
Taking the bull by the horns: Policy report from the project on mediation in regionalized intra-state conflicts: lessons from peace processes

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TAKING THE BULL BY THE HORNS: POLICY REPORT FROM THE PROJECT ON MEDIATION IN REGIONALIZED INTRA-STATE CONFLICTS: LESSONS FROM PEACE PROCESSES

Laurie Nathan, Michael Aeby, Pavel Baev, Antoni Bel, Kristian Berg Harpviken, Jørgan Jensehaugen, Julia Palik, Øystein H. Rolandsen, Laura Camila Suárez & Pinar Tank | April 2025

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Executive Summary

Background

This paper examines the regionalization of intra-state conflict, which is a significant trend in international peace and security. The trend is worrying because external military intervention leads to longer and more deadly wars, reduces the likelihood of a negotiated settlement, and bedevils mediation efforts, especially where proximate states are so deeply involved in the conflict that they are themselves conflict parties.



Soviet President Gorbachev speaking at the Madrid Conference while U.S. President Bush looks on.

Photo via Jim Hollander/Reuters

This paper presents the results of a research project led by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. The project is supported by the Cross-Border Conflict, Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research program, funded by UK International Development.

The project has the following aims: deepen understanding of how the regionalization of intra-state conflict affects mediation; analyze how mediators have addressed, or failed to address, the regionalization of conflict; and identify policy lessons for the international mediation community.

We define 'conflict regionalization' as a situation where states that are proximate to an intra-state conflict are militarily involved in that conflict through the use of force, troop deployment, arms supplies, and/or providing sanctuary to rebels.

We analyzed this phenomenon through case studies on peace processes for Afghanistan; Central America; the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); Arab-Israeli conflicts; the Russia-Ukraine war; South Sudan; Sudan; Syria; and Yemen.

Findings

For the following reasons, the regionalization of intra-state conflict makes mediation more difficult and less likely to succeed: it increases the number of conflict parties, interests, issues and incompatibilities; it increases the number of conflict systems; it heightens the complexity of conflict and peacemaking; and it reduces the overall receptiveness of the conflict parties to negotiations.

Mediators have dealt with the problem of conflict regionalization in one of three ways:

- **'Hiding in plain sight':** the mediators turned a blind eye to the regional conflict dynamics and focused only on the domestic conflict dynamics. By ignoring the regional conflict parties and dynamics, this approach was radically incomplete, deeply flawed, and unlikely to succeed.

- **'Foxes guarding the hen house':** external conflict parties purported to be mediators while simultaneously involved militarily in the conflict. This contradictory approach was inimical to effective mediation. It lacked credibility, prioritized the mediator's interests above those of the conflict country, was biased in favor of one of the domestic parties and was rejected by other domestic conflict parties. domestic conflict dynamics. By ignoring the regional conflict parties and dynamics, this approach was radically incomplete, deeply flawed, and unlikely to succeed.
- **'Taking the bull by the horns':** the mediators addressed the regional conflict dynamics as well as the domestic dynamics. This was the only sound approach to mediation in regionalized intra-state conflicts. It was a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for success.

Recommendations

Overarching perspective. Mediation must always cover comprehensively the major conflict actors and dynamics. In regionalized conflicts, this necessarily includes regional conflict actors and dynamics. A failure to acknowledge and address the involvement of these actors will doom a mediation to being sub-optimal at best or completely ineffectual at worst.

Mandate. An acknowledgement of conflict regionalization should be included in the mediator's mandate, which sets out the objectives, strategies and processes of mediation in a given conflict. Ensuring this may be extremely difficult politically because proximate conflict states are often opposed to formal acknowledgement of their status as conflict parties. At the very least, the mandate should require attention to 'the regional dimensions of the conflict,' even if it does not refer to any proximate country by name.

Analysis. The mediator's analysis must ascertain the objectives and interests of the proximate conflict parties, the nature of their military involvement in the conflict, their perceptions of conflict ripeness, and the nature of the regional conflict systems. How the mediator frames the conflict – e.g., as an intra-state conflict with external military involvement or as an inter-state conflict played out within a country – will have a strong bearing on the mediation strategies and processes.

Strategy. In regionalized intra-state conflict, the proximate conflict parties may be unreceptive to conflict resolution through negotiations. In these situations, critical strategic questions arise: What kind of pressure should be exerted on the proximate conflict actors? And which are the right actors to apply the pressure?

Another strategic question concerns the most appropriate mediating body. A regional organization that comprises proximate conflict actors may be so lacking in cohesion and credibility that it should not be the mediator. In some cases it may be appropriate to have different mediating actors address different dimensions of the conflict. This mixed approach obviously requires good coordination.

Process. Mediators cannot follow a formulaic process for addressing the regional conflict dynamics and actors. Instead, their process design should be based on the following questions:

- Should national and regional mediation tracks be integrated or pursued separately? If pursued separately, should they be undertaken sequentially or in parallel? If sequentially, should the mediator begin with the regional track?
- Should the regional track be organized as a single multilateral track that covers all the regional conflict actors, or rather as a collection of different tracks focused on different conflict systems?

The answers to these questions depend on a sophisticated conflict analysis, excellent political judgement, extensive mediation experience and the primary objective of different mediation phases (e.g., ceasefire vs. comprehensive settlement). The mediator's process design should also be informed by the conflict parties' interests, objectives and perceptions of ripeness.

In the successful cases of Central America and the DRC, there were certain process features that could be considered 'best practice' in regionalized conflicts: there were several mediation processes and not just one; there were a number of mediating actors and not just one; the processes took place over several years and were not done in a rush; the processes were adaptive and evolved in response to progress, obstacles and changing national and regional dynamics; and the mediators attended to disputes relating to the implementation of agreements.



The Swedish Foreign Minister and the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, with participants of the Yemeni political consultations in Sweden on 13 December 2018.
 Photo: Government Offices of Sweden/Ninni Andersson

Substance of Agreements. Peace agreements relating to the regional conflict dynamics must address the specific forms of military involvement by proximate conflict states. As important is the need to address, to the extent possible, the objectives and interests that underlie that involvement.

Introduction

A significant trend in international peace and security is the regionalization (and sometimes globalization) of intra-state conflict. This trend includes states in the neighborhood of the conflict country providing military support to one of the domestic conflict parties. The trend is worrying because external military intervention in civil wars leads to longer and more deadly wars and reduces the likelihood of a negotiated settlement.¹ As we show in this paper, the regionalization of conflict also bedevils mediation efforts, especially where proximate states are so deeply involved in the conflict that they are themselves conflict parties.

In 2024 the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame initiated a research project to investigate the dynamics and challenges of mediation in regionalized intra-state conflict. The project is supported by the Cross-Border Conflict, Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research program, funded by UK International Development.

The project has the following aims:

- Deepen understanding of how the regionalization of intra-state conflict affects mediation
- Analyze how mediators have addressed, or failed to address, the regionalization of conflict
- Identify policy lessons for the international mediation community.

In pursuit of these aims, the project prepared case studies on the following peace processes:

- U.S.-Taliban talks on Afghanistan, 2018-2020²
- Arias-led peace process for Central America, 1986-1990³
- United Nations (UN) and African mediations for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), 1998-2003⁴
- Madrid Conference and Washington process for the Arab-Israeli conflict, 1991-1993⁵
- Minsk process for the Russia-Ukraine conflict, 2014-2015⁶

- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) mediation for South Sudan, 2013-2015⁷
- Various mediations for Sudan, 2023-2024⁸
- Astana process for Syria, 2012-2024⁹
- Various mediations for Yemen, 2015-2023¹⁰

These cases are diverse in several respects: they range temporally from the late 1980s to the current period; geographically, they cover conflicts in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America; and the mediating bodies included the UN, regional organizations, global powers and other states. The mediation outcomes include full success (i.e., comprehensive resolution of the conflict); partial success (i.e., partial resolution of the conflict and/or significant reduction in hostilities); and failure (i.e., no comprehensive or partial resolution of the conflict, and no significant reduction in hostilities).



Volodymyr Zelenskyy visits Bucha, Kyiv Oblast, Ukraine. **Photo:** Courtesy of Rawpixel, Public Domain

For the purpose of our project, we define ‘conflict regionalization’ as a situation where states that are proximate to an intra-state conflict are militarily involved in that conflict through use of force, troop deployment, arms supplies and/or providing sanctuary to rebels.¹⁴ The military involvement of global powers in intra-state conflict lies outside our focus but is discussed in our case studies.¹⁵

Among our cases, the Central American process was a full success, providing a basis for ending the armed conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, as well as the military involvement of neighboring states in these conflicts.¹¹ The DRC process was a partial success, ending the Second War in the Congo but failing to stop foreign-sponsored insurgencies and the military involvement of Rwanda and Uganda in the eastern DRC.¹² The truce brokered by the UN in Yemen in 2022 was a partial success, leading to a significant reduction in hostilities without resolving the conflict in any way.¹³ The other processes were failures in terms of our criteria.

We define ‘mediation’ as a peacemaking endeavor whereby a third-party assists conflict parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict to their collective satisfaction. For the

This paper presents the project’s main findings based on the case studies referred to above and the relevant scholarly literature. The first part focuses on the ways in which conflict regionalization has impeded mediation. The second part discusses the ways in which mediators have addressed regionalization. The third part contains policy recommendations.

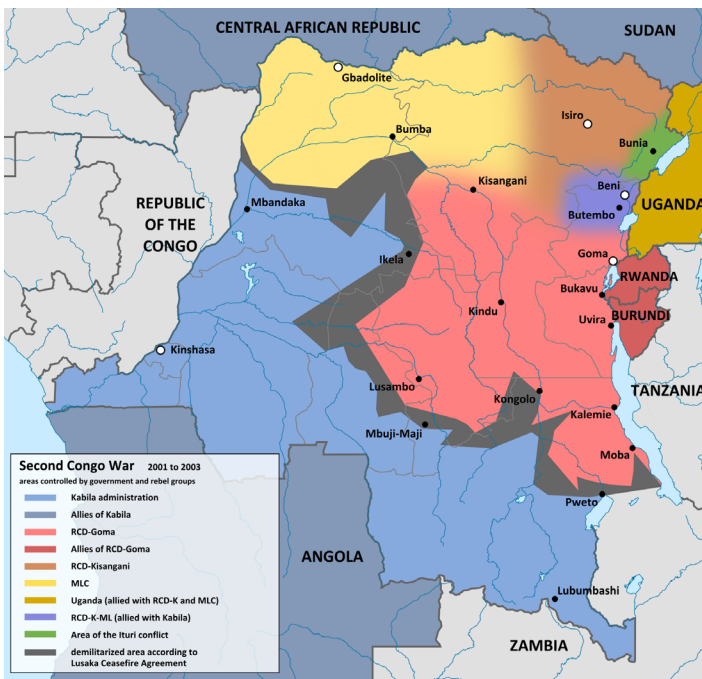
The Problem of Regionalization for Mediation

This section discusses the negative effects of regional conflict dynamics on mediation in intra-state conflicts.¹⁶ Mediation in these conflicts does not necessarily experience all these effects in every case, and the effects may differ in intensity from one situation to another.

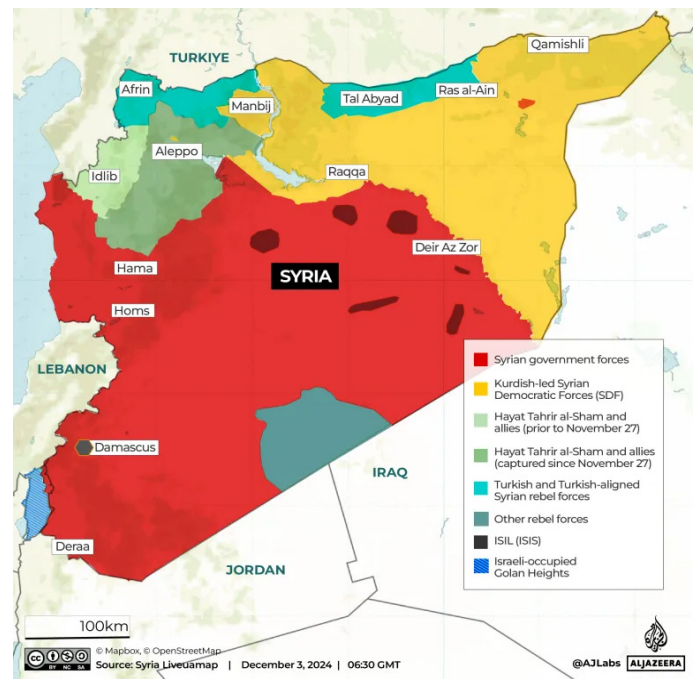
Regionalization » Greater Complexity » Greater Difficulty in Mediation

The regionalization of intra-state conflict significantly increases the difficulty of mediation by heightening the complexity of conflict and, consequently, the complexity of peacemaking. Our case studies identify four ways in which this occurs:

- Intra-state conflicts revolve around incompatibilities that the conflict parties are unable to resolve. The incompatibilities relate to political, security and economic issues, and their dimensions include interests, power, identity, norms and ideology. The mediator’s job is to help the parties find ways to resolve these incompatibilities. This is extremely challenging even when the parties are confined to the domestic belligerents. When the conflict parties include proximate states, the mediator’s job becomes much more complex and challenging because an increase in the number of parties increases the number of incompatibilities, conflictual relationships and competing objectives, interests, norms and priorities.¹⁷



By Don-kun



- Regionalization heightens the complexity of mediation by generating more than one conflict system. In addition to the primary domestic conflict system, there are multiple cross-border conflict systems that have their own distinct actors, dynamics and incompatibilities. In the most complex cases, the domestic conflict is enmeshed in the spillover of domestic conflicts in neighboring states.¹⁸
- Additional complexity arises in relation to the type of substantive political arrangements that are required to resolve the conflict. The typical arrangements for resolving an intra-state conflict – electoral reform, constitutional reform, elections, various kinds of power-sharing, etc. – are insufficient because they do not cover the regional dimensions of the conflict. As in the cases of Central America and the DRC, meaningful peace arrangements must address the presence of foreign troops and rebels in the conflict country, as well as the problem of governments providing sanctuary to rebels from neighboring states.¹⁹
- The regional conflict dynamics increase the difficulty of developing a sound mediation strategy and process, posing complicated questions that do not arise if the conflict is confined to domestic parties. International peacemakers must decide whether to exert pressure on the proximate conflict actors, and the mediator must decide whether there should be one or more regional peace tracks in addition to the domestic track (see section 4.5).

Regionalization » Reuced Potential for Ripeness » Greater Difficulty for Mediation

Armed conflicts are ripe for resolution through mediated negotiations only in particular periods. These periods are characterized by the parties' perception of a mutually hurting stalemate (MHS) and, where an MHS exists, by the parties' confidence that negotiations can lead to an acceptable way out of the conflict.²⁰ An MHS arises when all the belligerent parties believe they cannot win, and their cost-benefit assessment makes a negotiated settlement more favorable than continued fighting. Where the parties believe they can win militarily, or at least make gains through further fighting, they are resistant to negotiations. MHS is a subjective condition, dependent on the parties' perceptions rather than on objective conditions alone.²¹ Their cost-benefit assessment encompasses rational deliberations, as well as psychological and ideological factors.²²

Our case studies identify the following ways in which conflict regionalization reduces the prospects for ripeness:

- Domestic belligerents that receive arms and ammunition from proximate states may be confident they can pursue hostilities with less risk of running out of weapons and less risk of being defeated. In some of our cases, external military support staved off the likely defeat of a domestic belligerent.²³

- In regionalized conflicts, ripeness depends not only on the perceptions and calculations of the domestic conflict parties. It also relies on the perceptions and calculations of the proximate conflict states. Since ripeness hinges on multiple actors and relates to multiple conflict systems, it is less likely to be achieved. In order to ensure fruitful mediation, ripeness may be necessary at both the regional and the domestic levels.²⁴
- Where a proximate conflict state relies on proxy forces to fight and pursue its interests in the conflict country, the costs to that state – in terms of casualties and damage to the economy and infrastructure – are much lower than when hostilities take place in the proximate state’s own territory.²⁵ This reduces the potential for the proximate state to experience ripeness. Even when the proximate conflict state is incurring significant costs, such as Russia in its war against Ukraine, the costs are not as high as when a state is fighting on its own territory.²⁶
- The cost-benefit assessment of a proximate conflict state may strongly favor continued fighting, leading to reduced potential for ripeness, where that state is engaged in hostilities for existential reasons. This situation may arise where rebels from the proximate state have rear bases in the conflict country.²⁷
- The cost-benefit assessment of a proximate conflict state may favor continued fighting where its military or elite groups profit from exploiting natural resources in the conflict country.²⁸
- The prospect of ripeness is reduced where regional conflict dynamics prevent the development of a united regional front in favor of mediated negotiations, militate against collective regional pressure on the domestic parties, and afford the domestic parties leverage since they can play the proximate states against each other.²⁹



Soldiers loyal to Laurent Kabila's Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo brandish their weapons.
Photo: Jon Jones/Sygma/Getty Images

Mediator Approaches to Conflict Regionalization



Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron and Vladimir Putin attend a press conference after a summit on Ukraine at the Élysée Palace in Paris, Dec. 9 2019.

Photo: Charles Platiau/Pool/AFP/Getty Images

This section identifies and discusses three different mediation approaches to conflict regionalization: ‘hiding in plain sight,’ where mediators ignored the regional conflict dynamics and only attended to the domestic dynamics and parties; ‘foxes guarding the hen house,’ where external conflict parties assumed the role of mediators; and ‘taking the bull by the horns,’ where mediators sought to address both the regional and the domestic conflict dynamics.

Hiding in Plain Sight

In many of the cases we studied, the role of proximate states as conflict actors was well known publicly but was not formally acknowledged and addressed in the mediation process. Instead, the mediating body was complicit in the fiction that the proximate states were not conflict actors.

The mediations where regional conflict actors were ‘hiding in plain sight’ were inherently and deeply flawed and unlikely to make progress.

A sound mediation initiative necessarily requires the mediator to pay attention to all the major conflict actors and dynamics. It is axiomatic that the basic elements of peacemaking – conflict analysis, process design, strategy, and facilitation of dialogue and negotiations – must be comprehensive.³⁰ If a mediation initiative ignores major conflict dynamics and actors, it is patently incomplete, inadequate and non-credible. These strategies had the dual objectives of pressuring the belligerent parties and compensating for the divisions within IGAD. None of the strategies achieved these objectives.

By way of illustration:

- The Minsk mediation process led by France and Germany, which was set up to address Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in 2014, maintained the diplomatic pretense that Russia was not a belligerent party but was instead a member of the mediation ensemble.³¹ This framing distorted the nature of the conflict, misdirected the focus of the mediation, reduced Ukraine's confidence in the mediation and contributed to the mediators' implicit acceptance of Russia's aggression and annexation of Crimea.
- In the undertaken by IGAD for South Sudan in 2013-15, the mediating body comprised proximate conflict actors. Uganda provided military support to the South Sudanese government, while Sudan sent ammunition to the opposition forces.³² IGAD's failure to acknowledge the military involvement of some of its members meant that it could not develop strategies to address that involvement. This rendered the mediation incomplete and sub-optimal, and undermined confidence in IGAD among the conflict parties, international partners and other stakeholders.
- The UN Security Council framed the Yemeni civil war, which began in 2015, as an exclusively intra-state conflict between the ousted government and the Houthi rebels.³³ This framing ignored the role of Saudi Arabia, which led a destructive military campaign aimed at defeating the Houthis and reinstating the government, and the role of Iran as a military ally of the Houthis.³⁴ These external actors were quite evidently regional conflict parties, but they were not treated formally as such by the UN mediators.³⁵ Regional experts were critical of this exclusionary approach.³⁶ As discussed below, this changed in 2022 when the UN brokered a truce between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis.



Tribesmen loyal to Houthi rebels
Photo: AP Photo/Hani Mohammed

Foxes guarding the hen house

In some of the cases we studied, proximate states were simultaneously conflict actors and mediators.³⁷ A number of serious problems can emerge from these dual roles:

- The conflict state-as-mediator may position itself as a mediator not because it genuinely wants to play a peacemaking role but because it wants to whitewash its role as a conflict actor, thereby avoiding or minimizing international opprobrium, and challenge or squeeze out other mediators.³⁸
- The proximate conflict state-as-mediator may prioritize its own interests above those of the conflict country, pursue its own objectives at the expense of the goal of conflict resolution and/or engage in mediation in a way that bolsters its domestic ally rather than assists the domestic parties to forge a peace agreement.³⁹
- The conflict state-as-mediator is likely to be perceived by at least one of the domestic conflict parties as biased against it, leading that party to reject the proximate state as a mediator.⁴⁰ The conflict state may also be perceived internationally to lack legitimacy as a mediator, causing international actors to withhold support to the mediation.
- A multilateral mediating body whose members include proximate conflict states may be wracked by internal divisions and have insufficient clarity, cohesion and legitimacy to be effective. This in turn contributes to the scourge of mediator competition and forum shopping by the conflict parties.⁴¹ Mediator proliferation and competition are also frequently driven by the interests of proximate states. An extreme example of this is the current war in Sudan, which has experienced intense mediation competition between and among African and Arab actors.⁴²

The problems described above are exemplified by the South Sudan and Syria cases:

- The IGAD mediation for South Sudan, as noted above, was undertaken by a regional body whose member countries included proximate conflict states. As a result, IGAD was unable to reach consensus on vital questions of strategy and process; it could not exercise effective leverage over the domestic belligerents; its mediators received insufficient collective support from the IGAD heads of states; certain of the domestic parties viewed the mediation as biased; and domestic and international stakeholders lacked confidence in the mediation.⁴³

- The Astana mediation process for Syria was convened and led by Russia, Iran and Türkiye, all of which were involved militarily in the civil war. The combined conflict actor-mediator roles entailed propping up the Assad regime; managing the conflict in the interests of the external states rather than attempting to resolve the conflict in the interests of the Syrian people; and competing with, and undermining, the UN mediation for Syria.⁴⁴

In light of our critical comments here, we should note that regional organizations and neighboring states are often effective mediators in intra-state conflicts because they have an interest in regional stability, they are deeply familiar with the domestic conflict parties and dynamics, and they are able to move more swiftly than other international actors.⁴⁵ From a mediation perspective, the challenge arises where proximate states intervene militarily in the conflict and become external conflict parties.

We do not assume that mediating actors are ever entirely disinterested players. State and multilateral mediators are always motivated by political, security, economic and/or institutional interests.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, a legitimate mediating actor is not only concerned with defending or promoting its interests but also seeks to genuinely help the conflict parties resolve their conflict.

Taking the bull by the horns

In contrast to the failed mediation cases referred to above, the successful mediation processes among our cases formally recognized and addressed the role of proximate states as conflict actors:

- The mediation processes for the DRC in 1998-2003, which were led by different national and multinational actors, resulted in the following formal agreements: the 1999 Lusaka ceasefire agreement that covered the DRC government, proximate conflict states and assorted rebel groups based in the Congo; bilateral security agreements between the DRC government and neighboring Rwanda and Uganda; and a comprehensive peace settlement among the Congolese parties.⁴⁷ The Lusaka Agreement explicitly recognized that the conflict had “internal and external dimensions” that required intra-Congolese negotiations and a commitment by the proximate conflict parties to abide by their ceasefire obligations.
- The peace processes for Central America in 1986-1990 were driven at the regional level by a negotiating forum of the Central American presidents, who forged a comprehensive multi-track framework agreement that covered the domestic and regional dimensions of conflict. It encompassed ceasefires, negotiated settlements and democratization as means to ending



Sir Ketumile Masire, facilitator of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue, speaking at the peace talks at Sun City, February 26, 2002
Photo: Anna Zieminski/AFP

the intra-state conflicts; addressed inter-state conflicts by prohibiting state support for, and the use of national territory by, insurgents from another country; and provided for ongoing regional consultation, oversight and dispute resolution through periodic presidential summits.⁴⁸ The regional process was accompanied by bilateral negotiations to end the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. President Arias of Costa Rica played a critical mediating role in initiating and facilitating the regional negotiations.⁴⁹

- The UN mediation for Yemen is a case of belatedly taking the bull by the horns, albeit only partially. In the context of escalating cross-border hostilities between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia in 2019, the International Crisis Group (ICG) called for mediation between these two conflict parties.⁵⁰ In 2022, UN mediators brokered a two-month truce between them, which was extended twice and has largely held.⁵¹ Although the truce is not a conflict resolution agreement and leaves Yemen divided politically and territo-



President Salva Kiir signs the agreement on the resolution of the conflict in South Sudan Photo: UN Photo/Isaac Billy

rially, it is very important from a humanitarian perspective. In addition, since 2020 Oman has facilitated talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, but there has not been a major breakthrough. A long-term peace agreement between the Saudis and the Houthis could provide a basis for progress in intra-Yemeni negotiations.⁵²



President Óscar Arias (Photo: Luis Angel Espinoza)

Beyond our set of cases, another positive example of ‘taking the bull by the horns’ is the mediation undertaken by the US in 1988 to resolve the interconnected conflicts in Southern Africa. The mediation covered the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, Namibia’s independence from South Africa, a new constitution and elections in Namibia, and reconciliation between the Angolan government and Unita rebels.⁵³ In the 1980s, UN Security Council resolutions on the intra-state conflicts in Afghanistan and Cambodia tasked mediators with negotiating political solutions that had both domestic and external dimensions. The external dimensions included the withdrawal of foreign troops, reaffirmation of the principles of non-intervention and interference, and international guarantees for peace settlements.⁵⁴

Conclusion

We conclude that mediation efforts to address proximate conflict actors and regional conflict dynamics is a necessary condition for resolving intra-state conflict.⁵⁵ A softer formulation is that such efforts increase the prospects of success. Exceptions would arise where proximate conflict actors that are not part of a mediation process choose, for their own reasons, to end their military involvement in the conflict country, at which point they are no longer conflict parties.

The sound logic of acknowledging and addressing the intertwined regional and domestic dimensions of conflict also underpinned the Madrid process, initiated in 1991 by the US and the Soviet Union, which aimed to create a regional framework for resolving the Arab–Israeli conflicts in their entirety, including the Israel–Palestine conflict.⁵⁶ The failure of this process highlights the fact that mediation efforts to address regional conflict actors and dynamics may be necessary, but they are not a sufficient condition for resolving intra-state conflict.

Policy Recommendations: Addressing the Problem of Regionalization

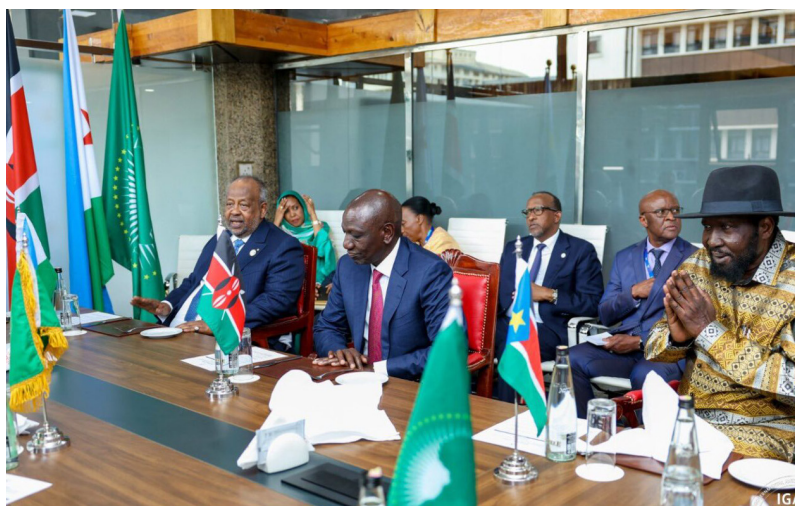
The recommendations in this section are directed at actors that undertake or support international mediation with the genuine intention of helping the domestic parties end their conflict through negotiations. The proposals will be of no interest to actors that purport to be mediators but cynically seek only to advance their own interests.

The recommendations below do not offer any guarantee of mediation success. In the nature of intractable conflict, mediation fails more often than it succeeds. The outcome depends primarily on the conflict parties rather than the mediator. Nevertheless, the premise of our recommendations is that sound mediation practice can heighten the chances of success.

Our recommendations cover the overarching approach; analysis and framing; mandates; strategy; process; and substance.

Overarching approach

Our cases confirm a fundamental overarching point about sound mediation practice: mediation analysis, processes and strategies must reflect accurately and



IGAD Quartet summit in Nairobi on September 6 in Nairobi

Photo: IGAD

comprehensively the major conflict actors and dynamics.⁵⁷ In regionalized conflicts, this necessarily and logically includes regional conflict actors and dynamics.⁵⁸ A failure to acknowledge and address the involvement of regional conflict actors will doom a mediation to being sub-optimal at best or completely ineffectual at worst.

Analysis and framing

The mediator's analysis must cover the proximate conflict actors as follows:

- What are their objectives, national agendas and foreign policy interests?
- What are their relationships with other relevant states and with the domestic conflict parties?
- What is the nature of their military involvement in the conflict?
- To what extent do they have leverage over the domestic parties?
- What is their own vulnerability to leverage exerted by powerful actors?
- How do they perceive ripeness? What are the diplomatic, political, economic and security costs of continued fighting?
- What are the main drivers of conflict at the regional level?
- What is the nature of the regional conflict systems and how are they intertwined with the domestic conflict system?

It is especially important to ascertain the proximate conflict actors' objectives and interests as this should inform the mediator's development of processes and strategies.

A critical feature of the mediator's analysis is the basic framing of the conflict. This is often contested among domestic and regional conflict actors, which might disagree on whether a given conflict is a) a genuinely intra-state conflict with external military involvement; b) acts of aggression by an external actor, accompanied by use of proxy forces in the conflict country; c) a proxy conflict between two or more regional or global powers; and/or d) a collection of intertwined intra-and inter-state conflicts within a regional security complex. The way in which the mediating actor frames the conflict will have a strong bearing on its strategies and processes.

Mandates

We have argued that mediation is deeply flawed if it fails to acknowledge and address formally the presence of regional conflict actors and dynamics. Ideally, such acknowledgement should be included in the mandate issued by the mediating organization.⁵⁹ This mandate frames the conflict, provides instructions to the mediator, and specifies the mediation objectives, strategies and process.⁶⁰

Ensuring an appropriate mandate may be extremely difficult politically. The 'hiding in plain sight' approach to mediation arises precisely because the proximate conflict states are opposed to formal acknowledgement of their role as conflict parties. At the very least, the mandate issued by the mediating organization should require attention to 'the regional dimensions of the conflict, even if it does not refer to any proximate country by name. Because conflicts and international perspectives evolve over time, it is possible that a proximate conflict party, initially 'hiding in plain sight,' later comes to be recognized formally as a conflict party and is then involved in mediated negotiations.⁶¹ Throughout this paper we have used the term 'formally' in relation to the need to acknowledge and address regional conflict actors. In reality, mediating entities and their partners frequently make informal diplomatic approaches to these actors. By virtue of being informal, however, such approaches are not well documented in the public domain, and we are unable to assess their efficacy. In the absence of binding formal agreements, moreover, proximate conflict parties cannot be held accountable for breaching any informal undertakings they made.

Strategy

In regionalized intra-state conflict, ripeness for mediation may depend on whether the proximate conflict parties experience an MHS and conclude that the costs of continued military involvement outweigh the benefits.⁶² If they do not perceive an MHS, they are likely to continue their involvement. If they do perceive an MHS, they can induce ripeness at the domestic level and put pressure on the

domestic belligerents to engage in negotiations.⁶³ Alternatively, the external actors may simply end their military involvement in the conflict. Both of these scenarios are favorable for mediation.

Where proximate conflict actors do not perceive ripeness, critical strategic questions arise: What kind of pressure can be exerted on the proximate conflict actors? Should these actors be subject to inducements, shaming and/or coercive measures? And which are the right actors to apply the pressure?⁶⁴

Another strategic issue that arises from conflict regionalization is the question of which actor is the most appropriate mediating body. It may be the case that a regional body comprising proximate conflict actors is so lacking in cohesion and credibility that it should not be the mediator.⁶⁵ It may also be the case that a division of labor, with different mediating actors addressing different dimensions of the conflict, is appropriate.⁶⁶ This mixed approach obviously requires good coordination.

Process

Every regionalized intra-state conflict is unique, with the nature, intensity and effects of regionalization varying from one case to another. Consequently, mediators cannot follow a formulaic process for addressing the regional conflict dynamics and actors. Instead, their process design should be based on the following questions:

- Should national and regional mediation tracks be integrated or pursued separately? If pursued separately, should they be undertaken sequentially or in parallel? If sequentially, should the mediator begin with the regional track?
- Should the regional track be organized as a single multilateral track that covers all the regional conflict actors, or rather as a collection of different tracks focused on different regional conflict systems and actors?
- If multiple mediation tracks are pursued, should they be undertaken by different mediating organizations and/or different lead mediators? If yes, what coordination mechanisms are required?

The answers to these questions depend on a sophisticated conflict analysis, excellent political judgement and extensive mediation experience. Process design obviously depends also on the objective of the mediation (e.g., pre-negotiations; confidence-building; ceasefire; comprehensive settlement). Further, as noted above, the mediating actor's framing of the conflict will shape decisions on process.



US Troop withdrawal from Afghanistan Photo: Wikimedia Commons



A meeting between the presidents of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, as part of the Esquipulas II agreement Photo: Secretaría General del SICA via Flickr

In addition, the mediator's process design should be informed by the parties' interests, objectives and perceptions of ripeness. For example, the parties themselves may have a preference for separating or combining the regional and national tracks; for conducting bilateral rather than multilateral regional agreements; or for undertaking bilateral negotiations between a proximate conflict party and a domestic conflict party (e.g., the UN mediation for Yemen).

In the successful cases of Central America and the DRC, there were several process features that could be considered 'best practice' in regionalized conflicts:

There were several mediation processes and

not just one;

- There were several mediating actors and not just one;
- Processes took place over several years and were not done in a rush;
- Processes were adaptive and evolved in response to progress, obstacles and changing national and regional dynamics; and
- Mediators attended to disputes relating to the implementation of agreements.

Substance of agreements

Agreements relating to regional conflict dynamics must address the specific forms of military involvement by proximate states (e.g., deploying troops; using proxy forces; allowing rebels to have rear bases in their territory; supplying weapons to the domestic belligerents; etc).



Photo: STANISLAV FILIPPOV / AFP

Addressing the relevant forms of external military involvement is not sufficient, however. As important is the need to address, to the extent possible, the objectives and interests that underly that involvement. These objectives and interests might be based on security, political, economic, commercial or ethnic considerations. How they are addressed will depend on their nature, intensity and legitimacy. The caveat - 'to the extent possible' - is necessary because external military involvement may be motivated by illegitimate objectives (e.g., plunder of natural resources) or by domestic politics in the proximate conflict state that lie outside the mandate of the mediator.

Global powers and dynamics

This paper has explored the complexities of conflict and mediation in the context of regionalized intra-state conflict. In some conflicts these complexities are compounded by the military involvement of global powers as conflict actors. Given the sheer power of these actors, the implications for mediation analysis, framing, processes, strategies and outcomes are considerable. These issues lie outside the scope of our analysis and proposals, however.

Conclusion

The regionalization of intra-state conflict increases the difficulty of mediation by heightening the complexity of conflict and, consequently, the complexity of peacemaking, and by reducing the prospects for ripeness, that depend on the perceptions and calculations of both the domestic conflict parties and the proximate conflict states. Mediation is especially fraught when it is undertaken by proximate states that are simultaneously conflict actors and mediators. These states tend to prioritize their own interests and objectives, and are more intent on backing their domestic ally than on achieving a resolution of the conflict.

The mediation approach of 'hiding in plain sight,' which ignores regional conflict actors and dynamics, is patently incomplete, inadequate and non-credible. Instead, mediation initiatives require 'taking the bull by the horns' and addressing the regional actors and dynamics. This is a necessary but insufficient condition for resolving intra-state conflict. The military involvement of regional conflict actors must therefore be addressed in the mediation mandate, analysis, strategies, processes and agreements.

Endnotes

- ¹ Regan, Patrick. 2010. 'Interventions into Civil Wars: A Retrospective Survey with Prospective Ideas,' *Civil Wars* 12(4): 456–76; Cunningham, David. 2010. 'Blocking Resolution: How External States Can Prolong Civil Wars,' *Journal of Peace Research* 47(2): 115–27; Mason, David, Joseph Weingarten Jr. and Patrick Fett. 2000. 'Win, Lose or Draw: Predicting the Outcome of Civil Wars,' *Political Research Quarterly* 52(2): 239–68.
- ² Harpviken, Kristian Berg. 2025. 'Isolating Peace Talks from a Complex Neighborhood: The US-Taliban Talks, 2018-2020', forthcoming.
- ³ Suárez, Laura Camila. 2025. 'The Central American Formula: The Arias Peace Plan and the Esquipulas II Agreement (1986 -1990)', forthcoming.
- ⁴ Aeby, Michael. 2025. 'Untangling Africa's World War: Mediation in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Regionalized Conflict, 1998 – 2006' (https://curate.nd.edu/articles/report/Untangling_Africa_s_World_War_Mediation_in_the_Democratic_Republic_of_Congo_s_Regionalised_Conflict_1998_2006/28473383?file=52570067).
- ⁵ Jensehaugen, Jørgen. 2024. 'The Madrid Conference and the Washington process (1991–1993): A Regional Framework for Resolving the Arab-Israeli Conflict' (https://curate.nd.edu/articles/report/The_Madrid_Conference_and_the_Washington_Process_1991_1993_A_Regional_Framework_for_Resolving_the_Arab-Israeli_Conflict/27941349?file=50918202).
- ⁶ Baev, Pavel. 2024. 'False Hopes and Broken Promises on the Road to War: The Minsk Process to Manage the Russia-Ukraine Conflict, 2014-2021' (https://curate.nd.edu/articles/report/False_Hopes_and_Broken_Promises_on_the_Road_to_War_The_Minsk_Process_to_Manage_the_Russia-Ukraine_Conflict_2014-2021/27942291?file=50975898).
- ⁷ Nathan, Laurie. 2024. 'Foxes Guarding the Henhouse? The IGAD Mediation for South Sudan, 2013-2105', (https://curate.nd.edu/articles/report/Foxes_Guarding_the_Henhouse_The_IGAD_Mediation_for_South_Sudan_2013-15/27392769?file=50122146).
- ⁸ Rolandsen, Øystein H. and Antoni Sastre Bel. 2025. 'Gravitating towards the Middle East: How Sudan's Changing Regional Context Fuels Conflict and Hinder Mediation', forthcoming.
- ⁹ Tank, Pinar. 2025. 'The Astana Platform for Syria: The Limits of an Unsustainable Mediation Process', https://curate.nd.edu/articles/report/The_Astana_platform_for_Syria_The_limits_of_a_conflict_management_mediation_process/28669859?file=53248514.
- ¹⁰ Palik, Julia. 2024. 'The Elephant in the Room: How Saudi Arabia's Multiple Roles in Yemen Influence Mediation Efforts, (https://curate.nd.edu/articles/report/The_Elephant_in_the_Room_How_Saudi_Arabia_s_Multiple_Roles_in_Yemen_Influence_Mediation_Efforts/27948006?file=50981484).
- ¹¹ Suárez, 'The Central American Formula'.
- ¹² Aeby, 'Untangling Africa's World War'.
- ¹³ Palik, 'The Elephant in the Room'.
- ¹⁴ This definition of 'regionalization' in terms of military involvement by proximate states purposely narrows the scope of our project. It excludes political involvement by proximate states, which can be multi-faceted and occur with varying degrees of intensity. Unlike military involvement, political involvement by a proximate state does not necessarily make that state a conflict party.
- ¹⁵ The involvement of Russia is prominent in two of our cases: as a belligerent party in the war against Ukraine (Baev, 'False Hopes'); and as a dual conflict party / mediator in the case of Syria (Tank, 'The Astana Platform').
- ¹⁶ Our project is concerned with the negative effects of regional conflict dynamics from a mediation perspective. From a democratic perspective, on the other hand, a proximate state's military intervention in an intra-state conflict might be considered positive where it supports rebels fighting an authoritarian regime or supports a democratic government under attack by anti-democratic forces.
- ¹⁷ Nathan, Laurie. 2014. 'What Is the Essence of International Mediation in Civil Wars? The Challenge of Managing Complexity', *BPC Papers* 2(2), BRICS Policy Centre, Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro.
- ¹⁸ In the DRC war, for example, intra-state conflicts in neighboring Angola, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda played out within Congolese territory (Aeby, 'Untangling Africa's World War').
- ¹⁹ Suárez, 'The Central American Formula'; Aeby, 'Untangling Africa's World War'.
- ²⁰ Zartman, I. William. 2001. 'The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments', *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 9(1): 8-18.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Nathan, Laurie and Joel Devonshire. 2024. 'Don't We Have a Right to Get Angry? Integrating Emotions into International Mediation Studies,' *International Journal of Conflict Management* 35(1): 81-103.
- ²³ In the Syrian civil war, Russian military intervention saved President Assad from defeat by the rebels (Tank, 'The Astana Platform for Syria'). In the DRC war, military intervention by Southern African Development Community (SADC) states in 1998 averted the overthrow of the Congolese government (Aeby, 'Untangling Africa's World War'). The Taliban was able to survive against the US-led

military coalition because of the support it received from Pakistan (Harpviken, 'Isolating Peace Talks from a Complex Neighborhood'). Military support from Iran and Egypt helped the Sudanese army avoid defeat by the Rapid Support Force at the start of the civil war in 2023 (Rolandsen and Bel, 'Gravitating towards the Middle East').

²⁴ For scholarly discussion of ripeness at the regional level, see Cunningham, 'Blocking Resolution'; Kane, Sean. 2022. 'Making Peace When the Whole World Has Come to Fight: The Mediation of Internationalized Civil Wars', *International Peacekeeping* 29(2): 177-203; and Stedman, Stephen. 1990. *Peacemaking in Civil War: International Mediation in Zimbabwe, 1974-1980*. Lynne Rienner.

²⁵ Proxy forces were used in the Syrian conflict by Türkiye (Tank, 'The Astana Platform'); and in the DRC conflict by Uganda and Rwanda (Aeby, 'Untangling Africa's World War').

²⁶ Baev, 'False Hopes'.

²⁷ For example, in the 1998 war in the DRC, rebels from Angola, Burundi and Uganda fought their respective governments from bases inside the Congo (Aeby, 'Untangling Africa's World War'). In the Syrian war, Türkiye has viewed Kurdish forces based in Syria as an existential threat (Tank, 'The Astana Platform'). In the Central America case, the Contras fighting the Nicaraguan government were based in Honduras (Suárez, 'The Central American Formula').

²⁸ For a discussion on the economic motivations of Rwanda and Uganda's military involvement in the DRC war, see Aeby, 'Untangling Africa's World War'.

²⁹ These problems have been extreme in the current war in Sudan (Rolandsen and Bel, 'Gravitating towards the Middle East'); in the war in South Sudan after 2013 (Nathan, 'Foxes Guarding the Henhouse?'); and in the case of Afghanistan (Harpviken, 'Isolating Peace Talks').

³⁰ United Nations. 2024. 'Briefing Note on Conflict Analysis and Ripeness for Mediation' and 'Briefing Note on Developing a UN Mediation Strategy', UN High Level Mediation Course manual, unpublished document.

³¹ Baev, 'False Hopes'.

³² Nathan, 'Foxes Guarding the Henhouse?'.

³³ UN Security Council Resolution 2216 (2015) and subsequent resolutions.

³⁴ Palik, 'The Elephant in the Room'.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Abdul-Hadi-Jadallah, Alma. 2023. 'Exploring United Nations Mediation Efforts in Yemen, 2011–2019', in Ibrahim Fraihat and Isak Svensson (eds.), *Conflict Mediation in the Arab World*, Syracuse University Press.

³⁷ These actors have also been referred to as 'warmakers-peacemakers' (Hellmüller, Sara and Bilal Salaymeh. 2025. 'Transactional Peacemaking: Warmakers as Peacemakers in the Political Marketplace of Peace Processes', *Contemporary Security Policy*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2024.2448908>).

³⁸ For example, the Astana mediation process for Syria was convened and led by Russia, Iran and Türkiye in order to advance their interests and provide diplomatic cover for their military involvement in the war (Tank, 'The Astana Platform'). This also applies to Egypt and the United Arab Emirates as mediators in the Sudan civil war (Rolandsen and Bel, 'Gravitating towards the Middle East').

³⁹ In the case of Syria, for example, the Astana mediators sought to keep President Asad in power (Tank, 'The Astana Platform'). See also the case study on Sudan (Rolandsen and Bel, 'Gravitating towards the Middle East').

⁴⁰ Conflict party accusations of mediator bias have been rife in the Sudan war (Rolandsen and Bel, 'Gravitating towards the Middle East').

⁴¹ For example, international frustration with IGAD's mediation for South Sudan led to a rival mediation by South Africa and Tanzania (Nathan, 'Foxes Guarding the Henhouse?').

⁴² Rolandsen and Bel, 'Gravitating towards the Middle East'.

⁴³ Nathan, 'Foxes Guarding the Henhouse?'.

⁴⁴ Tank, 'The Astana Platform'.

⁴⁵ On the pros and cons of regional bodies as mediators, see Nathan, Laurie. 2017. 'How to Manage Interorganizational Disputes over Mediation in Africa', *Global Governance* 23(2): 151-162.

⁴⁶ Zartman, I.W. and S. Touval. 2007. "International Mediation", in C. Crocker, F. Hampson and P. Aall (eds), *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*, Washington DC: US Institute for Peace, pp. 437-454.

⁴⁷ Aeby, 'Untangling Africa's World War'.

⁴⁸ Suárez, 'The Central American Formula'.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group. 2019. 'Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen', *Middle East Report* no. 203.

⁵¹ Palik, 'The Elephant in the Room'.

⁵² International Crisis Group. 2023. 'Catching up on the Back-channel Peace Talks in Yemen', 10 October.

⁵³ Crocker, Chester. 1992. *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood*, W.W. Norton.

⁵⁴ Kane, 'Making Peace'.

⁵⁵ This conclusion is consistent with Kane's argument that "in addition to addressing the [intra-state] conflict's internal dimensions, elective negotiations to resolve internationalized civil wars require reaching agreement on how to end the external military intervention in the conflict and measures to re-set the external environment fueling the civil war" (Kane, 'Making Peace', p. 179).

⁵⁶ Jensehaugen, 'The Madrid Conference'.

⁵⁷ United Nations, 'Briefing Note on Conflict Analysis' and 'Briefing Note on Developing a UN Mediation Strategy'.

⁵⁸ Kane, 'Making Peace'.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 186.

⁶⁰ Note that a mediator needs a mandate both from the mediating organization (i.e., an authorization to mediate) and from the conflict parties (i.e., the parties' consent to mediation). See Nathan, Laurie. 2017. 'Marching Orders: Exploring the Mediation Mandate,' *African Security* 10(3-4): 155-175.

⁶¹ In the Yemen civil war, for example, for several years Saudi Arabia purported to be a mediator rather than a conflict party but in 2022 the UN mediated a truce between the Saudis and the Houthis (Palik, 'The Elephant in the Room'). Whereas the Mink peace process for the Russia-Ukraine war treated Russia as a mediator rather than a conflict party (Baev, 'False Hopes'), the current approach of the US Administration seeks to broker negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.

⁶² Stedman, *Peacemaking in Civil War*.

⁶³ Stedman shows that the successful British mediation to end the Rhodesia/Zimbabwe conflict in 1980 was possible because the regional partners of the Rhodesian government and the liberation movements had reached the point of MHS and then pressured the domestic parties to go to the negotiating table (Stedman, *Peacemaking in Civil War*).

⁶⁴ The relationship between mediation and sanctions lies outside the scope of this paper. See Biersteker, Thomas, Rebecca Brubaker and David Lanz. 2022. 'Exploring the Relationships between UN Sanctions and Mediation', *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 28(2): 180-202.

⁶⁵ This was the case with IGAD in the South Sudan war (Nathan, 'Foxes Guarding the Henhouse?').

⁶⁶ This was the case in the DRC war (Aeby, 'Untangling Africa's World War').

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