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Peace as a Power Play – Mediation in an Era of Disorder

War has returned to the centre of international politics. Military force is increasingly used as an instrument for resolving political disputes, preserving influence, and reshaping regional and global orders. Armed conflicts are proliferating, military coups are spreading, and interstate confrontation is on the rise. This represents one of the most profound shifts in international relations in decades.

At the core of this development lies great power politics. Major powers have shown a growing willingness to use force and tolerate violence perpetrated by their allies. In turn, middle powers have used the opportunity to defend or expand their strategic interests militarily, often through proxies. At the same time, rapid technological development has offered new ways of waging wars. In short, war has become more politically acceptable and has further normalised violence as a tool of statecraft.

As a corollary to this development, demand has increased for credible mechanisms to de-escalate, contain, and ultimately end conflicts. Peacemaking has not disappeared from global politics, but rather it has been drawn directly into its most contested arenas. The new era of wars has made peacemaking more relevant but also more complex.

This paper is intended to provide insights for actors operating in this space from the perspective of a private actor.

Peacemaking as power politics

Peacemaking used to be primarily connected to the fragility of states and intra-state conflicts, with the foundational *United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation* (2012) a case in point. The increasing role of state-sponsored violence has changed the context.

Internationalised civil wars in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Sudan, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and other state-to-state conflicts across the globe have moved peacemaking closer to its historical geopolitical role.

The geopolitical significance of mediation is demonstrated by the fact that the world's two leading powers have set up two competing international platforms for conflict resolution: The US-initiated Board of Peace and the China-launched International Organization for Mediation in Hong Kong. The approaches differ. One is political, top-heavy and flexible, the other more legal and technocratic. But the aim of both is to bolster the founder's role in mediation, thereby not only institutionalising their preferred methods of dispute settlement but also projecting their respective worldviews.

Peacemaking has also shifted to the highest political level. Processes once led by UN Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSG) in closed rooms are now increasingly driven by heads of state and government in the full glare of publicity.

The more personalised approach seen today has particularly empowered states with centralised structures to engage in mediation. The powers involved increasingly use the new fora to engage and curry favour with major powers or their leaders. Peace mediation has increasingly become a competitive diplomatic battleground, where traditional powers, rising middle powers, and globally active smaller states alike seek influence, strategic advantage and legitimacy. It is shaped by state expediency operating in a more transactional manner, and it uses public exposure to increase pressure and put opponents into reaction mode.

The hollowing out of the UN

Geopolitical fragmentation has shrunk the space for collective action, and multilateral organisations are struggling. Political paralysis driven by great power rivalry has bedevilled the ability of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to agree on new comprehensive resolutions on conflicts. Historically, Security Council resolutions defined the key political parameters of conflict resolution and the UN derived much of its leverage from the agreed – if often lowest-common-denominator – resolutions.

The Security Council's inability to agree on these basic political parameters for some of today's most consequential conflicts has weakened the UN's role. The lack of major-power-agreed constraints "policed" by the UN has weakened SRSGs. The situation is exacerbated by the difficulties many regional organisations, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the African Union (AU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) face in setting the "rules of the game". They are also increasingly unable to find and endorse meaningful common positions. In Sudan, the cooperation with regional and multilateral organisations has been patchy, and the recent Sudan Quintet (the AU, the UN, the European Union, the League of Arab States, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development in Eastern Africa) is an opportunity for a more coordinated mediation structure. But major differences within and among the members will need to be overcome.

However, the lack of UNSC resolutions could also empower the UN Secretary General (UNSG) and increase room to manoeuvre. Without the "golden shackles" of the UNSC, the UNSG could operate in the conflict space in a way that was seen in the 1950s and 1960s. Now many new state players actively operate in this space, and the success of the UN would largely depend on the SG's ability to cajole the involved middle powers and draw from their resources.

The operational activities of the UN – e.g. humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, human rights monitoring – would continue to underpin mediation work. Notwithstanding their financial woes, they offer unmatched capacity for supporting broader stability and basic conditions necessary for peace. Peace in Gaza would be unachievable without the resources of the United Nations.

No rules or new rules?

An illustration of weakening international rules can be seen in how core international norms such as the prohibition of genocide and the inadmissibility

of territorial acquisition by force are being openly violated in contexts such as Sudan, Ukraine, and Gaza. These violations have been met with limited or inconsistent international responses. States' responses appear increasingly guided by narrow cost–benefit calculations and less by normative commitments and legal obligations.

Instead of international norms, peacemaking is increasingly underpinned by the logic of economic interdependence. This is a new, more sinister type of interdependence that gives an outside power a privileged position in the relationship. Economic instruments are mobilised to create incentives for restraint and cooperation of conflict parties, but they also yield economic benefits for outside countries and individuals involved in the mediation process, thereby reinforcing new forms of dependence. The Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) sought to address the vexed issue of facilitating overland transport links between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan in the South Caucasus by enhancing connectivity, but it also set US interests at the centre of the arrangement.

Recommendations

- Develop innovative methods to connect formal and informal tracks, such as leveraging technology to enhance consultation, coordination, and analysis. This includes identifying and engaging geopolitically significant small and middle powers committed to peacemaking, particularly those without immediate security or economic stakes. They could be best enabled to act as bridges between tracks, including within multilateral frameworks.

- Increase peacemaking actors' ability to quickly adapt strategies, methods, and operations to the changing dynamics. This must be supported by sufficient rapid reaction capabilities. Private mediation actors are uniquely positioned to adapt and produce results in this new environment.

- Renew analytical openness, including reassessing approaches such as peace through economic interdependence and the role of business, which continue to shape mediation efforts in many regions. Increase synergies with the private sector.

- Resist demoralisation, reduce fragmentation, and invest in collaboration, shared analysis, and adaptive practice. This is a defining "campfire moment" for the peacemaking community.

The sustainability of such peace and investment deals, like those in the South Caucasus and between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, is yet to be seen. There is the concern that without transparency and without deals being embedded in broader economic frameworks, they might prove transitory and become vehicles for redistribution of gains among a small circle of decision-makers.

In the European discussion, the idea of interdependence has been tainted following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It has led European states to shift towards greater defence autonomy and strategic independence. Russia's repeated proposals to the US showcase economic interdependence as a part of the solution to war in Ukraine. Despite European aversion, this new, more sinister interdependence logic is likely to continue to shape peacemaking approaches in other regions more than normative approaches.

Adapting peacemaking

For peacemaking, the implications of these shifts are significant, and the changing context requires new strategies. Three areas of work stand out in terms of challenges and possibilities.

First, as conflict space has become more open and unconstrained, there needs to be a more acute sense of geopolitics in mediation, and deeper connectivity with the active regional heavyweights and so-called coalitions of the willing. Middle powers and mini-lateral platforms, regional contact groups, and other coalitions of the willing, such as the Board of Peace, increasingly set agendas, broker access, mobilise resources and can block outcomes. The challenge is connecting these actors, aligning incentives, and integrating them effectively into global or regional institutional architectures to ensure systematic long-term engagement.

Second, as the role of economic interests in mediation increases, it necessitates a deeper understanding of economic drivers and their potential across every phase of a peace process. Economic statecraft – from sanctions to access to raw materials, and from investment opportunities to technology cooperation – will increasingly mould the parameters of mediation. This implies a shift toward more transactional forms of peacemaking often shaped by national and business interests. Peacemaking actors must therefore understand better and engage more with business and other economic actors.

Business could in some cases serve to support confidence-building and reconstruction if these are structured to reinforce stability, e.g. by supporting local ownership, building accountable institutions, and linking investment to inclusive governance and job creation. These elements would be needed also in Gaza's reconstruction. Analytical openness is required to examine how interdependencies are weaponised to coerce, but also how they can provide opportunities for fostering longer-term stability. The "business case" for peace, in which stability is framed as a platform for growth and returns, can mobilise capital and even re-energise an overstretched international community.

Third, cutting resources from inclusive political dialogues would be a mistake. There is a growing gap between top-level elite-driven deals and societies at large. Fostering civil society dialogue with political parties and other non-state actors and ensuring that it connects meaningfully to formal peace processes has become more difficult, but not impossible. Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogues continue to provide ideas, legitimacy, and societal perspectives for formal negotiations, and there are successful examples even from this more transactional era of peacemaking.

In fragmented and multi-layered conflicts, small and agile mediation actors can be best positioned to navigate overlapping arenas, provided they possess the needed connectivity, contextual analytical capacity, and the resources to move quickly. Success lies in maintaining local support, building trust over time, and ensuring that there are channels to those who ultimately hold decision-making power.

Supporting societal cohesion carries intrinsic worth because it strengthens the relationships, trust, and shared norms that allow communities to manage conflict even in the absence of any formal process. Supporting social cohesion in contexts such as Moldova and Yemen is therefore a key factor in enabling sustainable peace in the long run. New digital technology provides inclusive and scalable approaches. Even when political negotiations are narrow and transactional, these efforts can preserve space for societal engagement, cohesion and long-term reconciliation.

Ultimately, peacemaking needs to remain grounded in core principles such as inclusivity and local ownership. As President Martti Ahtisaari understood, peace is shaped within the currents of power, yet it lasts only when grounded in shared principles.