，在国与国之间的外交上发挥着重大作用 [Revealing China's special envoy diplomacy: they are both 'temporary workers' and 'special forces' and play an important role in diplomacy between countries]", 3 August 2020. Available at http://pdnet.cn/home/index/view/article_id/13761.html. (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[15] Ibid.

[16] People's Republic of China, State Council, "经典中国·辉煌60年：中国政府外交特使走遍世界 [Classical China: 60 years of glory – the Chinese government's special envoys travel around the world]", 22 September 2009. Available at https://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2009-09/22/content_1423209.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[17] Observer Network, "刘晓明大使再履要职 [Ambassador Liu Xiaoming is back in an important position]", 12 April 2021. Available at https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_12159930 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[18] People's Republic of China, Consulate in New York, "2013年3月11日外交部发言人华春莹主持例行记者会 [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's 11 March 2013 regular press conference]", 11 March 2013. Available at http://newyork.china-consulate.gov.cn/fyrth/201303/t20130311_4268734.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

- Special Envoy on Afghan Affairs: July 2014[19]
- Special Envoy on the Syrian Issue: March 2016[20]
- Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs: September 2019[21]
- Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Affairs: February 2022[22]

In the Chinese policy lexicon, these special envoys are described as "political special envoys", in contrast to "ceremonial special envoys". Whereas the latter are dispatched to other countries for special ceremonial roles on behalf of the Chinese leader, political special envoys are senior career diplomats with extensive experience in regional affairs, diplomatic engagement and problem-solving.

An interesting characteristic shared by these special envoys is that most are over the age of 60, the official retirement age in the Chinese bureaucracy for officials below the rank of government minister.[23] Most of the Chinese special envoys enjoy the bureaucratic rank of director general or vice-minister, and many have served as ambassadors during their careers.[24] These backgrounds provide them with the seniority, experience and relationships needed to perform mediation roles.

Yet, appointing retired diplomats as special envoys generates potential problems. While all of these special envoys are highly experienced and well trained, they are also at the end of their diplomatic careers. The special envoy position is typically their last post before retirement; some have even been brought back from retirement to serve in the role. Compared to their younger counterparts, these senior diplomats may not be as enthusiastic to promote issues as vigorously. Their performance largely depends on their own personality: some are visibly more proactive than others.

Chinese special envoys are similar to "case officers" assigned to specific conflict issues. Their offices are typically embedded in the geographical departments of the Foreign Ministry, which facilitate their daily communications with country desk officers about current issues. Given their bureaucratic seniority, the country desk officers also provide support to the

[19] Xinhua, "解局·外交 | 阿领导人访华 中国与阿富汗如何共赢 [Solution diplomacy: Afghan leader visits China, how can China and Afghanistan win together?]", 16 May 2016. Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-05/16/c_128986248.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[20] Pan Yinru, "专访中国叙利亚问题特使解晓岩：中东局势当务之急是降温 [Exclusive interview with Xie Xiaoyan, China's wpecial envoy for Syria: the top priority in the Middle East is to cool down the situation]", Yicai, 15 May 2018. Available at https://www.yicai.com/news/5423209.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[21] Lianhe Zaobao, "'俄国通'中国欧亚事务特别代表李辉 将赴乌克兰等国 ['Russia expert' and Chinese special representative for Eurasian affairs Li Hui will visit Ukraine and other countries]", 27 April 2023. Available at https://www.zaobao.com.sg/news/china/story20230427-1388104 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[22] Gu Yaping and Chen Along, "新时代中国的全球安全观及其在非洲安全治理的实践 [China's global security perspective and its security governance practice in Africa in the new era]", National Centre for Philosophy and Social Sciences Documentation, *Interpretation of Chinese Civilization and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations*, p. 54, http://iwaas.cssn.cn/kycg/xslw/202501/P020250110552488018920.pdf.

[23] For a discussion on age limits, see Shuli Ren, "Xi's cadre pension-age limit makes no sense", Bloomberg, 19 October 2022. Available at https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-10-19/china-s-retirement-age-for-officials-is-too-low (accessed on 25 November 2025); Yu Zeng and Stan Hok-wui Wong, "Time is power: rethinking meritocratic political selection in China", *The China Quarterly*, vol. 245 (2021), pp. 23–50.

[24] Based on in-depth analysis of publicly available background and resume information on each special envoy.

special envoys' missions. Special envoys operate on both bilateral and multilateral levels to facilitate dialogues and solutions to ongoing crises. They have proven to be the most engaged mediators in the Chinese foreign policy community.

Characteristics of China's Approach to Conflict Mediation

China's approach to conflict mediation is guided by several principles. First, China is focused on political dialogue and diplomatic resolution as the foundation of its mediation strategy, rather than military approaches. "Promotion of peace dialogue" is the central theme of Chinese involvement in international conflicts. In this sense, its conflict mediation mainly relies on deploying special envoys and applying diplomatic skills to bridge differences. China is no stranger to diplomatic manoeuvres, especially at multilateral forums such as the United Nations or regional organizations. The commitment to diplomatic negotiations and the outright rejection of military conflicts highlight the centrality of diplomacy to China's approach to conflict mediation.[25]

Second, China rejects foreign – especially Western – influence in conflict resolution. In most, if not all, cases, China emphasizes the will of the people in the conflict countries. "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned"[26] or "Palestinians governing Palestine"[27] and "Syrian-led, Syrian-owned" are key points in China's diplomatic stance on these conflicts. With this emphasis, China is tacitly rejecting proxy warfare and foreign influence in the conflicts, a stance that follows from its belief that foreign states back various political forces involved in conflicts to protect their own vested interests and, at times, their sphere of influence. Beijing has viewed conflicts in Afghanistan,[28] Syria,[29] Mali,[30] Yemen[31] and Sudan[32] as at least partially the result of foreign interference.

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[25] For one of many examples, see People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's regular press conference on September 15, 2021", 15 September 2021. Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347122.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[26] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Wang Yi chairs the first 'neighboring countries of Afghanistan plus Afghanistan' foreign ministers' dialogue", 31 March 2022. Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./wjbzhd/202204/t20220401_10663013.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[27] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Remarks on the Palestinian-Israeli issue by China's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council briefing", 18 March 2025. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zwbd/202503/t20250324_11580638.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[28] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's regular press conference on August 31, 2021", 31 August 2021. Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347111.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[29] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's regular press conference on March 10, 2023", 10 March 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347481.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[30] For an in-depth discussion of China's perceptions of and approach to mediation in Mali, see Lina Benabdallah, "China's conflict resolution and mediation approach in Mali", Stimson Center, 26 January 2024. Available at https://www.stimson.org/2024/china-conflict-resolution-and-mediation-in-mali/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[31] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "US hegemony and its perils", February 2023. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367483.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[32] Laura Barber, *China's Response to Sudan's Political Transition*, Special Report, No. 466 (Washington, D.C., US Institute of Peace, 2020), p. 3.

Relatedly, as noted above, China also does not subscribe to many of the traditional principles common to the Western approach to conflict resolution, such as democratic elections, federalism and civilian control of the military.[33] For China, each country has its own distinct historical and cultural background, and there is no single universal approach to conflict resolution that can be applied to all circumstances. On the contrary, China presents parties to the conflict with a series of its own experiences and lessons on dealing with legitimacy issues and the complex relationship between ethnic majority and minority groups. In contrast to legitimacy conferred by democratic elections, the Chinese argue that the performance of the ruling party, based on revolutionary credentials and economic growth, is equally important for establishing legitimacy. When it comes to managing the relationship between majority and minority groups, the Chinese also see their model of ethnic autonomous regions and the One Country, Two Systems principle,[34] as implemented in Hong Kong,[35] as alternatives to federalism. In recent years, in Bangladesh and Nepal, which are burdened by internal political turmoil, the Chinese have argued that Chinese-style modernization, which emphasizes the harmony between the state and its people, could very possibly be the key to resolving their internal conflicts. In short, approaches to mediating conflict vividly reflect a country's own political philosophy and ideals. For China, this means that conflict-affected countries should identify their own solutions or, at the very least, should not accept Western proposals based on liberal democracy and federalism as the default answer to conflict.

In the most acute conflicts, China tends to prioritize ceasefires over peace. The logic is that a ceasefire will suspend or de-escalate the conflict, creating space for political negotiations and confidence-building measures. But this approach also has weaknesses. A ceasefire is not a resolution to the conflict; it is a pause in the fighting that creates space for the eventual resolution, which usually takes the form of a peace agreement. However, a ceasefire also encourages inertia in a peace process due to the interest groups involved in these temporary arrangements, which can sow the seeds for the resumption of the conflict in the future. The 1953 truce on the Korean Peninsula is a good example. The armistice established a state of "no peace and no war" on the peninsula, but the transition to a peace mechanism has been exceedingly difficult. Understanding that reaching a peace agreement will be extremely difficult and could significantly change the situation on the ground, China seeks to prioritize ceasefires and let the parties to the conflict handle the peace process at their own pace.

In these types of conflicts, China also tends to prioritize regional organizations as the primary platform for conflict mediation, with China playing a supportive or collaborative role. This is evident in China's emphasis on the role of the African Union in conflicts in Sudan,[36] South

[33] For some discussions on these themes, see Soeren Keil, "Federalism as a tool of conflict-resolution: the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina", *L'Europe en Formation*, vol. 363, No. 1 (2012), pp. 205–218; and especially Peter Harris and Ben Reilly, eds., *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators* (Stockholm, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 1998

[34] People's Republic of China, State Council, "中国的民族区域自治 [Regional ethnic autonomy in China]", February 2005. Available at https://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2005-05/27/content_1585.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[35] People's Republic of China, State Council, "《"一国两制"在香港特别行政区的实践》白皮书 [White paper on the practice of 'one country, two systems' in Hong Kong SAR]", 10 June 2014. Available at https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-06/10/content_2697833.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[36] People's Republic of China, Permanent Mission to the UN, "On the issue of Darfur, Sudan", 13 March 2008. Available at http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/200803/t20080313_8399192.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

Sudan,[37] DRC,[38] the Horn of Africa[39] and in the Sahel region,[40] as well as its prioritization of ASEAN's central role in the Myanmar crisis,[41] and the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over their territorial disputes.[42] In Afghanistan, China has worked to ensure that any development plan has the support and participation of regional neighbours and partners, including but not limited to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Meetings of the Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan's Neighbouring Countries organized by China. Beijing's goal in these situations is to shift expectations and responsibility away from China as the mediator and hold regional countries more accountable for resolving the conflict, given that they are more affected by its impacts. In cases where neighbours of the conflict country play a de facto role in the conflict due to their own permeable borders, transnational ethnic ties and interest groups, their support and consent are essential for resolving the conflict. In this sense, China believes that regional organizations will help foster understanding and build consensus among relevant countries with vested interests in the conflict, making these organizations necessary and desirable partners in the mediation process.

China's Evolving Roles

If China places more emphasis on regional organizations for conflict mediation, this raises the question of what conflict-resolution proposal and model it brings to the table. Until 2023, China appeared to be content with organizing peace talks, facilitating communications and meetings, and focusing quite literally on the "promotion of dialogues" among parties to the conflict. What China had refrained from, however, was agenda-setting and developing substantive proposals to bridge differences and break negotiation impasses. Historically, China has convened meetings between the Afghan Taliban and the Ashraf Ghani government,[43] as well as dialogues between ethnic armed groups in Myanmar and the Burmese central government.[44] More recently, in 2024, Beijing also convened meetings

[37] People's Republic of China, Permanent Mission to the UN, "Remarks by Ambassador Dai Bing at the UN Security Council briefing on UNMISS", 6 March 2023. Available at http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202303/t20230307_11036642.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[38] People's Republic of China, Permanent Mission to the UN, "Remarks by Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council briefing on cooperation between the United Nations and the African Union", 29 March 2023. Available at http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/securitycouncil/202303/t20230330_11051653.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] People's Republic of China, Permanent Mission to the UN, "Remarks by Ambassador Geng Shuang at the UN Security Council briefing on the situation of Rakhine State of Myanmar", 4 April 2024. Available at http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/202404/t20240405_11276712.htm (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[42] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun's regular press conference on July 30, 2025", 30 July 2025. Available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202507/t20250730_11679797.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[43] For example, see BBC, "Viewpoint: Ashraf Ghani needs Pakistan help with Taliban talks", 13 January 2015. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30785086 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[44] International Crisis Group, "Rebooting Myanmar's stalled peace process", Asia Report, No. 308 (Yangon/Brussels, 2020). Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia-pacific/myanmar/308-rebooting-myanmars-stalled-peace-process (accessed on 25 November 2025).

among 14 Palestinian factions, which culminated in the Beijing Declaration.[45] But even in these cases where China assumed a leading role in convening stakeholders, it has refrained from playing a more substantive role – such as setting the agenda – or offering detailed proposals on how to break the political deadlock. As China believes in local solutions and the will of the people, it would have been contradictory for it to bring its own plan for resolving the conflict and impose it on the parties.

Until 2023, China's role in conflict mediation therefore remained peripheral to the essential resolution of the conflicts in question. China acted as a convener, dialogue host, facilitator of communications and messages, and sometimes even an endorser or guarantor of the agreements, as in the cases of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar in 2015 and the Saudi-Iran deal in 2023. But in all of these cases, China refrained from substantive contributions on how the conflicts should be resolved.

This tendency, however, has been changing more recently as China shows greater ambition in peacemaking and considers the great power glory such successes could bring. Two examples stand out. First, in the Saudi-Iran deal in 2023, China allegedly pressured Iran to accept the deal that Saudi Arabia first approached Beijing about.[46] While it remains unclear what positive reward China promised Iran or what negative consequences would follow if Iran failed to comply, the understanding is that China used its influence to shape Iran's decision-making. Experts in Beijing also confirmed that China signed the agreement as a guarantor, which is quite unprecedented.[47]

China's most coercive approach to mediation has been in Myanmar. After the 2021 coup triggered chaos and anarchy in the country, illicit activities, especially online scam centres, proliferated along the Chinese border and caused significant financial losses and security threats to Chinese nationals. To eliminate such operations and punish the military government for supporting them, China backed ethnic armed groups in Shan state as they launched Operation 1027 in October 2023.[48] The operation was highly successful, and the armed groups were able to significantly expand the territory under their control. China's approach also forced the Burmese military to pursue engagement with the US.[49] As the military-engineered election drew closer, China scaled back its support for these same ethnic groups[50] and pressured them to give up the territory they had gained since 2023,[51]

[45] People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Palestinian Factions Sign Beijing Declaration".

[46] Yasmine Farouk, "Riyadh's motivations behind the Saudi-Iran deal", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 March 2023. Available at https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/03/riyadhs-motivations-behind-the-saudi-iran-deal?lang=en (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[47] Track-two dialogue with Chinese expert, Muscat, Oman, April 2024.

[48] For an in-depth analysis on this situation, see International Crisis Group, "Scam centres and ceasefires: China-Myanmar ties since the coup", Asia Briefing, No. 179 (Bangkok/Brussels, 2024). Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china-myanmar/b179-scam-centres-and-ceasefires-china-myanmar-ties-coup (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[49] Private conversations, Washington D.C., June 2024.

[50] People's Republic of China, "王毅会见缅甸前国家和平与发展委员会主席丹瑞 [Wang Yi meets with Than Shwe, former chairman of Myanmar's State Peace and Development Council]", 14 August 2024. Available at http://mm.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/sgxw/202408/t20240816_11474392.htm. (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[51] The Irrawaddy, "TNLA defies Myanmar junta push to cede Shan towns in China talks", 7 July 2025. Available at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/tnla-defies-myanmar-junta-push-to-cede-shan-towns-in-china-talks.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

cease military operations against the military government[52] and participate in the elections in certain localities. All these steps were taken to ensure a smooth election that would confer more legitimacy on the new government that will succeed the military junta.

This may be the most proactive posture China has ever adopted in any mediation. Not only did China choose a side, encouraging the military to hold the election, but it also actively took measures to help the military suppress the ethnic armed groups in the name of stabilization and broader peace. Throughout 2025, China's priority has been to convince all the opposition groups to participate in the election. This strongly suggests that China decided to use its influence to steer the country's future in a specific direction through a general election and central government rule. China's rationale could be that, without an election, Myanmar will not be able to move beyond the current political and military impasse, but the approach it has adopted in pursuit of this goal is more coercive than we have seen in all other cases of China's involvement.

These examples demonstrate that China's role in conflict mediation has become more proactive, bold and ambitious. As it shifts from a facilitator to a mediator, China recognizes the increasing benefits of using mediation in conflicts or "global hotspot issues" to showcase its great power status, its perceived moral superiority and its leadership credentials. It is noteworthy that China also realizes that longstanding conflicts, like that in Israel-Palestine, have limited prospects for a quick resolution. Joining the mediators' club is therefore, ultimately, worthwhile. China can reap the benefits of involvement in the process while not incurring any cost from a lack of success in the short term. The low risk of involvement is a key factor that has shaped the expansion of China's role in conflict mediation over time.

Conclusion: Evaluating the Results

Overall, China has had experience mediating in two types of conflicts: intra-state and inter-state conflicts. The most visible examples from the first group include Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sudan and Palestine (though the last did not necessarily involve a protracted armed conflict between Palestinian groups). Examples from the second category include the Saudi-Iran peace deal, the border conflicts between Pakistan and Afghanistan since 2022, and the Rohingya issue between Myanmar and Bangladesh. China also offered to play a mediating role in the Russia-Ukraine war since 2022,[53] and, in 2025, in the Thailand-Cambodia border crisis,[54] but its offers were not accepted in either case.

The two most successful examples of China's mediation are the Saudi-Iran deal in 2023 and the Beijing Declaration among the 14 Palestinian factions in 2024. Despite the appearance of success, both deals come with significant caveats on the actual outcomes. It is widely acknowledged that China did not create the Saudi-Iran deal; the foundations were laid

[52] The Irrawaddy, "China ramps up pressure on TNLA to stop fighting junta", 5 May 2025. Available at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/myanmar-china-watch/china-ramps-up-pressure-on-tnla-to-stop-fighting-junta.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[53] incent Ni, "China signals willingness to mediate in Ukraine-Russia war", *The Guardian*, 1 March 2022. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/01/china-mediate-ukraine-russia-war (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[54] Zhao Ziwen, "Thai-Cambodian conflict: China blames Western colonial legacy for dispute" *South China Morning Post*, 25 July 2025. Available at https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3319558/china-takes-mediation-role-thai-cambodian-conflict-calls-restraint (accessed on 25 November 2025).

during negotiations facilitated by Iraq and Oman over several years.[55] Some analysts interpret Riyadh's decision to award China the prestigious role of formalizing the agreement as a snub to the Biden Administration, a direct consequence of President Biden's promise to make Saudi Arabia a "pariah" state following the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi columnist for *The Washington Post*.[56] Others contend that Riyadh was acting out of pragmatism, having learned in recent years that only China has the leverage to ensure that Iran would respect its commitments under the agreement to de-escalate, thereby avoiding a repeat of the massive cruise missile and drone attack in 2019 that took 5.7 million barrels of daily oil production – about half of the Kingdom's capacity – offline.[57]

The Beijing Declaration among the 14 Palestinian factions is equally problematic. While Beijing demonstrated its influence by convening the meeting and helped to craft the document, observers have criticized the declaration for its broad, vague terms and its failure to address the practical or specific challenges faced by the Palestinian movement.[58] Specifically, Beijing believes that the path to a two-state solution will depend on a strong and unified government of Palestine, which is an essential reason why China invested political capital in the Beijing meeting. However, whether the meeting and the declaration have actually contributed to building the capacity and capability of the Palestinian movement remains in question.

Beyond these two cases, Chinese mediation in Afghanistan did not produce concrete results before the Taliban took over Kabul. In Myanmar, China has been able to dial tensions in the country up and down to suit its own needs, but there is not yet a concrete peace process. Chinese mediation between Afghanistan and Pakistan seems to have brought some tranquillity to their broader disputes for now,[59] but experts question whether the effect is limited to a ceasefire, as the challenge posed by the Durand Line shows no tangible solution in the near future. Finally, while China's mediation between Myanmar and Bangladesh on the Rohingya refugee issue supported the conclusion of a bilateral agreement on a limited repatriation of Rohingyas from Bangladesh back to Myanmar's Rakhine state,[60] at the time of writing, few Rohingya refugees have returned.[61]

The point is not that China has not been an effective mediator. It clearly has a distinct ability

[55] Saeed Azimi, "The story behind China's role in the Saudi-Iran deal", Stimson Center, 13 March 2023. Available at https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-story-behind-chinas-role-in-the-iran-saudi-deal/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[56] For analysis on the tensions in US-Saudi ties around the time of the deal, see Peter Baker, "Chinese-brokered deal upends Mideast diplomacy and challenges U.S.", *The New York Times*, 11 March 2023. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[57] Farouk, "Riyadh's motivations".

[58] For an in-depth analysis, see Raphael Angieri, "Palestinian responses to the Beijing Declaration", China-Global South Project, 8 September 2024. Available at https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/palestinian-responses-to-the-beijing-declaration/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[59] Rick Noack and others, "As Afghanistan and Pakistan mend ties, China could be the real winner", *The Washington Post*, 5 June 2025. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/06/05/afghanistan-pakistan-relations-china-taliban/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[60] Imtiaz Ahmed, "The Rohingya crisis: eight potential pathways to repatriation", New Lines Institute, 7 August 2024. Available at https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/the-rohingya-crisis-eight-potential-pathways-to-repatriation/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[61] Meetings with ethnic group representatives, Chiang Mai, October 2024.

to influence the calculus of many governments and other conflict parties. But translating such influence into effective measures towards peace is a different question. China does not subscribe to the Western prescription for sustainable conflict resolution, which includes institutional guarantees such as democratic elections and federalism. At the same time, it has not articulated an effective alternative to this approach. Moreover, in the cases we have seen, China's motivation is not always solely peace. As a great power, its involvement is usually motivated by many other factors, including protecting its own political and economic interests. This creates a dilemma for its approach: in conflicts that do not involve Chinese interests, China is more likely to be a disinterested actor, but in those that do, it is less likely to remain purely neutral and objective.

As a relatively new player in global mediation, China is becoming increasingly ambitious and is eager to assume a larger role as a peacemaker. China's Global Security Initiative dictates its commitment to peacemaking and conflict mediation, with Chinese diplomats actively involved in identifying solutions to the world's deadliest conflicts. China's approach to conflict mediation is heavily imbued with its own political philosophy and experience. As a non-Western country and a leader of the Global South, China's mediation is often welcomed by conflict parties. At the same time, its motives for pursuing conflict mediation may not only include seeking peace but could also lead it to pursue goals that favour its own interests over a lasting resolution. As a result, China has some way to go to become an effective mediator with a distinguished record of success.

Qatari Mediation in a Changing Global Landscape after the 7 October War

Sansom Milton

Introduction

Over the course of just three decades, Qatar has become a leading actor in conflict mediation on the global stage. Starting in the 1990s and intensifying in the mid-2000s, the country has mediated in numerous regional and international conflicts and crises, establishing Doha as a major centre of dialogue and diplomacy. Since 2020, Qatar has engaged in efforts to resolve disputes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Somalia in Africa, between the United States and Venezuela in Latin America and over Taliban rule in Afghanistan in Central and South Asia. Its path offers valuable insight into the changing landscape of global mediation, particularly the growing influence of small states and the opportunities arising from the shift towards a more multipolar world order.

The rapidly transforming regional and global political landscape since the outbreak of the 7 October War in the Gaza Strip has had major implications for Qatar's evolving role in conflict mediation. Qatar led the multiparty mediation between Hamas and Israel, bringing unprecedented attention to the country's peacemaking profile. Qatari mediation was also instrumental in de-escalating the Iran-Israel "12-Day War". These and other mediation roles have gained prominence in an increasingly high-stakes geopolitical landscape marked by great power competition, rising nuclear risks and the looming threat of all-out war in the Middle East.

This chapter provides an analysis of Qatar's evolution as a mediator in this changing global environment. It begins with a brief overview of its mediation trajectory over the past three decades.

Qatar's Trajectory as a Mediator

Qatar has become one of the most proactive mediators globally, transforming from a small Gulf state with a low diplomatic profile into a leading global mediator.[1] Its trajectory in peacemaking has progressed from an initial phase involving mediation efforts in Lebanon and Darfur (2006–2010), through a decade of strategic reorientation during the Arab Spring

[1] Sansom Milton and Ghassan Elkahlout, *Gulf to Global: The Rise of Qatar in Conflict Mediation* (London, Hurst Publishers, 2025).

and the Gulf Crisis (2011–2020), to a post-2020 re-emergence as an effective mediator operating in an increasingly multipolar and dynamic global landscape.

Emergence of Qatari mediation

In the early 2000s, Qatar engaged in several high-profile mediation initiatives. It helped broker a ceasefire between the Yemeni government and the Houthis in 2007–2008, hosted talks that successfully resolved the Lebanese presidential crisis in 2008 and led multiparty mediation efforts between the Sudanese government and various rebel groups in Darfur.[2] As it took on more cases, Qatar was perceived as a culturally attuned mediator with diplomatic influence and financial resources, enhancing its potential as an intermediary. At the same time, Qatari mediation also came to be seen as lacking institutional capacities and prone to opportunism, often undertaken without addressing the underlying causes of conflicts.

Qatar's rise as a mediator was enabled by multiple factors, including its abundant resources, strategic investments, the active involvement of its leadership in diplomacy, an ambitious foreign policy, perception of Qatari neutrality and a long-term domestic transformation. Driven by LNG exports, the Qatari economy grew at a remarkable rate from the 1990s onwards. By 2006, Qatar was the world's leading exporter of LNG, which enabled it to pursue ambitious development projects across different sectors, with significant investments in education, culture and sports. Domestic security was also strengthened with the signing of the Defence Cooperation Agreement with the US in 1992 and later the establishment of Al Udeid Air Base in 1996, which allowed Doha to pursue a more independent foreign policy in the Gulf region.

This growing strategic autonomy created the diplomatic space for Qatar to pursue an active mediation agenda, distinct from that of other actors in the region. As such, it was well-positioned to establish and maintain communication channels with both state and non-state actors such as Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Taliban. By cultivating diplomatic ties and maintaining an impartial stance, Qatar emerged as a sought-after mediator in an increasing number of conflicts and crises. Gradually, mediation became a cornerstone of its foreign policy, as it built credibility and carved out a distinct niche in contemporary international relations. While Qatar's proactive diplomacy enabled it to take on prominent roles in mediation, its financial and institutional resources helped it establish an extensive role in providing humanitarian aid, development assistance and post-conflict reconstruction support, which was sometimes used strategically alongside its mediation efforts.

Mediation during the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis

The Arab Spring, which began in late 2010, had a profound impact on the trajectory of Qatari foreign policy. Doha provided backing to the revolutionaries demanding political and socioeconomic change and also mobilized support for the uprisings through Al Jazeera media network. Qatar's neutrality and policy of non-intervention were challenged by regional dynamics and came to be characterized as proactive and interventionist.[3]

The Arab Spring upended the regional landscape, and Qatar became embroiled in the

[2] Robert F. Worth, "Qatar, playing all sides, is a nonstop mediator", *The New York Times*, 9 July 2008. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/09/world/middleeast/09qatar.html (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[3] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014).

political dynamics of many crises in which it might have otherwise been called upon to mediate. These changing geopolitical shifts gave rise to bitter internal competition within the Gulf, leading to the blockade of Qatar from 2017 to 2021. From 2011 to 2020, mediation was no longer the central activity of Qatari foreign policy, although the country did not abandon its practice altogether. Instead, Qatar maintained its diplomatic engagement in several key crises, notably through the establishment of the political offices of Hamas and the Taliban, in addition to continuing to broker prisoner releases and mediate localized conflicts in Libya, Syria and elsewhere. Qatar also continued to support the Darfur peace process through aid and subsequent attempts to garner additional signatories to the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, which belied narratives of Qatar's short-termism.

While the overall geopolitical climate was unfavourable for Qatar to play a significant role as a mediator, it nonetheless quietly built institutional infrastructure. It established the Office of the Special Envoy for Counterterrorism and Mediation in Conflict Resolution in 2016 and invested in non-state capacities, including the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies that same year. For Qatari mediation, this period was part of a strategic shift towards longer-term engagement and a more institutionalized mediation structure, which kept Doha on the map as a diplomatic hub.[4]

Re-emergence of Qatari mediation in the 2020s

Building on the institutional foundations laid during the Arab Spring and Gulf Crisis, Qatar has deepened and expanded its mediation architecture. Since the 2020 US-Taliban agreement, a long-term approach has become a defining aspect of Qatari mediation. Marking the end of almost two decades of US military involvement in Afghanistan, the agreement was the result of years of sustained diplomatic engagement through close coordination with the US, the United Nations and other actively involved states, such as Germany and Norway.

Since then, Qatar has provided mediation assistance in a wide range of contexts, including in tensions between Somalia and Kenya, the Somali presidential crisis, the political agreement in Chad, talks to kickstart the Libyan political process and an agreement between the DRC and Rwanda. Several of those post-2020 processes involved the US as a major party to the negotiations, such as the US-Venezuela talks and US-Iran prisoner releases. Qatar has thus re-emerged as a top global mediator since the Afghanistan agreement.

These achievements would not have been possible without Qatari leadership, which envisioned and implemented the steady transformation of the country's mediation strategy. Unlike in the 2000s, when limited staffing, logistics and on-the-ground capacity constrained its ability to sustain engagement, monitor agreements or accept all offers to mediate,[5] Qatar has since built more institutional depth to match its ambitions. The expanded mediation portfolio in the 2020s witnessed the active involvement of professionalized and experienced staff, cross sector coordination within Qatar and agile cooperation with international actors. Qatar has successfully mobilized whole-of-society efforts for multifaceted conflict response, as seen in the humanitarian evacuations from Afghanistan after the takeover of Kabul by the

[4] Sansom Milton, Ghassan Elkahlout and Sana Tariq, "Qatar's evolving role in conflict mediation", *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 30, No. 1 (2025), pp. 53–77.

[5] Mehran Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari foreign policy", *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 65, No. 4 (September 2011), pp. 539–556.

Taliban, as well as in the Gaza Strip.[6]

Most notably, Qatar has been called upon to serve as a key mediator in response to the Israeli war in Gaza since 7 October 2023. Since 2014, Qatar has operated in the multiparty mediation architecture for the Gaza Strip alongside Egypt, the US and the UN. The post-2023 attempts to reach a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas have brought global attention to Qatari mediation and with it, persistent smear campaigns by some Israeli and US media and politicians intent on tarnishing Qatar's reputation.

The Gaza Genocide

The war in Gaza has become one of the defining issues of our time. Previously deemed a peripheral theatre in the broader Middle East conflict, it has moved to the forefront of international diplomatic and humanitarian attention. The military campaign launched by Israel in response to the 7 October attack has escalated into what many international experts and scholars have described as a genocide, killing over 65,000 people in Gaza, destroying more than 90 per cent of the infrastructure and displacing the entire population.[7] Qatar has maintained a consistent and principled stance on the war, both condemning Israel's atrocities and maintaining communication channels with all sides as negotiations ebb and flow.

Qatar played a key role in reducing tensions between Israel and Hamas. Throughout the war in Gaza, a multiparty mediation framework was employed, with Qatar primarily coordinating with Egypt and the US.[8] Qatar leveraged the presence of the Hamas political office in Doha and years of experience mediating between Hamas and Israel to broker ceasefires and push for de-escalation. It adopted a highly centralized approach led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in collaboration with the Amiri Diwan and several advisors.

As a result of the multiparty mediation efforts, a four-day ceasefire took effect on 24 November 2023,[9] although the agreement collapsed as Israel resumed its daily assaults on civilians in Gaza. Mediation efforts persisted nevertheless, aiming to establish a longer-term ceasefire. The framework proposed in May 2024 by Qatar, Egypt and the US laid the foundation for a ceasefire in January 2025 based on a three-phase plan.[10] That ceasefire, too, collapsed after Israel resumed bombardments, continuing to decimate infrastructure across the Gaza

[6] Sansom Milton and Ghassan Elkahlout, "Qatar's multifaceted humanitarian role in Afghanistan since August 2021", *Development Policy Review*, vol. 43, No. 1 (2025).

[7] UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, "UNRWA situation report #182 on the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Including East Jerusalem", 1 August 2025. Available at https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-182-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[8] Bethan McKernan, "US, Qatar and Egypt call on Israel and Hamas to resume urgent ceasefire talks", *The Guardian*, 9 August 2024. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/09/israel-gaza-war-ceasefire-talks-us-qatar-egypt (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[9] Isabel DeBre, "In West Bank, Palestinians rejoice over release of women and minors from Israeli Prisons", PBS News, 25 November 2023. Available at https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/in-west-bank-palestinians-rejoice-over-release-of-women-and-minors-from-israeli-prisons (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[10] The New Arab, "What is the Israel-Hamas Gaza ceasefire deal presented by Joe Biden?" 1 June 2024. Available at https://www.newarab.com/news/what-gaza-ceasefire-deal-presented-joe-biden (accessed on 25 November 2025).

Strip and killing civilians seeking aid, while creating famine-like conditions.[11] In the days leading up to the collapse, Qatar and Egypt intensified their diplomatic efforts in a last-ditch attempt to preserve the agreement, but to no avail.[12] In parallel, Qatar continued to work with international partners to address the worsening humanitarian crisis, as demonstrated by the UK–Qatar Joint Humanitarian Framework for Gaza[13] and the direct delivery of Qatari aid through the World Food Programme via the Rafah and Zikim crossings in late July 2025 amid widespread starvation in Gaza.[14]

Qatar's role in multiparty mediation in Gaza drew unprecedented attention to the country's diplomatic efforts. While Qatari mediation often occurred behind the scenes during other conflicts, the Gaza genocide was covered daily in the global media. In the context of the 7 October War, consistent attacks originating from US and Israeli media have accused Qatar of spreading propaganda supporting Hamas and inciting anti-Israel rhetoric through Al Jazeera, while claims re-emerged that Qatari humanitarian aid to Gaza was a cover for bankrolling Hamas.[15]

Commenting on the criticism by Israeli officials and some US politicians, Majed Al-Ansari, spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, noted that there is a "political cost" to acting as a third party in conflict resolution. He emphasized, however, that Qatar, remained committed to the mediation process and that "campaigns of distortion and political pressure will not deter Qatar from standing with oppressed peoples, defending the rights of civilians regardless of background and upholding international law without selectivity or exception".[16] Overall, the post-7 October landscape has drawn greater public attention to Qatar's mediation efforts, bringing with it criticism and highlighting Qatar's role in peacemaking.

[11] Merve Gül Aydoğan Ağlarcı, "UN reports nearly 400,000 displaced after Gaza ceasefire collapse", Anadolu Agency, 7 April 2025. Available at https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/un-reports-nearly-400-000-displaced-after-gaza-ceasefire-collapse/3530910 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[12] Lazar Berman and Jacob Magid, "Witkoff lands in Doha as talks resume with aim of extending fragile Gaza truce", *The Times of Israel*, 11 March 2025. Available at https://www.timesofisrael.com/witkoff-lands-in-doha-as-talks-resume-with-aim-of-extending-fragile-gaza-truce/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[13] Qatar, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Qatar, UK send first joint humanitarian aid shipment to Gaza", 25 January 2025. Available at https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/1445/07/13/qatar-uk-send-first-joint-humanitarian-aid-shipment-to-gaza (accessed on 25 November 2025); Qatar, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Second Qatar-UK strategic dialogue 2025 joint communiqué: partners for the future", 27 April 2025. Available at https://mofa.gov.qa/en/latest-articles/statements/second-qatar-uk-strategic-dialogue-2025-joint-communiqu%C3%A9--partners-for-the-future (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[14] Qatar News Agency, "49 Qatari aid trucks Arrive in Egypt, Jordan on way to Gaza Strip", 27 July 2025. Available at https://www.qna.org.qa/en/News-Area/News/2025-7/27/49-qatari-aid-trucks-arrive-in-egypt-jordan-on-way-to-gaza-strip (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[15] Barak Mendelsohn, "Understanding Qatar's relationship with Hamas: a critical exploration of state sponsored terrorism", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (July 2025), pp. 1–22; Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "Israel's campaign against Qatar over its support for Gaza and a ceasefire", 24 February 2025. Available at https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/the-israeli-campaign-against-qatar-because-of-its-role-in-supporting-gaza-and-the-ceasefire.aspx (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[16] Asmahan Qarjouli, "Qatar slams Netanyahu's 'inflammatory' remarks on mediation efforts", Doha News, 4 May 2025. Available at https://dohanews.co/qatar-hits-back-at-netanyahus-inflammatory-remarks-over-its-mediation-efforts (accessed on 25 November 2025).

New Responsibilities in a Global Crisis Landscape

The post-7 October landscape has drastically reshaped the geopolitical and security dynamics of the Middle East. The devastation in Gaza has created an urgency to promptly resolve the conflict, underscoring Qatar's peacemaking role in the process. Qatar's diplomatic power has come as a surprise to some observers. Its cultivation of long-standing relationships with both state and non-state actors in the region, expertise in ceasefire negotiations and provision of humanitarian assistance elevate mediation beyond a mere survival strategy for Qatar to a critical contribution to global peace and security. Qatar's rise as a sought-after mediator in high-stakes crises has been praised worldwide, but it also means the country must carefully navigate a delicate path, taking on new and unexpected responsibilities.

Qatar amid Iran-Israel conflict

Qatar undertook a high-stakes mediation initiative between Iran and Israel during the 12-Day War. Its acceptance as an intermediary was facilitated by Qatar's quiet diplomacy in US-Iran talks over the renewal of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which was seen as providing a solid platform for its role as a mediator. Qatar and Oman were reportedly in contact with both sides, calling for de-escalation.[17] The involvement of the US in the attacks and its bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities posed a significant risk to the neighbouring Gulf states. Qatar itself came under attack when Iran launched missiles at the Al Udeid Air Base, the majority of which were intercepted.[18] In response to this attack and violation of its sovereignty, Qatar proceeded with a diplomatic approach to resolve the conflict between Iran and Israel.[19] In an effort to avert escalation, a preceding round of face-to-face diplomatic communication was convened in Geneva between Iran's foreign minister and diplomats from the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the European Union on 20 June, but it yielded no immediate, concrete results.[20] Qatar's diplomatic efforts following the attack led to a ceasefire, earning praise from Iran, the US and the broader diplomatic community. The approach adopted by Qatar demonstrated that prospects for regional peace can be advanced through dialogue and mediation.

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[17] Foundation for Defense of Democracies, "Iran appeals to Qatar, Oman to revive nuclear talks", 15 June 2025. Available at https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/06/15/iran-appeals-to-qatar-oman-to-revive-nuclear-talks/ (accessed on 25 November 2025); Parisa Hafezi, Samia Nakhoul and Andrew Mills, "Iran sought US pressure on Israel for ceasefire via Gulf states, sources say", Reuters, 16 June 2025. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-asks-gulf-arab-states-have-trump-press-israel-immediate-ceasefire-sources-2025-06-16/ (accessed on 25 November 2025); Asmahan Qarjouli, "Iran tells mediators Qatar, Oman it will not negotiate 'while under attack'", Doha News, 16 June 2025. Available at https://dohanews.co/iran-tells-mediators-qatar-oman-it-will-not-negotiate-while-under-attack/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[18] Hafsa Adil, "Calm returns to Qatar following Iran's attack on Al Udeid Airbase", Al Jazeera, 24 June 2025. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/24/calm-returns-to-qatar-following-irans-attack-on-al-udeid-airbase (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[19] Qatar, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Advisor to prime minister and official spokesperson for Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Qatar strongly condemns attack that targeted Al-Udeid Air Base', 23 June 2025. Available at https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/2025/06/23/advisor-to-prime-minister-and-official-spokesperson-for-ministry-of-foreign-affairs--qatar-strongly-condemns-attack-that-targeted-al-udeid-air-base (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[20] Patrick Wintour, "Iran says diplomacy with US only possible if Israeli aggression stops", *The Guardian*, 20 June 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/20/iran-says-diplomacy-with-us-only-possible-if-israeli-aggression-stops (accessed on 25 November 2025).

Israeli airstrikes on Doha

On 9 September 2025, Israeli airstrikes targeted a residential compound in Doha that housed the Hamas negotiation team. This made Qatar a direct target in the conflict – an unprecedented instance of an active mediator's capital being struck during ongoing indirect talks, particularly one hosting negotiations at the request of the US. Reportedly, at the time of the attack, the Hamas delegation was discussing a new ceasefire proposal presented by the American side.[21]

Initially, the attack cast doubt over Qatar's willingness to continue serving as a mediator in Gaza, but statements made hours after the attack and in the following days by senior political figures emphasized Qatar's continued commitment to work towards an end to the war in Gaza.[22]

Although the efforts to reach peace persisted and the Hamas office in Doha was not permanently closed, the incident transformed the international mediation architecture within the Palestinian context. Traditionally, mediators are afforded a certain level of protection, whether it is formally guaranteed or supported through mutual recognition of the importance of third-party peace intervention and facilitation. Prior to 9 September, the parties involved in the ongoing talks operated with a degree of trust and under the rational assumption that the negotiation teams would not be targeted in a mediating country. This assumption was based on the multiyear engagement of Qatar, Egypt and the US in talks involving Israel, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority over ceasefires, prisoner exchanges, political arrangements and humanitarian matters.

Since 9 September, the already low level of trust has further declined, and Israel's strike on Doha has further complicated conflict dynamics. It prompted discussions about the involvement of alternative mediators, such as Türkiye or Oman, and raised the prospect of Hamas relocating its political office to more remote locations, which would significantly complicate future communication with the group and undermine the well-established Doha backchannel.[23] The attack also weakened potential for peaceful conflict resolution in this conflict or elsewhere in the world by demonstrating that any sovereign state would have to factor in the risk of strikes on its territory when hosting peace negotiations. The erosion of mediator protection in the case of Gaza set a concerning precedent for the international

[21] Tim Hume and others, "Updates: Hamas says leaders survived Israel's attack on Qatar's Doha", Al Jazeera, 9 September 2025. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2025/9/9/live-israel-pounds-gaza-city-as-netanyahu-tells-residents-to-leave-now (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[22] Reuters, "Qatari prime minister says nothing will deter Qatar's mediation role", 9 September 2025. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatari-prime-minister-says-nothing-will-deter-qatars-mediation-role-2025-09-09/ (accessed on 25 November 2025); Qatar, International Media Office, "His Highness the Amir's speech at the 80th session of the UN General Assembly", 24 September 2025. Available at https://imo.gov.qa/state-of-qatar/his-highness-the-amir/his-highness-the-amir-s-speech-at-the-80th-session-of-the-un-general-assembly (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[23] Sansom Milton, "After Israel's strike, will Qatar continue Gaza mediation?" Middle East Eye, 13 September 2025. Available at https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/after-israels-strike-will-qatar-continue-gaza-mediation (accessed on 25 November 2025); CGTN Africa, "Hamas considers relocating political office from Qatar after Israeli strike", video, 16 September 2025. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_Fytl2KPYw (accessed on 25 November 2025).

community, where diplomacy no longer shields but instead endangers those who pursue it.[24]

Meanwhile, the events also exposed Washington's failure to restrain an attack on a fellow facilitator by its closest ally. Given the significant American security presence in the region, the Gulf security formula had been assumed to protect Qatar and the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The events of 9 September – and the shortcomings of the US response, whether intentional or not – demonstrated the contrary. Consequently, the attack revived intra-Gulf security cooperation aimed at the activation of joint defence agreements.[25] In search of supplemental or alternative security partnerships with more clearly defined defence treaties, the Gulf states opted to explore closer ties with Türkiye, Iran and Pakistan.[26] These new partnerships may bring alternative forms of mediation support, including logistical, intelligence or diplomatic assistance, introducing more comprehensive security protocols and requesting third-party guarantors besides the US.

Gulf countries are now adopting more assertive, collectively self-interested and diversified diplomatic behaviour, shaped by internal economic reforms, demographic trends and the strategic pursuit of autonomy.[27] In this context, and within the first week after the attack, Qatar organized the Emergency Arab-Islamic Summit in Doha, bringing together regional and Islamic actors to condemn the Israeli action and coordinate a unified response.[28] The summit mobilized regional consensus and placed Qatar at the forefront of shaping Arab-Islamic diplomacy amid shifting global alliances, thereby reaffirming Doha's important role in the region's geopolitics.

Raised expectations of Qatari mediation

Qatar's mediation efforts have gained positive recognition both regionally and internationally. Its involvement in addressing the Gaza genocide, securing a ceasefire between Israel and Iran and mediating in several high-profile cases has put Qatar in the global spotlight. This highlights the country's increasingly proactive and worldwide role in conflict mediation, fostering hopes that it can help resolve some of the world's most enduring conflicts. Moreover, it has been acknowledged that, despite facing numerous challenges, Qatar has remained central to backchannel diplomacy and de-escalation efforts, further raising expectations of its mediation influence.

[24] Middle East Council on Global Affairs, "Israel's strike on Doha: what it means for the region", 11 September 2025. Available at https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/israels-airstrike-on-doha-what-it-means-for-the-region/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[25] General Secretariat of the Gulf Cooperation Council, "Statement of the extraordinary session of the Joint Defence Council", 18 September 2025. Available at https://www.gcc-sg.org/en/MediaCenter/News/Pages/news2025-9-18-5.aspx (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[26] Bader Al-Saif, "What can the Gulf do after the attack on Qatar?" Arab Gulf States Institute, 25 September 2025. Available at https://agsi.org/analysis/what-can-the-gulf-do-after-the-attack-on-qatar/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[27] Lakshmi Priya, "The changing foreign policy dynamics of GCC states: a study through the lens of positive interdependence", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, vol. 18, No. 1 (2024), pp. 32–47; Ahmed A. Shahbaz and Allan Hassaniyan, "The growing autonomy for GCC states' foreign policy and structural changes in the balance of power in the region", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, vol. 18, No. 4 (2024), pp. 321–339.

[28] Qatar News Agency, "Final communique issued by Arab-Islamic emergency summit in Doha", 15 September 2025. Available at https://qna.org.qa/en/news/news-details?id=final-communique-issued-by-arab-islamic-emergency-summit-in-doha&date=15/09/2025 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

Public reactions to Qatar's diplomatic posture have challenged long-standing stereotypes. Even figures from traditionally critical parts of the political spectrum, such as Steve Bannon, acknowledged that the Iran-Israel ceasefire in June 2025 was achieved "with the help of Qatar", which had also "stepped in the middle of the situation in Gaza".[29] In an interview with Tucker Carlson, Trump's special envoy to the region, Steve Witkoff, echoed this sentiment, vigorously defending Qatar's motives and credibility. He emphasized that the country seeks stability, has significantly moderated its foreign policy over time and remains a trusted US ally. He also stated that accusations portraying Qatar as an "agent of Iran" are "preposterous" and that "people know they are good, decent people."[30]

Reportedly reflecting a broader appreciation within key American security circles, General Michael Erik Kurilla, then-commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM), referred to Qataris as "special people" in recognition of their constructive regional engagement.[31] Similarly, Western media outlets like *The Guardian*, which have regularly criticized Qatar in the past, have since published more balanced perspectives, praising Qatar's proactive and effective diplomacy in responding to the evolving geopolitical order.[32]

This shift in perception has coincided with – and been amplified by – a deteriorating global security environment that has dramatically increased demand for mediation capacity. One alarming trend is that the world in the 2020s is becoming less peaceful.[33] Tectonic shifts have occurred in numerous chronic conflicts. The 7 October War has brought massive devastation to Palestine and pushed the region to the brink of all-out war. In Sudan, the breakdown of the post-revolution transition process led to a ruinous internal war between rival military factions. Wars in the Sahel region, Ethiopia, the DRC, Myanmar and elsewhere have underscored the urgency of protecting civilians and advancing humanitarian diplomacy in response to global crises.

With this rising tide of conflicts and widespread recognition of its track record, Qatar has experienced demand for its mediation role that exceeds its capacity.[34] In the first half of 2025 alone, Qatar was engaged in multiple efforts, including in Gaza, Iran-Israel de-escalation, Rwanda-DRC talks and attempts to reduce tension between India and Pakistan. Qatar's embedded and collaborative approach to mediation is also reflected in its participation in international conflict management frameworks, such as working with the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Egypt and Lebanon as part of a coordinated

[29] Real America's Voice, "The War Room with Stephen K. Bannon episode 4582 Part 1", video, 4 June 2025. Available at https://americasvoice.news/video/9WDvwNkzE61PBy3/?related=playlist (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[30] The Tucker Carlson Show, "Steve Witkoff's critical role in negotiating global peace, and the warmongers trying to stop him", video, 22 March 2025. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acvu2LBumGo (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[31] Ibid.

[32] Nesrine Malik, "The go-between: how Qatar became the global capital of diplomacy", *The Guardian*, 22 July 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/22/how-qatar-became-the-global-capital-of-diplomacy (accessed on 25 November 2025); Patrick Wintour, "Caught in the crossfire, Qatar again finds itself Middle East peace broker", *The Guardian*, 24 June 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/24/qatar-middle-east-peace-broker-iran-israel-us (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[33] Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global Peace Index 2025: identifying and measuring the factors that drive peace" (Sydney, Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025).

[34] Malik, "The go-between".

regional de-escalation initiative in August 2024.[35]

Qatar's Peacemaking in a Multipolar World Order

Qatar's emergence as a mediator on the global stage has occurred in a multipolar landscape of peacemaking increasingly characterized by transactional diplomacy and the erosion of international norms governing conflict response. In the 2020s, mediation is frequently viewed as a tool for states' "strategic positioning" in the changing world order, with new actors engaging in the "political marketplace" of peace processes.[36] Early research on Qatari mediation often overlooked the evolving institutional landscape and the growing strategic depth of its diplomacy, characterizing it as highly transactional, focused on short-term peace deals and lacking capacities for long-term conflict prevention and peacebuilding. This portrayal is evident in claims that "when the tension is reduced, Doha finishes its job".[37] Yet, this observation no longer reflects the reality of Qatari mediation, and the transactionalist critique of Qatari mediation paints a one-dimensional, reductive picture of a complex interplay of strategic leverage and diplomatic engagement. Instead, Qatar has expanded its peacemaking capabilities and blended aid and mediation in progressively more sophisticated ways.

The multipolar landscape is also marked by the rise of a diverse mediation field crowded with new entrants from the Gulf and elsewhere. Qatar has been operating in an evolving regional environment where other Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, alongside Türkiye and China, have advanced their own mediation initiatives in high-stakes conflicts.[38] Their diplomatic footprints have expanded in Afghanistan, Libya and the Horn of Africa, demonstrating a diversification of engagement beyond traditional Western-led formats. Recent years have witnessed Saudi mediation in Sudan, Omani mediation in Yemen and between the US and Iran, and Emirati mediation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. When any crisis escalates, such as the recent flaring of tensions between India and Pakistan, it is now common to see headlines speculating on which Gulf actor may step in to mediate, and Qatar is often the first to be called on. Meanwhile, the Saudi-Iran détente in 2023 signalled a realignment in Gulf politics, with China playing the crucial role in brokering the landmark agreement.[39]

The return of great power competition has also resulted in the collapse of long-held norms governing mediation and conflict response. The erosion of international humanitarian law, attacks on mediators and the weakening of multilateral frameworks have created an increasingly hostile environment for diplomatic intervention. Yet it is precisely within

[35] UN, "Statement by UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Tor Wennesland, on the risk of regional escalation", 2 August 2024. Available at https://www.un.org/unispal/document/statement-by-unsco-02aug24 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[36] Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Transactional peacemaking: warmakers as peacemakers in the political marketplace of peace processes", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 46, No. 2 (2025), p. 313.

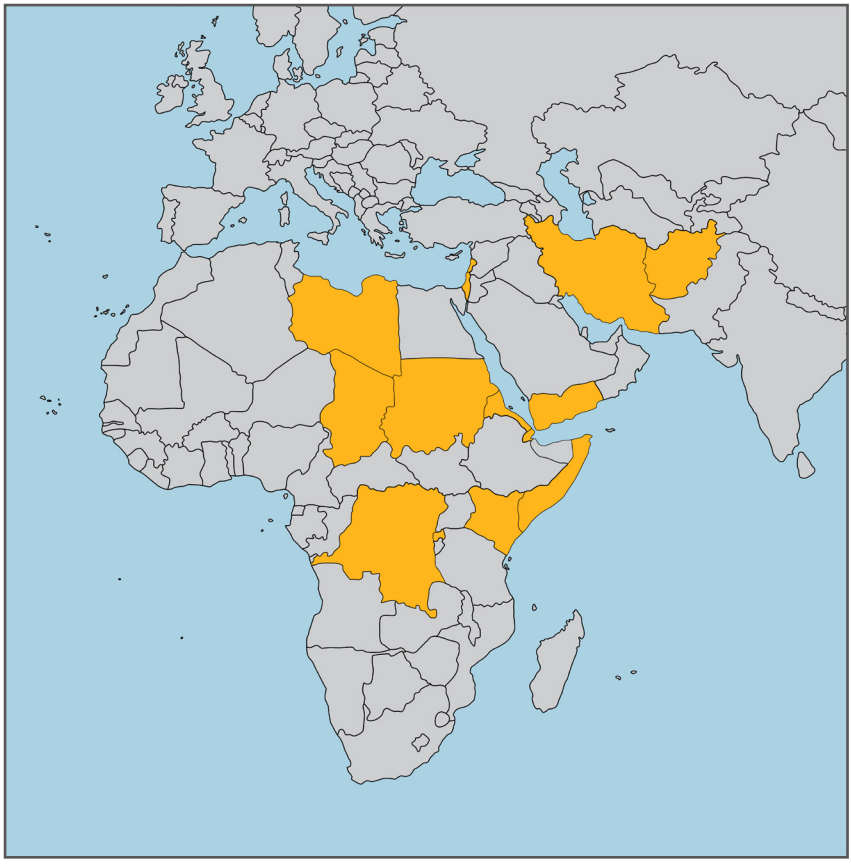
[37] Ruslan Minich, "Conflict mediation: the Qatari experience", *Historia i Polityka*, vol. 14, No. 21 (2015), p. 121.

[38] Oxford Analytica, "Mediation by the Gulf States will increase", 7 August 2024. Available at https://doi.org/10.1108/OXAN-DB288822 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[39] Yun Sun, "Forecasting China's strategy in the Middle East over the next four years", Brookings Institution, 19 December 2024. Available at https://www.brookings.edu/articles/forecasting-chinas-strategy-in-the-middle-east-over-the-next-four-years/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

this deteriorating context that Qatar's principled and steadfast commitment to mediation has gained strategic value. While transactional diplomacy characterizes much of the contemporary mediation marketplace, Qatar's continued engagement – even after direct attacks on its sovereignty – signals a form of diplomatic persistence that transcends short-term calculations. This commitment positions Qatar and other Gulf mediators as a hybrid alternative that bridges strategic positioning with sustained engagement, reflecting an adaptive model responsive to the demands of multipolar crisis diplomacy while maintaining credibility through demonstrated resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges.

Annex 1. Geographic reach of Qatar's mediation through peace and ceasefire agreements (1995–2025)



Annex 2. Qatari mediation in peace and ceasefire agreements (1995–2025)[40]

Year	Mediation context	Outcome
1995	Territorial dispute between Yemen and Eritrea over the Hanish Islands	Arbitration agreement between Eritrea and Yemen (3 October 1996)
2007–2008	Armed conflict between the Yemeni government and Houthi rebels	Ceasefire agreement between Yemeni government and Houthi rebels (in force since 16 June 2007) Doha Agreement (signed on 1 February 2008)
2008	Lebanon political crisis	Doha Agreement (signed on 21 May 2008)
2009	Cross-border tensions between Sudan and Chad	Doha Agreement between Chad and Sudan (signed on 3 May 2009)
2010	Border dispute between Djibouti and Eritrea	Agreement between Eritrea and Djibouti (signed on 6 June 2010)
2009–2017	Sudan-Darfur rebel movements conflict	Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (signed on 14 July 2011) and a series of ceasefire and framework agreements (signed between 2009 and 2017)
2012	Intra-Palestinian political division	Doha Agreement between Fatah and Hamas (signed on 6 February 2012)
2014–2023	Escalations in Gaza wars	Series of ceasefire agreements in 2014, 2021, 2022 and 2023
2015	Tuareg-Tebu conflict in Libya	Doha Peace Agreement between Tuareg and Tebu (signed on 23 November 2015)
2020	Afghanistan peace process	Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan (signed on 29 February 2020)
2021	Diplomatic crisis between Somalia and Kenya	Communique on the Resumption of Diplomatic Relations between Kenya and Somalia (issued on 6 May 2021)
2022	Chad conflict	Doha Agreement for Peace and Involvement of Political-Military Movements in the Sovereign and Inclusive National Dialogue in Chad (signed on 8 August 2022)
2023-2025	Israel's war on Gaza	Ceasefire agreement/humanitarian pause (24–28 November 2023; extended to 30 November 2023) Ceasefire agreement (in force since 19 January 2025)
2025	12-Day War between Israel and Iran	Ceasefire agreement between Iran and Israel (in force since 24 June 2025)
2025	Eastern Congo conflict	Peace agreement between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda (signed 27 June 2025)

[40] This table includes only peace and ceasefire agreements mediated or facilitated by Qatar, independently or in multiparty processes. It does not include prisoner or hostage exchanges. For further information, see the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, "Qatar's Mediation Efforts". Available at https://mofa.gov.qa/en/foreign-policy/mediation/mediation

Waging Peace While Others Wage War: The Promise and Practice of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda for Effective Mediation

Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, MBE

Introduction

In August 2025, an image circulated on social media of a woman protesting genocide in Gaza. She was holding a sign that read: "You can bomb the world to pieces, but you can't bomb it to peace." They are the lyrics of a 2003 protest song against the occupation of Iraq, but they remain resonant today, as the UN Security Council marks 25 years since its unanimous adoption of Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security (WPS).

From the outset, the WPS agenda was rooted in, informed by and inspired by women who lived the realities of war across Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Asia and South America. They had witnessed first-hand the failure of elite-led peace processes and responded by forging alternative pathways to peace rooted in and inclusive of affected communities.

In adopting Resolution 1325, the UNSC codified these experiences. It also recognized a paradigm of women-led war-resistance and peacemaking, which had existed in many cultures historically, but was largely ignored in the scholarship and praxis of contemporary state-based conflict mediation. The unique contribution of the resolution lies in its recognition of both the differential impacts of war on women and men, and women's complex roles and agency as peacemakers, mediators and fighters.

Twenty-five years on, the WPS agenda is anchored in 10 UNSC resolutions and reflected in commitments from the European Union, African Union, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, League of Arab States, Organization of American States and Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The framework has expanded from the original "four Ps" – prevention, participation of women, protection and peacekeeping in wars – to encompass violent extremism, climate-related conflicts and rising militarism.

Yet the agenda and its global constituency are at an inflection point. Although 109 states have national action plans committing to implement the agenda's key provisions, women peacebuilders are experiencing greater exclusion and increased risk. The targeting of women and children in wars has reached unprecedented levels. Meanwhile, multilateral institutions and the post-Cold War transnational civil society ecosystem that serve as custodians of the agendas are at risk.

The threats come from two directions. First, with the rise of power politics, disregard for international law and sweeping reductions in overseas development assistance, there is a retreat from mediation to resolve conflicts. The result is sharp decreases in organizational operating capacities and the loss of experienced personnel. Second, there is a backlash against women's rights and, more specifically, the marginalization of women in the already exclusive, male-dominated realms of peace and security decision-making.

Ironically, the backlash is partly fuelled by the mischaracterization of the WPS agenda as a Western imposition – a liberal normative project concerned with "gender equality" artificially aiming to increase the number of women in formal diplomatic, mediation and negotiation roles.

This misunderstanding has frequently led to outright resistance to the agenda, as well as ad hoc, performative and technocratic fixes. Internationally led mediation efforts consistently overlook the peacebuilding and mediation work undertaken by locally rooted women through indigenous social structures at the frontlines of conflicts. Also, routinely disregarded is the trust that women peacebuilders have from their communities, their knowledge of early warning signs, practical responses to humanitarian issues, security provisions related to ceasefires or detainee negotiations and local political issues directly relevant to mediation processes. The result, often, is that the warnings of women peacebuilders are ignored, violence escalates and as armed groups proliferate, opportunities for peace mediation are lost.

Twenty-five years on, the few processes in which independent delegations of women peacebuilders have been included, or where political delegations have agreed to include a critical mass of women, remain the exception.

From Afghanistan and Syria to Ukraine and Sudan, women peacebuilders are frustrated by this lack of progress, but undeterred. As self-declared and often self-taught mediators and peacebuilders, they identify and fill gaps left by multilateral entities and powerful states. Their actions are driven neither by external interests nor by "Western" norms. Instead, their approaches are typically inspired by a blend of cultural traditions and faith teachings, understanding of their societal contexts and transnational exchanges of good practices within their global community of practice. They bring new perspectives and challenge the conventional wisdom around the theory and practice of mediation, definitions of "peace" and the purposes of peace processes.

Despite the rise of transactional diplomacy and retreat of multilateralism, the global WPS community of practice remains vibrant and actively engaged in the peaceful mitigation of conflict. How can mediation practitioners learn from the WPS community of practice and implement the spirit, intent and vision of this agenda to ensure better peace outcomes? This chapter offers six key reflections.

Local Roots, Global Branches: The Power and Value of Peace and Security Policies Rooted in Lived Realities

It is past time to dispel the myth that human rights, women's participation and conflict prevention policies were created to impose a Western policy agenda globally. The WPS agenda originated with women in war zones and in the shared human experiences of violence across different times and places. Examples from the 1990s include: South Africa, where the first politicians to meet publicly across the divide and address issues of political transformation and reconciliation were women; Colombia, where indigenous and Afro-Colombian women who had resisted displacement brought a collective rights agenda to the negotiating table; Israeli and Palestinian women, including the Four Mothers movement that was pivotal to ending Israel's 20-year occupation of Lebanon; and Serbia's Women in Black movement, formed in 1991 to stop their state's regional war. These and similar efforts elsewhere translated women's moral and social legitimacy into political influence.

Message on a Postcard:

Dear Secretary-General Kofi Annan,
Women everywhere applaud the efforts made by the United Nations. Women recognise the progress made in including women in peace making and peace building efforts within the UN itself and the pledges made to women during the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. However, we believe that five years later not enough has been done to make these pledges a reality. They must be implemented, as sustainable peace can only be achieved with the full participation of women from all levels of society. We ask the governments of the international community and the United Nations to stand by the commitments they have made to women. These are to:
1. Include women in peace negotiations as decision-makers
2. Put women at the heart of reconstruction and reconciliation
3. Strengthen the protection and representation of refugee and displaced women
4. End impunity for crimes committed against women and ensure redress
5. Give women and women's organisations the support and resources they need to build peace.

The WPS agenda's resilience is a testament to its resonance with many indigenous values and practices and the universal drive for peace and coexistence. Its codification as a pillar of international peace and security in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) was a critical turning point driven by a global, women-led civil society movement. Mobilizing in 1998, through the Women Building Peace: From the Village Council to the Negotiating Table campaign, over 100 NGOs and networks collaborated internationally, consulting with women in war zones to determine their key concerns and priorities. The key pillars of the agenda – conflict prevention, participation of women in peacemaking and peacekeeping, protection and gender-responsive crisis response recovery – were universally relevant. A global petition and public postcard campaign addressed to then-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan synthesized the demands (see box). The process revealed women's leading roles in justice movements and non-violent conflict resolution and mediation practices throughout history across cultures and societies. Ironically, as formal state structures became dominant, women's praxis was erased. But where states have been weak or absent, particularly when conflicts expedite state failure, women become active.

The agenda's emphasis on recognizing women's contributions to peace and security resonated with the UNSC's membership in 2000. With the only female ambassador on the council in 2000, Jamaica was a strong supporter. For Bangladesh, a country with a history of conflict, the experiences of women as protectors, leaders and victims were significant. Canada was championing the human security agenda, which aligned with WPS. Namibia

was concerned about UN peacekeepers sexually abusing and exploiting women and girls in the communities where they served. Additionally, since Namibia had benefited from civil society solidarity during its struggle for independence, it welcomed partnerships with the campaign's advocates. Holding the presidency of the UNSC in October 2000, Namibia played a crucial role in the unanimous adoption of the resolution. In subsequent years, other non-Western states such as Vietnam and South Africa also championed women's agency and participation in peacemaking.

Everyone Helped Us Kill Each Other, No One Helped Us Talk to Each Other: Inclusivity and Political Will as Necessary Conditions for Mediation.

Peace actors in civil society matter. Successful peace processes are predicated on two key pillars: the political will of warring parties to seek resolution through negotiations, and inclusivity, bringing in broad societal constituencies to foster the middle ground in contexts of deep polarization and mistrust. Resolution 1325 explicitly called for women's participation in formal processes and support for women's local peace initiatives, as women peacebuilders are often the first to bridge the divides.

Moving beyond the simplistic notion of a conflict as a contest between two warring sides is critical in addressing today's conflicts, for two reasons. First, from Syria to Sudan, once violence breaks out, militias often splinter, transnational criminal organizations and mercenary forces enter the fray, and state actors and proxies fill vacuums. Meanwhile, local peacemakers also emerge and coalesce. Widening peace processes to include multiple actors may be challenging, but to be effective, the process must reflect the complexity of the context – this includes both warring and peacemaking parties.

Second, it is insufficient to frame mediation around the armed actors or as a two-party process. This assumes that communities bearing the brunt of the violence are represented by warring factions or are irrelevant to the outcomes of a political mediation process. But when civilian populations become the target, they often reject all warring parties – state and non-state. In 2012 in Syria, for example, women peace advocates leading citizen dialogues regularly questioned the international community's legitimation of violent factions while ignoring the non-violent peace actors.

From Somalia in the 1990s to Yemen today, women have stepped in, taking on the responsibility to protect civilians, addressing humanitarian issues and negotiating with armed forces. Some may have political and ideological affinities with warring factions, but their primary concern is for their societies. The majority are independent of the warring parties, taking on the risk of claiming the middle ground. Drawing on cultural sources of legitimacy – such as kinship and tribal ties, faith or socioeconomic roles as teachers, health professionals and social workers – they become trusted interlocutors.

Mediators seeking pathways to peace and spaces for dialogue can draw on the knowledge and solutions of such groups. For example, when Nelson Mandela faced an impasse in his mediation efforts between 19 warring factions in Burundi in 2000, he sought advice from the Burundian women's peace coalition. While the warring factions were unwilling to meet the women, Mandela found their solutions effective. As recounted in 2014, "In the evening he [Mandela] would sit and listen to [the women] and in the morning he suggested [their

points] as if they were his ideas, and the men loved them. Eventually, he told [the men] these were women's points, not his … that is how he brought women in to the final two rounds [of talks]."[1]

The UN Syria Envoy adapted and formalized this model in 2014 following considerable pressure from the Syrian women's peace movement. The UN team relied on the Women's Advisory Board for crucial issues, including sovereignty, citizenship and pluralism, as well as challenges related to safe refugee returns, women's rights and gender analysis of the constitution.[2] Similarly in 2016, the women's peace movement played a crucial role in the Colombian referendum for peace.

Needless to say, warring parties rarely welcome the scrutiny that civil society brings, but the WPS mandate enables mediators to engage and ensure that the peace process not only benefits from women's contributions but does not inadvertently harm women and society.

Yet most mediators overlook the power and potential of these *unarmed non-state* entities, putting their energy wholly into engaging and empowering armed entities. The implications can be devastating for long-term peace and specifically for women and minorities, as evident in Afghanistan.

Gender Analysis as a Window into Conflict Dynamics

Gender analysis is essential for effective mediation. This is a critical WPS contribution to mediation practices. Given the societal impact of wars today, gender analyses are essential for an informed understanding of power dynamics, differential impacts and the roles of women and men. From the outset, Resolution 1325 challenged the traditional binaries that framed women as passive victims and men as aggressors. It called for a nuanced understanding of women's power and agency as peacebuilders, as active participants in armed movements and as holders of cultural power and honour.

Across the world, women have often held leadership roles within armed and liberation groups. In the past decade, ideological extremists have recruited women into their movements, recognizing their sociocultural influence. Many women have joined such movements in pursuit of purpose and empowerment.[3] Ignoring this reality undermines our understanding of their motivations and needs. It can also perpetuate post-war reintegration paradigms that overlook women's political and security roles and increase the risk of their disrupting peace efforts. Mediators must analyse women's agency and influence – as contributors or spoilers - with the same seriousness as men's, and not ignore or dismiss them due to gendered assumptions.[4]

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[1] The anecdote was related by Ambassador Anwarul Chowdhury, former UN Under-Secretary-General, at the ICAN Better Peace Symposium in 2014. See International Civil Society Action Network, "Better peace tool", 2015. Available at https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Better-Peace-Tool-English.pdf (accessed on 26 November 2025).

[2] "Security Council Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security, summary of meeting on the situation in Syria", 2 May 2023. Available at https://uaeun.org/app/uploads/2024/01/IEG-WPS-Syria-summary-clean.pdf (accessed on 26 November 2025).

[3] See ICAN and United Nations Development Programme, *Invisible Women: Gender Dimensions of Return, Rehabilitation and Reintegration from Violent Extremism* (Paris, 2019).

[4] L. Sjoberg and C. E. Gentry, C. Duroch, M. McRae and R. Grais, "*Description and consequences of sexual violence in Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo*", *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, vol. 11, No. 5 (2011). (London, Zed Books, 2007).

Additionally, for the first time in history, the WPS agenda elevated the urgency of addressing gender-based violence (GBV), particularly sexual violence, not only as a humanitarian or human rights issue but as a central element of peace and security. As such, it is a critical factor shaping the dynamics and outcomes of mediation processes. By humanizing war, it also drew attention to men's victimization and vulnerabilities.[5]

As evident in the current contexts of Gaza and Sudan, sexual violence inflames conflicts, fuelling hatred and revenge. When used strategically or tactically, it is employed to sow fear and undermine community cohesion. In Bosnia and Rwanda, it was deployed as a tactic of genocide – with women's bodies as the frontline in a battle to destroy identity. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, it has been a tool for military domination and economic exploitation.[6] The threat of rape forces communities to flee their homes en masse, enabling armed groups to loot and claim territory. When security systems and social taboos break down, opportunistic sexual violence also increases, destroying societies from within. In Kenya, for example, in 2008, post-election violence included the opportunistic rape of women and men by security forces and civilians.[7] Such acts undermine public trust in state institutions, feeding vigilantism and militancy.

Trauma induced by political violence instigates a continuum of private violence. In Palestine, the levels of domestic GBV have spiked since the post-7 October Israeli onslaught on the West Bank and in Gaza.[8] In Ukraine, many men fighting the Russians to protect their homeland bring war trauma home, tragically turning violent against their families.[9] Ukrainian women's organizations undertake the delicate task of providing shelters while facing pressure to remain silent. Too often, politicians overlook the sacrifices faced by families and ignore the expertise of women-led organizations bearing the burden of caring for victims.

By shining a light on these horrific forms of violence against women, Resolution 1325, and subsequent resolutions, notably UNSC Resolution 1820, also drew attention to sexual violence against men that has historically been underreported and universally stigmatized.

Addressing such violence within mediation processes is essential. First, it is a matter of security for victims and ongoing negotiations. Incidents of sexual violence can weaken ceasefire agreements and incite retaliatory violence. Second, it concerns justice and accountability,

[5] For example, UNSC Resolution 1820 (2008) explicitly calls for addressing women and girls as victims of sexual violence. While member states were resistant to the inclusion of men and boys as victims, WPS advocates ensured gender neutral language in the resolution to enable attention to men and boys as well. The increased international discourse on sexual violence against women created space for men to come forward, too, and eased the deep taboos and silence surrounding such violence against men.

[6] C. Duroch, M. McRae and R. Grais, "Description and consequences of sexual violence in Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo", *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, vol. 11, No. 5 (2011).

[7] International Centre for Transitional Justice, "The accountability gap on sexual violence in Kenya: reforms and initiatives since the post-elections crisis", ICTJ Briefing (Nairobi, 2014). Available at https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Briefing-Kenya-SGBVAccountability-2014.pdf (accessed on 26 November 2025).

[8] United Nations Population Fund, "Gender-based violence safety audit report: West Bank, The Occupied Palestinian Territory", January 2025. Available at https://palestine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2025-03/GBV%20Safety%20Audit%20Report%20-%20West%20Bank%20January%202025.pdf (accessed on 26 November 2025).

[9] Jessie Williams, "'This war made him a monster.' Ukrainian women fear the return of their partners", *Time*, 13 March 2023. Available at https://time.com/6261977/ukraine-women-domestic-violence/ (accessed on 26 November 2025).

influencing survivors' willingness to accept peace deals and post-conflict processes. The implications can also be generational if children born of wartime rape are ignored. Third, if left unaddressed, impunity for such violence is normalized. Feminist mediators and women peacebuilders contributed to the UN's Guidance for Mediators on addressing sexual violence in ceasefire agreements and for survivor-centred approaches in truth and reconciliation processes.[10] The 2016 Colombian peace accord, for example, explicitly acknowledges sexual violence, calling for justice mechanisms.

From Power to Responsibility Sharing: Reframing the Mediator's Agenda

Speak of responsibility – not power sharing. Proponents of the WPS agenda have often critiqued the limited premises of peace processes. Rather than viewing mediation as a technical exercise that rewards violence with elite bargains, women peacebuilders consider sustainable and just peace as the overarching narrative and the ultimate goal of any process. They view peace processes as historic, moral and political opportunities for transformation, to address the root causes and consequences of violent conflict and establish societal contracts for a future anchored in justice, dignity and pluralism. These perspectives stem from the lived experience of communities that have suffered and survived war. For example, during the Northern Ireland peace process, the Women's Coalition introduced the need for integrated education, prison and police reform to the talks.[11] These were essential to reimagining society for the future and a durable peace.

Second, the WPS agenda rejects the minimalist approaches often favoured by traditional mediation frameworks. Ceasefires, security guarantees and elite bargains may temporarily silence the guns, but do little to change the underlying sociopolitical factors that drive conflict. In situations like South Sudan and Libya, the recycling of elite – often violent – actors through peace deals has resulted in recurrent violence. Women peacebuilders have voiced strong critiques of such arrangements. As Yemeni peacebuilder Rasha Jarhum has noted, peace that ignores justice and dignity is not peace, it's a pause before the next round of violence.

Third, WPS-informed mediation rejects the overreliance on power-sharing among warring elites as the hallmark of political settlement. Instead, it promotes a paradigm of accountability and what I termed "responsibility-sharing" while serving as the first Gender and Inclusion Expert on the UN's Standby Team of Mediation Advisors in Somalia in 2012. Power-sharing, as practiced in many post-conflict settings, rewards those who take up arms and marginalizes civil society actors who have worked tirelessly for peace. In Somalia, during the 2012 Garowe II negotiations, warring clans disputed the sharing of positions in the transitional government and parliament. This focus on securing "power" for themselves was distinctly at odds with the urgency of a famine then plaguing Somalia, to which Somali women peacebuilders were dedicating their efforts. By reframing power to responsibility, I sought to prioritize responsibility to the nation over the personal benefits of power. Such approaches bring to the fore politicians' accountability to peace for the public.

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[10] UN Department of Political Affairs, *Guidance for Mediators: Addressing Conflict related Sexual Violence in Ceasefire and Peace Agreements* (New York, 2012).

[11] Kate Fearon, *Women's Work: The Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition* (Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 1999).

Liberia offers examples. From 1989 to 1998, 14 peace agreements were broken. In 2002, when the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) mobilized a mass action for peace, they demanded a ceasefire, representation in the negotiations and accountability for former warlords so that violence was not rewarded with political power. They had experienced the impact of such deals following the 1996 peace agreement, when warlord Charles Taylor was elected president and renewed a brutal war. In 2003, WIPNET first coalesced around a "no more war" message and immediately mobilized to support Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in the presidential elections. Their activism was instrumental in securing a representative post-war political system and sustained national peacebuilding.[12]

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the WPS agenda reframes peace as a transformative process of building trust, rather than transferring wartime dynamics into the political realm. In Syria, for instance, from the outset of the war in 2011, women led local dialogues and trust-building across political and sectarian divisions. These bottom-up processes stood in stark contrast to the elite-dominated Geneva and Astana talks, which largely failed to produce a viable path forward. In 2024, when the Assad regime collapsed, the women-led networks were again vital to mitigating tensions and violence as the forces led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham took control. They continue leading social reconciliation in communities where tensions – and the risk of violence – remain high.

This attention to a peacebuilding ecosystem linking the national and subnational – mitigating localized violence, fostering trust, acknowledging harms and promoting shared values – sets feminist approaches apart from technocratic mediation. When violent conflict penetrates society deeply, political and military solutions are necessary but not sufficient. For sustaining peace, communities impacted by conflict must feel the benefits. Otherwise, the risk of localized violence sparking new conflict is high. In Colombia, for example, the 2016 peace accord ended the state's conflict with FARC, the largest armed group. But the violence metastasized at subnational levels with splinter groups and organized crime groups vying for control of natural resources. From 2016 to 2023, over 1,000 community leaders were assassinated.[13] Without effective, trusted state security systems, locally rooted civilian structures and community organizations are essential in dispute resolution and building peace from the ground up. This work is often done by women.

The WPS agenda provides mediators with a practical framework for supporting this peacebuilding ecosystem. It questions prevailing mediation practices to limit privileging armed actors as the sole political stakeholders. It also mandates mediators to seek out those women, who, despite exclusion and under-resourcing, have shown the greatest commitment to peace. This enables more legitimate, sustainable and ethical mediation practices.

Rationality and Emotionality, the Past and the Future: Reframing Mediation

Let the vision of a peaceful future guide the negotiations of the present. Implicitly and often explicitly, mediation processes are driven by the historic grievances between warring parties. Negotiations become mired in trauma, narratives of revenge and retribution. The past – be

[12] Leymah Gbowee and Carole Mithers, *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War. A Memoir* (New York, Beast Books, 2013).

[13] Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2023* (New York, 2023), pp. 162–170.

it 3,000 or 30 years ago – is thus not only present but also becomes the key determinant of the future.

In contrast, as civil society actors – especially women – have entered negotiation spaces, they have sought to focus on a vision of a shared and just future as the determinant of negotiations in the present. In Northern Ireland, women negotiators were frustrated by the historic scorekeeping and persisted with attention to bread-and-butter issues and their children's future. Similarly, in Rwanda, by 1998, four years after the genocide, women were speaking of reconciliation, not to diminish the depravity of violence and lost lives, but to give a chance to those who survived.

Much of today's political mediation practice, with its assumptions of "rational" and "interest-based" actors, is derived from the commercial world and game theory. Women, meanwhile, are labelled as emotional and irrational, and this has been an excuse to exclude them from decision-making. The logic is flawed on two counts. First, wars are complex existential crises, not business deals. Fear and grievances are manipulated to polarize and justify violence. Over time, the hate, trauma and mistrust become embedded in people's hearts and minds. Technical solutions and rationality are necessary, but not sufficient when emotions are raw. Mediators need to acknowledge the emotional drivers to weave trust to transform long-frayed relationships. Second, if emotionality is the reason for exclusion, it should be applied to male leaders who often act out of anger and humiliation, justifying violence. Experience across conflict zones reveals how women acknowledge these emotions while being future-oriented and committed to non-violent conflict resolution. As Israeli-American peace activist Terry Greenblatt stated when appearing at the UNSC in 2003 with her Palestinian counterpart, Maha Abu Dayyeh-Shamas:

> Even when we are women whose very existence and narrative contradict each other, we will talk – we will not shoot … We are willing to sit together – on the same side of the table ... look at our complex joint history, with the commitment and intention of not getting up until – in respect and reciprocity – we can get up together and … fulfil our joint destiny.[14]

Envisioning a shared future as a guide for negotiations enables confidence-building and transforms relations. South African negotiators adopted this strategy during the transition from apartheid to democracy. Instead of being mired in the past, this flipping of the script enabled them to identify shared solutions for the future, then work backwards to identify pathways for justice, reparations, reconciliation and memorialization addressing the past.

Conclusions: WPS and Innovations in Mediation

It would be naive to ignore the depth and complexity of today's global security challenges. Likewise, it would be just as naive to believe that such challenges, ranging from domestic and international political and ideological threats to climate, organized crime and cybersecurity-induced risks, can be solved militarily or addressed solely by states.

[14] Reem Bahdi, "Jerusalem Link and Right of Return.pdf," Refuge, 2003. Available at https://www.academia.edu/38487010/Jerusalem_Link_and_Right_of_Return_pdf (accessed on 26 November 2025)

More than ever, we need an ecosystem approach that draws on the strengths of all sectors to foster peace, justice and human and state security. Civil society networks, active locally and connected globally, are essential. They play key roles in mitigating, mediating and preventing conflict. Women peacebuilders, often underestimated, have been key interlocutors and influencers in grassroots, national and international contexts. As the WPS agenda marks its twenty-fifth anniversary, recommitting to its principles of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, particularly through partnerships with civil society, offers mediators and states pathways out of this current era of pessimism.

The five steps below are key.

1. Seat women peacebuilders as independent actors in peace processes

- Recognize civil society-based women peacebuilders as independent negotiating stakeholders, not token delegates.
- Invite and issue timely visas for independent civil society, including women's coalitions, with speaking and drafting rights.
- Aim for 30–40 per cent women across political parties, avoiding last-minute token quotas.
- Where resistance to women's participation is high, ensure observer status, advisory roles, agenda access and written responses to their proposals.
- Challenge those who question women's legitimacy by highlighting their agency as unarmed actors serving their communities and their knowledge of the issues being addressed.

2. Embed and systematize gender responsiveness throughout mediation and negotiation processes, including substantively

- Appoint a UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for WPS to serve as a bridge between states and civil society and to provide technical oversight support for gender responsiveness in mediation efforts.
- Mandate inclusion provisions in envoys' terms.
- Provide gendered briefing papers on all agenda topics for the mediation team and delegations.
- Deploy gender and inclusion advisors to provide such support, so that delegates can raise awareness of the human implications and avoid inadvertently harming women, men, boys and girls.
- Frame governance as responsibility-sharing with service delivery benchmarks.
- Per UN guidance, ceasefire agreements should prohibit conflict-related sexual violence, designate civilian no-fire zones and use gender-sensitive monitors.
- Include gender-responsive mechanisms for detainee release and missing-persons cases.

3. Fund and protect women's movements

- Partner with existing funds (such as the Innovative Peace Fund designed by the International Civil Society Action Network and the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund) that offer rapid grants (24–72 hours) covering travel, convenings, security, care, translation and legal needs.
- Provide multi-year core funding to women-led peacebuilding organizations in war zones.
- Adopt and implement the Protection of Women Peacebuilders' Guidance.[15]

4. Institutionalize inclusion and accountability

- Budget for participation costs.
- Ensure systematic consultations.
- Publish participation scorecards and require formal responses to civic proposals.
- If women peacebuilders are excluded, invite them to join your delegations.
- Do not fund or support processes and outcomes if agreements erase guarantees for women's rights or enable gender-based discrimination or exclusion.

5. Strengthen the WPS ecosystem and integrate it into global mediation efforts

- Integrate WPS approaches and actors in mediation fora and gatherings.
- Establish a "global innovations in mediation" course inspired by the WPS agenda for the professional development of all diplomats.
- Sponsor fellowships and residencies for women peacebuilders.
- Advocate for WPS practice standards in regional organizations, including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League.
- Support the written and audiovisual documentation and dissemination of women's peace leadership for public awareness.

[15] The Protection of Women Peacebuilders' Guidance is a practical framework developed by ICAN with members of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership to enhance the safety of women working in peacebuilding. It is available at https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ICAN_Protecting-Women-Peacebuilders-Guidance_EN.pdf (accessed on 26 November 2025).

Assessing the State of Peace Diplomacy: Towards Strategic Adaptation

Achim Wennmann

Introduction

This chapter will assess the current state of peace diplomacy and explore strategic avenues for its adaptation.[1] It conducts the assessment under the term "peace diplomacy" – and not "peace mediation" – to refocus the activities undertaken by the sector within the range of conflict management, transformation and resolution approaches and procedures.[2] This framing is important in a context in which peace mediation has become a label for activities that, in many instances, have little to do with the distinct activity of mediation, as defined further below. Using peace diplomacy as the overarching frame for the sector's activities will help to rehabilitate mediation as a distinct approach to ending conflict and building peace and will contribute to the reinvention of diplomacy.[3] A focus on peace diplomacy rather than mediation might also help frame a broader arc of support for conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts under which states, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community actors could reinforce their complementary purpose and capacities.

The chapter draws together the author's first year as the Nagulendran Chair in Peace

[1] Teresa Whitfield, ed., *Still Time to Talk: Adaptation and Innovation in Peace Mediation*, Accord, No. 30 (London, Conciliation Resources, February 2024).

[2] This range of approaches include conflict avoidance and informal dialogue, negotiation, mediation, administrative decisions, arbitration and judicial or legislative decisions as well as coercive actions. See Christopher W. Moore, *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2014), pp. 5–15. In this article, the term "conflict resolution" will be used as a shorthand for the range of non-coercive approaches and procedures for managing, transforming and resolving conflicts.

[3] Marie-Laure Salles and Achim Wennmann, "Diplomacy in international Geneva: beyond business as usual", *Global Challenges*, No. 17 (May 2025).

Mediation and offers a preliminary stock-taking of ongoing research.[4] It first describes the contours of peace diplomacy, followed by an assessment of current pressures on the sector and a review of sector funding. It then reflects on the adaptability of the sector and concludes with a proposal to move from a patchwork of institutions that define it towards the formation of a global peace diplomacy movement. Overall, the chapter focuses on third-party, non-coercive means of conflict resolution in which the conflict parties control decisions about conflict resolution outcomes. It does not address power- or violence-based approaches to conflict management and resolution among bigger states, corporations or movements, which merit a separate research effort.

The Peace Diplomacy Sector

The peace diplomacy sector differs from the security sector in the instruments, approaches and frameworks it employs to achieve peace and security for a given referent, ranging from individuals and communities to states and entire systems. Peace diplomacy builds on the notions of connectedness, proximity and trust – between individuals or states, different segments of society and in deeply divided contexts. It stands in contrast to the emphasis on the politics of fear that underpin securitized approaches, which build on the construction of separation, distance and the friend-enemy distinction.[5] Peace diplomacy can build a relational form of security through engagement, dialogue and compromise; a security approach aims for domination and control.

While the foundations of the sectors are different, it is essential to remain pragmatic and not fall into the trap of polarization between the security and peace diplomacy sectors. Both sectors intersect on issues of analysis and skill sets, and there can even be shared goals and objectives in constructing more stable and predictable relationships. Backchannels to diffuse misperceptions or manage crises, for instance, can be maintained by both security and peace diplomacy actors. In pursuing peace and stability, a sober strategic analysis should stress the right balance between security measures and peace diplomacy; yet at present, there appears to be an overemphasis on securitization.[6]

A global ecosystem

The current form of the peace diplomacy sector is best described as a global ecosystem comprising a community of organizations with a shared interest in resolving conflict and promoting trusted relationships. Different communities of organizations operate with varying missions, ranging from deal-oriented crisis management or humanitarian diplomacy

[4] The author would like to thank Adrian Bergmann, Sabrina Büchler, Yousuf Al Bulushi, Francesca Caruso, Seán Deely, Solomon Dersso, Ghassan El Kahlout, Tormod Endresen, Luca Fratini, Sidonia Gabriel, Rafael Gude, David Harland, Sara Hellmüller, Julian Hottinger, Itonde Kakoma, David Lanz, Joanne Liu, Elisabeth Lothe, Humaid Al Maani, Katia Papagianni, Lukas Probst-Lopez, Peter Prove, Georg Stein, Johan Vibe and Oliver Wils. Key conferences to study the peace diplomacy sector included the 2024 Berlin Moot, the 2024 ETH Zurich Biennial Policy Forum on Peace Mediation, the 2024 conference of the EU's Community of Practice on Peace Mediation, the 2024 Qatar Mediation Forum and the 2025 Basel Peace Forum. Particular thanks go to the participants of a retreat organized under the chair in Geneva on 29 August 2024, as well as to Emilian Berutti for assistance on the construction of the Peace Sector Database.

[5] Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (Los Angeles, SAGE, 2015); Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, expanded edition (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[6] See Mark Galeotti, *The Weaponisation of Everything: The Field Guide to the New Way of War* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2022).

to facilitation-based mediation to the pursuit of a more pragmatic or normative brand of peacemaking or peacebuilding. There are also distinctions between organizations working at different levels (from local to global) or in a specific country or region.

In operational terms, the peace diplomacy ecosystem represents a global network of access to the people, places and spaces necessary to prevent, de-escalate or resolve violent conflict, manage crises and address collective challenges. Different institutions play different roles based on unique analyses, skills and access opportunities. The practice of constructing "political space for exchange" or maintaining relationships with difficult actors for decades is a professional competency of the sector – not an art. For example, the mediation space approach is critical in contexts where deep-seated worldview differences hinder traditional negotiation processes.[7]

In recent years, much of the sector's work has been grouped under the term "peace mediation", which has become a broad umbrella for wide-ranging activities, many of which are only loosely related to mediation. This is why this chapter opted to focus its analysis on the peace diplomacy sector of which mediation is a distinct conflict resolution process, namely one:

> … in which a mutually acceptable third party, who has no authority to make binding decisions for disputants, intervenes in a conflict or dispute to assist involved parties to improve their relationships, enhance communications, and use effective problem-solving and negotiation procedures to reach voluntary and mutually acceptable understandings or agreements on contested issues.[8]

Hence, we can speak about the application of mediation in peace processes, as distinct from negotiation or arbitration. This framing of the sector as peace diplomacy aims to restore mediation as a distinct instrument in the toolbox of peaceful dispute resolution, alongside negotiation, enquiry, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement and resort to regional agencies or arrangements, as noted in Article 33 of the UN Charter. [9]

Professionalization

Peace diplomacy has benefited from three decades of investment in professionalization, especially in the peace mediation community. A plethora of training courses has set professional standards and developed deep technical competency.[10] These efforts also represent investment in the most critical asset of the sector: its human resources. If access, analysis and trust are the defining features of this sector, they are usually held by individuals and not institutions. This is why investing in and retaining uniquely skilled individuals is so important for the sector.

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[7] Jean-Nicolas Bitter and others, *Mediation Space: Addressing Obstacles Stemming from Worldview Differences to Regain Negotiation Flexibility* (Zurich, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, 2022).

[8] Moore, *The Mediation Process*, p. 8.

[9] Article 33 of the UN Charter stipulates that any dispute that is likely to threaten the maintenance of international peace and security must first be addressed through negotiation, mediation or other peaceful means, and that the Security Council may call on the parties to use such means to settle their dispute.

[10] David Lanz and others, *Understanding Mediation Support Structures* (Basel, swisspeace, 2017).

From a human resource management perspective, the sector is relatively healthy, primarily because it continues to attract a steady stream of young talent. However, the absence of clear career progression plans has created a structural challenge: senior leaders remain in their positions with limited opportunities for advancement, while the next generation is eager for promotion. At the same time, since peace diplomacy remains heavily influenced by seniority, early-career entrants bring fresh energy and innovative approaches – particularly in applying AI in work processes – but often face barriers. Staff burnout and duty of care are issues the sector is only beginning to address more systematically.[11] The return of power politics has also challenged the mindset of professionals dedicated to a normative brand of peacemaking or peacebuilding.

Institutions

The current peace diplomacy ecosystem is marked by significant diversity of institutions, including international and regional organizations, governmental and non-governmental actors, movements and local organizations. The 27 members of the Mediation Support Network provide some indication of the number of NGOs engaged in the field,[12] but many local and community-based organizations largely go unnoticed in assessments of the sector's strengths. This applies especially to urban peace and violence reduction initiatives, which constitute a particularly dynamic and innovative peacemaking space.[13]

On the governmental side, countries like Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Sweden, Türkiye, the United Kingdom and the Vatican have played important roles. Some of these countries have long histories in peace diplomacy (e.g. Oman in discreet facilitation, Norway in contact diplomacy and Switzerland in good offices).[14] While Gulf countries and Türkiye currently conduct highly visible efforts on Ukraine, Gaza, Iran and Yemen, European countries, the European Union and the UN still have an advantage with respect to technical peace support capacities. This results from investment in professionalization, as noted above, and gives European actors a comparative advantage in peace support activities. Switzerland has a particular comparative advantage since Geneva is a dedicated global hub for peace support.

It is important to emphasize that altruism is not necessarily a sufficient motivation for states to engage in peace diplomacy, which ultimately remains one of multiple foreign policy instruments of governments.[15] In the case of Norway, a recent white paper notes that

[11] I. B. Seu, *States of Mind in Conflict: Enhancing a Psychological Understanding of Peace Mediation*, Final Report (London, Birkbeck, University of London, 2022).

[12] Media Support Network, "Member organisations". Available at https://mediationsupportnetwork.net/member-organizations (accessed on 30 November 2025).

[13] See for instance the special issue of *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, vol. 2, No. 2 (2020), titled *Illicit Economies and Urban Peace; Achim Wennmann and Oliver Jütersonke, eds., Urban Safety and Peacebuilding: New Perspectives on Sustaining Peace in the City* (London, Routledge, 2018).

[14] James Worrall, "'Switzerland of Arabia': Omani foreign policy and mediation efforts in the Middle East", *The International Spectator*, vol. 56, No. 4 (2021), pp. 134–50; James Larry Taulbee, Ann Kelleher and Peter C. Grosvenor, *Norway's Peace Policy: Soft Power in a Turbulent World* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Markus Heiniger, *30 Jahre Friedensengagement im EDA 1990–2020* (Bern, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

[15] Robert U. Nagel and Govinda Clayton, "Mediation and foreign policy", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 29 March 2017. Available at https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.447 (accessed on 30 November 2025).

"diplomacy for peace and conflict resolution builds valuable political capital and expertise. The work provides links to key countries and actors, and this is important in shaping Norwegian foreign policy and the promotion of national interests". The white paper also emphasizes that for Norway the upside of contact diplomacy can outweigh the disadvantages of isolating an armed actor: "One loses both situational awareness and opportunities to influence when there is no contact, and there is a risk that isolation contributes to miscalculations and strengthens repressive elements internally".[16]

When it comes to leadership in peace diplomacy, we see a clear shift from the United Nations to government- or NGO-led processes. Currently, the UN has been relatively marginalized from peace diplomacy, for numerous reasons: key member states no longer confer the authority on the UN to play a more active role; the Security Council is blocked by great power tensions and there is no consensus on peace mandates; in some places the UN is perceived as biased, which undermines its reputation as an honest broker; and some regions and countries prefer approaches by regional organizations such as the African Union or Association of Southeast Asian Nations. In May 2025, at a signing ceremony attended by 60 countries and 20 international organizations, including the UN, China formalized the creation of a new International Organization for Mediation. Headquartered in Hong Kong, the new multilateral body aims to establish itself as an intergovernmental mediation council for international disputes.

Nevertheless, the UN remains indispensable. It is the only institution where member states can come together to apply peer pressure to powerful states. They can mobilize the web of treaties and conventions, the diplomatic competency of UN staffers and the UN's convening infrastructure to help deal with some of the most formidable challenges. The UN remains, therefore, the best hope for small states seeking help to restrain more powerful states. More specifically, the Mediation Support Unit of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) has contributed to the sector's professionalization and to pooling expertise relevant for peace processes. However, it is also important to recognize that the overall role of the UN in peace diplomacy is constrained because the normative framework it upholds can limit the scope for pragmatism.

Foundations and trajectory of institutionalization

Recent peace diplomacy builds on the three decades of investment in competencies, knowledge and institutions, described above. However, there are also deeper roots, starting with the entire history of diplomacy that builds on the practice of codifying inter-state relations through treaties, and the institutional capacity of foreign ministries to maintain them.[17] There are, of course, also the deeper foundations in political philosophy associated with Immanuel Kant's perpetual peace.[18] Peace activism in Europe and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century led to the 1899 and 1907 Hague Conventions on the Pacific Settlement of Dispute, the Covenant of the League of Nations and the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, laying the groundwork for the 1945 Charter of the United Nations, which forms the

[16] Norway, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Norway's Efforts on Peace and Conflict Resolution in a Troubled World*, white paper (Oslo, 2025), pp. 8, 30.

[17] Paul Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[18] Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual peace: a philosophical sketch", in *Kant: Political Writings*, Hans S. Reiss, ed. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 93–130.

foundation of today's international peace and security framework.[19] The sector also draws on many different kinds of local approaches rooted in, for example, Ubuntu philosophy in Africa or Confucianism in Asia that emphasize peaceful coexistence and harmonious relationships through dialogue, consensus building and mediation.[20] Ibadism in Oman has played an important role in the country's water management systems and in its network-based foreign policy, in which facilitation and mediation play a central role.[21] Considered together, peace diplomacy can rest on solid institutional, legal and cultural foundations.

A more recent institutional presence in the sector has grown around specific personalities. The role of the UN in conflict prevention, peacemaking and peacebuilding was shaped by Kofi Annan. Jimmy Carter and Martti Ahtisaari have also left their mark on the sector, including through two institutions, the Carter Centre and CMI, the Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation. In the 2000s, several other NGOs stepped into the political space for private mediation that opened with the US military interventions following 9/11.[22]

Given the number of institutions involved in peace diplomacy, overcrowding has become an operational problem. In the author's own experience, at least three dozen international institutions, NGOs or think tanks were involved in the economic aspects of Yemen's peace process, leading to significant coordination challenges. Overcrowding has also exacerbated the challenge of localizing peace diplomacy because local actors have few operational elasticities to engage with so many international actors.

Outcomes

The sector produced 582 agreements between 2015 and 2024. Most are limited and local, while large-scale or inter-state agreements are rare, as illustrated by the following breakdown from the PA-X Peace Agreements Database (Version 9) of the University of Edinburgh's Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep): 18 inter-state, 52 internationalized intra-state, 272 intra-state and 240 local agreements. In 2024, there were 43 agreements, mostly intra-state armed (31, including 22 in Colombia), five internationalized intra-state and seven local.[23]

Nonetheless, assessing the sector solely by the number of agreements underestimates its impact, as it produces numerous intangible outcomes essential to peace diplomacy, such as the transformation of armed actors, peace support roles or crisis management. Consider, for instance, the role of Conciliation Resources in transforming the Ogaden National Liberation

[19] Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2017).

[20] Tim Murithi, "Practical peacemaking wisdom from Africa: reflections on Ubuntu", *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 1, No. 4 (2006), pp. 25–34; D. A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong, eds., *Confucianism for the Modern World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[21] Worrall, "'Switzerland of Arabia'".

[22] Pierre Hazan, *Negotiating with the Devil: Inside the World of Armed Conflict Mediation* (London, Hurst, 2024), pp. 41–51.

[23] PA-X is a dataset on peace agreements, containing 2,144 agreements across more than 150 peace processes from 1990 to 2024. It defines peace agreements as formal, publicly available documents produced with conflict protagonists to address and end conflicts, and categorizes them into inter-state, internationalized intra-state, intra-state armed, and local conflicts. Available at https://www.peaceagreements.org/agreements/search (accessed on 15 August 2025).

Front from an armed insurgent group into a legitimate political actor.[24] Another example is the vital role played by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in accompanying Syria's transition in late 2024 based on its long-term and principled engagement with all relevant actors.[25]

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue's 2023 annual report offers an instructive example of value for money, illustrating what an annual budget of $50 million can deliver:

- Six outcomes on highly localized conflict dynamics.
- Six initiatives to support broader political processes.
- Targeted contributions to defuse great power competition.
- A sector-wide forum and new regional formats.
- Programme development and innovation on cross-cutting themes.
- Secret activities that cannot be reported publicly.

A bonus is access to an exceptional asset: high-quality human resources that are both a repository of skill and knowledge and define the centre's network value.[26]

These results highlight the importance of showcasing accomplishments – through both stories and data – rather than focusing on what has not worked. What deserves greater recognition is that these achievements result from a minimal budget compared to the funds available for the security sector, an imbalance to which we shall return below.

Understanding the Pressures on the Sector

Based on the contours of the peace diplomacy sector described above, the open question is whether the sector can withstand the pressures it currently faces as a result of the shift away from liberal internationalism.[27] This section takes a deeper look at three sources of pressure on the sector coming from the strategic environment, political change and the constitution of the sector itself, before examining the issue of funding in the next part.

The first source of pressure comes from a sharp increase in the number and complexity of violent conflicts that are straining institutional capacities. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme, 2024 saw a historic high of 61 state-based armed conflicts globally.[28] As a

[24] Aden Abdi, "Pathways to peace in Ogaden: navigating symbolism in early peace talks", in *Pioneering Peace Pathways*, Accord No. 29, C. Buchanan ed. (London, Conciliation Resources, 2020).

[25] Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, *Advancing Peace in Security in an Unstable World: HD's Impact in 2024* (Geneva, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2025), p. 12.

[26] Achim Wennmann, "Peace mediation in times of radical uncertainty", inaugural lecture of the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation, Geneva Graduate Institute, Geneva, 18 September 2024. Available at https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/sites/internet/files/2024-10/Nagulendran-Chair---Opening-Lecture.pdf (accessed on 30 November 2025).

[27] G. John Ikenberry, "The end of liberal international order?," *International Affairs*, vol. 94, No. 1 (January 2018), pp. 7–23.

[28] Uppsala University, "UCDP: sharp increase in conflicts and wars", news release, 11 June 2025. Available at https://www.uu.se/en/news/2025/2025-06-11-ucdp-sharp-increase-in-conflicts-and-wars (accessed on 30 November 2025).

result, the peace diplomacy sector is overwhelmed and can currently offer only temporary fixes rather than comprehensive peace agreements. Many foreign ministries are locked in a cycle of constant crisis diplomacy and have lost sight of the big picture. There is remarkably little political space to push for the kinds of systematic transitions out of war and violence that drove transformations in the 1990s in South Africa, Namibia, Cambodia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Ireland or the post-Second World War reconstruction of Germany, South Korea or Japan. Insider reports suggest that at least two dozen mediation or de-escalation opportunities every year are not realized due to a lack of political will, limited funding or overstretched capacities.

Another source of pressure is political in nature. In countries around the world, political currents associated with right-wing politics aim to build legitimacy by creating enemies and generating support for groups whose interests align around particular identity, business or security interests.[29] This type of politics grows from polarization and alienation, and has few interests in the moderation of diversity, co-existence or reconciliation, be it at home or abroad. The dismantling of USAID and organizations such as the United States Institute of Peace, as well as US sanctions on the International Criminal Court, offer a potent playbook for those interested in targeting the peace diplomacy sector. Unprecedented budget cuts and thousands of layoffs across the UN system could also be considered as part of a broader strategy to push the UN operationally to the edge until it becomes unworkable. These political threats to the foundations of peace diplomacy are real and have already shaken the humanitarian, global health and climate sectors.[30]

The third source of pressure comes from the constitution of the sector itself: as donor budgets shrink, many organizations – both large and small – are competing for profile, giving rise to complex competitive dynamics, including competition between governments for peace conference leadership and photo ops.[31] For some governments with an established track record of conflict resolution, like Qatar, Norway or Switzerland, peace diplomacy has become a defining feature of their foreign policy, driving a continuous effort to achieve high-level results.[32] In cities like Doha, Geneva, The Hague or Oslo, peace is part of the city branding, ideally associated with successful peace conferences or agreements. Another line of competition stems from the fact that many governments have been actors and funders at the same time. This has shaped competition for processes and successes between governments and NGOs, and competition between NGOs for government funding, and even within NGOs between different units for fundraising opportunities ("fundraise or perish"). Policy entrepreneurship and close relations with donors have become coveted assets.

Given the evolution of conflict dynamics, there has never really been a shortage of work, but always limited funding to get the work done. As a result, certain conflicts receive much

[29] Quinn Slobodian, *Hayek's Bastards: Race, Gold, IQ, and the Capitalism of the Far Right* (London, Allen Lane, 2025); Anne Applebaum, *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World* (New York, Doubleday, 2024).

[30] Kasmira Jefford and Michelle Langrand, "International Geneva layoffs pile up amid painful funding cuts", Geneva Solutions, 8 July 2025. Available at https://genevasolutions.news/global-news/international-geneva-layoffs-pile-up-amid-painful-funding-cuts (accessed on 30 November 2025).

[31] See David Lanz, "Envoy envy? Competition in African mediation processes and ways to overcome it", *International Negotiation*, vol. 26, No. 3 (2021), pp. 499–526.

[32] Sansom Milton, Ghassan Elkahlout and Sana Tariq, "Qatar's evolving role in conflict mediation", *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 31, No. 1 (2023).

attention while others are neglected – even if the human toll and destruction are significant.

Financing Peace Diplomacy

This section focuses on the financing of peace diplomacy, an area that demands many nuances. One key observation must be stated at the outset: the sector does not currently face an existential financial crisis, but it should remain alert and ready to adapt.

Many traditional donors supporting peace diplomacy have cut funding. For instance, the UK has cut its peacebuilding budget for fragile states by one third, dropping from £350 million ($469 million)[33] to £233 million ($312 million). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development reports that funding for peace and conflict prevention in fragile contexts is now at its second-lowest point since 2004.[34] The strategic dilemma is that beyond governments, there are no obvious funders for peace diplomacy. Mobilization of the philanthropic sector on peace issues is moderate at best, and the peace diplomacy field does not have a private sector lobbying arm (unlike the security sector) to tell governments to invest more.

It is important to make regional distinctions when analysing funding cuts. US-based peace diplomacy NGOs face significant cuts from US government funding. For example, Search for Common Ground saw a 40-per cent decline in its committed resources for 2025.[35] In contrast, based on their annual reports from 2024, several European NGOs reported slightly higher levels of income, including the Berghof Foundation, the Clingendael Institute, CMI, Conciliation Resources, Folke Bernadotte Academy, Independent Diploma and the Institute for Integrated Transitions. The US-based Carter Center's peace portfolio and the Colombian CINEP followed a similar upward trajectory. Organizations reporting a relatively small drop in income included the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution and swisspeace (see Table 1). The sharp reduction at Interpeace from $31.8 million to $19 million appears to be an outlier, due to "the scheduled conclusion of 14 peacebuilding programme contracts during the year, together with significant changes in the government donor environment for peacebuilding".[36]

[33] Conversion rates to the US dollar based on a Google search on 21 August 2025.

[34] Susannah Birkwood, "Holding the line: how Geneva's peacebuilders are adapting as aid shrinks", Geneva Solutions, 21 July 2025. Available at https://genevasolutions.news/peace-humanitarian/holding-the-line-how-geneva-s-peacebuilders-are-adapting-as-aid-shrinks (accessed on 30 November 2025).

[35] Search for Common Ground, "Double your impact". Available at https://www.sfcg.org/double-your-impact/ (accessed on 21 August 2025).

[36] Interpeace, "Annual report 2024: financial statements". Available at https://www.interpeace.org/annual-report-2024/financial-statement/ (accessed on 21 August 2025).

Table 1: Annual budgets of selected peace diplomacy NGOs ($ million)[37]

	2023	2024	Change
Berghof Foundation	20.5	23.8	↑
Carter Centre	35.5	37.1	↑
CINEP, Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular	13.6	15.0	↑
Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue	61.9	58.6	↓
Clingendael Institute	21.2	23.4	↑
CMI, Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation	15.4	19.9	↑
Conciliation Resources	14.5	15.5	↑
Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA)	3.7	4.1	↑
Independent Diplomat	3.2	3.6	↑
Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT)	2.9	3.4	↑
Interpeace	31.8	19.0	↓
NOREF, Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution	6.7	5.6	↓
swisspeace	10.1	9.0	↓

It is more difficult to assess government funding in peace diplomacy because it is distributed across many different budget lines of foreign ministries, intelligence services and the offices of heads of state. For example, the Norwegian Foreign Ministry's Section for Peace and Reconciliation had a budget of 395 million krone in 2025 ($40 million), but additional resources are also available in specific embassies, notably Colombia.[38] The Peace and Human Rights Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs had a budget of 256 million Swiss francs in the period 2025–2028 ($318 million), or approximately 64 million francs annually ($80 million). But these funds are dedicated to a much broader portfolio than mediation and dialogue.[39] Other investments include 269 million Swiss francs in the period 2026–2029 ($339 million) to strengthen International Geneva.[40] In the Philippines, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity has a budget of 7.1 billion Philippine pesos for 2025 ($120 million). Colombia set aside a budget of 50.4 trillion Colombian pesos ($12.5 billion) between 2022 and 2026 to implement the 2016 FARC peace agreement[41] and invested over 300 billion pesos ($75 million) between 2022 and 2025 in

[37] This table draws on the Peace Sector Dataset that is currently under construction by the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation at the Geneva Graduate Institute. The dataset aims to provide a transparent source for investigating the funding of the peace diplomacy sector.

[38] Norway, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Norway's Efforts*, p. 18.

[39] Switzerland, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland, *International Cooperation Strategy 2025–28* (Bern, 2024), p. 54.

[40] The amount noted is pending approval by the Swiss parliament. See News Service Bund, "The Federal Council is investing a quarter of a billion Swiss francs to strengthen International Geneva", press release, 20 June 2025. Available at https://www.news.admin.ch/en/newnsb/q6uAkjLQmvcWXUCvIATct (accessed on 30 November 2025).

[41] Portal para la Paz, "$50,4 billones son destinados a la implementación del Acuerdo de Paz", 12 June 2023. Available at https://portalparalapaz.gov.co/2023/06/12/504-billones/ (accessed on 30 November 2025).

President Petro's Paz Total initiative.[42]

Overall, the discussion of funding raises several strategic questions: what is the ideal size for a peace diplomacy institution? What is an ideal institutional structure – flat or hierarchical, closed or network-based? And ultimately, what is the purpose of each peace diplomacy organization? To what extent do ambitions match the capacities and funding?

The verdict for 2025 is still out, but austerity measures in some countries and the prioritization of funding for the security sector persist; peace diplomacy may face a more significant problem in the years ahead. Having recently dealt with a significant reduction in funds, Itonde Kakoma, president and CEO of Interpeace, remarked:

> The traditional dependency model – where peacebuilding organizations relied heavily on a few large government donors – no longer holds. We have significantly reduced our overheads and restructured our teams – not just to save money, but to operate within our means, stay true to our purpose and remain agile … we had to transform.[43]

Towards Adaptation

Adaptation has been in the DNA of the peace diplomacy sector for at least over a century, and this is why the sector should look ahead with confidence. It has continuously innovated in the face of changing conflict dynamics, pushing for the outlawing of wars of aggression and the regulation of warfare, and inventing good offices and hybrid diplomacy.[44] It can also draw confidence from the significant outcomes it has achieved with very limited financial resources. Estimates suggest that NGO peace mediation budgets amounted to about $300 million in 2023, which "represents about 0.01% of world military expenditure of USD 2.4 trillion in 2023 … [or the construction cost of] about 10 meters of a US nuclear submarine".[45] It is worthwhile reminding critics of the peace diplomacy sector about this imbalance of funding, the many political decisions made in favour of war and violence, and the global lobby that sells war, violence and enmity as a solution. As the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft notes: "The arms industry spent $2.5 billion on lobbying over the past two decades, accompanied by $285 million in campaign contributions."[46] Peace

[42] IFM Noticias, "Gobierno Petro ha gastado más de $300 mil millones en 'Paz Total' mientras se reduce el presupuesto de la Fuerza Pública", 25 May 2025. Available at https://ifmnoticias.com/gobierno-petro-ha-gastado-mas-de-300-mil-millones-en-paz-total-mientras-se-reduce-el-presupuesto-de-la-fuerza-publica (accessed on 30 November 2025).

[43] Birkwood, "Holding the line".

[44] David Lanz and Philipp Lustenberger, "The evolution of innovation in international mediation", in *Still Time to Talk*, Teresa Whitfield, ed. (London, Conciliation Resources, 2024), pp. 12–15; Pierre Hazan, *Negotiating with the Devil: Inside the World of Armed Conflict Mediation* (London, Hurst, 2024), pp. 41–51.

[45] Wennmann, "Peace mediation".

[46] William D Hartung, "Promoting stability or fueling conflict? The impact of U.S. arms sales on national and global security", Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 11 January 2024. Available at https://quincyinst.org/research/promoting-stability-or-fueling-conflict-the-impact-of-u-s-arms-sales-on-national-and-global-security/#recommendations (accessed on 30 November 2025).

diplomacy actors could be more direct in highlighting to governments that the exclusive reliance on security instruments for peace, stability and security is ill-suited to an era of polycrisis in which threats are diffuse and emerge in many different forms – from pandemics or heatwaves to power politics that make use of new weaponry or technology.[47]

The sector can also draw confidence from its existing strategic assets. The first set of assets consists of relationships and access to political spaces that are crucial for conflict resolution and crisis management. Actors in Geneva's peace, humanitarian and private sectors, for instance, have at least a second-degree relationship to any armed actor anywhere in the world. Another asset is the competency to moderate relations between a global order based on state sovereignty and "contexts of limited statehood".[48] Trusted relationships and political access in these contexts are usually maintained by specific individuals, often developed over decades of work within a particular region or with a specific group. As a result, such individuals frequently have a unique understanding of specific contexts, underscoring the significance of human resources as an essential asset within the sector. Yet another asset is a unique aptitude to work within contexts of limited statehood, from remote borderlands to ganglands.[49] This is especially valuable when the economic opportunities within these orders need to reach regional or global markets. Moderating the interface between non-state orders and regional or global markets represents a significant opportunity for the sector. As a starting point for adaptation, therefore, it is essential to appreciate the strategic value of this specialized human capital within the sector or within specific institutions in an era in which much of the zeitgeist is about war and power politics.

A unique characteristic of the sector is that it brings together excellent technical knowledge relevant to conflict resolution and peacebuilding in specific locations. However, these capacities are often scattered or reserved for proprietary purposes. For the technical competency to translate into a stronger sectoral asset, peace diplomacy actors may wish to envisage a global inventory of technical competency. Such an inventory could be ordered along brain trusts that "creatively pool and harness the unique strengths of local 'go-between' leaders to bridge national and community-level processes of dialogue, peacebuilding and transition".[50] Members of a brain trust might be chosen not just for their expertise, personal integrity and quality of network relationships, but also because they know how to apply their competencies in specific conflict situations or political transitions. Key also is that their thinking is not framed by specific institutional or partisan interests or approaches.[51] In a sense, the UN Mediation Support Unit's Standby Team might represent such a brain trust,

[47] Polycrises occur when multiple crises that grow from the clash of trigger events and slow-moving stresses are happening at once. See Matthew Lawrence and others, "Global polycrisis: the causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement", *Global Sustainability*, vol. 7 (2024), e6.

[48] Contexts of limited statehood exist where state authorities lack the capacity to implement and enforce central decisions or to uphold a monopoly over the means of violence. These areas are not necessarily ungoverned or ungovernable; rather, governance is carried out by a variety of actors, including non-state entities, international organizations and local authorities. See Tanja Draude, A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Governance and Limited Statehood* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018).

[49] Achim Wennmann, "Negotiated exits from organized crime? Building peace in conflict and crime-affected contexts", *Negotiation Journal*, vol. 30, No. 3 (2014), pp. 255–273.

[50] Institute for Integrated Transitions, "Country brain trusts". Available at https://ifit-transitions.org/country-brain-trusts/ (accessed on 21 August 2025).

[51] Phil Clark and Mark Freeman, "Building peace from the middle: the critical work of national brain trusts", *Peace Science Digest*, vol. 4 (March 2020), pp. 6–8.

as could the network of peace and development advisors jointly managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the DPPA. Outside the UN, the Consensus Building Institute's Global Network demonstrates the value of a strong mediator network with significant private-sector expertise, particularly in managing large-scale investments.[52] In sum, organizing and systematizing the tremendous knowledge, competencies and skills into more operational brain trusts might take three decades of professionalization to the next level.

The peace diplomacy sector may also help navigate increasingly complex information environments. Targeted disinformation campaigns and AI-boosted propaganda by war-fighting states make it increasingly difficult for politicians and local leaders to assess local conflict dynamics. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project observes that "there are a lot of inconvenient truths about conflict that come from solid evidence that's investigated in transparent ways, and the conclusions often substantially differ from what dominant online discourse would have us believe".[53] Peace diplomacy actors could play a special role in navigating complex information environments if they have a relationship to local conflict stakeholders, such as direct access to unfiltered information about specific events or perceptions of warring parties. In academia, for instance, terrorism is studied primarily indirectly – through media reports, second-hand sources or theoretical essays – rather than through direct engagement. This reliance creates an "echo chamber repeating what others have said", rather than producing empirical insights.[54] Peace mediation actors with direct access to armed groups may therefore play a more significant role in demystifying echo chambers in conflict contexts. Such work is currently done primarily behind the scenes, but a more ambitious role for the sector may be possible – and necessary – in a world facing weapons of mass disinformation – the new WMDs.[55]

More tailored roles may also exist in the context of stalled multilateral processes dealing with collective challenges. Peace diplomacy tends to be at its best when traditional channels of diplomacy have been exhausted. This is currently the case in several multilateral processes related to climate change, public health and technology governance. With problems growing more rapidly than solutions, the agility of peace diplomacy could stimulate progress at regional or local levels, even though progress has stalled globally.[56] Gabriel Gomes Couto has called the application of this more hybrid form of diplomacy to climate action "Earth Diplomacy". He argues that "instead of focusing on making 200 parties agree to a global multilateral treaty, Earth Diplomacy can help devise and advance pragmatic solutions on

[52] Brian Ganson and Achim Wennmann, Business and Conflict in *Fragile States: The Case for Pragmatic Solutions* (London, Routledge, 2016).

[53] Clionadh Raleigh, "As conflict rates soar, misinformation is getting worse", Politico, 27 January 2025. Available at https://www.politico.eu/article/as-conflict-rates-soar-misinformation-is-getting-worse-gaza-ukraine-war/ (accessed on 30 November 2025).

[54] Emily Feldman and Malia Politzer, "Inside the dangerous mission to understand what makes extremists tick—and how to change their minds", Time, 2 September 2020. Available at https://time.com/5881567/extremism-violence-causes-research/ (accessed on 30 November 2025); Andrew Silke, "The devil you know: continuing problems with research on terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 13, No. 4 (December 2001), pp. 1–14.

[55] Jean-Marc Rickli, "Dealing with the new WMDs – weapons of mass disinformation", Geneva Policy Outlook, 20 January 2025. Available at https://www.genevapolicyoutlook.ch/dealing-with-the-new-wmds-weapons-of-mass-disinformation/ (accessed on 30 November 2025).

[56] David Harland, "Reversing the decline of diplomacy", Geneva Policy Outlook, 5 February 2024. Available at https://www.genevapolicyoutlook.ch/reversing-the-decline-of-diplomacy/ (accessed on 30 November 2025).

targeted issues".[57]

In addition, there is scope to explore peace diplomacy activities in a greater diversity of conflict types beyond super-power tensions, inter-state conflict or civil war. Amplifying efforts in urban peace mediation, for example, could unlock more resilient and context-tailored agreements, allowing societies to rebuild from the ground up in a way that aligns with local political economies and social realities. The "urban political settlement" lens underscores the fact that cities – especially those grappling with conflict, violence and institutional fragility – can form their own localized ordering dynamics, separate from – and where possible, linked to – national agreements. It is important to recognize, however, that cities usually have peace competencies at local levels, and outsiders should scale what already works. Overall, cities are not passive arenas for peacemaking but are sites of agency and innovation, where daily interactions and localized interests create unique opportunities for negotiated order, even when national frameworks fail.[58] This de facto agency for peace diplomacy in cities might even call for the establishment of a "mediation support network for mayors, community leaders, and the range of perpetrators of violence in specific urban conflict systems". Such a network could also help protect local facilitators or interrupters and enable "an expanded toolbox and political space to address urban violence through dialogue and negotiation".[59]

Conclusion: Towards a Global Peace Diplomacy Movement?

In its assessment of the peace diplomacy sector and how it can adapt to a changing strategic landscape, this chapter finds that the sector possesses all the necessary elements to play a significant role in shaping a more stable and peaceful world in the future. A variety of institutions command unique assets – including relationships, access and expertise – and maintain a network of individuals with unique skills and an understanding of specific contexts and situations. The sector also has strong institutional, legal and cultural foundations that have enabled it to adapt in previous moments of significant and rapid change. Looking ahead, the sector could enhance the organization of its peace support competencies through the construction of brain trusts, and it could play a strategic role in helping decipher ever more complex information environments. It could also apply its tested instruments and approaches to other types of conflict than inter-state and civil wars – especially at the city level – and to broader collective challenges that are blocked at the multilateral level.

However, some issues limit the sector's current operations. There are too many actors, leading to overcrowding. Limited investment in the sector fuels competition, which weakens operational agility and focus, leaving opportunities for conflict resolution and peace unexploited. It is a sector composed primarily of smaller "boutique" actors with larger entities running on annual budgets of $50 million and smaller ones on less than $10 million annually. Some are self-governing; others are subsidiaries of larger entities. Compared to other international sectors, these are relatively small budgets, but being small, agile and

[57] Gabriel Gomes Couto, "Discreetly tackling climate action through Earth Diplomacy", Geneva Policy Outlook, 30 January 2023. Available at https://www.genevapolicyoutlook.ch/discreetly-tackling-climate-action-through-earth-diplomacy/ (accessed on 30 November 2025).

[58] Emilian Berutti and Achim Wennmann, "Urban political settlements: a new lens for peacemaking in cities", *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 25, No. 2 (2024), pp. 157–183.

[59] Achim Wennmann, "Crossing the new frontier: peace mediation in the city", Oslo Forum Paper (Geneva, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2018).

action-focused has always been the sector's trademark.

In conclusion, the key question is: what strategic adjustment might be necessary for the sector to be "fit for purpose" in addressing the future of conflict resolution and peacebuilding?

One answer may be to start constructing a global peace diplomacy movement that builds momentum towards a stronger shared foundation of the vision, principles, approaches and means for peace diplomacy. A sector composed of so many small institutions is limited in its ability to scale peace diplomacy work across the diverse range of conflict settings. What is therefore needed is a scalable approach to peace diplomacy that acts like a software – principles and procedures applied in similarly different contexts – but that is adaptive enough to local contexts to avoid the trap of being a blueprint.[60]

Constructing a peace diplomacy movement could entail drafting a peace diplomacy declaration that sets out a unifying vision, the functional elements of third-party dispute resolution and the protection measures of the entities and individuals that conduct third-party dispute resolution. It could also entail strengthening peace capacities from the bottom up and from the top down. At the local level, this could entail nurturing peace diplomacy societies that gather knowledge and expertise for dispute resolution at both local and national levels. This effort could build on existing networks that support insider mediators, peace and development advisors or peace architectures. Much like scaling the humanitarian movement through national Red Cross or Red Crescent societies, the peace diplomacy movement could build on the foundation of national or city-wide societies that help facilitate access, understanding and monitoring of localized conflict dynamics. At the global level, these societies should benefit from a degree of federation. Like the International Federation of the Red Cross or Red Crescent, which coordinates and operates through 191 national societies, a peace diplomacy federation could assure sector-wide exchange, learning and professionalization, as well as pool essential competencies and resources – including through brain trusts – and ensure that these are available for localized peace diplomacy efforts.

The topic of movement building in the peace diplomacy sector clearly warrants additional research. There is much to explore, not just an entire literature on social movements, but also decades of lessons from the human rights, climate and global health movements. The bottom line for a peace diplomacy movement may be to offer the prospect of a more unified collective voice as well as a sense of belonging and direction for those working in the sector. A movement would bring the sector together to be stronger and more united to play its part in preventing the worst for people and the planet, and to construct the foundations for a peaceful, equitable and sustainable future.

[60] Cedric de Coning, Alo Muto and Rui Saraiva, *Adaptive Mediation and Conflict Resolution: Peace-making in Colombia, Mozambique, the Philippines and Syria* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

CHAPTER 11

Mediation Trends and Ways Forward

Isak Svensson[1]

Introduction

In our increasingly violent, conflict-prone world, mediators have never been more needed. Historically, mediation has been such an effective way to manage, terminate and resolve armed conflicts that it has overshadowed other tools of conflict management, which have lost their relevance or potency over time. Our age should thus be the prime time for mediation, but looking at the world today, that is not what we observe. In fact, mediation is becoming less effective.

The existing measures of successful peacemaking show a decline over time. Fewer peace agreements are reached; fewer ceasefires are negotiated; and fewer negotiations between conflict parties are initiated by mediators. This presents us with a puzzling development: the mismatch between the growing need for mediation and the dwindling effectiveness of peacemaking practice. The chief explanation for this asymmetry is that the job of contemporary mediators has become more difficult.[2] In particular, three global trends are reshaping the nature of conflicts and mediators' ability to manage them effectively: the changing world order; the increasing involvement of radical actors, particularly Islamist armed actors in armed conflicts; and the global wave of state-based ethnonationalism. Mediators need to adapt to these changes to be able to meet the needs and fulfil the potential of international mediation.[3]

This chapter is divided into four parts. In the first, I will explore the need for mediation, and in the second, the decline in peacemaking success. In part three, I will examine potential explanations for the decline, discussing how three major trends affect the ability of mediators

[1] Special thanks to the Swedish Research Council for funding for my ongoing research project on which this chapter is based, and to my research assistant, Jakob Faller.

[2] On the supply and demand of mediation in a changing world, see Magnus Lundgren, Desirée Nilsson and Isak Svensson, "Unwilling or unwanted? Explaining the decline of mediation in armed conflicts", paper prepared for the Conflict Research Society Conference, 17–19 September 2025.

[3] Teresa Whitfield, *Still Time to Talk: Adaptation and Innovation in Peace Mediation*, Accord No. 30 (London, Conciliation Resources, February 2024).

to be effective. In the fourth and concluding section, I will discuss potential implications for mediators that may stimulate discussions among policymakers on how to adapt and make mediation more effective in a challenging time, including by taking historical mediation experiences into account to a larger degree.

A World in Urgent Need of Mediation

There is an increasing need for mediation. The latest report from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) recorded 61 active armed conflicts within and between countries. These are situations where at least one government is involved and that have resulted in at least 25 battle-related deaths. This is the highest number of armed conflicts registered at any time since the end of the Second World War, when UCDP records began,[4] suggesting that there have been an unprecedented number of occasions in which mediators could have acted.

More people are also being killed as a result of armed conflict. The last four years have seen the highest levels of fatalities in state-based conflicts since 1989 when data collection started. UCDP reports that 128,400 people died in battle in 2024, nearly 60 per cent of whom were killed in the Russia-Ukraine war – only a slight decrease from 2023. We are thus living in a more violent world, and higher conflict intensity should incentivize mediators to engage.

It should be clarified that the two indicators commonly used to measure violence – the number of conflicts worldwide and the global aggregate of conflict intensity – are distinct empirical processes, partly driven by different factors. In particular, conflict intensity is strongly associated with individual conflicts and is determined by how they evolve. Conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Gaza and Ukraine have been the major armed conflicts shaping casualty statistics over the last two decades. The trendline in global battle statistics fluctuates because it depends on developments in specific countries, but 2011 seems to be a turning point, for both the growing number of battle-related deaths and the increased number of conflicts.

Mediation has been shown to be an effective way to resolve conflicts and limit violence. "Mediation" as used here describes a range of diplomatic activities that an actor not directly involved in the conflict engages in to bring the belligerent sides closer together.[5] Mediation rests on the consent of the parties to the conflict; parties need to accept both the process through which mediation is carried out and the outcome that follows from such a process. Unlike arbitration, parties are not legally bound to accept mediators' suggestions, which are instead a focus for political negotiations. Mediation is always carried out by at least one individual; it is, at its core, a social, human-to-human process. At the same time, the individual mediator almost always acts on a mandate from a state or an organization (or both), and mediation is therefore a mechanism of inter-state and international relations.

[4] Shawn Davies and others, "Organized violence 1989–2024, and the challenges of identifying civilian victims," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 62, No. 4 (2025), pp. 1223–1240.

[5] On conceptual clarifications on mediation, see Jacob Bercovitch, Theodore J. Anagnoson and Donnette L. Wille, "Some conceptual issues and empirical trends in the study of successful mediation in international relations", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 28, No. 1 (1991); Peter Wallensteen and Isak Svensson, "Talking peace: international mediation in armed conflicts", Journal of Peace Research, vol. 51, No. 2 (2014). On the relationship between mediation and mediation support, see Govinda Clayton, Allard Duursma and Simon Mason, "What is peace mediation? Understanding the sources of conceptual confusion in the practice and study of mediation", Joint Brief Series: Improving Mediation Effectiveness (Stockholm, Folke Bernadotte Academy and ACCORD, 2023).

Moreover, most – though not all – mediators are unbiased when they enter into a conflict. Mediators may get involved in a conflict because they have developed particular ties with one or both sides. Previous connections do not necessarily impede mediation. In fact, parties in conflicts may accept a mediator who is biased against them because they can bring particular resources into the conflict management process (for example, unique access to the other side or the ability to influence that side and ensure it keeps to its commitments).[6]

Mediation has the potential to thoroughly transform conflicts. Much of what mediators do involves finding ways to end the violence. They do so through dialogue and more constructive negotiation processes that may open paths towards new types of solutions. But effective peacemaking goes beyond merely containing situations of violence; it also entails bringing fresh perspectives that can open up a path between incompatible positions and reconcile hostile attitudes. Mediation can also create space to reconfigure society towards broader inclusive processes and agreements that help to address the root causes of conflicts. Empirical research demonstrates that this potential has sometimes been realized: once mediators (or some specific types of mediated interventions) enter the conflict scene, they help to prevent armed conflicts,[7] shorten conflicts,[8] mitigate their intensity,[9] enable ceasefires,[10] bring about negotiated settlements[11] and deliver durable peace.[12]

Mediation is but one measure of international conflict management, among peacekeeping, international aid, multilateral institutional collaboration and (some form of) military intervention. Yet, there is a growing need for mediation because all other forms of international conflict management are in decline, strained by states' lack of financial support and political commitment. Official development assistance has fallen sharply and is projected

[6] On biased mediation, see Isak Svensson, "Bargaining, bias and peace brokers: how rebels commit to peace", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 44, No. 2 (2007); Isak Svensson, "Biased mediation," in Research Handbook on Mediating International Crises, Kyle Beardsley, Jonathan Wilkenfeld and David Quinn, eds. (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

[7] Kyle Beardsley, David E. Cunningham and Peter B. White, "Resolving civil wars before they start: the UN Security Council and conflict prevention in self-determination disputes", *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 47, No. 3 (2015); Magnus Oberg, Frida Moller and Peter Wallensteen, "Early conflict prevention in ethnic crises, 1990–98: a new dataset", *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 26, No. 1 (2009), pp. 67–91.

[8] Aysegul Aydin and Patrick M Regan, "Networks of third-party interveners and civil war duration", *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 18, No. 3 (2012).

9 Kyle Beardsley, David E. Cunningham and Peter B. White, "Mediation, peacekeeping and the severity of civil war", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 63, No. 7 (2018).

[10] Govinda Clayton and Han Dorussen, "The effectiveness of mediation and peacekeeping for ending conflict", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 59, No. 2 (2021).

[11] Elizabeth J. Menninga, "Bias and balance in civil war mediation," Journal of Peace Research (2023); Derrick V. Frazier and William J. Dixon, "Third-party intermediaries and negotiated settlements, 1946–2000", *International Interactions*, vol. 32, No. 4 (2006); Joakim Kreutz and Magda Lorena Cárdenas, "The women and men that make peace: introducing the mediating individuals (M-IND) dataset", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 62, No. 1 (2024).

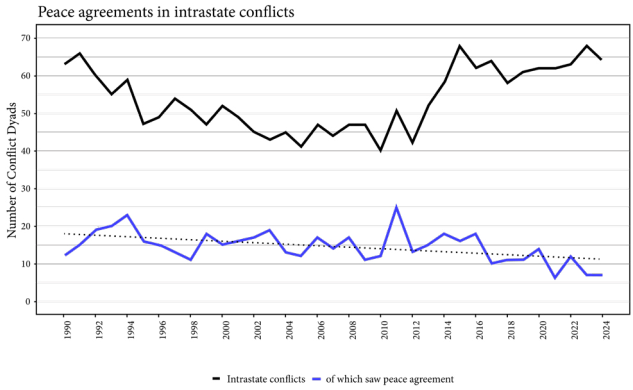
[12] Mehmet Gurses, Nicolas Rost and Patrick McLeod, "Mediating civil war settlements and the duration of peace", *International Interactions*, vol. 34, No. 2 (2008).

to fall further in the coming years,[13] while the deployment of peacekeeping forces has almost halved in the last decade.[14] The use of economic sanctions has also become politically contested at the UN.[15] There are thus fewer methods available to address the challenge of an increasingly violent world.

The Decline in Peacemaking Effectiveness

Mediation no longer achieves its full potential and has become less effective over time. One of the key indicators of success – the conclusion of peace agreements – has decreased in frequency (see Figure 1),[16] while other indicators of mediation success, such as ceasefires, appear to be declining as well. Mediators successfully bringing the parties to the table is yet another sign of progress in mediation, but negotiations are also becoming less frequent.[17]

Figure 1. Number of intra-state armed conflicts and peace agreements reached, 1990–2024



[13] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Cuts in official development assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term", OECD Policy Briefs, No. 26 (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2025). Available at https://doi.org/10.1787/8c530629-en (accessed on 1 December 2025). "The OECD projects a 9 to 17% drop in official development assistance (ODA) in 2025. This comes on top of a 9% drop in 2024" (p. 1). Overall, the projected funding cuts are "making these reductions a major shock to international development co-operation" (p. 2). In particular, "The United States accounted for 58% of humanitarian assistance from DAC countries in 2023 at USD 15 billion, and cuts in US ODA would have important knock-on effects for humanitarian efforts through multilateral channels" (p. 12).

[14] "The number of deployed peacekeeping troops has also fallen by 42 per cent over the past decade, while the number of conflicts has risen steadily" (p. 5). Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global peace index 2025: identifying and measuring the factors that drive peace" (Sydney, June 2025). Available at http://visionofhumanity.org/resources (accessed on 1 December 2025).

[15] See Maya Ungar, "Political divides drive a reassessment of UN sanctions", International Crisis Group, 26 August 2024. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/political-divides-drive-reassessment-un-sanctions (accessed on 1 December 2025).

[16] Adam Farquhar and others, "Peace agreements in 2023: insights from the PA-X database" (Edinburgh, The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh, 2024).

[17] For example, the Peace Observatory dataset shows that the number of negotiations in intra-state conflicts has been decreasing slowly since 2014, with a strong decline from 2022 to 2023. Even negotiations in inter-state conflicts became less frequent from 2022 to 2023, although there was an upward trend in the years before. Allard Duursma and others, (2025). "Introducing the Peace Observatory: peace negotiations in armed conflicts, 1989–2023". Available at https://peaceobservatory.com/about (accessed on 1 December 2025).
On the mismatch between international capacity for mediation and number of mediated conflicts, see Magnus Lundgren and Isak Svensson, "The surprising decline of international mediation in armed conflicts", Research and Politics, vol. 7, No. 2 (2020).

Figure 1 shows the number of intra-state armed conflicts and the number of conflicts in which peace agreements were reached between 1990 and 2024. During this period, the proportion of conflicts that have been resolved through peace agreements has also fallen. The past 15 years have seen a growing divide, with more intra-state conflicts emerging and a continuous decline in the number of those conflicts reaching peace agreements.

This decline may be attributable to the dearth of capable, willing mediators, but that seems unlikely given the great interest among many countries in offering their services as mediators.[18] In one of the defining wars of our era – the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which is a key point of tension among the great powers – there have been several different mediation efforts. States such as Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have found ways to offer their good offices or act as mediators to help the parties find common ground and explore diplomatic openings. Mediation offers have also been made by China, Brazil, Israel and the Vatican.[19] Because there are many actors who wish to maintain good contact with both the US and Europe, as well as Russia, the role of mediator can be strategically important. Yet, despite numerous offers, the tangible results of these efforts have been fairly limited so far.

Why Peacemaking Effectiveness Has Declined: Three Global Trends

The reason mediation cannot meet the apparent needs of the world is that mediation practice has generally become more difficult as the global landscape of conflict has changed. While this evolving landscape entails other changes, here I outline and discuss three key global trends that are most important from a mediation perspective: the changing world order, the increasing number of radical actors in conflicts and the rising global wave of state-based ethnonationalism.

The changing world order

The end of the Cold War opened a new era with greater opportunities for peacemaking. The easing of tensions between the Soviet Union/Russia and the US brought about two major shifts: a desire to disengage from many of the proxy wars waged by the two superpowers and a greater interest and ability to collaborate within the international system, especially the United Nations. Thus, the end of the Cold War paved the way for a surge in peacemaking, as evidenced by the rising share of conflicts reaching peace agreements in the 1990s and 2000s (see Figure 1 above), as well as the increased number of mediation interventions. The UN Security Council became more effective in fulfilling its purpose.[20] This era can be characterized as a multilateral world order underpinned by a unipolar (American-led) system.

That moment now seems to be drawing to its end. There are various theoretical explanations

[18] On the mismatch between international capacity for mediation and number of mediated conflicts, see Magnus Lundgren and Isak Svensson, "The surprising decline of international mediation in armed conflicts", *Research and Politics*, vol. 7, No. 2 (2020).

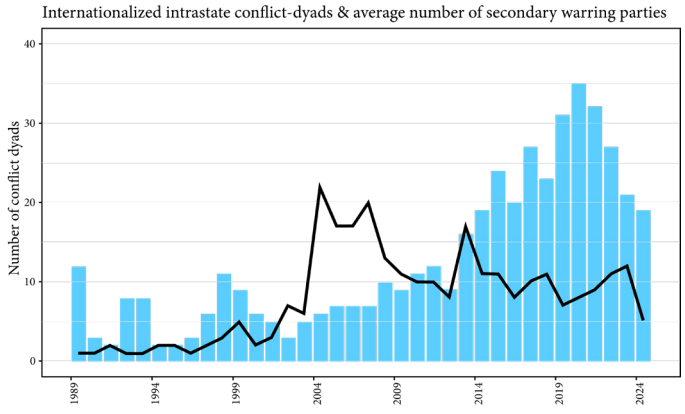
[19] Isabel Bramsen and Isak Svensson, "Peace talks in the Russia-Ukraine war: when, who, and how?" *International Negotiation*, vol. 30 (2025), pp. 97–122.

[20] Richard Gowan and Stephen John Stedman, "The international regime for treating civil war, 1988–2017", *Daedalus*, vol. 147, No. 1 (2018).

for how peace can be maintained among nations, but the three dominant paradigms offer different diagnoses. From a realist perspective, the current turmoil is caused by shifting global power balances and growing uncertainty over a possible power transition, driven by the rise of a more assertive China, reactions to the overreach of Western-led military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya and the rise of middle powers. From a liberal perspective, the causes include the decline of democracies (notably, the increasingly authoritarian turn in Russia), the weakening of international institutions and declining support for global economic integration. From a constructivist perspective, it is primarily norms that are being contested, including fundamental norms such as territorial integrity (with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine serving as a turning point) and basic rights that are in danger of being reversed as a result of counter-revolutions. While these perspectives can be usefully distinguished in academic discussions, most observers would recognize that all of them contribute valuable insights into the current crisis.

The changing world order affects the space for mediators in four distinct ways. First, it has led to an increase in the number of armed conflicts across state borders. There are more inter-state and intra-state conflicts, as well as internationalized intrastate conflicts – where external actors have intervened on the side of government or rebel groups – which is the category of conflict that has grown the most in recent years. Internationalization can help explain why mediation has become more challenging: there are more veto players, increased complexity, more resources available to continue fighting, an externalization of conflict costs that relieves some pressure from the battlefield and more obstacles to aligning parties' expectations, which hinders the establishment of a foundation for resolving the conflict. The last years have seen a decline in internationalized conflicts since the peak in 2020, but the number of internationalized conflicts remains higher than in earlier decades. Figure 2 illustrates the increase in internationalized conflicts from 1989 to 2024: it shows the number of active internationalized intra-state conflicts during this period, as well as the average number of secondary warring parties per conflict.

Figure 2. Internationalized intra-state conflicts and average number of parties, 1989–2024



Second, mediators face additional challenges not only because of the growing frequency of conflicts but also due to shifting type and format of internationalized conflicts. In the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the US, international coalitions of actors

came together to intervene in Afghanistan in 2001, and a similar (albeit smaller) coalition invaded Iraq in 2003. The most prevalent intervenors during this period were the US and France, and the typical intervention was undertaken in fragile countries to combat militant Islamist groups and support state-building. Today, the picture is more complex. First of all, we see fewer countries intervening. While this may decrease complexity to some extent due to the reduction in the number of actors, it is also a manifestation of the changing nature of interventions, as can be seen in Figure 2. As the number of internationalized conflicts has grown since the early 2000s, the average number of external actors involved in each conflict has been declining. Thus, fewer actors are engaged in more conflicts. At the same time, those who intervene are individual countries seeking to advance their own national interest and are less attentive to the needs of state-building. In the latest report from the UCDP, 19 conflicts were identified as internationalized. Mediators need to manage not only governments and rebel groups, but also external actors with varied motivations.

Third, territorial integrity, the legal norm that prohibits the forcible annexation of territory, is a cornerstone of modern international law. This norm has not been universally respected, but violations have largely been met with negative reactions by other UN member states. For example, many states have refused to recognize conquered territories in Cyprus, Palestine, Western Sahara and East Timor. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a blatant violation of the norm, and the fact that it was launched by a member of the UNSC renders it especially egregious. Yet, there are other signs that this norm is weakening. Other states are attempting to conquer territory through force, among them Israel in Syria and Palestine,[21] Rwanda in the DRC[22] and Thailand in Cambodia.[23] We have also witnessed worrying shifts in the rhetoric from other countries, suggesting territorial ambitions in disregard of the norm (e.g. Venezuela's claims to an oil-rich territory in neighbouring Guyana; US proposals to acquire Greenland and Panama; and Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed's claims of access to the sea).[24] The US recognition of Moroccan control over Western Sahara and the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights during President Trump's first term can also be viewed from this perspective. This erosion of a foundational norm has serious implications for mediation. Territorial integrity undergirds the modern international order, which is predicated on a stable set of territorially defined states. Without it, state authority would be much more susceptible to contestation and revision, heralding a new era of opportunity for secessionists and powerful states seeking to acquire strategically important and resource-rich territories. The continued erosion of this norm will make mediators' work more challenging everywhere.

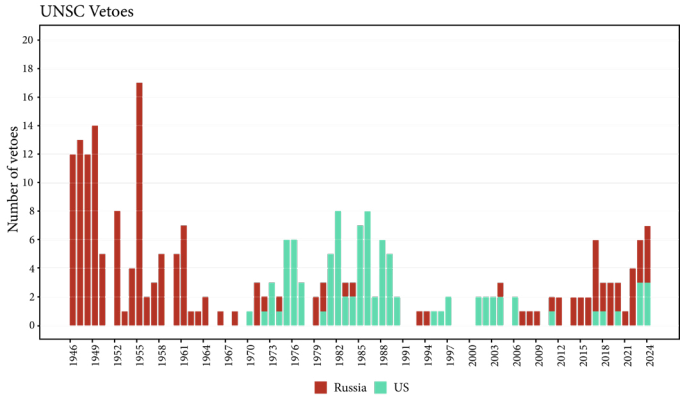
[21] Kelly Ng and Ruth Comerford, "What we know about Israel's plan to take over Gaza City", BBC, 8 August 2025. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1mpg2glz1zo (accessed on 1 December 2025); on the Israeli occupation of Syria, see Jason Burke, "Israel to occupy Syrian southern territory for 'unlimited time', says minister", *The Guardian*, 12 March 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/12/israel-to-occupy-syrian-southern-territory-for-unlimited-time-says-minister (accessed on 1 December 2025).

[22] Richard Moncrieff, "The DR Congo-Rwanda deal: now comes the hard part", International Crisis Group, 5 July 2025. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/democratic-republic-congo/dr-congo-rwanda-deal-now-comes-hard-part) (accessed on 1 December 2025).

[23] Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Why are Thailand and Cambodia engaged in a border conflict?" *The Guardian*, 24 July 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/24/why-thailand-cambodia-border-clash-conflict (accessed on 1 December 2025).

[24] Mahemud Eshtu Tekuya, "Swimming against the current: Ethiopia's quest for access to the Red Sea under international law", *Fordham International Law Journal*, vol. 47, No. 3 (2024).

Figure 3. Number of vetoes by Russia/Soviet and the US in UN Security Council, 1946–2024



A fourth way in which the changing world order is exacerbating challenges for today's peacemakers is the breakdown of consensus in international institutions.[25] One indicator of this rising tension, particularly among the great powers, can be found in voting patterns of the UNSC and the use of the veto. Figure 3 shows that the number of vetoes exercised in the UNSC by either the US or Russia has been climbing over the past decade and, in 2023 and 2024, reached levels similar to those at the end of the Cold War. In 2024, the US and Russia vetoed three and four resolutions, respectively. The discord among the members of the council has undermined effective UN mediation and peacemaking, as starkly demonstrated in the case of the Syrian civil war and Israel's assault on Gaza. Russia used its veto to protect its ally in the Assad regime in Syria, and the US used its veto to protect its ally in the Netanyahu government in Israel. Mediators have not received sufficient political support for their efforts to end wars, neither UN-mandated mediators in the Syrian civil war, nor Qatar and Egypt in the Gaza war. Great-power rivalry can influence mediators' prospects to secure effective outcomes. Mediation not only requires a willing mediator, accepted by the parties, but also needs pressure (from the mediators or, more commonly, other actors) to encourage them to move towards solutions. Giving up positions they have held requires actors with leverage over the parties to engage in peacemaking and do so in a concerted manner. Unified pressure from external actors with ties to the parties is often necessary to persuade them that continuing the conflict will be too costly and that the benefits of peace will outweigh the costs. Building unity is challenging, and persuading external actors to put pressure on the conflict parties is even more difficult when they are focused elsewhere.

The proliferation of radical actors

Over the past few decades, the increase in conflicts framed in Islamist terms is one of the most significant shifts in the conflict landscape. To a large extent, this development has been driven by an increasing number of conflicts where at least one side has been associated with one of the two major transnational jihadist networks, the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. It is also a function of the fact that conflicts involving actors with self-proclaimed Islamist goals,

[25] For more on how world order changes affect peacemaking practices, see Sara Hellmüller, "Peacemaking in a shifting world order: a macro-level analysis of UN mediation in Syria", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 48, No. 3 (2022); Sara Hellmüller and Fanny Badache, "Children of their time: the impact of world politics on United Nations peace operations", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 46, No. 2 (2025).

as well as conflicts more generally framed in religious terms, tend to be more intractable. Once religious claims become part of a conflict, they tend to hinder mediators' ability to resolve the conflict peacefully. Islamist conflicts, especially those with a transnational focus, are even harder to resolve because the international scope on both the government and rebel sides makes the termination and resolution of conflicts more difficult to achieve. In many of these conflicts, the explicit demand for mediation from the conflict parties seems to have been low due to the parties' resolve as well as the complexity that arises from external support structures surrounding these types of conflicts.

Mediation practice has been further complicated by the use of terrorist proscription, especially in conflicts involving actors fighting over self-proclaimed Islamist goals. Western states, particularly following 9/11, have tended to view non-state armed actors in general, and Islamist armed groups in particular, through a terrorism lens and have increasingly used terrorist proscription to enforce legal action. Proscription has prevented diplomatic engagement with these types of groups and associated actors, in the process strengthening hawks on both sides – governments gain legitimacy for violent repression and groups see no other way forward than through violence.[26] The use of proscription against conflict parties has become more frequent over time.[27] Terrorist proscription limits the space for mediation. It can hinder one of the key steps in negotiation: recognition of the other side and the identification of valid spokespersons with whom both sides can talk, which is a common precondition for serious negotiations. One-sided violence against civilians by non-state actors is not increasing over time, but the perception and treatment of actors using these types of tactics seems to have shifted.

The global wave of state-based ethnonationalism

The trend towards globalization over the last decade has faced a growing counter-force, as ethnonationalism and religious nationalism have taken hold in countries around the globe.[28] Support for internationalism has fallen sharply as nationalist political forces have gained or consolidated power in countries including Israel, the US, India, China and Russia, all of which play key roles in shaping international relations.[29] The divisions between the new form of nationalists and traditional political parties also run deep in Europe, in countries such as Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, while the opposition in France, Germany and the UK is currently dominated by parties with nationalist ideologies. Revisionist political forces in

[26] Sophie Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace: How Listing Armed Groups as Terrorists Hurts Negotiations* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2021).

[27] Magnus Lundgren, Emma Janson and Martin Lundqvist, "Introducing the proscription of armed actors dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 62, No. 4 (2024).

[28] As pointed out in a recent study: "The global frequency of [right-wing populist] leaders has surged in recent years (albeit with temporal and regional variation), having surpassed even the period leading up to World War II." See Minnie M. Joo and others, "Right-wing populist leaders, nationalist rhetoric, and dispute initiation in international politics", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 69, Nos. 2–3 (2024).

[29] On the growing power of nationalist parties in Israel, France, Germany and Poland, see Freedom House, "Freedom in the world 2025" (Washington D.C., 2025). On nationalism as a driving force for withdrawals from international governmental organizations, see Seung-Whan Choi, "Nationalism and withdrawals from intergovernmental organizations: connecting theory and data", *The Review of International Organizations*, vol. 17, No. 1 (2021). Relations between great powers have varied over time historically between periods of particularism versus universalism, driven to a large extent by domestic changes within the great powers. See Peter Wallensteen, "Universalism vs. particularism: on the limits of major power order", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 21, No. 3 (1984).

Russia and Israel are pressing for territorial expansion on the basis of religious nationalism.

The rising wave of ethnonationalism poses challenges for mediators. Ethnonationalist political group are actively working against multilateral collaboration and peacemaking efforts. In some of the most intense conflicts, such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, nationalist actors from multiple countries work politically to undermine solutions based on international law. Collaboration between ethnonationalist actors seems to be on the rise.

This is not the first time the world has experienced a global wave of ethnonationalism. Nationalist sentiments were mobilized after the end of the Cold War, fuelling a number of ethnic conflicts around the world. During the early and mid-1990s, ethnonationalist political forces dominated countries on the margins of the global power system, in regions such as West Africa, the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union. The current wave, by contrast, has involved key players in the international system: the US, Russia, China and India, while Europe's future direction remains uncertain. In the 1990s, the major powers could work together to address the effects of rising nationalism. This time, the centre itself is weakening, and peacemaking is up to actors who have historically been less influential on the international scene.

Conclusions: Ways Forward for Mediators?

> *Is it a new land*
>
> *in another reality than today´s?*
>
> *Or have I been here before, before the day?*
>
> *I woke up…*
>
> Dag Hammarskjöld, excerpt from his last quote in *Markings*

There is, as I have shown here, an urgent need for mediation, but at the same time, mediation is proving less successful than in the past. Mediation processes have become increasingly difficult to bring to fruition, but what this means is less clear. The reasons, I have argued, are rooted in three main global trends that together make the work of today's mediators much more challenging and complex: the changing world order, the rise of radical actors in conflicts and the global wave of state-based ethnonationalism. The reality facing the peacemakers of today is thus markedly different from yesterday. Mediators find themselves in a tough spot.

The changing nature of conflicts can impede the chances of conflict ripeness. Research shows that mediation often relies on a sense of urgency, generated when the conflict is perceived by the parties as too costly to continue to pursue. Once parties are unable to escalate with available resources and cannot make progress towards their goals, even as the status quo is untenable, they will seek solutions. Skilful mediators can recognize such openings, help

create them and capitalize on them when they appear.[30] In many cases, the changing nature of conflict, as described in this essay, reduces the likelihood of a hurting stalemate. Several trends suggest that conflicts are increasingly perceived as less costly by decision makers, which discourages them from seeking peaceful solutions: internationalization serves to externalize conflict costs; some extremist Islamist groups tend to be much more intransigent, less likely to compromise and less war-averse; and growing ethnonationalism reduces the scope for common ground or potential agreement. With more external actors, more armed groups with self-proclaimed Islamist goals and the more frequent use of terrorist designations, the chances of identifying a solution are further diminished. Therefore, ripeness may be less likely to occur in today's conflicts compared with those in the past. One implication of this is that more efforts should be directed towards limiting the resources available to conflict parties to continue fighting, and the economic and political cost of conflicts must be ramped up. Mediation alone cannot be expected to settle conflicts; it must be done within a context where more actors impose costs on conflict actors, especially those mainly responsible for the continuation of the wars.

Mediators also need to adapt to allow for more constructive ways to manage conflicts that involve actors with self-proclaimed Islamist goals. For example, in addressing the challenge posed by the increasing number of Islamist armed conflicts, mediators have begun exploring ways to distinguish between the more intransigent transnational actors and the locally embedded actors, who tend, for various reasons, to be more pragmatic. Islamist conflicts can be approached more constructively by localizing transnational Islamist issues and exploring ways to accommodate local actors.[31] Drawing on this distinction, there are ways to engage constructively with Islamist actors, where de-transnationalization is both a condition for dialogue and often also a consequence of it. Mediators, particularly in the Gulf, have also found ways to circumvent the obstacles associated with the terrorist designation.

Clearly, the tensions among the great powers have hindered effective UN mediation activities in many situations. This does not mean, though, that the UN is passive. Nor have other actors remained on the sidelines: new countries are stepping into the fold. The peace mediation sector has, for some time, been dominated by diplomats from Western countries, including Switzerland, the Nordic countries (primarily Norway, but also to some extent Sweden and Finland) and Canada. In recent years, this trend has begun to change. Countries like Oman and Qatar have a long tradition of peace mediation but have become more vocal and visible in their roles as mediators on the international scene. Türkiye has also been positioning itself as a mediator. The increasing number of mediators from Middle Eastern countries has created new opportunities to address some of the issues linked to the conflict landscape, in particular the ability to engage actors who have framed their conflicts in Islamist terms; they are also less bound by all terrorist proscription regulations. How countries that do not necessarily belong to the liberal democratic political tradition will

30 On conflict ripeness and mutually hurting stalemates, see William Zartman, Elusive Peace: Negotiating an End to Civil Wars (Washington D.C., The Brooking Institution Press, 1995). See also Michael J. Greig, "Moments of opportunity: recognizing conditions of ripeness for international mediation between enduring rivals", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 45, No. 6 (2001); Marieke Kleiboer, "Ripeness of conflict: a fruitful notion?" *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 31, No. 1 (1994); C. R. Mitchell, "The right moment: notes on four models of 'ripeness'", *PARADIGMS: The Kent Journal of International Relations*, vol. 9, No. 2 (1995); Siniša Vuković, "Expanding ripeness beyond push and pull: the relevance of mutually enticing opportunities (MEOs)", *Ethnopolitics*, vol. 21, No. 2 (2022).

31 Desirée Nilsson and Isak Svensson, *Jihadist Peace: Ending Civil Wars* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2025).

shape the form and outcomes of mediation remains to be seen. The inclusion of civil society may be negatively affected, although tentative empirical evidence does not support this hypothesis.[32] The increasing involvement of countries from the Middle East may also affect the outcomes of mediation. Often, mediation processes have involved constitution-making (or at least a pre-process to constitution-making), aimed at laying the groundwork for a post-conflict democratic system. Whether mediators that are not liberal democracies have the interest and capabilities to support the democratic transition in conflict countries is also an open empirical question.

Mediators appear to be increasingly averse to seeking to craft comprehensive peace agreements that can bring about a genuine transformation of the conflict, although such agreements have always been rare. Also, peace agreements of a less ambitious nature appear to be more difficult to achieve, given the current state of world affairs. Mediators have adjusted their expectations and tailored their goals to what can be achieved; local ceasefires, solutions to specific sub-issues or the mitigation of the consequences of wars seem to be the main objectives of many mediators.

There is still room, albeit more restricted, for would-be peacemakers to act. There are certain areas where great powers can find common ground and agree to cooperate. For example, in Yemen, the UN mediator Hans Grundberg has been able to maintain acceptance from both external and local actors. Furthermore, mediators have been able to make progress on conflicts that lie outside the primary attention and sphere of interests of the great powers. The key processes that have made some progress during the last years have been in countries where the great powers, although having supported one of the sides, have not had particularly strong stakes in the conflicts, such as in Ethiopia (Tigray peace agreement in 2022), the Philippines (framework agreement in 2022), Colombia (peace agreement with FARC-EP in 2016), Yemen (de facto ceasefire) and Thailand (opening of negotiations).

There are risks associated with mediation adaptation. Mediation is a way to reconcile the diverging interests of conflict parties but should not impede any of the parties' fundamental rights. To be considered legitimate, mediation should be based on international law. An emerging trend in peacemaking and mediation is the increasing dominance of the transactional mediation model.[33] This is most evidently manifested in US President Donald Trump's mediation efforts around the world, where economic benefits for the US are a central focus, including rare earth deals negotiated with DRC and Ukraine, strategic development projects such as the Trump Road to International Peace and Prosperity in Armenia and the proposed US takeover of Gaza for the purpose of property development ("the Riviera of the Middle East").[34] It is an approach to peacemaking that ignores fundamental issues about rights and status. It seeks to pacify conflicts, not transform them. This less principled approach to mediation, which shows little respect for the UN Charter and the prohibition against the acquisition of territory by force, is gaining traction. If this trend continues, mediation may serve to reinforce a development that is, in the longer run, detrimental to the

[32] I explore this further with Desirée Nilsson in a forthcoming book tentatively titled, *Bringing Them in or Leaving Them out? Mediator Types and Civil Society Inclusion in Peace Negotiations.*

[33] Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Transactional peacemaking: warmakers as peacemakers in the political marketplace of peace processes", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 46, No. 2 (2025).

[34] Nadine Yousif, "Trump wants US to take ownership of Gaza Strip", *BBC*, 5 February 2025. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyk0r3kvxyo (accessed on 1 December 2025).

fundamental purposes of peacemaking.

Finally, it is important to remember that many of the challenges facing contemporary peacemakers are not entirely new; issues that confronted peacemakers during the Cold War can now serve as valuable lessons for contemporary mediators. As the above quote from the renowned Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, reminds us, it is worth asking ourselves whether we have been here before. Hammarskjöld was active during the Cold War, an era dominated by great power rivalries. Hammarskjöld worked to expand the mandate of the Secretary-General and make the UN a relevant player in the management of international crises. His approach to preventing local conflicts from being drawn into great power rivalries offers an example to us today. A readiness to talk and engage in dialogue with key actors, even the intransigent parties; a willingness to act in situations where there are opportunities to make progress; and a commitment to anchoring mediation practice in international law – these were all hallmarks of Hammarskjöld's mediation approach. It remains as relevant today as it was then.

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A broad consensus has emerged among global experts, UN agencies, and major aid organizations that norms prohibiting the use of force and the targeting of civilians are collapsing, and the global order is at a critical inflection point regarding multilateral cooperation against conflict. The analysis presented here testifies to this reality, surveying practice and analysing challenges to stimulate a wide-ranging debate on how peace mediation needs to adapt to remain effective. The report 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.

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