Strategic Security Analysis

The Future of Mediation in the Post-COVID World

Itonde Kakoma and Edward Marques

Key Points

- Existing norms, institutions and practices supporting global peace and security are struggling to adapt to the geopolitical realities of the 21st century.

- Complex conflict dynamics make it difficult for traditional peacemaking structures – states and multilateral institutions – to meet the various demands of the different actors in a particular conflict and engage with them effectively.

- "Hybrid" conflicts with proxy actors create a greater need for unofficial actors and different methods of peacemaking.[1]

- New technologies are likely to impact the basic preconditions for the maintenance of global peace and security.

- Virtual spaces for dialogue may enable a more inclusive and innovative way of dealing with future crises, yet this will not replace, but rather complement, traditional means of convening parties for direct peace talks.

About the Authors

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The pandemic itself has not presented intrinsically novel conflict drivers within the context of global peace and security

Introduction

The basic precepts underpinning global peace and security are in flux, and peace mediation practice needs to adapt accordingly. While the impact of COVID-19 has been sweeping, and the resulting economic slowdown is likely to have an enduring impact. The pandemic itself has not presented intrinsically novel conflict drivers within the context of global peace and security.

However, the pandemic has further exacerbated or complicated a number of existing trends.

What then – from the perspective of global peace and security – are some of the most critical existing trends that are being intensified? What impact might this have on the dynamics and mechanics of peace processes? And, to help us seek clarity on how to act in light of these intensifying trends, what are the key questions we still need to answer to help define the future of mediation? It is incumbent on mediators and those that support them to understand the implications that these global trends have for the field of peace mediation. In the past years several attempts have been made to address the broader impact of these trends, namely the United Nations (UN) High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation and the digital diplomacy efforts of the European Union (EU). These serve to explore the impact of some of the most significant developments facing multilateral institutions, have garnered policy interest in the use of new and emerging technologies, and have widened the scope – at least theoretically – of traditional diplomacy.

Private diplomacy actors have also launched initiatives that address emerging transnational themes affecting mediation, some of which aim to reconceptualise the basic fundamentals underpinning peace mediation. Notable efforts include, but are not limited to, the Imperial War Museum's and Conciliation Resources' "Reimagining Victory", a "digital series" that looks into what it really means to "'win' a war" and the challenges that peacebuilders face,[2] and the CyberMediation Initiative, launched by the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the Diplo Foundation and swisspeace, which "seeks to explore how digital technology is impacting the work of mediators in preventing and resolving violent conflicts worldwide".[3] Additionally, the Crisis Management Initiative's overarching policy work concerns the future of peace mediation in light of the changing character of conflict. Moreover, at an official level the EU's refinement of its Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities seeks to contemporise the EU's mediation framework to encompass the latest global trends impacting the field of mediation.

For actors in this field, critical trends include, but are not limited to, shifting power centres and the impact on multilateralism; the ways in which existing, new, and emerging technologies will challenge how conflicts are manifested; the changing character of conflict generated by the evolving calculus and incentive structures within conflicts; the vacillating global political geography and how this is impacting the suitability of environments for peacemaking; and the looming threat of climate change.

Shifting power centres

Possibly the deepest effect of COVID-19 will be the way in which its economic impact quickens ongoing political and economic megatrends, as well as the emergence of a G-Zero[4] world.[5] Multilateral institutions and the norms in terms of which they operate are being tested and the foundations on which conflict mediation organisations are based are shifting. Existing norms, institutions, and practices supporting global peace and security are struggling to adapt to the geopolitical realities of the 21st century and to the era of "Westlessness".[6] The underlying assumptions of global leadership are becoming an open question, as expectations grow for various states and multilateral institutions to fill the vacuum of convening authority in the absence of a traditionally engaged United States.[7]

These geopolitical realities also permeate multilateral institutions, whereby transnational cooperation is under strain, particularly with regard to issues of conflict resolution. Currently, several UN-led peace processes are facing difficulties, because deadlock in the UN Security Council prevents an effective mandate. This is exemplified in a personal account of the former UN Special Representative for Libya, Ghassan Salamé, in which he expresses concern for the Security Council's inability to forge consensus, which compromised his mandate to lead official peace mediation efforts in Libya.[8] The significance of this is that even common threats to international peace and security on a global scale are politicised, and thus collective action is undermined – with tragic consequences. The Security Council's inability to lead a collective global response indicates the extent to which existing multilateral systems are no longer able to address the complex crises of today. For example, in the context of the Syrian and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, permanent member vetoes stymie any progress. Therefore, if the required willingness and efficacy to achieve sustainable, mediated solutions does not come from the Security Council, which institutions or actors will step in to fill the gap? And what does an effective mandate currently look like for a peace mediator?

This cornerstone of efforts to maintain international peace and security – i.e. the Security Council – is weakened by multiple handicaps, which are rooted in the expanding dissonance between its obviously anachronistic composition and the realities of the modern world. These realities reflect a need for an overhaul of the global governance system, especially at a time when the threat of intra- and inter-state conflict is reaching a post-cold war peak. Given this urgency, the questions of how mediators might play a role in developing new normative frameworks,[9] who will have the authority to convene future high-level meetings, and how these actors will be committed to ensuring peace are yet to be answered.

The diminished role of formal processes is shown in the decreasing proportion of armed conflicts that actually receive formal international mediation, despite the increased professionalism and preparedness of mediators themselves.[10] Traditional diplomatic hubs for global decision-making are facing overt competition from other centres of power, such as Beijing, Moscow, and Ankara, which have demonstrated their ability to convene meetings of conflict parties and are attempting to broker agreements where others have failed. There are also signs that regional organisations like the EU, African Union and Association of Southeast Asian Nations will pick up the slack generated by the failures of global governance and more actively seek to fill this gap.[11]

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Existing, new and emerging technologies

Technology has historically been a driver of and catalyst for social change. According to Schwab, "we stand on the brink of a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope, and complexity, the transformation will be unlike anything humankind has experienced before".[12] New technologies have sped up communication, have generated an excess of information, and are making informational conflict an ever more ubiquitous aspect of conflict at large, resulting in blurred lines between peace and conflict. While this trend may positively impact the ability to participate in increased peaceful engagements (such as through cross-cultural online dialogue platforms), the use of these technologies to fuel and advance conflict is growing.

Larger powers are already expanding their use of "hybrid" means of conflict enabled by the reach and connectivity of cyberspace. And although traditional forms of conflict are not going away, cheaper disruptive dual-use technologies (publicly available drones, social media, etc.) are an increasingly defining element of 21st century conflicts due to their effectiveness. In the context of peace mediation, a critical question is therefore raised: what sorts of monitoring and control mechanisms need to be developed to regulate dual-use technologies and support future ceasefires and peace agreements? Existing technologies have meant that non-state actors and proxies can quickly – and deniably – engage in conflicts, blurring the lines between conflict parties. Complex conflict dynamics heighten the need for more effective conflict analysis in order to understand the levels and nature of a particular conflict and the relationship between the actors involved.

The capabilities that new technologies demonstrate are likely to impact the basic preconditions for the maintenance of global peace and security. Understanding their development is therefore essential.[13] How these technologies may be used in and transform conflict is not yet fully understood and need further scrutiny. In military technology, there is a trend toward greater automation enabled by advances in artificial intelligence (AI), which include the use of lethal autonomous and/or remotely controlled weapons systems. The competition for this space is yet to be settled – some say we are already in the midst of an AI arms race between the great powers. Once superiority in the virtual realm is established, the impact on mass behaviour and virtual manipulation could be significant.

These developments are already shifting the military planning and investment cycles of small to medium-sized powers, who will increasingly focus their military power on technologies that strengthen their capabilities, given the asymmetric nature of warfare.[14] States have also advanced efforts to develop resilience to cyber conflict, hybrid threats, and new forms of proxy engagement, but have not been able to prevent or regulate them.[15] Technology has the capacity to impact the quality of alliances, seen in cases where one state utilises AI but another does not, due to their lack of trust in the system.[16] In order to adapt to these dynamics, peace mediators must understand how existing (deepfake) and emerging (AI) technologies might hinder their ability to do their job.

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"The changing character of war"[17]

The internationalisation of intra-state conflict is by no means new. It reached a peak during the cold war[18] and in the wars that followed.[19] What is new, however, are some of the dynamics and means through which it occurs. While state interests are often one of the underlying factors that cause conflicts, most conflicts now include local, regional and international dimensions, as well as the participation of both state and non-state actors. This raises the following questions: how can local ownership be strengthened when the principal drivers of a conflict might not be local at all? And how can monitoring and control mechanisms be developed that take into account new forms of internationalisation?

The connections between the actors and their various levels of independence deepen the complexity. This makes it difficult for traditional peacemaking structures – states and multilateral institutions – to meet the demands of the different actors involved in a conflict and engage with them effectively. This also challenges our ability to usefully understand conflict dynamics: due to technological limitations and the involvement of non-state cyber mercenaries, it is almost impossible to attribute beyond any doubt a cyber attack to a specific country. Complex conflict dynamics increase the need for clearer and more meaningful conflict analysis in order to understand the levels of conflict and the relationship between the actors involved. And as conflicts become more complex, the need is enhanced to combine comprehensive conflict analysis with tools to inform decision-making in order to understand how to develop effective strategies to foster sustainable peace.

The use of mercenaries and proxies is growing.[20] While there is nothing new about proxies, the ways and means by which they are involved in conflict have changed. The use of cheap dual-use technologies such as drones by state and non-state actors alike is having a transformative effect on the character and effectiveness of their involvement.[21] Moreover, the pervasiveness of information technology across conflict theatres is enhancing the role of cyber mercenaries and weakening an already porous international legal framework to regulate their activities. Thus, how can we model opaque, complex, multi-level proxy relationships especially where relations are obfuscated by new technologies?

Furthermore, the existence of multiple "addresses" for conflict parties through the use of proxies and mercenaries could make it harder to de-escalate conflict – even where the will to do so exists – and as such makes it even more difficult to achieve the conditions necessary for a ceasefire.[22] Hybrid conflicts involving proxy actors create a greater need for unofficial actors and hybrid methods of peacemaking. The flipside of this development is that some conflict actors actively engaging in hybrid and proxy methods will project their experience and assume that unofficial mediators and peacebuilders are also someone's proxies and do not act of their own accord. Given such a predicament, how do unofficial mediators retain their independence and prevent the perception that they are part of a hybrid conflict?

The pervasiveness of information technology across conflict theatres is enhancing the role of cyber mercenaries

Suitable environments for peacemaking

Sufficiently impartial and "safe" spaces for peace mediation are diminishing. This is due in part to the perceived and actualised politicisation of traditional venues for the resolution of conflicts. Settings that served as sufficiently impartial, if not neutral, in terms of cold war dynamics such as Helsinki, Geneva and Vienna still to a large extent enjoy this legacy of being conducive environments for conflict parties to convene for talks. While these venues remain among a select set of suitable environments for peacemaking, the very premise of physically convening parties is complicated by the COVID-19 global health pandemic, resulting in restricted movement and limited international travel, which means that traditional ways of convening are at a standstill.

New technologies are being deployed to maintain momentum or establish lines of communication via virtual platforms for dialogue. Currently, there is a heavy dependence across the globe on US-based tools, but other advanced technological centres such as China are seeking for parity in technological competence.

Subject to ensuring sufficient levels of security and trust, virtual spaces for dialogue may enable a more inclusive and innovative means to deal with future crises. However, this will not replace, but rather complement traditional means of convening parties for direct peace talks. If certain parties were previously not able to physically travel to particular countries or facilitation sessions, they may be able to participate if certain types of virtual software or platforms are used. This raises the question of what forms of validation and authentication might need to be developed to ensure that virtual dialogue remains uncorrupted.

How can spaces be created that satisfy needs in terms of perception and suitability, but also accessibility? The physical setting of a sufficiently impartial venue such as Finland, Norway, Jordan, Oman, Switzerland or Tanzania (among increasingly few others) inspires confidence among conflict parties that the space is free from external influence, especially by other interested parties. Key questions on which spaces are safe, for whom and why, should be considered when planning both physical and virtual safe spaces. This has generated the need for new safe spaces in the virtual realm, so that there is increased trust in the platform. That said, with increasing shifts to dialogue through virtual platforms and the falling cost of deepfake technology, effective and secure validation and authentication practices will increasingly be needed.[23]

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Climate change

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has not been found to be a contributing driver of climate change, the realities of the effects of climate change in the conflict cycle have become evident. Awareness of this important trend as a global threat to security must be addressed. Environmental degradation can act as "threat multiplier" in fragile regions, exacerbating socio-political and economic tensions such as persistent inequality, political marginalisation, and the lack of strong institutions and environmental governance, raising the potential for instability and conflict.[24] The negative effects of climate change fall most heavily on excluded populations in the poorest countries, where social tensions are already running high. Although conflicts are not directly caused by climate change, the environment will become a more prominent factor in the outbreak of conflict.[25] It will also prompt important changes in the way peacebuilders specifically address the rise of conflicts over natural resources as the availability of these resources become scarcer. The consequences that follow, such as internal displacement, fall disproportionately on women and children, and can add to the deterioration of global peace and security.[26]

Climate change may contribute to the multiplicity of conflicts worldwide,[27] the growing use of proxy actors, and the recruitment of members of affected populations by terrorist organisations, further complicating conflict resolution efforts. Given the ever-growing role of climate change as a factor that can affect all stages of the conflict cycle, it is crucial to understand its long-term implications for peace processes. Therefore, some questions that need to be addressed are as follows: in what ways can mediators be prepared to address the dynamics of climate change and understand the extent of its impact on instability? What strategies can mediators incorporate to handle climate change-related disputes or conflicts? How can peacebuilding organisations contribute to global frameworks or norms and what steps or approaches are needed to address climate change? How can mediators help to identify new or reinforced entry points to tackle a global problem such as climate change when its impact is so vast, yet each conflict is so unique?

> Environmental degradation can act as "threat multiplier" in fragile regions

Conclusion

The UN Secretary-General António Guterres described the state of the world today in two words "uncertainty" and "instability".[28] These two terms will remain the defining characteristics of the future. If we want international peacemaking structures to remain relevant then the evolving nature of conflict must be taken more seriously. Doing so will require addressing fundamental questions including but not limited to: what does an effective mandate look like in the current geopolitical climate? What might de-escalation mechanisms or a ceasefire look like for hybrid or cyber conflicts? How can virtual safe space for dialogue be secured? How do we ensure that peace agreements hold, when the parties to the conflict are so many, and so far away from the conflict itself? How can we advance international cooperation on peacemaking in the absence of an effective UN Security Council? Given the increasingly blurred lines between peace and conflict, the basic concepts of global peace and security and thus the future of peace mediation will need to be reconceived.

Endnotes

1. We acknowledge that the term "hybrid" is ambiguous and highly politicised, but believe that it points to some of the more common types of conflict that do not cross the threshold of war and as such is part of a rich discourse among several intellectual and practitioner communities around the world.

2. IWM Institute, "Reimagining Victory", 22 June 2020, https://www.iwm.org.uk/institute/reimagining-victory.

3. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, "Launch of the CyberMediation initiative – New Technologies for Political Mediation: Opportunities and Risks", 7 March 2018, https://www.hdcentre.org/updates/launch-of-the-cybermediation-initiative-new-technologies-for-political-mediation-opportunities-and-risks/.

4. A G-Zero world is characterised by an emerging power vacuum in international politics created by the decline of the West's influence and the internal, domestic focus of developing states' governments.

5. G. Gopinath, "The Great Lockdown: Worst Economic Downturn Since the Great Depression", IMF Blog, 14 April 2020, blogs.imf.org/2020/04/14/the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression/.

6. A term coined by the Munich Security Conference to capture the widespread feeling of uneasiness and restlessness in the face of increasing uncertainty about the enduring purpose of the West.

7. See W.J. Burns, "The Demolition of U.S. Diplomacy", *Foreign Affairs*, 14 October 2019, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-10-14/demolition-us-diplomacy; G. Packer, *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2019.

8. A. Cooper, "Ghassan Salamé on the Failures of the International Community to Stop Wars", The Mediator's Studio, Oslo Forum, 30 June 2020, http://www.hdcentre.org/osloforum/podcasts/.

9. S. Hellmüller et al., "Are Mediators Norm Entrepreneurs? Exploring the Role of Mediators in Norm Diffusion", swisspeace Working Paper No. 4, 2017.

10. M. Lundgren and I. Svensson, "The Surprising Decline of International Mediation in Armed Conflicts", *Research and Politics*, April-June 2020, pp.1-7.

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12. K. Schwab, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution: What It Means, How to Respond", World Economic Forum, 14 January 2016, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/.

13. SIPRI, "Emerging Military and Security Technologies", 2020, https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/emerging-military-and-security-technologies; M.C. Horowitz, "Do Emerging Military Technologies Matter for International Politics?", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol.23, 2020, pp.385-400.

14. Sveriges Radio, Sweden to train first conscripts as cyber-soldiers, 19 Jan 2019, https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/7132677.

15. Hybrid CoE, n.d., https://www.hybridcoe.fi/.

16. E. Lin-Greenberg, "Allies and Artificial Intelligence: Obstacles to Operations and Decision-making", *Texas National Security Review*, Vol.3(2), Spring 2020.

17. The Changing Character of War Centre, n.d., http://www.ccw.ox.ac.uk.

18. See G. Modelski, *The International Relations of Internal War*, Research Monograph No. 11, Center of International Studies, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, 1961; J.M. Rosenau, *International Aspects of Civil Strife*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1964.

19. For example, W. Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

20. It is important to note that the nomenclature around proxies is contested by leading global strategists such as Jean-Marc Rickli from the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, who argue that the more accurate term "surrogate warfare" rather than "proxy warfare" is more reflective of 21st century conflicts; see A. Krieg and J.-M. Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-first Century*, Washington DC, Georgetown University Press, 2019.

21. K. Gilsinan, "The Return of the Mercenary: How Private Armies, and the Technology They Use, Are Changing Warfare", *The Atlantic*, 25 March 2015, https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/drones-deniability-and-disinformation-warfare-in-libya-and-the-new-international-disorder/.

22. S.W. Kane, "Making Peace When the Whole World Has Come to Fight: The Mediation of Internationalized Civil Wars", *International Peacekeeping*, 2020.

23. J.-M. Rickli, presentation during the Stockholm Security Conference session on "The Future of Conflict and Mediation: The Role of Proxies", 3 October 2019; J.-M. Rickli, presentation during the "Security and Ethical Implications of Deepfakes" public event, Geneva, 27 November 2019, https://www.gcsp.ch/events/security-and-ethical-implications-deepfakes. Blockchain was used to authenticate the recent Colombian election and such technologies may be required to provide a way to authenticate involvement in a peace or mediation process.

24. L. Rüttinger et al., *A New Climate for Peace – Taking Action on Climate and Fragility Risks – Executive Summary*, 2015, https://www.adelphi.de/en/publication/new-climate-peace---taking-action-climate-and-fragility-risks.

25. K. Johnston, "Climate Change: A Cause of Conflict?", *Global Politics Magazine*, January 2008.

26. UNEP, UN Women, UNDP and UNDPPA/PBSO, *Gender, Climate and Security: Sustaining Inclusive Peace on the Frontlines of Climate Change*, 9 June 2020, https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/gender-climate-and-security-en.pdf?la=en&vs=215.

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