


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Peacemaking in a shifting world order: A macro-level analysis of UN mediation in Syria

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Abstract

Failures to bring internationalised civil wars, such as in Syria, Libya, or Yemen, to a negotiated agreement have led to a questioning of the UN's role in peacemaking. The literature explains such mediation outcomes by examining micro-level aspects pertaining to either the mediation process or the conflict context. While both are important, they are influenced by macro-level dynamics related to world politics that have received less attention. Yet, such an awareness of the structural context in which mediation takes place is particularly relevant in times of tectonic shifts in world politics, such as the current change in world order from unipolarity to multipolarity. This article fills this gap by exploring the mechanisms through which macro- and micro-level factors interact in mediation, illustrated by the case of the UN mediation in Syria. The article thereby makes two contributions. First, it provides an analysis of the link between world politics and UN mediation by complementing micro-level explanations with a macro-level perspective. Second, it allows for a better understanding of UN mediation in internationalised civil wars, and particularly in Syria. Overall, the article contributes to reflections on how the UN can keep its relevance in peacemaking in a shifting world order.

Keywords: Mediation; Peacemaking; Multipolarity; World Order; United Nations

Introduction

In a briefing to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), UN Secretary-General António Guterres called mediation one of 'the most important tools to reduce human suffering'.¹ Mediation is commonly defined as a process 'where those in conflict seek the assistance of, or accept an offer of help from, an outsider ... without resorting to physical force or invoking the authority of law'.² Mediation has become a standard international response to armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War, with the UN playing a leading role in many peace processes.³ Yet, recent failures to bring the conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen to a negotiated agreement have

¹António Guterres, 'Remarks at Security Council Meeting on Conflict Prevention and Mediation', United Nations, New York, 12 June 2019.

²Jacob Bercovitch, 'Mediation and conflict resolution', in Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenyuk, and I. William Zartman (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (London, UK: SAGE Publications, 2009), p. 343.

³Richard Gowan and Stephen J. Stedman, 'The international regime for treating civil war, 1988–2017', *Daedalus*, 147:1 (2018), pp. 171–84; Lise Morjé Howard and Alexandra Stark, 'How civil wars end: The international system, norms, and the role of external actors', *International Security*, 42:3 (2017/18), pp. 122–71.

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led to a questioning of the UN's role to promote a pacific settlement of contemporary armed conflicts.⁴

The existing literature predominantly explains such mediation outcomes by focusing on micro-level aspects, examining either *process factors*⁵ in terms of the characteristics of the mediation or *conflict factors*⁶ in terms of the characteristics of the conflict context. Both play a crucial role in understanding mediation. However, as I show in this article, these micro-level factors need to be understood in light of macro-level factors related to the world political environment in which mediation processes take place. While it is a truism that world politics affect peacemaking, the exact way in which changing world orders influence mediation outcomes has received relatively little scholarly attention.⁷ Yet, such an analysis is particularly important in light of the current tectonic shifts in the prevailing world order from unipolarity to multipolarity, with the United States (US) no longer being the sole superpower, and other actors, such as China and Russia, playing increasingly important roles in world politics.⁸ It is thus crucial to explore how these macro-level factors influence mediation. Without such an analysis, we risk neglecting the structural environment in which mediation takes place and may therefore have an incomplete view or even misinterpret what determines mediation outcomes.

In this article, I fill this gap by examining the mechanisms through which macro- and micro-level factors interact and how they jointly influence mediation outcomes.⁹ To do so, I focus on UN mediation in internationalised civil wars. I analyse the UN due to its central role in mediation. Its main mandate is the maintenance of peace and security with a priority accorded to the pacific settlement of disputes and it constitutes an arena where major discussions around mediation take place. I specifically look at UN mediation in internationalised civil wars, defined as armed conflicts in which at least one of the parties receives military support or training, weapons, or other logistical and financial backing from other governments.¹⁰ Internationalised civil wars are not a new phenomenon, as evidenced by the proxy wars during the Cold War.

⁴Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, 'The shifting sands of peacemaking: Challenges of multiparty mediation', *International Negotiation*, 20:3 (2015), pp. 363–88; Jean-Marie Guéhenno, 'The United Nations and civil wars', *Daedalus*, 147:1 (2018), pp. 185–96.

⁵See, for example, Kyle Beardsley, David M. Quinn, Bidisha Biswas, and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, 'Mediation style and crisis outcomes', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50:1 (2006), pp. 58–86; Isak Svensson, 'Mediation with muscles or minds? Exploring power mediators and pure mediators in civil wars', *International Negotiation*, 12:2 (2007), pp. 229–48; Andrew H. Kydd, 'Which side are you on? Bias, credibility and mediation', *American Journal of Political Science*, 47:4 (2003), pp. 597–611; Timothy Sisk, *International Mediation in Civil Wars: Bargaining with Bullets* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009); Siniša Vuković, *International Multiparty Mediation and Conflict Management: Challenges of Cooperation and Coordination* (London, UK: Routledge, 2015).

⁶See, for example, I. William Zartman, *Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 445–61; Michael Greig, 'Moments of opportunity: Recognizing conditions of ripeness for international mediation between enduring rivals', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 45:6 (2001), pp. 691–718; Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, 'Ready for prime time: The when, who, and why of international mediation', *Negotiation Journal*, 19:2 (2003), pp. 151–67; Patrick M. Regan and Allan C. Stam, 'In the nick of time: Conflict management, mediation timing, and the duration of interstate disputes', *International Studies Quarterly*, 44:2 (2000), pp. 239–60.

⁷Notable exceptions are Crocker, Hampson, and Aall, 'The shifting sands'; I. William Zartman, 'Structuring in a vacuum: Negotiating in the current world disorder', *International Negotiation*, 25:1 (2020), pp. 5–17. For scholarly insights on the impact of world politics on UN peace operations, see Roland Paris, 'The geopolitics of peace operations: A research agenda, international peacekeeping', *International Peacekeeping*, 21:4 (2014), pp. 501–08; and the edited volume by Cedric de Coning and Mateja Peter (eds), *United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁸Barry R. Posen, 'Emerging multipolarity: Why should we care?', *Current History*, 108:721 (2009), pp. 347–52; G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), pp. 7–23; John J. Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail: The rise and fall of the liberal international order', *International Security*, 43:4 (2019), pp. 7–50; Philip Cunliffe, 'Framing intervention in a multipolar world', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 19:3 (2019), pp. 245–50; Mateja Peter, 'UN peace operations: Adapting to a new global order', in de Coning and Peter (eds), *United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order*, pp. 1–22.

⁹In this article, I define mediation outcomes as successful if they lead to the signature of an agreement.

¹⁰UCDP, 'Uppsala Conflict Data Program' (Uppsala: Uppsala University); T. David Mason, Joseph P. Weingarten Jr, and Patrick J. Fett, 'Win, lose, or draw: Predicting the outcome of civil wars', *Political Research Quarterly*, 52:2 (1999), pp. 239–68.

They have, however, seen an unprecedented increase in recent years, skyrocketing from 9 in 2012 to 25¹¹ in 2020.¹² Internationalised armed conflicts, like the ones in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Syria, or Yemen, are likely to be more lethal and last longer than other civil wars because external actors provide resources to sustain the fighting and more actors have stakes in their outcomes.¹³ They therefore represent extreme cases for UN mediation considering their limited prospects for success. Yet, it is often in such cases that the UN's legitimacy in peacemaking is evaluated. It is thus of particular relevance to better understand UN efforts to resolve them.

The article takes UN mediation in Syria from 2012 to 2018 as a case study. The war in Syria constitutes a typical case of internationalised civil wars and the challenges of resolving them. In the period under study, the conflict opposed the government and opposition groups,¹⁴ with the main bone of contention being the fate of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. The Gulf States, Turkey, European states, and the US provided military training and provisions to the opposition while Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia backed the Syrian government with military supplies and support. The assistance that the parties received was not equal, however. Russia was determinant to keep Assad in power and intervened militarily in September 2015.¹⁵ The US, in turn, made it increasingly clear that it would not get too deeply embroiled in the Syrian conflict, as a military intervention on behalf of the opposition would clash with its strategic and material interests.¹⁶ The conflict also metastasized into various sub-conflicts due to a fragmentation of opposition groups and the formation of new armed, and often radical, actors, thereby blurring the distinction between a distinct pro-government and pro-opposition alliance. Most importantly, the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria substantively changed the conflict dynamics and alliances. This complexity made the Syrian conflict particularly challenging to address. Between 2012 and 2018, the UN mandated three Special Envoys to Syria,¹⁷ indicating the difficulty of peacefully resolving the conflict. This led some authors to refer to the situation in Syria as 'mission impossible'¹⁸ or pointing to it as an instance of 'entrapment'.¹⁹

¹¹In 2020, they included Afghanistan (Taliban, IS); Azerbaijan, Burkina Faso, Burundi (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), IS); Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo (Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo, Collective of Movements for Change, National Coalition of the People for the Sovereignty of Congo; Bundu dia Kongo, IS, Kata Katanga); Iraq, Kenya, Libya, Mali (JNIM, IS); Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia (Al Shabab, IS); Syria (Syrian insurgents, IS); Ukraine, Yemen. See Therése Pettersson, Shawn Davies, Amber Deniz, Garoun Engström, Nanar Hawach, Stina Höglblad, Margareta Sollenberg, and Magnus Öberg, 'Organized violence 1989–2020, with a special emphasis on Syria', *Journal of Peace Research*, 58:4 (2021), pp. 809–25.

¹²Pettersson et al., 'Organized violence 1989–2020, with a special emphasis on Syria', pp. 809–25; Therése Pettersson, Stina Höglblad, and Magnus Öberg, 'Organized violence, 1989–2018 and peace agreements', *Journal of Peace Research*, 56:4 (2019), pp. 590–91; Erik Melander, Therése Pettersson, and Lotta Themnér, 'Organized violence, 1989–2015', *Journal of Peace Research*, 53:5 (2016), pp. 729–30.

¹³Dylan Balch-Lindsay, Andrew J. Enterline, and Kyle A. Joyce, 'Third-party intervention and the civil war process', *Journal of Peace Research*, 45:3 (2008), pp. 345–63; David E. Cunningham, 'Blocking resolution: How external states can prolong civil wars', *Journal of Peace Research*, 47:2 (2010), pp. 115–27.

¹⁴The Syrian opposition consists of different military and political actors. Militarily, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) formed on 29 July 2011, but opposition groups splintered over the years into diverse fighters. Politically, the Syrian National Council (SNC) formed on 23 August 2011 and merged with other opposition groups into the Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) on 11 November 2012.

¹⁵Nikolay Kozhanov, 'From Russia's military deployment in Syria to the Astana process', in Raymond A. Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli (eds), *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising* (London, UK: Routledge, 2019), pp. 245–60.

¹⁶For an analysis of US policy in Syria, see Jasmine K. Gani, 'US policy towards the Syrian conflict under Obama: Strategic patience and miscalculation', in Hinnebusch and Saouli (eds), *The War for Syria*, p. 209.

¹⁷Kofi Annan (March to August 2012); Lakhdar Brahimi (September 2012 to May 2014); Staffan de Mistura (September 2014 to December 2018).

¹⁸Muriel Asseburg, Wolfram Lacher, and Mareike Transfeld, *Mission Impossible? UN-Vermittlung in Libyen, Syrien und dem Jemen* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2018).

¹⁹Siniša Vuković and Diane Bernabei, 'Refining intractability: A case study of entrapment in the Syrian civil war', *International Negotiation*, 24:3 (2019), pp. 407–36.

In this article, I analyse how macro-level factors related to world politics interacted with micro-level factors related to the mediation process and conflict context in producing this impossibility of bringing the Syrian armed conflict to a negotiated agreement. I argue that at the macro level, multipolarity has both material and ideational dimensions that manifest themselves in a resurgence of geopolitical competition and a decline of the liberal normative order.²⁰ These macro-level factors have affected UN mediation in two main ways. First, they have led to increased disunity among the permanent five members (P5) of the UNSC, resulting in reduced support to mediation from *within* the UN. Second, alternatives to the liberal peacemaking approach²¹ have emerged, leading to competition to UN mediation from *without* the UN. In the case of Syria, this lack of internal support paired with outside competition influenced micro-level factors as the UN mediators were unable to garner the necessary leverage and legitimacy to forge the parties' consent to find a negotiated solution.

The article draws on two main sources of data. First, 41 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between June 2018 and July 2020 with the former UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, UN staff and diplomats involved in or close to the mediation process, Syrian civil society and political actors, and experts on Syria, including from both the US and Russia.²² Second, I reviewed press statements and UNSC briefings by the three UN Special Envoys appointed as mediators during the period covered.

The article unfolds in two parts. It first provides a conceptual framework to analyse the impact of world politics on UN mediation by examining how macro- and micro-level factors interact. It then analyses UN mediation in Syria. It shows that changing material and ideational factors have led to a weakening of the UN as a peacemaker, rendering its mediators unable to broker a peace agreement. Thereby, the article makes two main contributions. First, it provides a systematic analysis of the link between world politics and UN mediation by complementing micro-level explanations with a macro-level perspective. Second, it enables a better understanding of UN mediation in internationalised civil wars, and particularly in Syria.²³ Overall, the article contributes to reflections on how the UN can keep its relevance in peacemaking in a changing world order.

²⁰The liberal order is defined as being characterised by 'economic openness, multilateral institutions, security cooperation and democratic solidarity' (see Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?'). While the extent of its decline is debated in the literature, there is a broad consensus that liberal internationalism was promoted by the US during the Cold War and that it globalised after 1989. See John M. Owen, 'Liberalism and its alternatives, again', *International Studies Review*, 20:2 (2018), pp. 309–16; Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'Liberal world: The resilient order', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August (2018), pp. 16–24; Mearshimer, 'Bound to fail'; Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Struggles for recognition: The liberal international order and the merger of its discontents', *International Organisation*, 75:2 (2020), pp. 611–34.

²¹I define a liberal peacemaking approach as one that considers a democratic transition as indispensable for sustainable peace.

²²Interviews were conducted in English, Arabic, and Russian. I had consecutive interpretation for the interviews in Arabic while Ignatius Ivlev-Yorke conducted the interviews in Russian. Respondents participated in the interviews with informed consent and had a choice between three options regarding referencing in publications: (1) identification by name and title; (2) identification by generic title; (3) no disclosure of identity. I transcribed and coded all data with MaxQDA.

²³Other scholars have analysed aspects related to UN mediation in Syria. For mediation by Kofi Annan, see Michael Greig, 'Intractable Syria? Insights from the scholarly literature on the failure of mediation', *Penn State Journal of Law & International Affairs*, 2:1 (2013), pp. 48–56; Tom Hill, 'Kofi Annan's multilateral strategy of mediation and the Syrian Crisis: The future of peacemaking in a multipolar world?', *International Negotiation*, 20:3 (2015), pp. 444–78; Richard Gowan, 'Kofi Annan, Syria and the uses of uncertainty in mediation', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 2:1 (2013), pp. 1–6. For a comparison between Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi, see Raymond Hinnebusch and I. William Zartman, *UN Mediation in the Syrian Crisis: From Kofi Annan to Lakhdar Brahimi* (New York, NY: International Peace Institute, 2016); Francesco Mancini and Jose Vericat, *Lost in Transition: UN Mediation in Libya, Syria, and Yemen* (New York, NY: International Peace Institute, 2016). For an overview of mediation covering Annan, Brahimi, and parts of de Mistura, see Magnus Lundgren, 'Mediation in Syria: Initiatives, strategies, and obstacles, 2011–2016', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37:2 (2016), pp. 273–88.

Conceptual framework

The micro level: Need for a complement

Existing research on mediation mainly focuses on the micro level, analysing either process or conflict factors.²⁴ Scholars interested in *process factors* study the characteristics of the mediation. A major subject in this regard are mediators' styles, which are often clustered into different taxonomies that distinguish between more and less intrusive approaches.²⁵ The theme of mediators' traits has also attracted attention, especially with regard to whether mediators are impartial or biased,²⁶ and what sort of leverage they have.²⁷

A second set of scholarship examines *conflict factors* studying how the characteristics of a conflict influence the prospects for mediation. Several authors argue that the conflict costs increase the parties' willingness to engage in mediation.²⁸ One of the most well known concepts in this regard is ripeness as developed by I. William Zartman.²⁹ He states that in order for a conflict to be 'ripe' for mediation, there needs to be a mutually hurting stalemate on the battlefield and parties need to consider mediation as a viable alternative to fighting.³⁰ Other scholars have built on Zartman's ripeness theory and added quantitative and qualitative evidence to it.³¹

These process and conflict factors are usually linked to mediation outcomes in terms of how they influence the prospect for mediation onset, for the signing of a peace agreement, or for the quality and durability of the ensuing peace.³² While studying these micro-level factors is important, they are influenced by macro-level dynamics related to world politics. Indeed, some scholars

²⁴Sara Hellmüller, 'Mediation', in Oliver Richmond and Gëzim Visoka (eds), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

²⁵Authors distinguish three main styles: A communicative style where the mediator channels information and facilitates contact between the parties, a facilitative/formulative style where the mediator structures the process and formulates specific solutions as suggestions, and a directive/manipulative style where the mediator actively influences the parties by promising carrots or threatening with sticks. See Kenneth Kressel and Dean G. Pruitt, 'Themes in the mediation of social conflict', *Journal of Social Issues*, 41:2 (1985), pp. 179–98; Saadia Touval and I. William Zartman, *International Mediation in Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985); Jacob Bercovitch and Allison Houston, 'Why do they do it like this? An analysis of the factors influencing mediation behavior in international conflicts', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 44:2 (2000), pp. 58–86; Daniel Curran, James K. Sebenius, and Michael Watkins, 'Two paths to peace: Contrasting George Mitchell in Northern Ireland with Richard Holbrooke in Bosnia-Herzegovina', *Negotiation Journal*, 20:4 (2004), pp. 513–37; Beardsley et al., 'Mediation style and crisis outcomes'.

²⁶Kydd, 'Which side are you on?'; Robert W. Rauchhaus, 'Asymmetric information, mediation and conflict management', *World Politics*, 58:2 (2006), pp. 207–41; Isak Svensson, 'Bargaining, bias and peace brokers: How rebels commit to peace', *Journal of Peace Research*, 44:2 (2007), pp. 177–94; Isak Svensson, 'Research on bias in mediation: Policy implications', *Penn State Journal of Law & International Affairs*, 2:1 (2013), pp. 17–26.

²⁷Sisk, *International Mediation*; Kyle Beardsley, 'Intervention without leverage: Explaining the prevalence of weak mediators', *International Interactions*, 35:3 (2009), pp. 272–97; Kyle Beardsley, 'Using the right tool for the job: Mediator leverage and conflict resolution', *Penn State Journal of Law & International Affairs*, 2:1 (2013), pp. 57–65; Burcu Savun, 'Mediator types and the effectiveness of information provision strategies in the resolution of international conflict', in Jacob Bercovitch and Scott Gartner (eds), *New Approaches to Mediation* (London, UK: Routledge, 2009), pp. 96–114.

²⁸Oran R. Young, *The Intermediaries: Third Parties in International Crises* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967); Christopher Mitchell, 'The right moment: Notes on 4 models of ripeness', *Paradigms*, 9:2 (1995), pp. 35–52; Regan and Stam, 'In the nick of time'; Greig, 'Moments of opportunity'.

²⁹Zartman, *Ripe for Resolution*.

³⁰I. William Zartman, 'Ripeness: The hurting stalemate and beyond', in Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman (eds), *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000), pp. 225–50.

³¹Stephen John Stedman, *Peacemaking in Civil War: International Mediation in Zimbabwe, 1974–1980* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991); Louis Kriesberg and Stuart Thorson (eds), *Timing the De-escalation of International Conflicts* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991); James Goodby, 'When war won out: Bosnian peace plans before Dayton', *International Negotiation*, 1:3 (1996), pp. 501–23; Mohammed Maundi, Gilbert Khadiagala, Kwaku Nuemah, Saadia Touval, and I. William Zartman, *Entry and Access in Mediation* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2000); Greig, 'Moments of opportunity'.

³²Siniša Vuković, 'Three degrees of success in international mediation', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 42:3 (2014), pp. 966–76.

have already considered mediation in the context of shifting global contexts.³³ Particularly noteworthy is the seminal book series edited by Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, which analyses peacemaking in different periods.³⁴ However, while they provide crucial empirical details, the concrete mechanisms through which macro-level factors influence micro-level factors, and how the interplay between them shapes mediation outcomes, warrants deeper exploration. This article provides such an analysis as illustrated in Figure 1.

The macro level: From unipolarity to multipolarity

Macro-level factors are influenced by prevailing world orders, which are commonly distinguished according to their polarity in terms of the distribution of power within the international system, with either unipolarity (one dominant power), bipolarity (two dominant powers), or multipolarity (more than two dominant powers).³⁵ The use of the concept of polarity as an indication of the prevailing world order in this article warrants two clarifications. First, while some authors define polarity based on a conceptualisation of power as material capabilities,³⁶ I ascribe to a definition that includes ideational aspects related to a state's influence on the 'content' of the international system. This refers to a state's capacity to shape the dominant norms and ideas in world politics.³⁷ Second, the three variations of polarity are ideal-types and their identification contains subjective elements.³⁸ Accordingly, some periods are subject to more contestation regarding the identification of the prevailing world order than others. Most authors agree on a bipolar world order during the Cold War³⁹ and a unipolar order at the end of the Cold War.⁴⁰ Yet, while some authors

³³Crocker, Hampson, and Aall, 'The shifting sands'; Zartman, 'Structuring in a vacuum'.

³⁴Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (eds), *Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict* (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 1996); Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (eds), *Herding Cats: Multiparty Mediation in a Complex World* (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 1999); Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (eds), *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict* (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 2001); Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, *Taming Intractable Conflicts: Mediation in the Hardest Cases* (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 2004); Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (eds), *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World* (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 2007); Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (eds), *Rewiring Regional Security in a Fragmented World* (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 2011); Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (eds), *Managing Conflict in a World Adrift* (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 2015).

³⁵Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill, 1979); Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York, NY: Wiley, 1957); Karl Deutsch and J. David Singer, 'Multipolar power systems and international stability', *World Politics*, 16:3 (1964), pp. 390–406; Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London and Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1977); Ted Hopf, 'Polarity, the offense-defense balance, and war', *American Political Science Review*, 85:2 (1991), pp. 475–93; Edward Mansfield, 'Concentration, polarity, and the distribution of power', *International Studies Quarterly*, 37:1 (1993), pp. 105–28; Barry T. Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004); Ian Hurd, 'Breaking and making norms: American revisionism and crises of legitimacy', *International Politics*, 44:2–3 (2007), pp. 194–213.

³⁶Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, 'Introduction: Unipolarity, state behavior, and systemic consequences', *World Politics*, 61:1 (2009), pp. 1–27; Posen, 'Emerging multipolarity'.

³⁷Martha Finnemore, 'Legitimacy, hypocrisy, and the social structure of unipolarity: Why being a unipole isn't all it's cracked up to be', *World Politics*, 61:1 (2009), pp. 58–85; John G. Ruggie, 'International regimes, transactions and change: Embedded liberalism in the postwar economic order', *International Organization*, 36:2 (1982), pp. 379–415; Benjamin Zala, 'Polarity analysis and collective perceptions of power: The need for a new approach', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 2:1 (2017), pp. 2–17.

³⁸Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, 'Introduction', p. 5.

³⁹An exception is Zala who questions the affirmation that the Cold War order was characterised by an unbroken bipolarity; see Zala, 'Polarity analysis and collective perceptions of power'.

⁴⁰Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth, 'Introduction'; Robert Jervis, 'Unipolarity: A structural perspective', in G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth (eds), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1–27; Posen, 'Emerging multipolarity'; Jeffrey

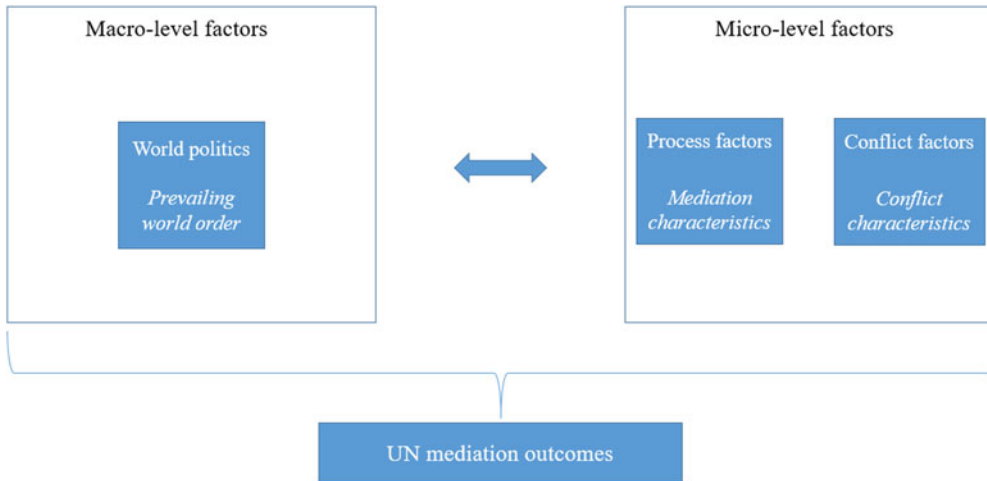


Figure 1. Conceptual framework on macro- and micro-level factors influencing UN mediation outcomes.

describe the current world order as having arrived at multipolarity,⁴¹ others see the shift as still ongoing.⁴²

I concur with the view that the world has become multipolar, defining it in line with Cedric de Coning and Mateja Peter as a situation in which each state has access to networks and forms of power sufficient to prevent any of the others from dominating the global order.⁴³ While the US remains militarily the strongest state,⁴⁴ other powers challenge both its material and ideational domination in world politics.⁴⁵ China has experienced rapid economic growth and challenges US global leadership through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, its assertive posture regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and its increased role in multilateral forums, such as those on climate change mitigation.⁴⁶ Moreover, Russia has equally reasserted itself as an influential power, as most recently manifested in its invasion of Ukraine.⁴⁷ Other states, such as Brazil, India, and South Africa, are also asserting a growing influence in international politics.⁴⁸ In this sense, US dominance in world politics is being questioned as other states exert power in the

W. Legro, 'Sell unipolarity? The future of an overvalued concept', in Ikenberry, Mastanduno, Wohlforth (eds), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity*, pp. 342–66; Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail'.

⁴¹Mearsheimer says that the world order became multipolar 'in or close to 2016' (p. 8), although he later refers to the 'emerging world order' (p. 50); see Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail'.

⁴²Posen, 'Emerging multipolarity'; Bruce Jones and Stephen John Stedman, 'Civil wars and the post-Cold War international order', *Daedalus*, 146:4 (2017), pp. 33–44; Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?'; Cunliffe, 'Framing intervention'; Barry R. Posen, 'From unipolarity to multipolarity: Transition in sight?', in Ikenberry, Mastanduno, Wohlforth (eds), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity*, pp. 317–41.

⁴³De Coning and Peter, *United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order*, p. 301.

⁴⁴Posen, 'Emerging multipolarity', p. 347; Jones and Stedman, 'Civil wars and the post-Cold war international order', p. 36; Adriana Erthal Abdenur, 'UN peacekeeping in a multipolar world order: Norms, role expectations, and leadership', in de Coning and Peter (eds), *United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order*, p. 49.

⁴⁵Amitav Acharya, *The End of the American World Order* (London, UK: Polity, 2014); Charles T. Call and Cedric de Coning (eds), *Rising Powers and Peacebuilding: Breaking the Mold* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Liberal world'.

⁴⁶Yuen Foong Khong, 'Power as prestige in world politics', *International Affairs*, 95:1 (2019), pp. 119–42; Shirley Yu, 'The Belt and Road initiative: Modernity, geopolitics and the developing global order', *Asian Affairs*, 50:2 (2019), pp. 187–201; Anita Engels, 'Understanding how China is championing climate change mitigation', *Palgrave Communications*, 4:101 (2018), pp. 1–6.

⁴⁷Cunliffe, 'Framing intervention', p. 245; Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail', p. 42.

⁴⁸Randall Schweller, 'Emerging powers in an age of disorder', *Global Governance*, 17:3 (2011), pp. 285–97; Abdenur, 'UN Peacekeeping in a multipolar world order'.

international system and ‘offer new ordering projects’.⁴⁹ As Roland Paris observes, ‘power seems to be diffusing away from the US and the Western “core” of the international system’.⁵⁰

I argue that this shift towards multipolarity has both material and ideational dimensions that manifest themselves in increased geopolitical competition and a declining liberal order. I will now explore these two dimensions in more detail.

Material dimensions of multipolarity: Geopolitical competition

Shifts in polarity have material dimensions. Authors argue that unipolarity creates relatively few incentives for interstate competition since the existence of a superpower leads to an undisputed hierarchy of power.⁵¹ In turn, a shift towards multipolarity increases geopolitical competition, defined as ‘the contention between great powers and aspiring great powers for control over territory, resources, and important geographical positions’.⁵² Geopolitical competition influences UN mediation insofar as it creates disunity among the P5 of the UNSC with the risk that they block important decisions through the exercise of their veto right. While the UN Secretary-General appoints the Special Envoys who act as mediators, the UNSC can call for such an appointment in the first place⁵³ and is usually responsible for clarifying the mediator’s mandate in a resolution. The UNSC can also provide mediators with leverage. Especially in conflicts where the conflict parties do not lend their sustained consent to mediation, the UNSC can create positive incentives or exert pressure by threatening the parties with sanctions, no-fly zones, embargos, or military intervention. This shows that the UNSC’s unambiguous backing of mediators with a coherent strategy is vital for effective UN mediation.⁵⁴ In case of P5 disunity, UN mediators can thus be severely limited in their effectiveness.

What does this mean for the current shift from unipolarity to multipolarity? As discussed above, the end of the Cold War heralded a unipolar world order. While geopolitical competition was not fully absent,⁵⁵ it was less pronounced given US domination. This led to an unblocking of the UNSC and widespread support for the UN to offer its conflict resolution services.⁵⁶ The UN’s role in peacefully terminating civil wars reached a high point in the early post-Cold War years, as it was involved in more than half of all mediated armed conflicts from 1992 to 2009.⁵⁷ While a number of conflicts remained unresolved, the UN registered some success in mediation in terms of peace agreements being signed under its auspices, including in internationalised civil wars, such as in Angola (1991) or the Democratic Republic of Congo (2002/03).⁵⁸

⁴⁹Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, ‘(No) exit from liberalism?’, *New Perspectives*, 28:3 (2020), pp. 280–91 (p. 280).

⁵⁰Paris, ‘The geopolitics of peace operations’, p. 502.

⁵¹William C. Wohlforth, ‘Unipolarity, status competition, and Great Power war’, in Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth (eds), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity*, p. 30; Mearsheimer, ‘Bound to fail’, p. 12.

⁵²Michael Klare, ‘The new geopolitics’, *Monthly Review*, 55:3 (2003), p. 1.

⁵³The conflict parties, the Secretary-General, or the General Assembly can also request the appointment of a mediator. See Ban Ki-moon, *Report of the Secretary-General on Enhancing Mediation and its Support Activities* (New York, NY: United Nations, 2009).

⁵⁴Fen Osler Hampson, ‘Can the UN still mediate?’, in Richard Price and Mark Zacher (eds), *The United Nations and Global Security* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 75–92; Simon Mason and Damiano Sguaitamatti, *Mapping Mediators: A Comparison of Third Parties and Implications for Switzerland* (Zürich: Center for Security Studies, 2011); Mancini and Vericat, *Lost in Transition*.

⁵⁵Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra, ‘The mandate and the (in)effectiveness of the United Nations Security Council and international peace and security: The contexts of Syria and Mali’, *Geopolitics*, 21:1 (2016), pp. 43–68.

⁵⁶Betts Fetherston and Carolyn Nordstrom, ‘Overcoming habitus in conflict management: UN peacekeeping and war zone ethnography’, *Peace & Change*, 20:1 (1995), p. 101; Sarah B. K. Von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace? Local Ownership and UN Peacebuilding* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 331; Michael J. Greig and Paul F. Diehl, *International Mediation* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012), p. 36.

⁵⁷Mason and Sguaitamatti, *Mapping Mediators*, p. 18. See also Hampson, ‘Can the UN still mediate?’, pp. 6–10 and Jones and Stedman, ‘Civil wars and the post-Cold War international order’, p. 33.

⁵⁸Gowan and Stedman, ‘The international regime’.

The multipolar world order, in turn, is characterised by ‘the “rebirth” or “return” of geopolitics’.⁵⁹ One major factor for this trend has been the rise of China and Russia and their competition with the US. While China has portrayed itself as ‘champion of liberal globalization’, it has engaged with the US in a trade war and in fierce competition over technological leadership.⁶⁰ Russia has also competed directly with the US since the mid-2010s, illustrated by its role in the Syrian conflict, its annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its invasion of the entire Ukraine in 2022.⁶¹ This increased geopolitical competition has engendered disunity among the UNSC P5 and blocked it on key decisions. The number of UNSC resolutions vetoed has steadily increased since the 1990s: from 7 between 1991 and 2000, to 14 between 2001 and 2010, to 26 from 2011 to 2020, which constitutes a rise by a factor higher than 1.8.⁶² P5 disunity in recent years is far from being absolute, as illustrated for instance by the UNSC’s ability to deploy a peacekeeping force with a robust mandate to Mali in 2013.⁶³ However, in other internationalised conflicts, such as in Syria, Libya, or Yemen, its paralysis has been reminiscent of Cold War times.⁶⁴ UN mediators have consequently often lacked the necessary support for their peacemaking attempts from *within* the UN.⁶⁵

Ideational dimensions of multipolarity: Decline of liberal order

Shifts in polarity also have ideational dimensions. In a unipolar world order, the ideology of the main power dominates. Indeed, in the unipolar post-Cold War period, the US upheld a liberal order characterised by economic openness, security cooperation, and democratic solidarity.⁶⁶ As UN mediation enacts the prevalent norms in world politics,⁶⁷ it too became dominated by a liberal approach. Such a liberal approach to mediation is based on the belief that democracy is indispensable for sustainable peace and manifests itself in the attempt to broker a peace agreement that foresees a democratic transition.⁶⁸ Peace agreements signed under UN auspices in Angola (1991), Cambodia

⁵⁹Paris, ‘The geopolitics of peace operations’, p. 502.

⁶⁰Nana De Graaf, Tobias ten Brink, and Inderjeet Parmar, ‘China’s rise in a liberal world order in transitio: Introduction to the FORU’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 27:2 (2020), pp. 191–207; Evan S. Medeiros, ‘The changing fundamentals of US-China relations’, *The Washington Quarterly*, 42:3 (2019), pp. 93–119. See also Beverley Loke, ‘The United States, China, and the politics of hegemonic ordering in East Asia’, *International Studies Review*, 23:4 (2021), pp. 1208–29.

⁶¹Daria Vorobyeva, ‘Russian foreign policy in the early Syrian conflict: Traditional factors and the role of Syria in the Kremlin’s wider domestic and international goals’, in Hinnebusch and Saouli (eds), *The War for Syria*, p. 238; Constance Duncombe and Tim Dunne, ‘After liberal world order’, *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), p. 29; Elias Götz and Camille-Renaud Merlen, ‘Russia and the question of world order’, *European Politics and Society*, 20:2 (2019), p. 135.

⁶²Numbers generated from ‘Security Council – Veto List’, available at: {<https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>}.

⁶³Mahapatra, ‘The mandate’.

⁶⁴During the Cold War, the number of resolutions vetoed rose steadily with 15 from 1960 to 1969, 33 from 1970 to 1979, and 46 from 1980 to 1989 (Numbers generated from ‘Security Council – Veto List’, available at: {<https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>}). Despite offering its ‘good offices’ in some conflicts such as in Cyprus since the 1960s or in the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s, P5 disunity curtailed the UN role in mediation. Indeed, the UN only mediated in 19 per cent of all the civil wars from 1945 to 1987, compared to the 49 per cent mediated by foreign governments. See Gowan and Stedman, ‘The international regime’, p. 173; Crocker, Hampson, and Aall (eds), *Herding Cats*, pp. 5–6; Raimo Väyrynen, ‘The United Nations and the resolution of international conflicts’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 20:3 (1985), p. 147; Thomas M. Franck, ‘The Secretary-General’s role in conflict resolution: Past, present and pure conjecture’, *European Journal of International Law*, 6:3 (1995), pp. 361–2, 365, 371.

⁶⁵Jones and Stedman, ‘Civil wars and the post-Cold War international order’, pp. 33–44; Guéhenno, ‘The United Nations’, p. 191.

⁶⁶Ikenberry, ‘The end of liberal international order?’, p. 7; Posen, ‘Emerging multipolarity’; Deudney and Ikenberry, ‘Liberal world’; Owen, ‘Liberalism’; Cunliffe, ‘Framing intervention’.

⁶⁷Paris, ‘The geopolitics of peace operations’, p. 504; Howard and Stark, ‘How civil wars end’. On norms in mediation, see Sara Hellmüller, Jamie Pring, and Oliver Richmond, ‘How norms matter in mediation: An introduction’, *Swiss Political Science Review*, 26:4 (2020), pp. 345–63; Sara Hellmüller, Julia Palmiano Federer, and Mathias Zeller, *The Role of Norms in International Peace Mediation* (Bern: swisspeace, 2015).

⁶⁸Hellmüller, Pring, and Richmond, ‘How norms matter’; Edward Newman, Roland Paris, and Oliver Richmond, ‘Introduction’, in Edward Newman, Roland Paris, and Oliver Richmond (eds), *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding* (Tokyo and New York, NY: United Nations University Press, 2009), pp. 3–25; Meera Sabaratnam, ‘The liberal peace? An

(1991), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (2002/03), for instance, foresaw elections and a democratic transition aiming at changing states and societies according to liberal values.⁶⁹

Yet, liberalism can only survive as a global ideational system if there is a liberal superpower upholding it by bearing the costs for public goods, enforcing its rules, and combating competing ideologies in other countries.⁷⁰ The willingness of the US to uphold the liberal order has been waning.⁷¹ This is exemplified for instance by the former US President Trump's credo to 'put America first',⁷² withdrawing from multilateral agreements, such as the Paris Agreement or Open Skies Treaty, and cutting funds to several UN agencies.⁷³ While the administration under Joe Biden has verbally recommitted the US to multilateralism, its retreat from Afghanistan and the clear rejection to intervene against Russia in Ukraine indicate an end to its willingness to uphold the liberal order through military engagements in foreign territories. In the meantime, the actors who fill the normative vacuum left by the US promote alternatives to the liberal order.⁷⁴ China, for example, limits liberalism to principles of economic openness and fundamentally questions the political system of liberal democracy. Internationally, its scepticism towards norms, such as the responsibility to protect or human security, puts key tenets of the liberal order into question.⁷⁵ Its rise is therefore likely 'to dilute the liberal color of internationalism'.⁷⁶ Other rising powers have also expressed discontent with the norms of the liberal governance system.⁷⁷ Thus, a higher degree of normative pluralism characterises the multipolar world order.⁷⁸

This influences UN mediation because it produces alternatives to the liberal approach to mediation, emanating predominantly from states. In recent years, Turkey, Iran, and Russia brokered ceasefires in Syria, while Turkey and Russia proposed their mediation in the Libyan conflict,⁷⁹ and Russia offered to mediate in the Yemen conflict.⁸⁰ Competition to UN mediators has been present since the end of the Cold War,⁸¹ with a growing number of actors offering

intellectual history of international conflict management, 1990–2010', in Susanna Campbell, David Chandler, and Meera Sabaratnam (eds), *A Liberal Peace? The Problems and Practices of Peacebuilding* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2011), pp. 13–30.

⁶⁹Marina Ottaway, 'Rebuilding state institutions in collapsed states', *Development and Change*, 33:5 (2002), pp. 1001–23; Marina Ottaway, 'Promoting democracy after conflict: The difficult choices', *International Studies Perspectives*, 4:3 (2003), pp. 314–22; Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁷⁰Carla Norrlof, *America's Global Advantage: US Hegemony and International Cooperation* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Owen, 'Liberalism', p. 7. Keohane does not see a hegemon as indispensable for the existence of a liberal international order, but contends that it facilitates the building and sustaining of it. See Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁷¹See Gani, 'US policy' for a historical overview.

⁷²Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail', p. 29.

⁷³Michael J. Green and Matthew P. Goodman, 'After TPP: The geopolitics of Asia and the Pacific', *The Washington Quarterly*, 38:4 (2015), pp. 19–34; Cooley and Nexon, '(No) exit from liberalism?'

⁷⁴Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Liberal world', p. 8; Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?'; Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail'; Owen, 'Liberalism'.

⁷⁵Owen, 'Liberalism', p. 311; Richard Caplan, 'Peacekeeping in turbulent times', *International Peacekeeping*, 26:5 (2019), p. 528.

⁷⁶Owen, 'Liberalism', p. 314.

⁷⁷Abdenur, 'UN peacekeeping in a multipolar world order'; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, 'Struggles for recognition'.

⁷⁸Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Liberal world', pp. 16–24.

⁷⁹Kirill Zharov, *Can Russia and Turkey Bring Peace to Libya?* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2020).

⁸⁰Mustafa Naji, *Yemen's Role in Moscow's Mideast Comeback* (Sana'a: Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2019).

⁸¹Crocker, Hampson, and Aall, 'The shifting sands'; Crocker, Hampson, and Aall (eds), *Herding Cats*; Vuković, *International Multiparty Mediation*; Tetsuro Iji, *Multiparty Mediation in Violent Conflict: Peacemaking Diplomacy in the Tajikistan Civil War* (London, UK: Routledge, 2019); Tímea Spítka, 'Mediating among mediators: Building a consensus in multilateral interventions', *International Negotiation*, 28:1 (2018), pp. 125–54; David Lanz, 'Envoy envy? Competition in African mediation processes and ways to overcome it', *International Negotiation*, 26:3 (2021), pp. 499–526.

mediation, such as states,⁸² individuals,⁸³ non-governmental organisations,⁸⁴ and regional organisations.⁸⁵ However, in a unipolar world order, it came mostly from like-minded actors who subscribed to the notion that a democratic transition is indispensable for sustainable peace. In a multipolar world order characterised by normative pluralism, however, competition increasingly comes from actors proposing a different approach to mediation.⁸⁶ Indeed, in contrast to the types of peace agreements mediated by the UN, actors such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey, do not necessarily pursue the liberal goal of enabling a democratic transition in their peacemaking efforts. UN mediators are thus confronted with alternative approaches and face competition from *without* the UN.

The above shows that in terms of macro-level factors, the shift towards multipolarity has two dimensions (see Figure 2): First, material dimensions in the form of increased geopolitical competition that leads to disunity among the UNSC P5 and thus to reduced support for UN mediators from *within* the UN. Second, ideational dimensions in the form of a declining liberal order that enables alternative approaches to mediation and thus increased competition to UN mediators from *without* the UN. In the following, I will explore how these dynamics influenced the micro-level factors in Syria and therefore mediation outcomes.

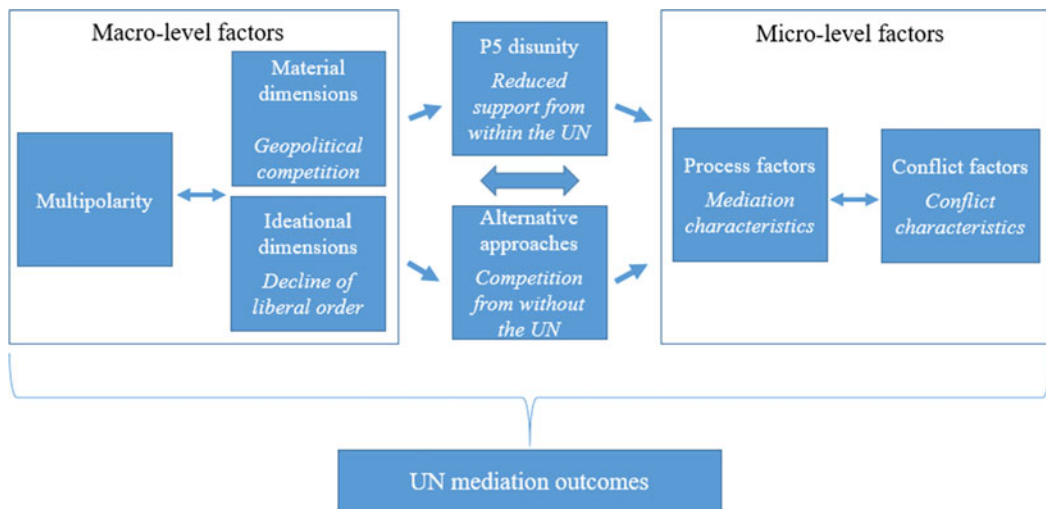


Figure 2. Detailed conceptual framework on macro- and micro-level factors influencing UN mediation outcomes.

UN mediation in Syria

Micro-level explanation

The UN Secretary-General mandated three Special Envoys to mediate in Syria between 2012 and 2018: Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi, and Staffan de Mistura. However, none of them managed to broker a peace agreement. Scholars have suggested micro-level factors to explain this outcome. In terms of *process factors*, they analyse particular mediators' styles or traits, such as the mediator's

⁸²For example, Finland, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, Russia, Iran.

⁸³For example Kofi Annan, Nelson Mandela.

⁸⁴For example, The Carter Center, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Conflict Management Initiative.

⁸⁵For example, European Union, African Union, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

⁸⁶David Rampton and Suthaharan Nadaraja, 'A long view of the liberal peace and its crisis', *European Journal of International Relations*, 32:2 (2017), pp. 441–65.

leverage or impartiality,⁸⁷ and regarding *conflict factors*, they point to the lack of ripeness of the Syrian conflict.⁸⁸ In particular, the absence of the parties' sustained consent to the mediation process is often mentioned as a main cause for the ineffective mediation outcome.⁸⁹ The Syrian opposition initially refused to agree to a mediation process with Assad, but nuanced this precondition as it became clear that his departure was not guaranteed. The Assad government, in turn, lost interest in genuinely participating in mediation after receiving decisive military support from Russia in September 2015, which paved the way for its military victory.

These micro-level factors are of central importance in explaining the lack of mediation success in Syria. However, they are influenced by structural dynamics of world politics and therefore need to be *complemented* by an understanding of macro-level factors. In other words, the unsuccessful outcome of the UN mediation in Syria was not *only* due to micro-level factors, such as the disputants' lack of willingness to engage, but also due to structural factors that impeded the UN from relevantly influencing these aspects. In the following, I analyse these dynamics in-depth by showing how geopolitical competition and the declining liberal order led to reduced support to UN mediators from *within* the UN and increasing competition from *without* the UN, and how this impacted mediation outcomes in Syria. Figure 3 presents the conceptual framework applied to the case of Syria.

Macro-level complement

UNSC P5 disunity: Reduced support from within

UN mediation in Syria reflected geopolitical competition and the ensuing UNSC P5 disunity. At the onset of the Syrian armed conflict, the P5 were divided based on whether they favoured regime stability or change. Russia and China argued for respect of national sovereignty and opposed any form of external intervention.⁹⁰ The military intervention in Libya consolidated this position as Russia and China felt that Western states had used a Chapter VII resolution invoking the protection of civilians⁹¹ for regime change purposes.⁹² Especially for Russia, the Syrian conflict was a forum to reassert its great power status in competition with the US. Indeed, its military intervention rendered it highly prominent as it gained decisive influence over the Syrian government, positioning itself as an actor 'without whom the Syrian question cannot be resolve'.⁹³ The US, the United Kingdom, and France (P3), in turn, supported the opposition's regime change agenda. US President Barack Obama, for instance, called on Assad 'to get out of the way' in 2011.⁹⁴ This division among the P5 remained throughout the conflict, even if the forcefulness with which Western states demanded regime change declined in the face of the

⁸⁷Mancini and Vericat, *Lost in Transition*; Hill, 'Kofi Annan's multilateral strategy'; Hinnebusch and Zartman, *UN Mediation in the Syrian Crisis*.

⁸⁸See, for example, Greig, 'Intractable Syria'; Hinnebusch and Zartman, *UN Mediation in the Syrian Crisis*; Mancini and Vericat, *Lost in Transition*.

⁸⁹Sara Hellmüller, 'The challenge of forging consent to UN mediation in internationalized civil wars: The case of Syria', *International Negotiation*, online first (2021).

⁹⁰For an extensive analysis of Russia's domestic, regional, and international interests and their changes over the course of the conflict in Syria; see Vorobyeva, 'Russian foreign policy'. Russia also wanted a secular regime, as it feared a spillover of the conflict given its own Muslim population, and it wanted to keep a Russia-friendly regime in place to protect its economic interests related to the extraction of oil and gas as well as its naval base in Tartous that provided access to the Mediterranean. See Aron Lund, *From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations* (Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019); Andrej Kreutz, 'Syria: Russia's Best Asset in the Middle East', in *Russie.NEL.Visions* (Paris: French Institute of International Relations, 2010); Kozhanov, 'From Russia's military deployment', p. 245.

⁹¹UNSC, S/RES/1973, 17 March 2011.

⁹²Okon Eminue and Monday Dickson, 'The United Nations Resolutions on Syria: Exploration of motivation from Russia and China', *International Affairs and Global Strategy*, 10 (2013), pp. 5–14; Esmira Jafarova, 'Solving the Syrian Knot: Dynamics within the UN Security Council and challenges to its effectiveness', *Connections*, 13:2 (2014), pp. 25–50.

⁹³Kozhanov, 'From Russia's military deployment', p. 245.

⁹⁴See Obama White House Archives, available at: {<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad>}. For an extensive analysis of US interests

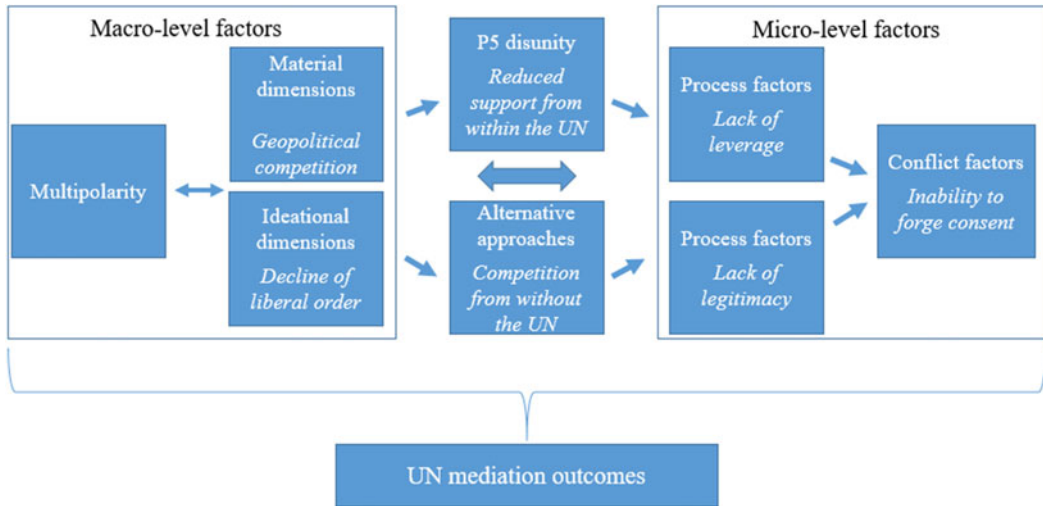


Figure 3. Conceptual framework applied to case of UN mediation in Syria.

government's increasing likelihood to win the war militarily.⁹⁵ While there were moments of convergence between the US and Russia, discord dominated, illustrated by the fact that 12 out of the 19 resolutions vetoed between 2011 and 2018 were on Syria and all involved a negative vote by Russia.⁹⁶ Given the lack of conflict parties' sustained consent to the talks, the UN mediators' only leverage would have come from the UNSC in terms of united support or even a decision on coercive means, such as sanctions, a no-fly zone, or a weapons embargo. Yet, this was not forthcoming and left the UN mediators powerless in the face of a stalling political process. An overview of the three mediators' efforts to make peace in Syria illustrates this.

Kofi Annan was Special Envoy for Syria from March to August 2012, with a joint mandate from both the UN and the League of Arab States (LAS).⁹⁷ Trying to forge consensus among the divided P5, Annan hosted the Geneva I conference bringing together key regional and international actors to discuss the Syrian conflict. The attendees adopted the Geneva Communiqué on 30 June 2012, which foresaw a political transition with a Transitional Governing Body to be formed in Syria. As this had wide-reaching implications including a transferral of power, the Syrian government's acceptance of the Communiqué was indispensable. Thus, a UNSC resolution endorsing the Geneva Communiqué was important to confer onto Annan the necessary leverage to foster the parties' consent to it. Yet, the P3 wanted to add teeth to the document and insisted on integrating it into a Chapter VII resolution, authorising non-military sanctions under Article 41 of the UN Charter in case the parties did not respect it.⁹⁸ Russia and China vetoed the resolution fearing that it could become a slippery slope for military intervention, as in Libya, and hence play into the Western regime change agenda. Recognising the lack of P5 support, Annan withdrew from his role as UN-LAS Joint Special Envoy for Syria over the resolution's rejection. In his resignation speech, he said that

and policies in the Syrian conflict, see Gani, 'US policy'. For a more general analysis of Obama's Middle east policy, see Fawaz A. Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

⁹⁵See Gani, 'US policy' for an extensive analysis of US policy towards the Syrian conflict under Obama.

⁹⁶See 'Security Council - Veto List', available at: <https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>.

⁹⁷UNGA, A/RES/66/25, 16 February 2012.

⁹⁸The draft resolution said that in case of non-compliance of the Syrian authorities, the UNSC 'shall impose immediately measures under Article 41 of the UN Charter'. UNSC, S/2012/538, 19 July 2012.

‘when the Syrian people desperately need action, there continues to be finger pointing and name-calling in the Security Council’.⁹⁹

Lakhdar Brahimi was the UN-LAS Joint Special Envoy for Syria from September 2012 to May 2014. The P5 remained divided and both Russia and the US spoke out more fervently in favour of their respective allies. Russia said in December 2012 that there was ‘no possibility’ to persuade Assad to leave Syria.¹⁰⁰ The US put its full weight behind the opposition by recognising the Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in December 2012.¹⁰¹ It also announced that the Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons would prompt serious consequences from the US.¹⁰² When the Syrian government crossed this red line by using sarin gas in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta in August 2013, the US and Russia shared an interest in avoiding US intervention.¹⁰³ This enabled the UNSC to pass resolution 2118 on 27 September 2013, in which it finally endorsed the Geneva Communiqué negotiated under Annan and foresaw political talks.¹⁰⁴ The so-called Geneva II conference took place in early 2014, but did not produce any results.¹⁰⁵ When the fleeting US-Russia rapprochement reversed itself over Russia’s annexation of Crimea in early 2014, Brahimi resigned. As one interviewee mentioned, ‘Brahimi knew that he was going nowhere after the Ukraine crisis happened because the US and Russia would not talk to each other anymore, even less about Syria’.¹⁰⁶

Staffan de Mistura was the UN Special Envoy for Syria from September 2014 to December 2018. Divisions among the P5 persisted, but in late 2015, Russian and US interests converged momentarily. Russia’s willingness to find an agreement increased as they expected Hillary Clinton to win the upcoming US elections leading to a tougher US stance on Syria. The US was also willing to engage in talks because Assad’s immediate departure became less of a priority as the rise of IS had transformed him into the lesser of two evils.¹⁰⁷ This convergence allowed for the passing of UNSC resolution 2254 on 18 December 2015, which led to the so-called Intra-Syrian Talks that started in January 2016 and consisted of several rounds of proximity talks.¹⁰⁸ Yet, in September 2016, the US and Russia fell out yet again after the US air force had attacked government positions in Syria, claiming to have been aiming at IS targets. Russian and Syrian government forces subsequently attacked a UN aid convoy.¹⁰⁹ Russia also intensified its military intervention, supporting the Syrian government in regaining key territories, most importantly Aleppo in December 2016. Moreover, US President Trump ordered the first US military airstrikes on Syrian government targets in April 2017 after a chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun. The P5 were thus fundamentally divided again. Without the support of the UNSC, de Mistura could do little to move the process forward and the talks stalled. Reflecting on the process, he said: ‘when the US and Russia agree and have common interests, then everybody else agrees too because they are powerful enough to prevent spoilers ... But they need to agree’.¹¹⁰

⁹⁹Kofi Annan, ‘Transcript of a Press Conference’ (2 August 2012), available at: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2012-08-02/note-correspondents-transcript-press-conference-kofi-annan>.

¹⁰⁰‘Insisting on Assad’s exit will cost more lives, Russian says’, *New York Times* (29 December 2012).

¹⁰¹‘U.S. will grant recognition to Syrian rebels, Obama says’, *New York Times* (11 December 2012).

¹⁰²‘Obama issues Syria a “red line” warning on chemical weapons’, *Washington Post* (20 August 2012); ‘Barack Obama warns Syria against use of chemical weapons’, *The Guardian* (4 December 2020).

¹⁰³Gani, ‘US policy’; Pinar Akpınar, ‘The limits of mediation in the Arab Spring: The case of Syria’, *Third World Quarterly*, 37:12 (2016), p. 2292.

¹⁰⁴UNSC, S/RES/2118, 27 December 2013.

¹⁰⁵Mancini and Vericat, *Lost in Transition*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁶Interview with expert involved in mediation (#20), 9 August 2018.

¹⁰⁷‘How a U.S.-Iran nuclear deal could help save Iraq’, *Washington Post* (11 July 2014).

¹⁰⁸UNSC, S/RES/2254, 18 December 2015.

¹⁰⁹Asseburg, Lacher, and Transfeld, *Mission Impossible*, p. 40.

¹¹⁰Interview with Staffan de Mistura, 21 July 2020.

The consequence of P5 disunity was that none of the three UN mediators had the leverage to engage the conflict parties in meaningful negotiations. The Syrian opposition and the government could stick to their preconditions or stalling tactics with the mediators having no means to convince them otherwise. In other words, the macro-level factor of geopolitical competition influenced micro-level factors because P5 disunity led to reduced support to mediators from within the UN and limited their leverage to forge the parties' consent to find a peace agreement.

Alternative approaches: Competition from without

The UN mediation in Syria also illustrates the impact of the declining liberal order and ensuing alternative approaches. The UN approach to mediation in Syria was liberal, as it explicitly called for a democratic transition. The Geneva Communiqué negotiated under Annan foresaw a political transition that would lead to democratic elections. Brahimi followed the same path by calling for a democratic transition and UN-supervised elections. Finally, under de Mistura, UNSC resolution 2254 that enabled the Intra-Syrian Talks set a schedule for holding 'free and fair elections'.¹¹¹ The UN thus focused on a liberal transition, including democratic elections.

Given increasing multipolarity and a declining liberal order, the UN was confronted with alternative approaches to its mediation.¹¹² Russia became a key player in that regard, wanting to 'impose its view on the conflict settlement'.¹¹³ In December 2016, Russia and Turkey proposed to their Syrian allies, the government and the opposition respectively, to continue negotiations outside the UN framework. In early 2017, Russia, together with Iran and Turkey, sponsored a meeting between the Syrian government and representatives of the armed opposition in Astana (today Nur-Sultan), which started the so-called Astana Talks that subsequently continued over several rounds.¹¹⁴ During the fourth round of the Talks in May 2017, the three guarantor states signed a memorandum of understanding to create four 'de-escalation zones' in which a ceasefire would be respected.¹¹⁵

The approach taken by Russia in Astana stood in contrast to the UN's liberal approach as it did not aim at a democratic transition, but instead at containing violence through de-escalation.¹¹⁶ As one interviewee stated, Astana 'was conceived as primarily a space for military negotiations ... and not a space for political negotiations'.¹¹⁷ Russia's goal was to end the war by keeping the regime in place.¹¹⁸ Indeed, while the de-escalation zones negotiated in the Astana Talks initially led to a reduction of violence and improved humanitarian access,¹¹⁹ they favoured the Syrian government's interests as the ceasefires allowed it to regain strategically important territories.¹²⁰ By mid-2019, the government was in control of three of the four de-escalation zones, cementing its military victory and thereby further reducing its willingness to make concessions at the negotiating table.¹²¹

¹¹¹UNSC, S/RES/2254, 18 December 2015.

¹¹²Interviews with experts involved in mediation (#20), 9 August 2018; (#24), 13 August 2018; diplomat close to the peace process (#28), 17 August 2018; Nikolay Soukhov, Russian Middle East expert, 12 August 2019.

¹¹³Kozhanov, 'From Russia's military deployment', p. 249.

¹¹⁴By the end of 2018, ten rounds had taken place in Astana and one in Sochi. See Marika Sosnowski, 'Negotiating statehood through ceasefires: Syria's de-escalation zones', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 31:7–8 (2020), pp. 1395–414.

¹¹⁵The zones were in parts of the Idlib Governorate, the northern parts of the Homs Governorate, the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta, and the Jordan-Syria border area.

¹¹⁶Kozhanov, 'From Russia's military deployment', p. 256.

¹¹⁷Interview with Leonid Isaev, Associate Professor, Higher School of Economics, 2 October 2019; also interview with Nikolay Soukhov, Russian Middle East expert, 12 September 2019.

¹¹⁸Interviews with Zaki Mehchy, civil society actor, 13 August 2018; Nikolay Soukhov, Russian Middle East expert, 12 September 2019.

¹¹⁹Interviews with civil society actors (#7), 28 June 2018 and (#13), 31 July 2018.

¹²⁰Interviews with Syrian with civil society actors (#1), 26 June 2018 and (#25), 14 August 2018; experts involved in mediation (#20), 9 August 2018 (#21), 9 August 2018. See also Esther Meininghaus, *War in Syria: UN Peacekeeping Mission and Deal with Russia are Imperative* (Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion, 2018), p. 3.

¹²¹Interview with expert involved in mediation (#21), 9 August 2018.

The UN was forced to position itself in relation to this alternative format. It depended on Russia who had become the only player with significant leverage over Assad.¹²² Indeed, there was a clear understanding that without the help of Russia, the Syrian government would not consent to any political process.¹²³ In the end, de Mistura attended the Astana Talks, but branded them as complementary to the UN-led process, underlining that Astana would cover the military aspects related to a reduction of violence while the UN would still be in charge of the political process. Trying to keep the legitimacy of the UN-led process, he said that ‘only the UN has the legitimacy and credibility needed for a viable, enduring political solution’.¹²⁴ Yet, in adhering to such a position, he increasingly lost exactly this legitimacy in the eyes of both conflict parties. Regarding the Syrian government, de Mistura’s insistence on a democratic transition stood in contrast to the military situation on the ground, which was tilted in favour of the government. This made him prone to accusations of favouring a solution in line with the P3’s regime change agenda. For the opposition, de Mistura’s acquiescence to the Astana Talks hampered the perception of him as an impartial mediator, especially as it became clear that the de-escalation approach favoured the Syrian government. One interviewee expressed these circumstances in the following words: ‘the Special Envoy ... attended the Astana Talks while on the ground, ... we are seeing Russians and Iranians and the regime taking more territories’.¹²⁵ This led to a perceived de-legitimation of the UN as a peacemaker.¹²⁶ Summarising the situation, a respondent remarked that ‘the legitimate process has de-legitimized itself and legitimized other processes that are not legitimate’.¹²⁷

The above shows how the macro-level factor of a declining liberal order influenced micro-level factors because alternative approaches to peacemaking led to competition from without the UN and undermined the UN mediator’s legitimacy to forge the parties’ consent to find a peace agreement.

Conclusion

This article analyses the impact of world politics on UN mediation by studying the interaction between macro- and micro-level factors. It argues that multipolarity has both material and ideological dimensions manifested in a resurgence of geopolitical competition and a declining liberal order. This has engendered increased disunity among the UNSC P5 leading to reduced support to mediation from within the UN and has enabled alternatives to the liberal peacemaking approach resulting in competition to UN mediation from without the UN. These processes have led to a weakening of the UN as a global peacemaker, rendering it unable to broker a peace agreement in Syria.

The article contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, it provides a systematic analysis of the link between world politics and UN mediation by complementing micro-level explanations for UN mediation outcomes with a macro-level perspective. Second, it allows for a better understanding of UN mediation in internationalised civil wars, and particularly in Syria, which has become a test case for UN legitimacy in contemporary peacemaking.

¹²²Kozhanov, ‘From Russia’s military deployment’, p. 245.

¹²³Interviews with civil society actors (#3), 27 June 2018 and (#13), 31 July 2018; expert involved in mediation (#20), 9 August 2018; Leonid Isaev, Associate Professor, Higher School of Economics, 2 October 2019.

¹²⁴‘Press elements by the President of the Security Council’ (22 April 2018), available at: {<https://www.government.se/statements/2018/04/press-elements-by-the-president-of-the-security-council-following-discussions-on-syria-at-the-retreat-at-backakra-sweden-on-22-april-2018/>}.

¹²⁵Interview with Mutasem Alsoufi, civil society actor, 2 August 2018.

¹²⁶Interviews with civil society actor (#1), 26 June 2018; Mutasem Alsoufi, civil society actor, 2 August 2018; Zedoun Alzoubi, civil society actor, 26 July 2018; expert involved in mediation (#20), 9 August 2018.

¹²⁷Interview with Fadi Dayoub, civil society actor, 30 July 2018.

The article focused on the single case study of UN mediation in Syria as an example of internationalised armed conflicts. The empirical depth gained by such an approach comes at the cost of three main limitations, which provide avenues for further research. First, situating the Syrian armed conflict in the larger universe of internationalised civil wars, I argue that an analysis of UN mediation in other such conflicts is likely to yield similar results. Indeed, UN mediators in Libya and Yemen, for instance, also face UNSC P5 disunity and competing peacemaking attempts. Yet, detailed empirical insights on mediation in these contexts would be needed to test the generalisability of the findings in this article. Second, the article's findings do not necessarily apply to other contemporary conflicts where the vital interests of the most powerful states in the international system, particularly the P5, are not as directly affected as in the case of Syria. Extending the analysis to such contexts could provide additional theoretical insights on how the multipolar world order influences (or does not influence) peacemaking across contemporary conflict contexts. Third, the article focuses on mediation by the UN, whose efficiency depends institutionally on the convergence of P5 interests and whose approach reflects the prevailing norms in the international system. Other actors engaging in mediation, such as states, non-governmental organisations, or regional organisations, are less directly affected by P5 disunity and may themselves be drivers of alternative approaches to the liberal one. Examining how current world political changes influence non-UN mediation could yield interesting results and broaden the scope of the argument made in this article.

The article constitutes a first attempt at shedding light on the mechanisms through which macro- and micro-level factors interact in mediation. It will ideally encourage other studies on such factors to provide a complement to the current focus on micro-level aspects in mediation research. This additional layer of analysis is all the more important given its direct relevance to mediation practice. Indeed, a neglect of the structural context in which mediation takes place may result in ineffective or counterproductive policy recommendations. Scholars therefore need to provide sound insights on the implications of changing world politics in order to help the UN maintain its role in peacemaking in a shifting world order.

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