

**PEACE MEDIATION IN THE AGE OF
GEOPOLITICAL CONTESTATION**

NAVIGATING THE NEW REALITY

Olli Ruohomäki



PEACE MEDIATION IN THE AGE OF GEOPOLITICAL CONTESTATION

NAVIGATING THE NEW REALITY

- Violent conflict increasingly operates as an intertwined set of local, national and transnational conflicts. Peace processes need to acknowledge the tensions between geopolitics, power machinations and mediation.
- Traditional mediation models aimed at achieving settlements between belligerents are rare. Instead, diplomatic efforts often seek mainly to manage flashpoints, signal red lines and avoid mishaps and miscalculations.
- Emerging actors from the Gulf, Turkey, China and ASEAN are reshaping diplomacy in a multipolar world and directly impacting the peace mediation scene, once the playing field of the UN and primarily Western actors.
- While third parties have long played an integral role in official peace mediation, a range of non-governmental organisations has emerged in recent years to act as go-betweens, provide analysis and build the capacities of negotiating parties.
- AI is playing an increasing role in peace mediation. It can help process and analyse vast amounts of data, including historical conflict data, socio-political dynamics and cultural nuances, giving mediators a greater understanding of complex conflict settings and helping them formulate more effective strategies.



OLLI RUOHOMÄKI

*Non-resident Senior Fellow
Global Security and Governance
FIIA*

ISBN 978-951-769-813-9

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

Graphics: Anna Kananen

Cover photo: Yasser Qudih/Eyevine/Lehtikuva

PEACE MEDIATION IN THE AGE OF GEOPOLITICAL CONTESTATION

NAVIGATING THE NEW REALITY

INTRODUCTION

The maintenance of international peace and security faces multiple challenges. Many internal conflicts are characterised by a deadly mix of fragmented armed groups and political interests, funded by criminal activities, while external actors meddle in the internal affairs of other states, fuel dissent and cause harm. Peace agreements are becoming more elusive and short-lived.

As war and peace mediation become increasingly complex, innovative thinking is needed to save and improve the lives of millions of people affected by political conflict and strife. The UN has acknowledged this need, and the Pact for the Future, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 22 September 2024, is a recent attempt to address international security and peace in a way that reflects today's realities.

In many ways, the age of formal peace agreements – such as the 1991 Comprehensive Agreement that marked the end of the Cambodian-Vietnamese War and the Third Indochina War, the 1995 Dayton Accords that put an end to the three-and-a-half-year-long Bosnian War, and the 2005 Aceh peace deal, mediated by former President Martti Ahtisaari, which paved the way for stability in Indonesia's conflict-torn province – is more or less over. Back in the day, a UN-led peace-keeping force or a smaller monitoring mission composed of third-party actors was put in place to oversee the implementation of peace agreements and the transition from a war-torn society to peace and stability. Today, such missions are few and far between and, if they do exist, their success is highly questionable.

This is because we live in an age of unprecedented geopolitical and geo-economic contestation, and the rules-based international order is crumbling fast. The UN Security Council is struggling to agree on anything meaningful to bring conflicts to an end. The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine serves as the final nail in the coffin for peace processes in which the major powers came together and at least attempted, however grudgingly, to carve out peace deals.

Nevertheless, although the situation is bleak, with wars raging in Europe, the Middle East and the Horn of

Africa, emerging actors from the Gulf, Turkey, China and ASEAN are reshaping diplomacy in a multipolar world and having a direct impact on the peace mediation scene that used to be the playing field of the UN and primarily Western actors. There are prospects for forging alliances between traditional and emerging actors that can lead to creative ways of mediating peace.

Additionally, the traditional concept of peace mediation – where formal representatives of conflict parties sit around a table to agree on peace settlements – is evolving to include a wide array of actors, from national bodies to civil society groups, academics and think tanks, women's organisations, religious leaders and young activists. New tools such as artificial intelligence and digital peacemaking are being developed and tested.

It is with this in mind that this Briefing Paper examines the current peace mediation scene, with a focus on the emerging actors, the role of multi-actor peacemaking, 'multimediation' and new tools involved in peacemaking. The paper concludes with reflections on the prospects for peace mediation in the age of geopolitical and geo-economic contestation.

EMERGING ACTORS RESHAPING DIPLOMACY IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD¹

The engagement of the Gulf States and Turkey in peace mediation is a testament to the growing influence of middle powers in international politics, particularly in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. China has also shown increasing interest in peace mediation, and there is a growing focus on mediation within the ASEAN region. All these actors bring new energy to the field.

Many tried-and-tested methods of traditional actors such as the UN and the EU are no longer suited to the specifics of new, highly networked conflicts, which are deeply rooted in local settings and require an in-depth understanding of regional power dynamics and political economies. The emerging actors bring

¹ Much of this section is based on the author's conversations in Riyadh, Masqat, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Beijing, Ankara and Jakarta (virtually) with both officials and policy analysts working on peace mediation.

Number of conflicts and number of peace agreements by type, 1975–2021

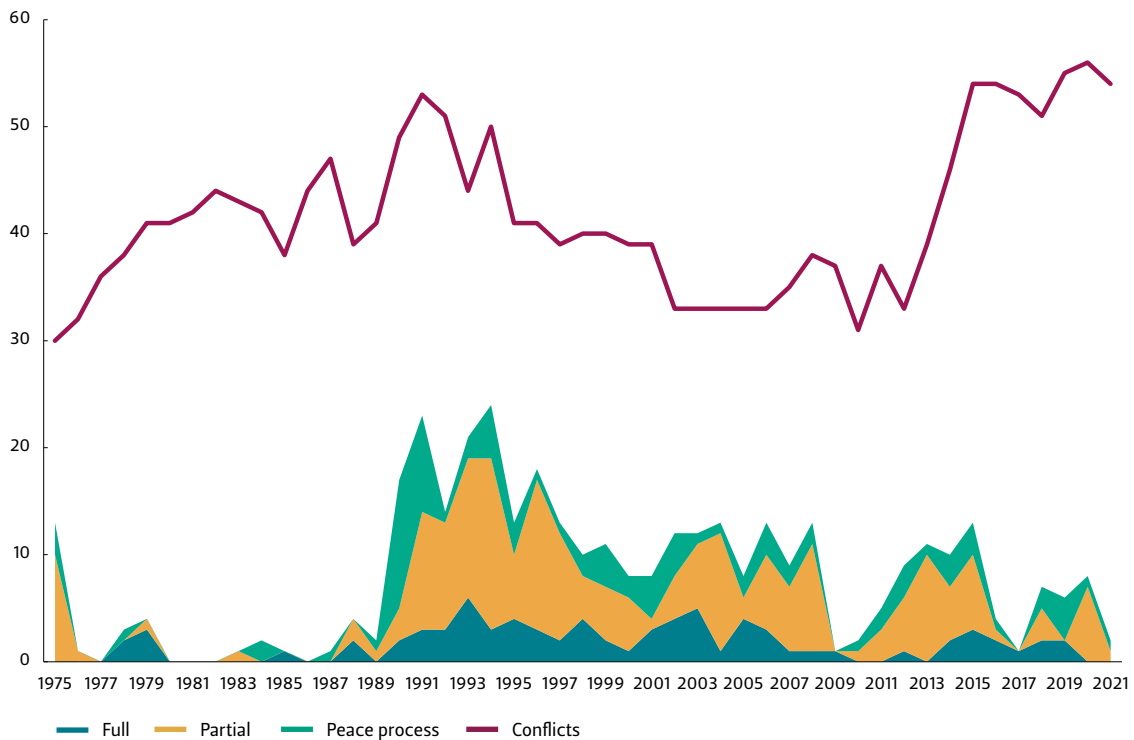


Figure 1. Number of conflicts and number of peace agreements by type between 1975–2021. In a full peace agreement one or several parties agree to settle the whole incompatibility, and in a partial agreement a part of the incompatibility. A peace process agreement is an agreement where one or several parties agree to initiate a process that aims to settle the incompatibility. Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 24.1; UCDP Peace Agreement Dataset version 22.1

economic and political clout, cultural concepts and mediation styles that shape the way peace mediation is conducted. The endgame is not necessarily a transition from a conflict-ridden society to liberal democracy as espoused by traditional actors, but rather a semblance of political stability that emphasises reconciliation and the restoration of relationships. The economic well-being of citizens tends to take precedence over political rights in the emerging actors' approach.

Gulf States

All Gulf States recognize that there is a correlation between economic prosperity and regional stability. Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Saudi Arabia are seeking economic diversification and a future beyond hydrocarbons. To achieve this, they need stability in their immediate neighbourhood and beyond. Their involvement in peace mediation is very much about protecting their own economic interests, resource supply lines and trade routes.² However,

there is some variation in their peace mediation policies and practices.

Qatar embraces a multifaceted diplomacy framework. While it hosts a significant US military presence at Al Udeid Air Base, Doha also hosts Taliban and Hamas political offices. Qatar was involved in the US-Taliban negotiations that led to the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and has mediated in the current Gaza war, as well as between Ukraine and Russia.

The UAE's style is characterised by a quiet and discreet approach, whereas Oman blends traditional diplomacy with cultural wisdom, prioritising non-interference and confidence-building. Muscat was involved in preparing the ground for the Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement, which led to a thaw in the hostile relations between the region's two major rivals. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has traditionally tried to mediate in the intra-Palestinian conflict with the Mecca Agreement and by hosting the Jeddah talks between warring Sudanese factions.

Notably, some Gulf States are interested in learning and exchanging ideas with other actors in the field. For example, Qatar and Finland recently signed

² See Mladenov, Nickolay (2024) "The Arab Approach to Mediation – Reshaping Diplomacy in a Multipolar World". *Horizons*, Issue 24. Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development.

a Memorandum of Understanding on peace mediation, and the UAE has exchanged views with Finnish experts.

Turkey

Turkey is active in peace mediation, but like the Gulf actors, its engagement in the field is driven by national interests. Turkey is not risk-averse and has learned from experience that it is hard to find solutions in its near neighbourhood without engaging with Russia. The situation in Idlib province in Northwestern Syria in 2020 was a case in point. Both Turkish and Russian forces were involved in building up deconfliction zones while keeping rebel forces opposed to the Iranian and Russian-backed Damascus regime at bay.

Turkey has also been active in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Horn of Africa, particularly in Somalia. Furthermore, Turkey played a pivotal role in securing the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which allowed food and fertilizer exports from Ukraine onto the global market. Like many other new actors in peace mediation, Turkey prefers to engage with state actors rather than civil society.

China

China's role in peace mediation came to the fore in March 2023, when Iran and Saudi Arabia re-established diplomatic relations following years of icy relations. China was seen as brokering this breakthrough between the two Gulf rivals due to its economic leverage and interests in the hydrocarbons that both Iran and Saudi Arabia have to offer. Indeed, China views conflicts in a global context and only gets involved when its geoeconomic and geostrategic interests are at stake. It values political stability and insists that it does not interfere in the internal affairs of other states. However, although this is the official line, practice shows that there are exceptions, as the case of Myanmar reveals. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which runs from Kunming in Yunnan to the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone by the Bay of Bengal, is partly located in areas controlled by various ethnic armed groups fighting the Burmese military junta. This has forced China to get involved in the internal affairs of its neighbour to protect Chinese investments.

China's peace mediation policies are still being shaped, with the Chinese Communist Party's Central Foreign Affairs Commission, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of State Security and the Counsellors' Office of

the State Council all playing central roles. Additionally, think tanks and academia feed ideas and concepts into the official debate and policymaking.

China has appointed several special envoys and representatives that are involved in various conflicts around the world, ranging from the Korean Peninsula to the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Moreover, China is actively promoting its version of a peace plan for Ukraine. It contains 12 points that address issues such as respect for sovereignty and the security interests of individual countries. Western analysts have interpreted the latter point as catering to Russia's interests in keeping Ukraine within its sphere of influence. China's stated interest in conflict resolution and peace mediation is increasing with its rising power and status, particularly in the context of its geopolitical and geoeconomic competition with the West. In many ways, China engages more in conflict management than peace mediation.

ASEAN

It should be stressed that from the outbreak of World War II until the end of the Cold War, violence and political turmoil were rife in Southeast Asia. The two Indochina wars, the Sino-Vietnamese conflict in 1979 and the internal insurgencies in several ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries have left deep scars in the region's collective consciousness. The Association has transformed the region from a battlefield into a marketplace through economic integration.

When ASEAN was formed in 1967, it adopted a set of principles known as the "ASEAN Way". It has also served as a form of tacit diplomacy between the leaders of the respective countries. The rationale for the "ASEAN Way" is political engagement, while avoiding isolating and embarrassing member state governments by lecturing them about human rights and democracy.

Notably, ASEAN's flexible engagement with Myanmar in the 2010s arguably yielded more results in promoting a peaceful transition towards a more democratic regime than the Western sanctions-based approach. However, since the February 2021 coup by the Burmese junta, ASEAN's efforts to promote peace in Myanmar have been severely challenged.

The Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (IPR) is a fledgling body within the ASEAN Secretariat tasked with developing ASEAN's peace mediation policies and practices. Like Qatar and the UAE, ASEAN is also interested in learning from more established actors in the field and has sought cooperation with Finland.

WIDENING THE SCOPE OF ACTORS AT THE TABLE

Peace mediation still conjures up images of formal negotiations and a handshake between conflicting parties in the presence of a third party brokering a peace deal – a kind of ‘grand bargain’ that makes the news. While these images are not entirely a thing of the past, they are rare examples of contemporary peace mediation. The current age is characterised more by short-term solutions such as local ceasefires, the creation of humanitarian corridors, the management of flashpoints, and the creation of different kinds of coalitions to respond to threats. The International Red Sea Task Force, set up to secure shipping lanes in the Red Sea, is a good example.

Major questions abound on how to approach the role of armed non-state actors in conflicts and peace mediation attempts.³ What to do with Al-Shabaab, the terrorist organisation holding sway in Somalia, is a case in point. While some argue that there can be no negotiations with a terrorist group, others think that the only way out of the protracted conflict is to start having a conversation with Al-Shabaab and to seek a political solution.⁴ All in all, the situation underscores the fragmented nature of conflicts, which in turn leads to an even more fragmented peace mediation scene.

While track one diplomacy tends to involve official actors with clear mandates, a motley array of individuals – including ex-officials, traditional and religious leaders, academics, think tanks, private entrepreneurs, women’s groups and young activists – play pivotal roles in securing agreements that, while temporary at best, are often lifesavers for people struggling to get by in their daily lives. One example is the numerous temporary ceasefires that have been part and parcel of the decades-long civil strife in Myanmar between the country’s national army, the Tatmadaw, and several ethnic armed organisations operating in the borderlands between Myanmar and Thailand, China and India.

Different peace actors are also part of the semi-official track one-and-a-half and unofficial track two diplomatic initiatives, which can at times complement and add significant value to peace mediation processes. Track one-and-a-half initiatives refer to dialogues where a mix of official and non-official participants sit around the same table, whereas track two initiatives denote dialogues where academics, ex-officials,

ex-politicians and the like come together.

While third parties have long been an integral part of the official or track one peace mediation scene, in recent years a whole gamut of non-governmental organisations and private actors have emerged to act as go-betweens, provide analysis and build the capacities of negotiating parties.⁵ Although the non-governmental organisations and private actors come in many shapes and forms, they can be described as engaging in ‘private diplomacy’, which has become an increasingly common approach to exploring and ‘pre-cooking’ solutions. Private diplomacy, in its various forms, refers to discreet, unofficial dialogue processes facilitated by non-state institutions or individuals that bring together relevant actors – or sometimes their associates – involved in a conflict to develop mutually agreeable options for conflict resolution.⁶

The widening scope of actors at the negotiating table is not without its problems, however. While striving for inclusivity, such as bringing different voices and actors to the table, is a worthy objective, it is not always clear on whose behalf the different actors are talking and which agendas they are pushing. There are also issues around accountability, duplication of effort and effectiveness.

The contemporary fragmented geopolitical landscape has produced mediation adaptations such as ‘multimediation’,⁷ which is the deliberate use of multiple overlapping mediation processes (track one, track one-and-a-half and track two). This approach aims to deconstruct and reduce the elements that fuel the conflict. The endgame in ‘multimediation’ is uncertain and most likely to be de-escalation or a local pact rather than an overarching peace agreement, as the former tends to be a more realistic outcome in today’s geopolitical contestation

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND DIGITAL PEACEMAKING

Artificial intelligence has proven effective in analysing large quantities of data from conflict settings. AI can be used in developing early warning systems, predicting political and social unrest, and tracking changes in

3 Mustasilta, Ruohomäki and Salo (2022) “Understanding Non-State Armed Groups: Forces for Good, Evil or Something In-Between”. *FIIA Working Paper 128*. Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

4 International Crisis Group (2022) “Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia”. *ICG Africa Report No. 309*, 21 June.

5 Dialogue Advisory Group, Inter Mediate, Geneva Call, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Ottawa Dialogue, Crisis Management Initiative, Conciliation Resources, Sant’Egidio, International Crisis Group, and Search for Common Ground are examples of private non-governmental actors that have become an integral part of the contemporary peace mediation scene.

6 Cf. Lehrs, Lior (2022) *Unofficial Peace Diplomacy: Private Peace Entrepreneurs in Conflict Resolution Processes*. Manchester University Press.

7 Bell, Christine (2024) “‘Multimediation’: Adapting in Response to Fragmentation”. *Accord*, issue 30: 27–30.

battlefield incidents.

It is worth noting that most AI development is concentrated in a few countries and driven by a handful of corporations. Hence, the growth and diversity of AI will, unfortunately, exacerbate the already stark digital and technological divide between the “haves” and “have-nots” within the international system.

Nevertheless, since OpenAI launched ChatGPT in 2022, such publicly available tools have had the potential to contribute to both conflict and peacemaking.⁸ On the negative side, generative AI can facilitate the spread of misinformation, disinformation and even malinformation, which is information based on facts but taken out of its original context in order to mislead. Generative AI can also lead to the development of sophisticated deepfakes. On the positive side, AI tools can support peace processes. For instance, AI can provide platforms that enable digital dialogues, promoting safe virtual spaces for wide participation, opinion sharing and idea generation. The Crisis Management Initiative, an independent peace mediation organisation, tested digital dialogues in Sudan following the eruption of violence in 2023 and found that AI-powered tools proved useful in understanding the priorities, views and perspectives of the Sudanese population in efforts to achieve an inclusive political process.⁹

Technology can be a tool for peace processes. For example, Suldaan said Ahmed, currently the Special Envoy of the Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs to the Horn of Africa, engages intensively with what he has called ‘WhatsApp diplomacy’. This means using the platform to communicate and pass on messages between different interlocutors. This would not have been possible a few years ago. On another note, drones can play a role in monitoring contact lines and cease-fire violations, contributing to confidence building between conflicting parties. They can be deployed to areas where access is limited. AI, in turn, can be used to comb through a wealth of historical data on peace agreements and assist in formulating best practices suited to particular conflict contexts. AI-powered translation tools can help overcome communication barriers, while new technologies can be harnessed in war crime investigations and record and preserve cultural heritage in the midst of conflicts – all part and parcel of reconciliation and reconstruction efforts.¹⁰

Nevertheless, it is important to note that there is a lot of hype around AI and peace mediation. At best, AI can help process and analyse vast amounts of data, including historical conflict data, socio-political dynamics and cultural nuances, and provide mediators with a greater understanding of complex conflict dynamics, helping them to formulate more effective strategies. AI-powered algorithms can also be used to support foresight – helping to simulate different scenarios and predict outcomes, allowing mediators and conflict parties to make more informed decisions. However, AI cannot replace humans in peace mediation.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, violent conflict increasingly operates as an intertwined set of local, national, transnational and geopolitical conflicts. Traditional models premised on using mediation to achieve a ‘national peace accord’ or a settlement between belligerents have become rare. Conflict resolution now centres more on risk management than on minimising violence. Diplomatic efforts often seek mainly to manage flashpoints, signal red lines and avoid mishaps and miscalculations.

Despite, or precisely because of the changing mediation landscape, multi-actor involvement and multilateralism are needed perhaps more than ever before. As traditional peace mediation actors, mostly based in the West, are constrained by stances and policies on issues like sanctions and terrorism listings, emerging actors offer platforms and venues to engage with belligerents and armed non-state actors. This does not mean, however, that there is no longer space for traditional actors in peace mediation. The EU, for instance, has a lot of experience in partnering, supporting mediation functions, resources for capacity-building and a reserve of capabilities in the member states, all of which are still very much needed.¹¹ Rather, the question is more about forging partnerships in which both traditional and emerging actors can complement each other with know-how and find synergies.

Support for mediation efforts can be hampered by accusations of double standards and perceived partiality. As conflicts become increasingly internationalised, peace processes must acknowledge the tensions between geopolitics, power machinations and mediation. The risk of ‘big wars’, as currently witnessed in the Middle East, and actual proxy wars is very real. This

8 Ashby, Heather (2023) *A Role for AI in Peacebuilding*. United States Institute of Peace. December 6.

9 Thompson, Sylvia and Piirtola, Aino (2024) “Artificial Intelligence and Peace-making: The Case of Digital Dialogues in Sudan”. *CMI Insight*, February. Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation.

10 Glybchencko, Yelyzaveta (2023) “Virtual Reality Technologies as PeaceTech: Supporting Ukraine in Practice and Research”. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 19(1), pp. 117–122.

11 Karjalainen, Tyyne (2020) “EU Peace Mediation in the 2020s. From Intervention to Investment”. *FIIA Working Paper 118*, Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

state of affairs underscores the urgency of settling conflicts between great powers through peaceful means. Building new alliances between diverse mediators that balance skills, access and interests, minimise competition and maximise collective impact is the way forward. This will require acknowledging different world-views, reaffirming national ownership, and supporting initiatives that build trust among mediators.

This leads to ‘multimediation’, sometimes involving task-focused mediation initiatives with a range of actors, including both traditional and emerging states, agencies and private actors. This may include humanitarian corridor negotiations to ensure access for humanitarian agencies to deliver aid to civilians at risk, as in Gaza, or ensuring that fighting around nuclear

power plants does not lead to a nuclear catastrophe, as in the case of Ukraine.

Artificial intelligence and technology offer new tools for peace mediation, particularly for analysis, foresight, better communication and monitoring. However, at the end of the day, they are merely tools that need to be harnessed by humans. AI implementation requires an approach that values human judgement and ethics, while leveraging AI’s capabilities for efficiency and precision. Mediation is often about being creative and thinking outside the box in order to find solutions. As the world faces global challenges of varying magnitude, it is important to remember that every day the world offers at least as many opportunities as obstacles. /