



# Patterns of Peacemaking

*When do we see international mediation, and what are the impacts?*

International mediation is a form of diplomatic intervention aimed at reaching negotiated solutions to armed conflict, political violence and international crises. Used by states, organizations, groups or individuals, mediation continues to be an important form of peacemaking. This brief outlines the major trends in international mediation, identifies relevant empirical trends and discusses implications for policy.

## Brief Points

- Mediation increases the likelihood of short-term peaceful settlement of conflicts.
- While international mediation has become increasingly common, many conflicts are still unmediated.
- The distribution of mediation is globally skewed, with Europe and the Middle East attracting the most attention.
- States and the UN remain key mediators, but regional organizations are becoming increasingly active and competent.
- There is no evidence of a positive long-term effect of international mediation.

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## Global trends of peacemaking: Is mediation becoming more common?

International mediation became more common after the end of the Cold War, particularly in international crises and interstate conflicts, but also in civil wars and intrastate armed conflicts. As can be seen in Figure 1, international mediation in interstate conflicts and crises has increased slowly since the end of World War II, with a more marked increase in the last two decades. Up from 35 percent in the 1980s, about half of interstate conflicts and crises received mediation in the 1990s and during the first years of the 2000s.

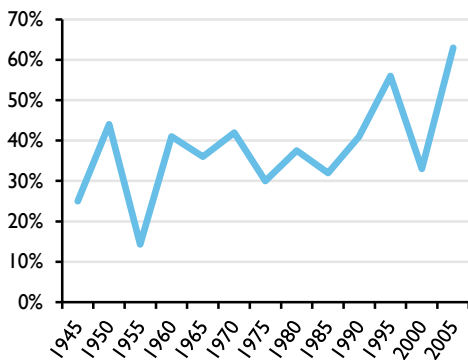


Figure 1: Proportion of interstate conflicts and crises that received mediation, 1945–2007. Source: International Crisis Behavior dataset.

There are several reasons to expect that the frequency of mediation should vary over time. First, we could expect an increased willingness to engage in mediation given the high costs of other forms of intervention, such as economic sanctions, military interventions or the deployment of peacekeepers. Moreover, in an increasingly globalized world, the costs of inactivity are rising, as seen in the massive refugee flows following the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, or the establishment of training grounds for international terrorist networks in failed states. Second, emerging international norms, which include the stronger emphasis of human rights relative to the principle of state sovereignty, may account for the underlying propensity to resort to international mediation, especially in civil wars. The shifting geopolitical landscape after the end of the Cold War may further explain some of the long-term increase in peacemaking efforts. During the 1990s, a number of protracted

armed conflicts were brought to the negotiation table, providing a new political space for smaller and middle-sized actors to function as diplomatic go-betweens.

The mediation surge around the end of Cold War has not been sustained for all types of conflicts, however. Civil wars, the most frequent type of conflict in today's world, do show a somewhat different trend. As shown in Figure 2, the proportion of civil wars that receive mediation is considerably lower than for conflicts between states. In the 1990s and 2000s, 27 percent of civil-war-years received mediation, about half the ratio for interstate conflicts and crises during the same time period. In many civil wars there are several armed groups active, and it is quite common that mediators address only one or a few sub-conflicts, leaving other sub-conflicts unmediated. When taking the number of conflict groups into account, mediation may even be on the decline. On average, 28 percent of all sub-conflicts received mediation in the 1990s, compared to just 22 percent in the 2000s. Note that this dataset only includes mediation efforts that are reported in news media. Secret, unofficial mediation efforts are not included in these figures.

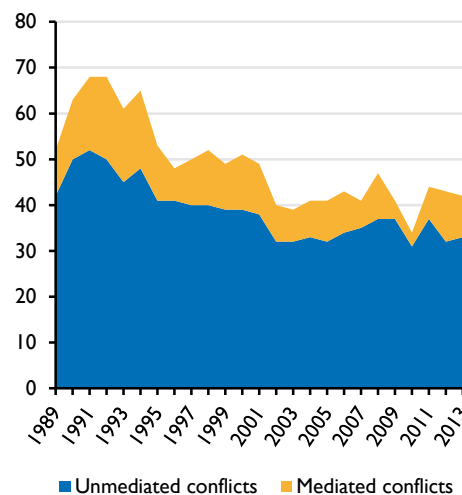


Figure 2: Mediated and unmediated civil conflicts, 1989–2013. Source: Svensson and Onken (2015), based on UCDP data.

Why are so few civil conflicts being mediated? This is puzzling, particularly given the growing number of actors that are willing to act as potential mediators. The answer is to be found in demand-side factors: governments

and rebel groups are reluctant to accept third-party mediation. A recent illustration of this phenomenon is the civil war in Syria, where the majority of rebel groups have resisted external mediation attempts.

The overall policy implication is that there is still a great growth potential in the international mediation market. There is room for more mediators to be involved, particularly in conflicts, or sub-conflicts, that have not hitherto received much attention.

## Where do mediators go?

There are certain geographical biases in the provision of mediation. The Middle East and Europe have seen the highest proportion of mediation efforts relative to the number of conflicts. Both the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia have been subject to extensive mediation efforts. On the other end of the scale, Asia as a whole, and East Asia in particular, are regions that have seen the lowest relative levels of mediation. Some of the longest lasting civil wars are taking place in Asia, such as low-intensity conflicts in India and Myanmar, yet Asia has received the lowest level of third-party mediation relative to its proportion of conflicts and in comparison to other conflict regions. There are several possible reasons for this pattern. In the case of East Asia, existing structures of institutional cooperation emphasize respect for sovereignty, whereas in Europe and Africa there is stronger institutional cooperation between countries and, to some extent, greater openness for external diplomatic interventions.

Research shows that mediators are generally appointed to the more difficult conflicts and do not engage in cherry picking. Higher conflict intensity, internationalization, duration, and the presence of territorial disputes all increase the likelihood of mediation. Furthermore, warring parties are less likely to accept mediation when they anticipate military success, something that is especially true in conflicts where there is a great asymmetry in power between the disputants.

From a policy perspective, these patterns point to three general conclusions. First, since mediators tend to engage in particularly hard conflicts, any assessment of their relative ef-

fectiveness should take this into account. Second, mediators should be encouraged to try to seek out areas of engagement that can complement, rather than interfere with, other parallel mediation efforts. Third, in circumstances involving a number of mediators, particularly in the European region, improved coordination of institutional response is required. Mediating between mediators may be more important than mediating between the parties in some contexts.

### Who are the mediators?

Mediation is undertaken by a range of different actors: from individuals up to the United Nations (Figure 3). The most common mediators are states and intergovernmental organizations. Historically, the United Nations has been the most frequent mediator in both international conflicts and civil wars. States have also been, and remain, active as mediators. While a popular perception of mediators is that they are “neutral go-betweens”, most definitions utilized by scholars of international mediation do not require neutrality or impartiality. This implies that diplomatic interventions by actors that have supported one or the other side of a conflict are not uncommon. The question of whether biased or unbiased mediators are the more effective peacemakers is a disputed one, with some studies finding that neutral mediators are more effective, and others indicating that partial mediators may have advantages.

The acceptance of mediation offers is determined by factors such as whether the potential mediator is a neighbouring state, whether there has been prior involvement in the dispute, and whether there are former colonial ties.

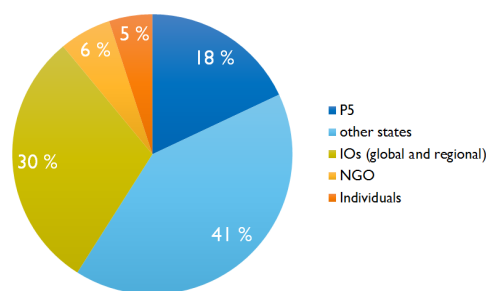


Figure 3: Types of actors in mediation. Source: Svensson and Onken (2015), based on UCDP data, 1989–2013.

Regional intergovernmental organizations have recently expanded their engagement in international mediation. There is a trend that regional organizations take greater responsibility for managing conflicts within their geographical domain. The institutionalization of mechanisms for international mediation, including specialized support capabilities provided by international secretariats, has increased in many of the regional organizations. The UN is leading the way, but regional organizations, among them the African Union, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), are aspiring to provide similar mediation functions. In Figure 4, we graph the average depth of institutional cooperation for conflict resolution across different regions, measured as an index score that takes into consideration the extent and mandate of regional mediation and peacekeeping capabilities. There is a clear trend of growing capabilities, but the regional variation is significant: some regions have deeper institutional cooperation, whereas others are lagging behind. Europe and Africa have developed deep cooperation around conflict resolution, but in Asia and the Middle East institutional capabilities remain relatively weak. These differences reflect regional variation in the need for mediation services, but they also point to underlying differences in the political willingness to cooperate in international institutions.

In sum, the UN and individual states remain the most important mediators, but we are witnessing a trend of regionalization of international mediation and, in conjunction with that, a growing institutionalization of mediation practices. This holds great potential for the future and should be supported. In relative terms, the rise of regional organizations as conflict managers may result in a reduced role for the UN, and there is debate over the complementarity between UN and regional organizations. But given that many regions still see low levels of mediation, the primary concern should be to ensure effective coordination between mediating organizations rather than worrying about duplicating the functions of the UN. Efforts should be made to strengthen the institutional mediation structures in some regions.

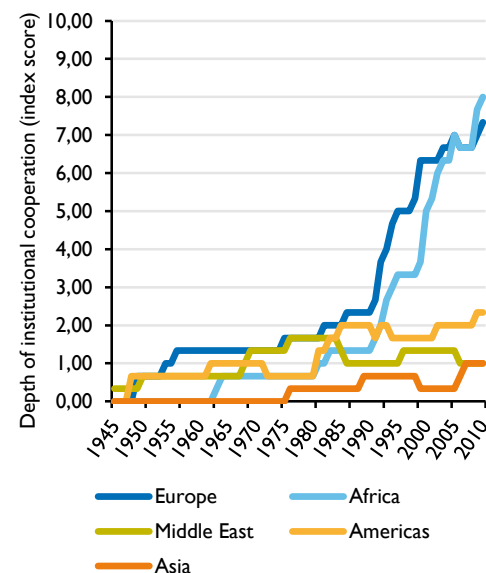


Figure 4: Conflict management cooperation in different regions, 1945–2010. Source: International Organization Conflict Management dataset.

### Outcomes of international mediation: general patterns?

Research on international mediation has identified a number of quite strong short-term outcomes of mediation, such as the cessation of fights, reaching agreements on key issues, and establishing procedures for handling contentious issues. Overall, then, mediation seems to be an important peacemaking instrument with a relatively high probability of succeeding. A statistical analysis of international conflicts, carried out by political scientists Derrick Frazier and William Dixon, found that the chance of reaching a negotiated settlement was six times higher when third-party intermediaries were present than when they were not. As shown in Figure 5, some positive results were reached in almost 80 percent of the mediation cases since 1989. Depending on the data and time period covered, however, different empirical studies arrive at somewhat different success scores for international mediation. The success rate for civil war mediation is lower, but still quite remarkable. One recent dataset shows that only 4 percent of all civil war mediation efforts failed completely, whereas 38 percent resulted in some sort of settlement. Another dataset on the outcome of civil war mediation efforts between 1946 and 2004 indicates that only one quarter of the mediation efforts were unsuccessful,

whereas agreement of some sort on the substantial issues were reached in 46 percent of the cases. Mediation resulted in ceasefires in about a third of the cases (30 percent).

Any discussion about mediation outcomes needs to recognize the many difficulties involved in defining mediation “success”. To what extent a successful outcome can be credited to the mediators, to the parties themselves, or to the structural conditions, is difficult to judge in the individual case. Further, it is not clear what indicators should be used for defining success. Another problem for scholars of mediation is that existing data sources do not take mediator mandates into account: relying on generalized measurements (such as peace agreements or ceasefires) as outcome indicators is problematic if they are not benchmarked against what the mediators were trying to achieve. Mandate-based measurements of interventions are for instance common in assessments of peacekeeping, but rarely used in the study of international mediation.

Although there is no consensus among researchers or practitioners as to which mediation strategy is the most effective generally,

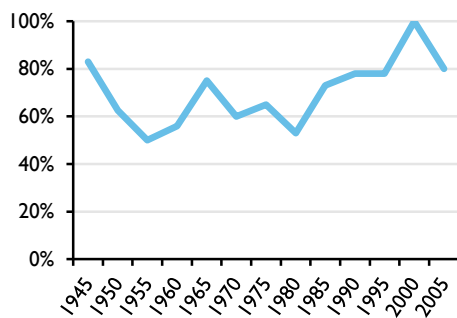


Figure 5: Proportion of mediation efforts that led to crisis abatement, 1945–2007. Source: International Crisis Behavior dataset.

the more active and powerful strategies – using bigger sticks and carrots – appear to be effective in the short term and more applicable in highly intense and complex conflicts. Less intrusive strategies are more effective in low intensity conflicts and may also bring about more sustainable settlements. The procedural strategies are also the ones most frequently utilized in the contexts of civil wars.

While the data suggest that mediation on average has a short-term positive impact, research on the long-term effects of mediation paints a bleaker picture. The mediation scholar Kyle Beardsley has pointed to one particular problem with mediation: there is a risk that mediators create temporary artificial incentives for agreement, which may bring conflict parties together momentarily, but leave the deal vulnerable in the longer term. Once the presence of mediators – and their leverage and inducements – is no longer felt, there is a risk that disputants return to fighting. Overall, empirical studies do not find any consistent, long-term positive effects of mediation on durable peace. Rather, some studies indicate a negative relationship. Nonetheless, research is still not in the position to definitively conclude that mediation has negative long-term effects, and more research, preferably across different datasets, is needed on this issue. Beyond research, one implication for policymakers in the field of international mediation is to pay more attention to the question of long-term effects of mediated interventions. While it is evident that mediators have the potential to help generate settlement, they have not yet managed to influence longer-term changes in the direction towards peace. Mediators should thus focus attention on how to generate more sustainable solutions to armed conflicts. ■

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## THE PROJECT

The Conflict Trends project aims to answer questions relating to the causes, consequences and trends in conflict. The project will contribute to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and works to produce thorough and quality based analysis for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## PRIO

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