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Minilateral Mechanisms for Peacemaking in a Multipolar World: Friends, Contact Groups, Troikas, Quads, and Quints

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Cover Photo: US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov attend the International Syria Support Group meeting at the Palace Hotel in New York City on September 22, 2016. US State Department.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ALPS	Aligned for Advancing Lifesaving and Peace in Sudan Group
AU	African Union
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CNEB	Coordinadora Nacional del Ejército Bolivariano
DDR	disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ELN	National Liberation Army
EMC	Estado Mayor Central
EU	European Union
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FFC	Forces of Freedom and Change
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GPAAC	Group of Accompanying, Support and Cooperation Countries
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IMT	International Monitoring Team
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
LAS	League of Arab States
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
NDC	National Dialogue Conference
OAS	Organization of American States
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
P3	three Western permanent members of the UN Security Council

P5	five permanent members of the UN Security Council
RECs	regional economic communities
RENAMO	Mozambican National Resistance
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SRSG	special representative of the secretary-general
TMC	Transitional Military Council
TM	Trilateral Mechanism
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNAMA	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNITAMS	UN Integrated Assistance Mission in Sudan
UNMISS	UN Mission in South Sudan
UNSMIL	UN Support Mission in Libya

Executive Summary

Informal "minilateral" coalitions of the willing and interested have long been a feature of peacemaking. Groups of states identified as "friends" of the mediator or a particular peace process and contact groups bringing together interested powers date back to concert diplomacy traditions and proliferated at the end of the Cold War as conflict resolution activity surged. The incidence of such informal mechanisms grew exponentially between 1990 and 2009. This report assesses how they have evolved in the years since 2010 and investigates their place in current and future peacemaking efforts.

This is a period when international peacemaking has been severely challenged. Numerous actors, including multilateral and regional organizations, a widening number of states, and nongovernmental peacemakers, have remained interested in peacemaking. At the same time, the period has been marked by accelerating geopolitical polarization and a shift away from peace processes configured around a single lead mediator orchestrating efforts toward a comprehensive peace agreement. More fluid and multilevel processes have involved various group structures and ad hoc configurations representing distinct interests and ambitions, contributing to pushback against some peacemaking norms and outcomes that have fallen short of sustainable peace.

This report examines the experience from the mechanisms formed to support or work in parallel to the UN's efforts to mediate internationalized internal conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen; peace processes in the Philippines, Colombia, and Mozambique taking place in relatively benign regional settings, as well as the anomalous case of Venezuela, where efforts toward a peaceful resolution of the political crisis were mired in international divisions; the geopolitically contested contexts of Myanmar and Afghanistan; and the democratic transition and descent into war in Sudan.

In the current context of conflict fragmentation, escalating threats to peace and security, multipolarity, and disruption in the global order, as well as the proliferation of would-be peacemakers, peacemaking partnerships of some kind will be essential. However, the cases examined in this report demonstrate that the formation of group structures will need to be approached with care, as while groups have many benefits, their establishment has not had uniformly positive results.

Among the benefits identified within the report are groups' capacity to coordinate support to peace processes and to engage a bespoke set of actors that may have more legitimacy in a particular regional context than the UN Security Council or another multilateral actor. Groups have the potential to build internal coherence among their members, as well as to elevate public messaging and facilitate information sharing. Their innate flexibility allows them to bridge geopolitical divisions, while also, in some instances, building the knowledge and commitment required for peacemaking as a long-term endeavor.

However, these groups are no panacea. In different contexts there may be cogent arguments against their creation. These include that the external actors have fundamentally different ideas and ambitions for how a particular conflict will be resolved and will prioritize their own interests over a collective effort. Groups themselves can become a forum for competition between their members or, in some circumstances, be seen as infringing on the sovereignty of the conflict parties. The benefits groups may offer must also be weighed against the challenges entailed in forming and managing them, which can become a time-consuming endeavor of its own.

The report identifies lessons to help those considering whether a group is appropriate. The "right" group structure will depend on the context, and the adage of "form follows function" is critically important. It is key to set realistic expectations and, in some cases, accept that the "right" structure will be no group at all. Tiered mechanisms can help balance inclusivity with efficacy, and hybrid mechanisms can leverage different capacities and relationships. A further lesson is that examples of successful groups and partnerships all point to the importance of skilled individual mediators committed to working with each other, whether within a group or without an established mechanism. Finally, some contexts may defy attempts to design or deliver a coherent international peace architecture. In these cases, more modest goals related to specific or localized gains and incremental support to conflict parties and other affected communities should be pursued.

Introduction

This is an extraordinarily challenging moment for peacemaking. Amid geopolitical flux and polarization, armed conflicts are on the rise. In 2023, the number of state-based armed conflicts reached the highest level ever recorded by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program.[1] In December 2024, global conflicts had doubled in the past five years, while incidents of political violence had increased by 25 percent in the previous twelve months, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED).[2]

Diplomatic efforts to secure peace are struggling to take root and deliver results. Peacemaking has been impacted by geopolitical divisions and the hardening of states' priorities around their national interests, as well as the complex mix of factors driving contemporary conflicts. A number of high-profile conflicts, including in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, have ended in military victory.[3] This marks a shift away from the soft norm prevalent since the end of the Cold War that most internal conflicts end in negotiated settlements. Other norms, too, are under assault. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a blatant violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, as well as norms against the threat or use of military force in international relations. More recently, the positions and aspirations of US President Donald Trump—on Ukraine itself, but also on Canada, Greenland, and Panama—suggest that Russia is no longer an outlier in its willingness to countenance the erosion of state sovereignty. Meanwhile, international humanitarian law has failed to stem mass atrocities in Gaza, Sudan, or Ukraine, and humanitarian assistance is plummeting under Trump's assault on the multilateral system.

Peacemaking is also increasingly complicated by fragmentation in multilateral organizations. Differences among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) have blocked action on major conflicts in Syria, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Ukraine, Sudan, and Israel-Palestine. Regional organizations, meanwhile, have grown in prominence and capacity since the end of the Cold War, though their mandates, ambitions, and capacities for peacemaking vary. Differences on core peace and security challenges and sensitivities over the sovereignty of their member states have hindered the peacemaking efforts of organizations from the African Union (AU) and the regional economic communities (RECs) in Africa to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the League of Arab States (LAS), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The war in Ukraine has forced the European Union (EU) to face the challenge of aligning its advocacy of peace mediation with "the realities of a continent embroiled in conflict."[4]

More broadly, an erosion of confidence in multilateral institutions reflects a significant and accelerating geopolitical realignment. This includes both the emergence of an "unbalanced multipolarity" that encompasses the rise of capable middle power states and the reassertion of spheres of influence in the foreign policies of China, Russia, and the United States.[5] This geopolitical realignment has been keenly felt in peacemaking. The peacemaking field was already crowded, occupied by the UN and regional organizations, powers such as the US and Russia, established mediators (like Norway, Qatar, and Switzerland), international nongovernmental mediation organizations, and local mediators with legitimacy and authority in their communities.[6] The field has now shifted south and east as part of a "global market of political change," bringing in states like Angola, Brazil, China, Cuba, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Oman, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).[7] Some of these states have long histories as peacemakers, while others

1 Shaun Davies et al., "Organized Violence 1989–2023, and the Prevalence of Organized Crime Groups," *Journal of Peace Resource* 61, no. 4 (2024).

2 ACLED, "Conflict Index: December 2024," available at https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/.

3 The government of Ethiopia's military victory over the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was formalized in a cessation of hostilities agreement.

4 Antje Herrberg and Guy Banim, "Quo Vadis EU Peace Mediation? Maintaining the Skill of Peaceful Intervention in the Era of Strategic Competition," College of Europe, October 2024.

5 Emma Ashford and Even Cooper, "Assumption Testing: Multipolarity Is More Dangerous than Bipolarity for the United States," Stimson Center, October 2, 2023; Monica Duffy Tott, "The Return of Spheres of Influence: Will Negotiations Over Ukraine Be a New Yalta Conference That Carves Up the World?" *Foreign Affairs,* March 13, 2025.

6 Sanja Badanjak and Mateja Peter, "Diversification and Congestion in International Peacemaking: What the Data Says," in Teresa Whitfield, ed., "Still Time to Talk: Adaptation and Innovation in Peace Mediation," *Accord* 30, Conciliation Resources, 2024.

7 Ibid.; Thomas Carothers and Oren Samet-Marram, "The New Global Marketplace of Political Change," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2015.

are newer to the game.[8]

These mediators and peacemakers have different interests, attributes, and leverage, sometimes wielded through proxies or more directly in a transactional form of peacemaking that prioritizes bilateral over multilateral approaches.[9] They also have different ambitions and normative commitments, with some pursuing sustainable and inclusive peace and others prioritizing stability and the continuity of relationships among ruling elites. "Mediation itself," as Christine Bell puts it, "is increasingly seen as an important strategic move for a state to project itself on the world stage."[10]

Minilateralism, Informal Groups, and Coalitions for Peacemaking

Writing in 2015 on the rise of minilateral cooperation, Stewart Patrick identified "growing reliance on informal, non-binding, purpose-built partnerships and coalitions of the interested, willing and capable" as "a defining feature of twenty-first century multilateralism."[11] He noted the dramatic proliferation of informal arrangements and the popularization of the concept of "minilateralism," first coined by the political economist Miles Kahler in 1992 and brought to wider attention by Moises Naim in 2009.[12] Naim had lamented the inability of large multilateral initiatives to reach agreements, even as the need for multilateral collaboration on a range of transnational threats and issues had soared. As an answer, he proposed the "more targeted approach" of minilateralism: "We should bring to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem. Think of this as minilateralism's magic number."[13]

In the past decade, as international fragmentation has accelerated and agreement in multilateral fora has become more elusive, minilateralism has come to the fore.

In the past decade, as international fragmentation has accelerated and agreement in multilateral fora has become more elusive, minilateralism has come to the fore.[14] The influence of existing minilateral structures, such as the G7, the G20, and the BRICS, which in recent years has expanded from five to ten members, has grown.[15] New issue-specific formations have proliferated, ranging from the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that brings together Australia, India, Japan, and the US in the Indo-Pacific to more rarefied minilateral coalitions, such as the Mangrove Alliance for Climate, announced by the UAE and Indonesia during COP27 in Egypt in November 2022.

The development of "purpose-built partnerships and coalitions" has long been a feature of peacemaking. Such coalitions can be traced to the traditions of concert diplomacy, which Paul W. Meerts defines as "harmonized diplomatic negotiation"; this diplomatic mode dates back to the Treaty of Westphalia and rose to the fore in nineteenth-century Europe. But it is also among the approaches to peacemaking introduced as conflict resolution activity surged at the end of the Cold War.[16] Evolving both within and outside intergovernmental frameworks, informal mini-coalitions of states, multilateral organizations, and sometimes NGOs have been formed to support peace negotiations and the implementation of agreements. In a related development that marks a shift away from the institutionalization of multilateral peace operations, the decline in the number of UN peacekeeping operations has been accompanied by deployment of multiple new operations by ad hoc coalitions of regional actors.[17]

Groups formed specifically to address peacemaking

8 Bernardo Mariani, "Mediating Peace in a Fragmented World Order: International Mediation: The Role and Impact of Emerging Powers," Austrian Centre for Peace, 2024.

9 Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Transactional Peacemaking: Warmakers as Peacemakers in the Political Marketplace of Peace Processes," *Contemporary Security Policy* 46, no. 2 (2025).

10 Christine Bell, "'Multimediation': Adapting in Response to Fragmentation," *Accord* 30 (2024), p. 28.

11 Stewart Patrick, "The New 'New Multilateralism': Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?" *Global Summitry* 1, no. 2 (2015).

12 Miles Kahler, "Multilateralism with Small and Large Numbers," *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (1992).

13 Moises Naim, "Minilateralism: The Magic Number to Get Real International Action," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2009.

14 Aarshi Tirkey, "Minilateralism: Weighing the Prospects for Cooperation and Governance," Observer Research Foundation, September 2021.

15 In 2024 and early 2025, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa were joined in the BRICS by Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the UAE.

16 Paul W. Meerts, "Concert Diplomacy: Past, Present, Prospects," *Global Policy* 10, no. S2 (2019).

17 Malte Brosig and John Karlsrud, "How Ad Hoc Coalitions Deinstitutionalize International Institutions," *International Affairs* 100, no. 2 (2024).

have taken different forms. Some gathered external actors with interests in and leverage on a particular conflict to offer support as "friends" of the mediator or process; in other cases, interested powers came together in the form of a contact group to lead the peacemaking. Some mechanisms prioritized the assembly of the like-minded—what today might be referred to as "friend-shoring"—while others recognized the value of bringing together actors that might fundamentally disagree but could find common ground on a strategic need to pursue peace.

Earlier work by this author, supported by the US Institute of Peace (USIP), traced the emergence of friends, contact groups, and other such mechanisms between 1990 and 2009. This research explored when and why these mechanisms were most effective and developed a toolkit for peacemakers on how to work with them.[18] The current report returns to the subject to assess how these informal mechanisms and their successors have evolved since 2010 and under what circumstances they have contributed, and might contribute, to effective outcomes.

Conceptual and Methodological Challenges

Conducting research into the evolution and efficacy of friends, contact groups, and the (by now) many other related mechanisms is complicated for several reasons. The structures are informal and thus poorly documented. While some establish written terms of reference or issue the occasional statement, others leave no public trace of their work. The research for this report relied on secondary sources and interviews (many of them on background) with some seventy-five current and former officials from the UN, regional organizations, states, NGOs, and think tanks who generously took the time to share their views. These complement the more than 200 interviews that informed the author's earlier work.

The subject is also rife with methodological challenges. The labels "friends," "contact group," "troika," "quad," and "quint" are not helpful in distinguishing a group's function, duration, or impact. Groups fill different roles depending on, among other factors, the nature of the issues in contention; the presence or not of a lead mediator, as well as other group structures; their composition, their goals, and the policies, interests, and capacities of their members; their relationship to the conflict parties; their timing with respect to the conflict's life cycle; and the regional environment. They are also constantly evolving.

The report makes a broad distinction between groups formed to support a particular mediator or peace process, groups that lead peacemaking or diplomatic engagements themselves, and more distant mechanisms of support or coordination (see Table 1). With a focus on peacemaking, the report does not address the core groups that guide drafting at the Human Rights Council or the UN's many thematic groups of friends on subjects such as women, peace, and security; children and armed conflict; the protection of civilians; and climate and security; nor does it cover the Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the UN formed by states, including China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia, in 2021.[19] The report also does not examine mechanisms such as the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia, established in early 2009; the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which met monthly after April 2022 to coordinate the military resources provided to Ukraine; or the Group of Friends for Peace established in September 2024 by Brazil and China to bring together states from the Global South committed to the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis.[20]

Structure of the Report

The report starts by recapping the origins of different group structures established in the optimistic period for peacemaking at the end of the Cold War and surveys the trajectory of such mechanisms in the more complicated years that followed. It then addresses the evolution of these groups and other forms of collaborative peacemaking since 2010. That year marked the

18 Teresa Whitfield, *Friends Indeed? The United Nations, Groups of Friends, and the Resolution of Conflict* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2007); Teresa Whitfield, *Working with Groups of Friends: Peacemakers Toolkit* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2010).

19 David Joseph Deutch, "What Are Friends For? 'Groups of Friends' and the UN System," Universal Rights Group, March 31, 2020; Group of Friends in Defense of the UN Charter, "About Us," available at https://www.gof-uncharter.org/about-us.

20 Lara Seligman and Paul McLeary, "The Little-Known Group That's Saving Ukraine," *Politico*, May 1, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China, "'Friends for Peace' Group on the Ukraine Crisis Set up in the United Nations," September 28, 2024.

beginning of what Giulia Piccolino identifies as "a marked decline in the number of peace agreements and ceasefires brokered and an increasing number of internal conflicts de-escalating with no decisive conclusion."[21] The downward spiral accelerated in 2011, when the hope embodied in the revolutions of the Arab Spring quickly dissipated into conflicts across the region and geopolitical polarization that have profoundly challenged peacemaking ever since.

The bulk of the report looks at four broad categories of groups: (1) groups formed to support or work alongside the UN to mediate internationalized internal conflicts where the UN has a peacemaking mandate—specifically in Libya, Syria, and Yemen; (2) groups and structures introduced to support more successful peace processes in relatively benign regional settings—specifically in the Philippines, Colombia, and Mozambique, as well as the anomalous case of Venezuela; (3) groups attempting to align efforts in countries whose current authorities are unrecognized by the UN—specifically Myanmar and Afghanistan; and (4) the challenges of aligning peacemaking efforts in Africa, illustrated by the case of Sudan, where the multiple structures working to support the country's democratic transition descended into "mediation mayhem" after the outbreak of a devastating new war in April 2023.[22] The last section of the report offers conclusions and lessons to guide decisions on the formation of future peacemaking groups or other forms of supporting peace architectures.

Friends and Contact Groups in the Two Decades after the Cold War

As great power rivalry began to ease in the late 1980s and Cold War adversaries sought to extricate themselves from proxy conflicts, conflict resolution in southern Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central America surged. During this period, mediators and others developed a wide array of new peacemaking arrangements, including informal mini-coalitions of states and sometimes intergovernmental organizations brought together by their collective desire to address a given conflict. A particular innovation was the creation of a dedicated group of "friends" to support the efforts of a lead mediator, in the first instance the Friends of the UN Secretary-General for El Salvador.

The perceived success of this mechanism contributed to the establishment of an array of related groups to support the UN's peacemaking in the 1990s. As the era of the UN's preeminence as a peacemaker began to fade, regional organizations, individual states, and international NGOs became more active, and friends, contact groups, core groups, and other such mechanisms, including international contact groups formed to address African conflicts, proliferated. Between 1990 and 2009, their number grew from four to more than thirty, a larger than sevenfold increase that reflected both broad support for negotiated solutions to armed conflict and the increasing disposition of a widening number of actors to become involved.[23]

Peacemaking at Cold War's End

The impending end of the Cold War saw a burst of peacemaking, facilitated by growing collaboration among the P5. At the beginning of his second term as secretary-general of the UN in January 1987, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar publicly encouraged the members of the Security Council to work together to address the ongoing war between Iran and Iraq.[24] Separately, he encouraged the ambassadors of the P5 to meet "privately and informally, keeping their discussion off the Council's agenda until they had explored all possibilities for a meeting of minds."[25] This process initiated a pattern of cooperation among the P5, including on the Security Council's authorization of coalition forces to use "all necessary means" to counter Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990.[26]

21 Based on data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. Giulia Piccolino, "The Resolution of Civil Wars: Changing International Norms of Peace-Making and the Academic Consensus," *Civil Wars* 25, nos. 2–3 (2023), p. 308.

22 Ameer Chughai and Theodore Murphy, "Conflicts and Interests: Why Sudan's External Mediation Is a Barrier to Peace," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 8, 2023.

23 Whitfield, *Working with Groups of Friends*, p. 5.

24 UN Doc. SG/SM/3956, January 13, 1987.

25 Cameron R. Hume, *The United Nations, Iran, and Iraq: How Peacemaking Changed* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 89.

26 UN Security Council Resolution 678 (November 29, 1990), UN Doc. S/RES/678.

The year 1988 saw breakthroughs in several notable peacemaking processes: Iran and Iraq agreed to a ceasefire, the UN mediated agreements on the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, and Angola, Cuba, and South Africa agreed to the Tripartite Accord providing independence for Namibia. The process toward independence for Namibia, which began as part of a complex regional effort but was gradually subsumed under the leadership of US Assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker, had been driven by a Western Contact Group formed in 1978. This group, made up of Canada, France, the UK, the US, and West Germany, engaged with a frontline group of African states (Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe).[27]

The first face-to-face talks between the parties to the Cambodian conflict also took place in 1988. This diffuse movement toward peace was shaped by several factors: warming relations between China and the Soviet Union and their desire—shared with the US—to disengage from Indochina; the gradual normalization of relations between China and Vietnam; and the assertion of regional influence, under the lead of Indonesia and ASEAN. Among the many elements that contributed to the Cambodian peace agreements finally reached in October 1991 was, in Asif R. Khan's words, "a decisive and united plan put together by the five permanent members of the Security Council."[28]

Friends of the Secretary-General in the 1990s

It was in this relatively benign diplomatic environment that the first groups of friends were established, initially to harness the efforts of interested member states to negotiations led by representatives of the UN secretary-general. The groups represented a significant diplomatic innovation that appeared to offer many benefits. They encouraged collaboration rather than competition around a particular peace process and offered the means to maximize potential leverage on conflict parties and support for any peace agreements achieved.

The first group of friends, the Friends of the Secretary-General on El Salvador, was formed in 1990 by Álvaro de Soto, Pérez de Cuéllar's personal representative, to support his mediation of negotiations between the government of El Salvador and insurgents in the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).[29] Composed of Colombia, Mexico, Spain, and Venezuela, the group drew on earlier efforts to promote peace in Central America by the Contadora group of countries (Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela). It also responded to the FMLN's worries about the capacity of the secretary-general to act independently of the Security Council, which by late 1989 it saw as increasingly dominated by the US.

De Soto likened his relationship to the group of friends as that of "a very authoritarian conductor,"[30] and the case remains a classic example of "hierarchical coordination."[31] De Soto engaged regularly with the friends' representatives in their capital cities as well as in New York and San Salvador. He drew on them, both individually and collectively, for encouragement, leverage, and assistance with the conflict parties, with whom they each maintained distinct relationships. During implementation of the peace agreement reached in early 1992—and now joined by the US in a group of "four plus one"—the group of friends provided support on the ground and successfully managed the issue of El Salvador in the Security Council and General Assembly.

The Friends of the Secretary-General on El Salvador were widely perceived as successful. The mechanism enhanced the leverage of the secretary-general and preempted competition among its members and "forum shopping" by the conflict parties. It also offered the group members themselves status and legitimacy in the peace process and allowed interested states other than Security Council members to engage in the council's work.

27 Chester A. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

28 Asif R. Khan, "When Great Powers Behave: Mediation Lessons from the Cambodia Peace Process," Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, October 2022, p. 9.

29 For further details on the groups discussed in this and the following subsection, see: Whitfield, *Friends Indeed*?

30 Jean Krasno, interview with Álvaro de Soto, Yale University, April 9, 1996.

31 David Lanz, "Envoy Envy? Competition in African Mediation Processes and Ways to Overcome It," *International Negotiation* 26 (2021). The image of an orchestra conductor was also invoked by: Jeffrey Feltman, "UN Envoys as Conductors, Not Soloists," Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, June 18, 2019.

The establishment of other groups of friends of the secretary-general (or groups of friends of a particular process) quickly followed. In neighboring Guatemala, the Friends of the Guatemala Peace Process included the four Salvadoran friends plus Norway and the US. Between 1992 and 1995, groups of friends were formed in Haiti, Georgia, Tajikistan, and Western Sahara, and core groups were formed in Cambodia and Mozambique. In all of these contexts, the groups assumed dominant roles in decisions taken by the Security Council; in some instances, they also provided coordinated support to the implementation of the mandates of UN peace operations on the ground.

Some groups had more impact than others, reflecting both the nature of the conflicts being addressed and the level of coherence among group members. In Guatemala, which, like El Salvador, saw negotiations between a government and an insurgent group, the friends provided helpful accompaniment of the UN's mediation of agreements reached in early 1996. Through protracted political crises in Haiti, the four Friends of the Secretary-General on Haiti (Canada, France, the US, and Venezuela) drove the Security Council's decision making for many years. A group of friends supported the OAS when the UN peace operation left Haiti in 2001; after a new UN mission deployed to the country in 2004, the group was reconfigured first as the Friends of Haiti and then as the wider Core Group, including representatives of the OAS and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) as well as the international financial institutions. This group went on to play a constructive role in efforts to help Haiti hold credible elections in 2006 before its membership was reduced to the principal donor states. On Tajikistan, an informal group of friends that met in New York brought together the eight states formally designated as observers of the negotiations between the government and united opposition forces, as well as other actors supportive of the peace process.

The groups of friends addressing Georgia and Western Sahara, where conflict was over disputed territory, maintained tight control of drafting processes in the Security Council. However, they did not advance either conflict toward resolution. Divisions between the "Western friends" of Georgia—France, Germany, the UK, and the US—and the fifth member, Russia, mirrored divisions between Georgia and Abkhazia on the fundamental question of the latter's status. The Friends of Georgia and the UN-led process both came to a dramatic end when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008.[32] Meanwhile, some members of the Group of Friends of Western Sahara, especially France (the group's other long-term members included Russia, Spain, the UK, and the US), maintained support for positions taken by Morocco. This contributed to stasis in the Security Council and limited progress toward the UN's stated goal of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara.

> After the proliferation of friends' groups in the context of UN peacemaking in the 1990s, the profusion of international actors engaged in peacemaking in the late 1990s and 2000s led to a mushrooming of groups outside the UN.

Only two more groups of friends analogous to the Friends of the Secretary-General for El Salvador were formed in the late 1990s. A Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar was established in 2007 and proved a useful forum to accompany developments in Myanmar from New York, as discussed below.[33] The last such group, the Core Group for East Timor, was formed in mid-1999. The group was conceived as the confidential "core" of a wider "support group" of some twenty-plus members. It was composed of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the UK, and the US, a mix of regional actors and P5 members well placed to support the UN's effort to organize a popular consultation on East Timor's future in August 1999. Guided by Australia, the group took a leading role in responding to the post-referendum security crisis and in steering action in the Security Council in the following years.

32 A New Group of Georgia's Friends was set up in 2005 by Western-leaning former members of the USSR and met intermittently until 2011; a larger Group of Friends of Georgia composed of Western members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has met since 2014 to express support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Nina Tsikhistavi-Khutsishvili, "Groups of Friends of Georgia," International Center on Conflict and Negotiation, 2023.

33 This group followed an earlier "Informal Consultation Group." see Whitfield, *Friends Indeed*, pp. 225–228.

The Core Group for East Timor was something of an exception, however. By the late 1990s, the UN's credibility was battered by civil war and crisis in Somalia, the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, as well as wider humiliation in the Balkans. The original formulation of "friends of the secretary-general" no longer held currency, as the UN's preeminence in peacemaking began to wane.

A Proliferation of Groups in the 2000s

After the proliferation of groups of friends in the context of UN peacemaking in the 1990s, the profusion of international actors engaged in peacemaking in the late 1990s and 2000s led to a mushrooming of groups outside the UN. The formation of these groups frequently reflected generalized attempts to accommodate interested external actors—including multilateral, regional, and subregional organizations as well as individual states—rather than deliberate orchestration by a lead mediator. Meanwhile, international NGOs assumed increasing prominence across different levels of mediation activity, although rarely as members of group structures. They found particular traction in the new global environment after 9/11. As militarized responses to armed conflict and the listing of groups as terrorist became more widespread, the ability of nongovernmental mediators to engage with a wide variety of non-state armed groups had real value. In some circumstances, the nongovernmental mediators were also useful for states, whose sensitivity to sovereignty limited their willingness to accept more visible forms of international mediation, especially by the UN.[34]

In conflicts that directly engaged the interests of major powers, groups of friends working in support of a third-party mediator were generally absent. Peacemaking in the Balkans and the Middle East, for example, was for many years driven by bilateral diplomacy or channeled through various ad hoc mechanisms. These included the Minsk Group, formed in 1992 by the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (co-chaired by France, Russia, and the US) to work toward the peaceful resolution of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh; the Contact Group on the former Yugoslavia (made up of France, Germany, Italy, Russia, the UK, and the US); and the Quartet on the Middle East (the EU, Russia, the US, and the UN).

Between 2013 and 2015, the P5 plus Germany, together with the EU, negotiated the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran. The Trilateral Contact Group (Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE) and the Normandy Format (France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine) were both established in 2014 to address the conflict in eastern Ukraine fomented by Russia. Their collective efforts achieved the Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015, but implementation soon hit an impasse, and no diplomacy was able to prevent the downward spiral toward Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[35]

At the UN, bitter divisions among members of the Security Council on the Balkans in the 1990s had brought a rude end to the first wave of post–Cold War peacemaking. The Contact Group on the former Yugoslavia took shape in 1994 to counter the proliferation of conflicting mediation efforts by distinct international actors.[36] It operated independently of the Security Council and was perhaps the closest equivalent to the great power "concerts" of the past. In November 1995, the Contact Group convened the conflict parties in Dayton, Ohio, for peace talks led by the US. The following month, it witnessed the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in Paris. Intense differences over the Kosovo crisis in 1999 prompted the group's Western members to divest themselves of Russia and engage as the "Quint." They would regroup in later years as talks on Kosovo's final status, led by former Finnish President Marti Ahtisaari, took shape. However, in 2007, searing differences within the Security Council prevented adoption of Ahtisaari's proposal for the "supervised independence" of Kosovo. Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, leading to fears of a major escalation of the conflict. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stepped in with some of the

34 On the rise of international nongovernmental mediators, see: Teresa Whitfield, "International Private Mediators in a World in Flux," *Accord* 30 (2024).

35 Andrew Lohsen and Pierre Morcos, "Understanding the Normandy Format and Its Relation to the Current Standoff with Russia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 9, 2022.

36 Helen Leigh-Pippard, "The Contact Group on (and in) Bosnia: An Exercise in Conflict Mediation," *International Journal* 53, no. 2 (1998).

most audacious diplomacy of his tenure to "manage down" the crisis and secure the de facto end of the UN's interim administration.[37]

The Quartet on the Middle East was publicly established in April 2002. Meeting at both principal and envoy levels, it brought the power of the US, the money of the EU, and the legitimacy of the UN together with the political influence of Russia to support the two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict outlined in Security Council Resolution 1397. Over the following years, this group became the principal driver of international policy on Israel-Palestine. It offered an example, as Nathalie Tocci later suggested, of "crystallizing multilateralism" through a flexible yet deliberate grouping of key actors outside an institutional framework.[38] It lent its backing to the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which looked toward normalization of Israel's relations with the Arab world in parallel to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace; agreed and then launched a Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East in 2003; endorsed Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005; and defined the conditions for international relations with Hamas after the latter's landslide election victory in January 2006.

After Hamas's victory, De Soto, who had succeeded the UN's first special coordinator for the Middle East peace process in 2005, had hoped to pursue "a common but differentiated approach" toward the organization.[39] But this was not to be, and, under pressure from the US, the UN instead agreed to the Quartet's conditions, resulting in Hamas's international isolation. In a blistering end-of-mission report leaked to *The Guardian* after he stepped down in 2007, De Soto complained that the Quartet had become "pretty much a group of friends of the US."[40] That same year, an Office of the Quartet Representative was established in Jerusalem to support Palestinian economic and institutional development, and a distinct Arab Quartet—Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—was formed to revive peace efforts.

The political engagement of both quartets gradually faded with the hopes of a successful peace process. Indeed, by the time Nikolay Mladenov took up the position of UN special coordinator in 2015, he found the original Quartet "basically defunct."[41] Sensing the utility of a format that still represented powerful voices in the international community, he worked to maintain its relevance, in part by securing a mandate to produce a report on the viability of a two-state solution, published in 2016.[42] The Quartet's influence declined during the first Trump administration, which prioritized the Abraham Accords and the bilateral US relationship with Israel. After October 7, 2023, while the war in Gaza burned, the US turned to the states of the region for contacts and leverage in hostage and ceasefire negotiations with Hamas—not to the heterogeneous members of the Middle East Quartet.

International Contact Groups in Africa

Starting in the mid-1990s and building on earlier collaborative peacemaking practices, multiple groups were formed to address African conflicts. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan advocated for the establishment of such groups as an effective way to marry African leadership with resources and capacity from outside the continent.[43] The Security Council's Ad Hoc Working Group on Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Africa even came up with a set of recommendations on groups' optimal composition and attributes, though these efforts to codify best practices did not gain traction.[44]

As regional leadership on African conflicts took shape, international contact groups assumed prominent roles in addressing the intertwined conflicts in West Africa. These included the International Contact Groups on Liberia, Guinea,

37 David Harland, "Kosovo and the UN," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 52, no. 5 (2010).

38 Nathalie Tocci, "The Middle East Quartet and (In)effective Multilateralism," *Middle East Journal* 67, no. 1 (2013).

39 Álvaro de Soto, "End of Mission Report," May 2007, p. 17, para. 44.

40 Ibid., p. 24, para. 63.

41 Interview with Nikolay Mladenov, July 2023.

42 United Nations, "Report of the Middle East Quartet," July 1, 2016.

43 UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa*, UN Doc. S/1998/318, April 13, 1998.

44 UN Security Council, *Annex to the Letter Dated 29 August 2002, from the Permanent Representative of Mauritius to the President of the Security Council*, UN Doc. S/2002/979, August 30, 2002.

and Guinea-Bissau and an International Working Group and smaller mediation group constituted by the AU for Côte d'Ivoire. Other mechanisms included the International Commission to Accompany the Transition in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which enabled the alignment of regional and international efforts in the period leading up to the 2006 elections. In early 2009, the AU Peace and Security Council formed the International Contact Group on Madagascar to respond to a constitutional crisis in the country and assert the AU's lead in a contested mediation process.[45] Notably, a number of these groups included the World Bank, and several also included the International Monetary Fund. This was part of a deliberate attempt to ensure that peacemaking efforts were buttressed by financial commitments.[46]

While the propensity to create large international contact groups diminished over time, the informal Troika consisting of Norway, the UK, and the US has remained engaged on Sudan and South Sudan to the present day, as discussed below. This group stands out for the role it played—alongside others, including the AU, Italy, Switzerland, and the UN in the latter stages—in supporting the peace process on southern Sudan initiated by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the early 1990s, as well as the complex processes and conflicts that ensued.

The Troika began to take shape in 2000. It was the product of long-standing engagement with Sudan by senior Norwegian, UK, and US officials and their recognition of the benefits of "a small and cohesive team of countries with their own strengths in relation to both parties in Sudan."[47] Norway's involvement was anchored in the personal commitment to the region of its minister of development, Hilde Johnson, as well as Norway's long history of providing humanitarian assistance, especially in the south. The UK was the former colonial power and retained a deep understanding of the north as well as extensive relations in Khartoum. The US was motivated by congressional pressure on issues such as slavery and the persecution of Christians in the south. But the US was also interested—especially after 9/11—in more directly engaging with a country straddling Africa and the Middle East that had a history of promoting Islamic fundamentalism (and supporting Osama bin Laden) and that was a growing oil producer. As negotiations led by General Lazaro Sumbeiywo of Kenya moved toward the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in early 2005, the Troika contributed expertise and resources and calibrated political pressure.

Peacemaking in the Post-2010 Era of Multipolarity

Since 2010, two somewhat contradictory developments have shaped the formation—or lack of formation—of informal groups to support peacemaking: a growing capacity for and interest in mediation, on the one hand, and accelerating geopolitical divisions and increasingly complex conflicts, on the other. In a new environment of competition for political influence, most of the groups formed after 2010 have been far removed from the original model of friends of the secretary-general. These groups have struggled to achieve both the hierarchical coordination possible when the authority of a lead mediator is clearly recognized and its alternative, the more horizontal "collaborative cooperation" based on an agreed unity of purpose.[48]

The widespread enthusiasm for mediation at the end of the 2000s reflected a growing consensus that the negotiation of peace agreements worked, and this contributed to interest in and appetite for groups of friends. New data confirmed that there had been a visible increase in peace agreements since the end of the Cold War and that these were at least in part attributable to the efforts of the international community.[49] Meanwhile, mediation was becoming more professionalized and more tied to normative frameworks such as the women,

45 Lanz, "Envoy Envy," p. 511.

46 For the membership of these groups, see: Ingo Henneberg, "International Contact Groups: Ad Hoc Coordination in International Conflict Management," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 27, no. 4 (2020).

47 Hilde F. Johnson, *Waging Peace: The Inside Story of the Negotiations That Ended Africa's Longest Civil War* (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 2010), p. 27.

48 Lanz, "Envoy Envy," p. 522.

49 Andrew Mack and Zoe Nielsen, eds., *Human Security Brief 2007* (Vancouver: Human Security Report Project, 2008); Joakim Kreutz, "How and When Armed Conflicts End: Introducing the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (2010).

peace, and security (WPS) agenda embodied in Security Council Resolution 1325. The UN established its Mediation Support Unit in 2006; regional organizations, states, and nongovernmental mediation entities soon followed suit with their own efforts to improve mediation practices. In 2010, Finland and Türkiye established a Group of Friends of Mediation at the UN. The following year, the group led efforts to get the UN General Assembly to adopt its first resolution on strengthening the role of mediation, which called on the UN Secretariat to develop mediation guidance. By 2024, the group had grown to include fifty-two member states and eight regional organizations.

The multiplicity of organizations, states, and other actors active in mediation by the end of the 2000s was positive and could be seen as validating the importance placed on the political settlement of disputes. Yet it also contributed to the emergence of more competitive peacemaking, a development that Chester A. Crocker described in 2007 as "a stark fact of contemporary international life."[50] "Coherence, coordination and complementarity of the mediation effort" was one of the ten "mediation fundamentals" introduced in the UN Guidance for Effective Mediation, submitted to the General Assembly in 2012. Recognizing the complexity of having multiple mediators, the guidance recommended that mediation processes "should have a lead mediator, preferentially from a single entity." It suggested that "international actors should consider establishing coordination mechanisms, such as groups of friends or international contact groups, to provide consistent political and resource support for the mediation effort." It also cautioned that "there may be circumstances in which such groups risk replicating the conflict dynamics, which would be unhelpful to the process."[51]

> In a new environment of competition for political influence, most of the groups formed after 2010 have been far removed from the original model of friends of the secretary-general.

Paradoxically, this new support for mediation came just as mediation was becoming more complicated. Fewer conflicts were amenable to what Stephen John Stedman and Richard Gowan have called the "standard treatment for civil wars"—internationally mediated negotiations culminating in peace agreements and the deployment of peacekeepers to implement them.[52] Conflicts were instead increasingly characterized by the fragmentation of conflict parties and the presence of religious and other agendas that defied negotiation.[53] A marked acceleration in the number of internationalized internal conflicts also complicated conflict resolution; there were more than ten such conflicts in 2014 (a first) and twenty-five or more each year between 2018 and 2022, constituting around half of all internal conflicts.[54] In the absence of the stable political settlements of the past, mediation practice shifted to what Gowan later labeled the "treatment of civil wars in a fragmenting international order."[55] Christine Bell and Jan Pospisil pointed to the emergence of "formalised political unsettlements" that have translated the disagreement at the heart of the conflict into a "set of political and legal institutions for continuing negotiation."[56]

The groups of friends, contact groups, and other groups in this period have taken many forms (see Table 1). With a few exceptions—such as the Friends of Western Sahara and the Troika now engaged on both South Sudan and Sudan—the groups from the past are long gone.[57] The grip that

50 Chester A. Crocker, "Peacemaking and Mediation: Dynamics of a Changing Field," International Peace Academy, March 2007, p. 6.

51 United Nations, "United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation," 2012, pp. 18–19.

52 Richard Gowan and Stephen John Stedman, "The International Regime for Treating Civil War, 1988–2017," *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (2018).

53 Magnus Lundgren and Isak Svensson, "The Surprising Decline of International Mediation in Armed Conflicts," *Research & Politics* 7, no. 2 (2020).

54 Shawn Davies, Therése Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg, "Organized Violence 1989–2021 and Drone Warfare," *Journal of Peace Research* 59, no. 4 (2022).

55 Richard Gowan, "The Treatment of Civil Wars in a Fragmenting International Order," *Global Governance* 30 (2024).

56 Christine Bell and Jan Pospisil, "Navigating Inclusion in Transitions from Conflict: The Formalised Political *Un*settlement," *International Development* 29, no. 5 (2017), p. 576.

57 The Core Group in Haiti gradually lost traction as it became subject to criticism that it was undermining Haitian sovereignty. Particularly contentious was the role it played in shaping the response to the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021. In mid-2023, CARICOM appointed an Eminent Persons Group to engage with Haitian authorities and stakeholders. Interview with UN official, October 2023; CARICOM, "CARICOM Appoints Eminent Persons Group to Broker Discussions with Haitian Interests," May 26, 2023.

several of them had retained on the work of the Security Council has diminished, largely replaced by a system of "penholding" by council members assigned to lead the negotiation and drafting of resolutions on specific agenda items, instituted around 2010.[58] Meanwhile, a wide variety of other groups have been established or emerged more organically.

While the great majority of these groups remained the domain of formal actors (states and multilateral organizations), a hybrid mechanism also involving NGOs had been pioneered in the Philippines, as described below. And in the anomalous case of efforts to end the Basque conflict, a group emerged with no official actors at all, as Spain would countenance no formal international involvement. Instead, an International Contact Group made up of individuals helped build confidence that a move away from the violence of the ETA separatist group was possible. This took place alongside a confidential and unorthodox mediation process facilitated by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.[59]

By 2011, the UN had over two dozen peacekeeping operations and special political missions deployed in the field, but the situations in which it had a clear lead in peacemaking were diminishing.

The UN's Contested Lead in Internationalized Internal Conflicts

By 2011, the UN had over two dozen peacekeeping operations and special political missions deployed in the field, but the situations in which it had a clear lead in peacemaking were diminishing. It maintained mediation mandates in legacy conflicts over Cyprus and Western Sahara but elsewhere was partnering with or supporting other actors on peace processes and conflict prevention initiatives. The repercussions of the Arab Spring, particularly the descent of Libya, Syria, and Yemen into civil wars, would change that. Although the trajectory by which the UN came to its mediation mandate was different in each case, and the challenges it faced were distinct, its experience with the three civil wars had elements in common: the fragmentation and dynamic evolution of local actors and armed groups; the support these received from external actors; the focus of the UN's efforts on the negotiation of power-sharing agreements; and an inability to secure a settlement in any of the three countries.[60]

Peace processes at the end of the Cold War had regularly involved or addressed the engagement of regional and other powers. They had demonstrated, as Sean William Kane concluded, that "effective 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."[61] The circumstances within which the new generation of UN envoys were working made such goals extraordinarily challenging. Their roles evolved incrementally and were conditioned by differences in the Security Council mandates, which to differing extents undermined their impartiality; in the case of Yemen, Security Council Resolution 2216 explicitly supported one side of the conflict.[62] In contrast to the 1980s, the mandates of these envoys did not directly address the external dimensions of these "new proxy wars" due to differences among regional and great powers and sensitivities over sovereignty—heightened by the failings of post-conflict interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.[63] Yet these external dimensions quickly emerged as the primary obstacles to peacemaking, highlighting what Martin

58 Security Council Report, "The Penholder System," December 21, 2018.

59 Teresa Whitfield, *Endgame for ETA: Elusive Peace in the Basque Country* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2014), pp. 233–235.

60 Muriel Asseburg, Wolfram Lacher, and Mareike Transfeld, "Mission Impossible? UN Mediation in Libya, Syria and Yemen," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik/German Institute for International and Security Affairs, October 2018.

61 Sean William Kane, "Making Peace When the Whole Word Has Come to Fight: The Mediation of Internationalized Civil Wars," *International Peacekeeping* 29, no. 3 (2020), p. 179.

62 Resolutions on Syria were oriented toward a predetermined outcome of an interim transitional government. As is discussed below with reference to Resolution 2254, they also explicitly excluded armed groups listed as terrorists. The UN was further limited in its engagement of Syrian Kurds by Turkish sensitivities. SRSGs in Libya headed a mission bound to support an internationally recognized government while also trying to mediate between this government and unrecognized authorities.

63 Peter Bergen et al., eds., *Understanding the New Proxy Wars: Battlegrounds and Strategies Reshaping the Greater Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Griffiths, UN envoy in Yemen from 2018 to 2021, referred to as "the irritating relevance of ripeness in strategic conflicts."[64]

The absence of clearly structured, multidimensional processes, combined with high levels of external engagement, led to the emergence or creation of a panoply of group structures to support, lead, or subvert progress toward peace. In each case, the array of groups varied over time in accordance with fluctuating levels of interest shown by various states—such as Russia, Iran, Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, the UAE, and the US and other Western states—as well as shifting rivalries and alliances among them. The most significant of these group structures are briefly considered below.

Libya

The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) was established in September 2011 to support the post-Qaddafi transition, which was ushered in by a short military intervention with a polarizing legacy.[65] Security Council Resolution 1973 had authorized the use of "all necessary measures" to protect civilians under threat of attack and had passed with abstentions from Brazil, China, Germany, India, and Russia.[66] Bitter divisions quickly opened up as Western powers, with the support of some Arab states, tapped NATO to coordinate the intervention, alienating Russia and many African states. Critics understood this as a pivot away from Resolution 1973's stated intention of protection toward support for the Libyan rebels (including weapons, in violation of the Security Council's own arms embargo) and a determination that Qaddafi "must go."[67] This pivot took place even as separate efforts toward a negotiated solution were being pursued by the AU as well as a UN envoy and Norway.

Decision making in this period was driven by a series of Western-led meetings among supporters of intervention. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France convened the first meeting of a group he dubbed "Friends of Libya" on March 19th, hours before he ordered the first airstrikes on the country.[68] Ten days later, the participants in a larger London Conference established themselves as a Contact Group made up of more than thirty governments and organizations, including NATO, the EU, the LAS, and (in a questionable decision considering the group's overt championing of intervention) the UN. The group met five times over the following months—including in a July 14th meeting when it formally recognized the Libyan rebels' National Transitional Council as Libya's legitimate authority—before being rebranded, by Sarkozy once again, as the Friends of Libya for a single meeting on September 1, 2011. Its members pushed for UNSMIL to convene the group in Tripoli, but as Ian Martin, the first special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) to head UNSMIL, later recalled, "The Libyans wanted none of it, so it died."[69]

Successive SRSGs heading UNSMIL tried to balance engagement with Libyans with rounds of regional diplomacy to address the different dimensions of the conflict and fend off efforts to establish competing mediation fora.

In the following years, Libya's descent into conflict was accelerated by the emergence of two sets of international rivals: backers of the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (Türkiye, Qatar, and Sudan, as well as militia fighters from Syria) and backers of the forces of General Khalifa Haftar and the Tobruk-based parliament in the east (principally the UAE, Egypt, Russia, and France).[70] Successive SRSGs heading UNSMIL tried to balance engagement with Libyans with rounds of regional diplomacy to address the

64 Email correspondence with Martin Griffiths, May 6, 2020.

65 Adrian Johnson and Saqeb Mueen, eds., *Short War, Long Shadow: The Political and Military Legacies of the 2011 Libya Campaign* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2012); in this volume, see: Jonathan Eyal, "The Responsibility to Protect: A Chance Missed."

66 UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (March 17, 2011), UN Doc. S/RES/1973.

67 White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Joint Op-Ed by President Obama, Prime Minister Cameron and President Sarkozy: 'Libya's Pathway to Peace,'" April 14, 2011.

68 Ian Martin, *All Necessary Measures?: The United Nations and International Intervention in Libya* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2020), p. 38.

69 Email correspondence with Ian Martin, May 11, 2024.

70 On the complex evolution of the internationalization of Libya's conflict, see: Frederic Wehrey, "'This War Is Out of Our Hands': Libya's Internationalized Conflict Since 2011," in *Understanding the New Proxy Wars*, Bergen et al., eds.

different dimensions of the conflict and fend off efforts to establish competing mediation fora.[71] Beginning in 2016, the UN met periodically to exchange perspectives with the AU and LAS in a Troika, which became a Quartet with the addition of the EU the following year.

By the middle of 2019, the UN's efforts to advance a peace process were stuck. Ghassan Salamé, the SRSG at the time, had hoped to convene an inclusive national conference that April. But such a meeting became impossible after Haftar attacked Tripoli—a move for which he had gathered significant material and political support, including in a final telephone call from President Trump's national security adviser, John Bolton.[72] In July 2019, Salamé proposed a high-level meeting to bring "concerned countries" together and create the space for the relaunching of a Libyan process. Germany appeared a logical partner: Chancellor Angela Merkel was a leader with broad international authority, and Germany was perceived as neutral by the Libyans and was an elected member of the Security Council with close ties to regional actors. When Salamé met with Merkel the following month, she responded positively to the proposal, but with a note of caution: she wanted assurances that such a conference could have a concrete impact.[73]

Over the following months, while Türkiye's decisive military intervention in support of the Government of National Accord transformed the situation on the ground, Germany and the UN convened six preparatory meetings to advance the drafting of a fifty-five-point outcome document. The states involved committed to refrain from interfering in Libya's armed conflict and to support UN efforts to return to an intra-Libyan political process. On January 19, 2020, the Berlin International Conference, cochaired by Merkel and Secretary-General António Guterres, brought together world leaders from the P5 and other states engaged in the conflict (Algeria, Egypt, Italy, the Republic of the Congo, Türkiye, and the UAE, as well as representatives of the AU, EU, and LAS). The conference's conclusions addressed a ceasefire, the arms embargo, a return to the political process, security sector reform, economic and financial reform, respect for international humanitarian law and human rights, and a range of follow-up mechanisms.

Some of the conference's commitments were promptly violated, weapons shipments into Libya resumed, and in July 2020, Egypt threatened military intervention to counter Türkiye's engagement. But the conference nonetheless had impact.[74] It established four international working groups and facilitated the launching of three intra-Libyan tracks under UN auspices on the economic, political, and security aspects of the conflict. These would yield a durable ceasefire, a roadmap toward elections, and terms for the formation of a government of national unity. A second Berlin International Conference was held in June 2021 with participants from both Libya and the region. Yet problems were mounting. The actions of some of the states participating in the conferences raised serious questions about their commitment to its ambitions. Elections planned for December 2021 did not take place, and, while the ceasefire held, Libya's divisions persisted.

In addition to the various structures established by the Berlin Conference, shifting configurations of states managed the coordination of some of the key external actors. These shifting groups consisted of the three Western permanent members of the Security Council—France, the UK, and the US—plus key partners Italy and Germany (referred to as the P3 + 2) and sometimes critical regional actors as well, such as Egypt and Türkiye (P3 + 2 + 2), as well as Qatar and the UAE (P3 + 2 + 2 + 2). The atmosphere and value of the meetings varied in accordance with developments in Libya and evolving external priorities.[75] Moreover, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the meetings

71 Such efforts were made at different moments by Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, France, Italy, and Morocco. See: Asseburg, Lacher, and Transfeld, "Mission Impossible," p. 21; Christopher Thornton, "Reality Bites Back: Violence, Power and International Mediation in Libya," in *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya*, Wolfram Lacher and Virginie Collombier, eds. (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2023).

72 David D. Kirkpatrick, "The White House Blessed a War in Libya, but Russia Won It," *New York Times*, April 14, 2020.

73 Interview with Christian Buck, July 2023; Interview with Stephanie Williams, October 2023.

74 International Crisis Group, "Averting an Egyptian Military Intervention in Libya," July 27, 2020.

75 Interviews with P3 and UN officials, June, July, and September 2023.

were met with trenchant criticism by Russia, which was always wary of parallel mechanisms that might seem to challenge the prerogative of the Security Council.[76]

In September 2022, Abdoulaye Bathily, a senior Senegalese official, became the new UN SRSG. His appointment contributed to lowering tensions between the UN and the AU that dated back to the circumstances of UNSMIL's creation. However, his efforts to move a UN-facilitated process forward were frustrated. He resigned in April 2024 after a briefing of the Security Council in which he lambasted both "the stubborn resistance, unreasonable expectations and indifference to the Libyan people" of its key political stakeholders and the continuing interference of regional actors in "unilateral, parallel and uncoordinated initiatives."[77] UNSMIL went back to the drawing board. Efforts to develop proposals for a new UN-facilitated political initiative to help overcome the "contentious issues" blocking elections and broaden consensus through a national dialogue were taken forward by the deputy SRSG, Stephanie Koury, until a new SRSG, Hanna Tetteh, was appointed in early 2025.[78]

Syria

Over the course of thirteen years of war in Syria, mediation efforts have been led by four UN special envoys; the first two of them, Kofi Annan (March–August 2012) and Lakhdar Brahimi (September 2012–May 2014) were also joint envoys of the LAS. These efforts came to seem more and more unlikely to bring the increasingly internationalized civil war to a negotiated conclusion.[79] After years of political stasis, in late 2024 the former al-Qaida affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which had controlled the northwestern city of Idlib and its surrounding governorate since 2019, seized an opportunity presented by the weakness and distraction of President Bashar al-Assad's regime and its supporters in Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia. A brief offensive, during which HTS was joined by other armed groups, forced Assad's departure on December 8th, leading to the collapse of his government.

Prior to Assad's ouster, Annan, Brahimi, and their successors, Staffan de Mistura (2014–2018) and Geir O. Pedersen (2018–present), faced daunting obstacles: a backdrop of a devastating conflict; deep divisions in the Security Council, especially on the core issue of whether the regime of Assad should go; and varying levels of military support for different opposition forces (from the Gulf states, Türkiye, some European states, and the US) and the government (from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, whose 2015 military intervention to shore up Assad had been a turning point in the war). By the early 2020s, an evolving constellation of armed groups and gradual consolidation of the status quo had left the Syrian regime in place, albeit in control of just two-thirds of the national territory.

> The Syrian political process has been, as one UN official put it, "a creature of all the geopolitical forces in the world."

The Syrian political process has been, as one UN official put it, "a creature of all the geopolitical forces in the world."[80] The priorities of external actors shifted in response to considerations such as the rise of the Islamic State and the refugee crisis, as well as regional power struggles.[81] While different international actors convened in a variety of group structures and initiatives, Syria's tragedy was that the key external actors never aligned behind a concerted effort for peace.

In early 2012, as efforts by the LAS foundered, France took the lead, supported by the US, in convening a Group of Friends of the Syrian People. The goal was to demonstrate clear support for the opposition Syrian National Council, which the group had recently recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.[82] Participation

76 Interview with UN official, June 2023.

77 United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), "Remarks by SRSG Abdoulaye Bathily to the Security Council," April 16, 2024.

78 UNSMIL, "Remarks by DSRSG Stephanie Koury to the Security Council," December 16, 2024.

79 Asseburg, Lacher, and Transfeld, "Mission Impossible"; Sara Hellmüller, "Peacemaking in a Shifting World Order: A Macro-level Analysis of UN Mediation in Syria," *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 3 (2022); Alex J. Bellamy, *Syria Betrayed: Atrocities, War, and the Failure of International Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

80 Interview with UN official, July 2023.

81 By 2023, more than half of Syria's population had been forcibly displaced, and over 6 million refugees were outside the country.

82 Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Friends' Group Reaffirmed Its Determination to Support the Just Cause of the Syrian People," April 1, 2012.

in meetings of the group, which the regime predictably identified as "enemies of Syria," fluctuated. Some 114 states attended a meeting in Marrakesh, Morocco, in December 2012, but in 2013, the group crystallized around a core "London 11" (including the P3, Egypt, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the UAE) after Brahimi recommended the group refocus itself to help counter the rampant fragmentation of the opposition.[83]

During the intense few months of his tenure, Annan worked to build consensus through a high-level action group composed of the P5, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Türkiye, the secretaries-general of the LAS and the UN, and the high representative of the EU for foreign affairs and security policy (the US and UK had blocked the participation of Iran, which led to the exclusion of Saudi Arabia as well).[84] This group met at the ministerial level in June 2012 and issued the Geneva Communiqué, which identified steps and measures to cease violence and initiate a political process, presented agreed principles, and put forward guidelines for a Syrian-led transition.[85] Efforts to secure the Security Council's endorsement, however, only exposed the depth of divisions: while the P3 wanted to strengthen the communiqué by integrating it into a resolution under Chapter VII of the UN Charter that would have authorized nonmilitary sanctions, Russia and China vetoed it. Annan resigned soon afterward, and violence in Syria rapidly accelerated.

It would take until September 2013 for the Security Council to finally endorse the Geneva Communiqué. But the Geneva II talks convened in early 2014 to carry it forward achieved little, and US-Russian relations deteriorated after Russia annexed Crimea that February. The following year, it was again an outside development—the agreement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran—that suggested the possibility of alignment on Syria. At an October 2015 meeting in Vienna with de Mistura, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov agreed to a new group, this time including Iran and Saudi Arabia, and committed to finding a way out of the Syrian morass. While their intention was to keep the group small, multiple states and organizations pressed to be part of it, and the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) and its Ceasefire Task Force ultimately came to comprise twenty-seven members. In 2016, the smaller Lausanne Format group was formed as essentially a core group of the larger ISSG.[86]

The effort brought new momentum to US-Russian military coordination on ceasefire discussions, counterterrorism, and humanitarian action. In December, Security Council Resolution 2254 acknowledged "the role of the ISSG as the central platform to facilitate the United Nations' efforts to achieve a lasting political settlement in Syria" and looked forward to the negotiation of a new Syrian constitution and free and fair elections. The resolution also specifically excluded all groups and entities associated with al-Qaida or the Islamic State, including the al-Nusra Front, HTS's antecedent, from any ceasefire, and thus from the political process.[87]

Negotiations between Russia and the US and meetings of the ISSG continued in 2016 but broke down after the fall of Aleppo that summer, the progressive abandonment of the opposition by Western and Arab states, and the transition between the administrations of President Obama and President Trump in the US. In January 2017, Russia convened the first meeting of what became known as the Astana process. Participants included Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, the three states with the most established military presence and interests in Syria, as well as representatives of the Syrian parties. The UN perceived the Astana process as an effort by its participants "to navigate the conflict not to a solution but a better place of conflict management" and faced a difficult decision

83 Bellamy, *Syria Betrayed*, pp. 56–57, 148.

84 Iraq was a member of the group as chair of the LAS Summit, Kuwait as chair of the LAS Council of Foreign Ministers, and Qatar as chair of the LAS Arab Follow-up Committee on Syria.

85 UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, "Final Communiqué of the Action Group for Syria (Geneva Communiqué)," annex to "Identical Letters Dated 5 July 2023 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council," UN Doc. A/66/865–S/2012/522, July 6, 2012.

86 Lesley Wroughton and Alexander Winning, "Syrian Talks in Lausanne End without Breakthrough," Reuters, October 15, 2016.

87 UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (December 18, 2015), UN Doc. S/RES/2254.

regarding its participation in the format.[88] Not wanting either to snub it or to provide it with full international legitimacy by joining as a fourth member, the UN opted to attend as observer. It also insisted that the Astana discussions be confined to a ceasefire and confidence-building mechanisms while discussions of the political process remained in Geneva.

This approach was an awkward fudge, however. It did not mask the challenge to the UN-led process, which would soon get bogged down in a painfully slow effort to establish a Constitutional Committee in Geneva that seemed increasingly remote from developments on the ground.[89] Nor did it disguise the marginalization of Arab states from discussions on the future of a major Arab country. Western states—sometimes with Arab countries, sometimes without them—coalesced into a new Small Group on Syria clearly opposed to Astana and supportive of the UN's efforts in Geneva. With the states in both the Astana process and the Small Group on Syria saying they sought to implement Resolution 2254, the UN was left to navigate between them; at one point, it urged the two groups to come together in one renewed contact group arrangement, but the differences between them were too profound.[90]

In December 2024, as the dramatic changes in Syria took hold, international actors moved quickly to try to craft a common position. On December 14th, an Arab Ministerial Contact Group on Syria, which had been formed by Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab League's secretary-general in May 2023 to welcome Syria—then still under Assad—back into the LAS, met in Aqaba, Jordan, with representatives of Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE and then with France, Germany, Türkiye, the UK, the US, the EU, and the UN. Together, they emphasized the validity of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process. This, they concluded, must "produce an inclusive, non-sectarian and representative government formed through a transparent process based on the principles of the UN Security Council Resolution 2254."[91] Days later, these sentiments were reaffirmed in a press statement unanimously agreed by the Security Council.[92] But there were signs this did not sit easy with the new authorities; HTS's leader Ahmed al-Sharaa told Pedersen that the 2015 resolution needed to be updated "to suit the new reality."[93]

In the early months of 2025, the situation in Syria was extremely fluid. The interim government established under al-Sharaa in January was caught in what the International Crisis Group described as a "delicate entr'acte" as it tried to address competing priorities, including the devastation wrought by years of civil war and persistent sectarian divisions amid a complex international environment.[94] The influence of Iran and Russia had fallen, but the regional rivalry between Israel and Türkiye had taken on new and dangerous dimensions in military operations on Syrian territory.[95] Meanwhile, Syria's interim authorities lacked confidence that sanctions would be lifted and the country would receive desperately needed economic support from international donors. As a result, they faced steep challenges in being able to deliver on the promised political transition and prevent a return to violence, instability, and the further fragmentation of the country.

The interim government's efforts to convene a rushed "national dialogue" to develop a new constitutional framework and reach out to other factions had mixed results. In early March, a violent clash between forces of the former and interim regimes across the coastal regions resulted in the massacre of civilians by both sides.[96] This was soon followed by the more positive news that the interim authorities had reached an agreement with the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) active in the northeast of the country for their eventual integra-

88 Interview with UN official, July 2023.

89 The committee was first proposed by Russia at the Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue it hosted in Sochi in January 2018. See: Lars Hausch, "Mixing Politics and Force: Syria's Constitutional Committee in Review," Clingendael, August 2020, p. 9.

90 Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, "Moving Forward: Geir O. Pedersen on Developments in Syria," Oslo Forum Interview, May 2019, p. 5.

91 US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Joint Statement on Syria," media note, December 14, 2024.

92 United Nations, "Security Council Press Statement on Syria," press release, UN Doc. SC/15943, December 17, 2024.

93 "UN Envoy Tells al-Jolani: Syria Must Have a 'Credible' Transition," Al Arabiya News, December 16, 2024.

94 International Crisis Group, "The New Syria: Halting a Dangerous Drift," March 28, 2025.

95 "Turkey and Israel Are Becoming Deadly Rivals in Syria," *The Economist*, April 7, 2025.

96 "United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen Briefing to the Security Council," March 25, 2025.

tion into Syrian institutions. On March 14th, the Security Council issued a presidential statement strongly condemning the earlier violence.[97] In late April, sectarian violence escalated once again, even as Israeli attacks continued to rain down upon the country. However, President Trump's announcement from Saudi Arabia in mid-May that the US would lift all sanctions on Syria opened new possibilities for the country's transition, and a realignment of international efforts to support it.

Yemen

Events in Yemen initially progressed quite differently from those in Libya and Syria. After President Ali Abdullah Saleh's government violently repressed peaceful demonstrations in March 2011, Saudi Arabia launched an initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to prevent escalation. This eventually included provisions for Saleh to step down at the end of the year, the presidency to be transferred to Vice President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and preparations for a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) to begin. Starting in April 2011, UN Special Adviser Jamal Benomar supported dialogue and preparations for the transition, his good offices affirmed by a Security Council resolution from October 2011.[98] He then played a leading role in helping to guide the NDC. In 2014, Yemen could be hailed as "the only site of an Arab Spring uprising that has ended in a negotiated agreement and a structured, internationally supported transition process."[99]

Different mediation initiatives, as well as the UN's preferences for more informal consultations, help to explain the absence of any stable group of friends or contact group designed to support a UN-led process in Yemen.

The transition, and the NDC in which it culminated, could not hold. They were not sufficiently inclusive of southern constituencies, and from mid-2014, violence escalated.[100] In September, Houthi rebels in the Ansar Allah movement (at the time loosely backed by Iran) and allied forces seized control of the capital, Sana'a, and other areas of the country. In March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition of ten states, most belonging to the GCC, launched a military intervention on behalf of the internationally recognized Hadi government. The humanitarian consequences for Yemen, already desperately poor and fragmented by political and tribal differences, have been devastating.[101]

In contrast to the UN's experience in Libya and Syria, successive UN envoys heading the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESGY) have been supported by a consensus within the Security Council. But the ability of these envoys to maintain the UN's impartiality has been challenged by both the framing resolution, Resolution 2216, and the actions of some of the Security Council's most powerful members; the US, the UK, and France, all close allies of and purveyors of arms to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, provided political and military support to the coalition. Shifting regional politics had been shaping diplomacy even before the regional upheaval precipitated by Hamas's attack on Israel of October 7, 2023, and Israel's response. As Iranian support for the Houthis deepened, first the UAE, which became a prime backer of anti-Houthi forces in the south of the country, and then Saudi Arabia began to realize that their interests lay in extricating themselves from the conflict.

Different mediation initiatives, as well as the UN's preferences for more informal consultations, help to explain the absence of any stable group of friends or contact group designed to support a UN-led process in Yemen. No such groups were established, even as a variety of groups sought to coordinate international engagement in the country.

The first of these, the Friends of Yemen, was formed in 2010 by the UK, the former colonial power in South Yemen and later the penholder on Yemen in the Security Council. The aim was to "help bolster international political support for

97 UN Security Council, *Statement by the President of the Security Council,* UN Doc. S/PRST/2025/4, March 14, 2025.

98 UN Security Council Resolution 2014 (October 21, 2011), UN Doc. S/RES/2014.

99 Steven A. Zyck, "Mediating Transition in Yemen: Achievements and Lessons," International Peace Institute, October 2014, p. 1.

100 Erica Gaston, "Process Lessons Learned in Yemen's National Dialogue," United States Institute of Peace, February 2014.

101 Helen Lackner, *Yemen: Poverty and Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2022).

Yemen and to assist Yemeni-led efforts to tackle the underlying causes of instability."[102] After a pause during the crisis of 2011, this large group of states and organizations met in capitals throughout Yemen's transition, usually at the ministerial level. On the ground, Benomar met regularly with a group of ten ambassadors (G10) from the P5, GCC states (except for Qatar), and the EU, which helped manage communication both within the GCC and between the US, UK, and Russia. The P5 ambassadors in Riyadh remained constructive interlocutors for the UN even after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 strained relations between them elsewhere. However, their interactions became more complex after the Houthis initiated maritime attacks in the Red Sea in late 2023.[103]

As Yemen slid into war, more states demanded to participate in the G10. While the group was less useful at eighteen or nineteen members, it served as a forum for the UN special envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, to provide briefings on his efforts to move forward the political process. These efforts included the convening of direct talks in Switzerland in 2015 and in Kuwait in 2016. The UN also began to explore the possibility of forming a smaller platform with the US and UK, hoping to encourage better collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Oman—which maintained communications with the Houthis—as well as between the US, the UK, and Saudi Arabia, including on economic initiatives. This group came to be known as the Quad. However, as Kenny Gluck, Cheikh Ahmed's deputy, recalled, an initial meeting of the Quad proved to be "an unmitigated disaster." By bad luck, it was called on the same day that the Houthis announced (in Oman) the formation of a new government and other measures that were seen as incompatible with the proposals under discussion at the talks in Kuwait.[104]

The Quad did not meet again in this format but reemerged later with the UAE replacing Oman. In this iteration, it thus represented the GCC coalition in Yemen and its most important external partners. After the collapse of the talks in Kuwait, the Quad met regularly in Riyadh, sometimes to address just economic issues, as well as more occasionally in capitals with a broader agenda. Both Cheikh Ahmed and Martin Griffiths, who succeeded him in early 2018, would brief Quad members in advance of their meetings but then withdraw. The Quad met once as a Quint (with Oman) in 2017. This format reemerged in 2022 as UN-led efforts to reach a ceasefire took shape, but the group met less frequently as talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis moved forward.[105]

The UN process was constrained by both Yemen's internal fragmentation and the competing strategic interests of the regional actors. In December 2018, Griffiths facilitated a partial accord, the Stockholm Agreement, between the government and the Houthis on the redeployment of forces away from the port city of Hodeidah. Hans Grundberg became special envoy in August 2021; the truce he announced in April 2022 contributed to a marked decline in violence across the country and provided a basis for the UN to work toward a nationwide ceasefire and an inclusive, Yemeni-led process. However, both these goals were beholden to the outcome of the separate negotiations now taking place between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, facilitated by Oman. The UN was only partially briefed on these talks, and key parties to the conflict, including the Presidential Leadership Council heading Yemen's internationally recognized government, were excluded from them entirely.[106]

In 2024, the regional dimensions of the Yemeni conflict became more complex as Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea and on Israel, meant to protest the latter's war on Hamas, provoked airstrikes by the US and the UK, as well as by Israel itself. The space for UN mediation shrank further in May 2024 as the Houthis arbitrarily detained some fifty humanitarian personnel from the UN and international and national NGOs, and intra-Yemeni peace and political processes ground to a halt. In early 2025,

102 UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "Friends of Yemen: Questions and Answers," February 1, 2013. See also: UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "Friends of Yemen: How Has It Performed and Where Is It Going?" December 2013.

103 Mutual recrimination in meetings of the Security Council saw the US alleging that Russia was considering transferring weapons to the Houthis and Russia criticizing the retaliatory strikes by the US and UK on the Houthis. Security Council Report, "January 2025 Monthly Forecast: Yemen," December 30, 2024.

104 Email correspondence with Kenny Gluck, January 22, 2024.

105 High-level meetings of the Quint took place in March 2017 and January 2022 (in London) and in July 2022 (virtually).

106 International Crisis Group, "Catching Up on the Back-Channel Peace Talks in Yemen," October 10, 2023.

the Trump administration redesignated the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization, and in March, the US launched extensive airstrikes on Houthi targets in Yemen. The cessation of hostilities between the US and the Houthis in early May, facilitated by Oman, represented a welcome de-escalation. But the path back to a peace process would not be easy.[107]

Cooperation on Peace Processes with Broad International Support

The architecture of international cooperation, whether in groups or outside them, has been less complicated—although never easy—in peace processes that count on broad regional and international support. These have included peace processes in the Philippines, Colombia, and Mozambique. The structures adopted, however, have varied greatly in accordance with the needs and preferences identified by the conflict parties. As the anomalous case of the negotiations to address the political crisis in Venezuela illustrates, deep international divisions do not necessarily prevent the creation of group structures. However, they shape both their composition and their potential utility.

> The hybrid composition of the International Contact Group in the Philippines reflected the parties' desire to draw on recognized expertise and to include both Western and Muslim participants.

The negotiations between the government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) were facilitated by Malaysia and supported by an innovative International Contact Group composed of a mix of states and international NGOs. In Colombia, the government embarked on direct negotiations with insurgents in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and, from 2023, other armed groups embraced within the framework of President Gustavo Petro's ambitious policy of "total peace." While there were no groups of friends or contact groups, "guarantor" and "accompanying" states and institutions provided clearly delineated support. In contrast, international divisions around Venezuela resulted in a variety of group structures at some remove from negotiations (facilitated by Norway) between the government of Nicolás Maduro and the opposition. In Mozambique, the relatively contained process to agree and implement the 2019 Maputo Accord between the government and the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) drew strong support from both an in-country contact group and a separate donor support group.

Philippines

International involvement in the peace process between the government of the Philippines and the MILF grew as the process encountered increasing difficulties. Major outbreaks of violence in 2000, 2003, and 2008 were followed by the parties' agreement to negotiate outside the country under the facilitation of Malaysia in 2001; to establish an unarmed International Monitoring Team (IMT) to observe the ceasefire in 2004; and—after the Supreme Court dismissed a carefully negotiated Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain in 2008—to expand the IMT and to create an International Contact Group composed of both states and international NGOs, the first example of a hybrid group.[108]

The composition of the International Contact Group reflected the parties' desire to draw on recognized expertise and to include both Western and Muslim participants. It also demonstrated the government's reluctance to include either big powers or multilateral organizations; Australia, the US, the UN, the EU, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) were all out on this basis. Japan, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the UK were the four state members of the group, alongside the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (which informally coordinated the group), the Asia Foundation, Conciliation Resources, and the Indonesian organization Muhammadiyah. An agreement among the group's members gave it a flexible mandate that spanned support for negotia-

107 United Nations, "Note to Correspondents: On the Recent Developments in Yemen," March 17, 2025.

108 Conciliation Resources, "Innovation in Mediation Support: The International Contact Group in Mindanao," July 2013.

tion and a continuing role "in ensuring the successful implementation of signed agreements."[109]

The International Contact Group engaged with the parties during and between the talks, proving its utility through problem solving and technical expertise as the parties worked toward a Framework Agreement in 2012 and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014. From the beginning, it was assumed that the NGOs would interact more easily with the MILF than the governments and bring different competencies to the table. As Mohagher Iqbal, chair of the MILF peace panel, later put it, "Governments are so very restrained."[110] The governments accepted this arrangement as natural. Saudi Arabia and Türkiye—both less interested in peace mediation than they would later become—for the most part engaged only formally, while both Japan, a major donor to the Philippines, and the UK attended the rounds of negotiations held in Kuala Lumpur. The UK drew on its experience with the Northern Ireland conflict and made good use of its close bilateral relations with Malaysia, which the Philippine government had long considered less than impartial as a facilitator. The NGOs contributed mediation and peacebuilding expertise not necessarily available within the governments, as well as outreach to civil society.

The International Contact Group was formally recognized in the Bangsamoro Agreement. During the agreement's implementation, the group has continued to engage alongside an evolving number of dialogue and monitoring mechanisms that included a range of states and international and domestic NGOs.[111]

Colombia

Secret talks and more public negotiations in Colombia took place over six years, ending in the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government headed by President Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC. The negotiations were characterized by thorough preparation and robust process design.[112] They were able to draw on essential support from the region, which was united in seeing only benefits to the successful resolution of an internal conflict that had plagued Colombia for more than half a century. Guided by the determination that the process would be "for Colombians, by Colombians," the negotiations had no external mediator.[113] However, the parties agreed early on that two countries would serve as "guarantors": Norway, which brought resources, experience, and the trust of the government as well as of the US (a critical external actor in the conflict); and Cuba, which had historic ties to the FARC, close relations with neighboring Venezuela, and deep experience of its own. Chile and Venezuela had a distinct role as "accompanying" states; unlike Cuba and Norway, they were not permanently present during negotiations in Havana but usually attended their concluding sessions.

Negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC were able to draw on essential support from the region, which was united in seeing only benefits to the successful resolution of an internal conflict that had plagued the country for more than half a century.

As the process progressed, Cuba and Norway provided flexible support, including logistics and capacity building, but also troubleshooting and mediation initiatives when needed. Their steadfast role anchored growing international engagement, including the appointment of dedicated envoys from the US and the EU and the gradual engage-

109 "Framework Agreement on the Formation of the International Contact Group for the GRP-MILF Peace Process," September 15, 2009.

110 Interview with Mohagher Iqbal, February 2013.

111 "The Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro," March 27, 2014. See also: Maria Carmen (Ica) Fernandez, "Hybrid Mediation and Dialogue Mechanisms in the Implementation of Peace Deals: Lessons from Bangsamoro, Philippines," paper presented at the Wilton Park "Collaborative Conflict Resolution in a Competitive Age" conference, February 12–14, 2024.

112 Dag Nylander, Rita Sandberg, and Idun Tvedt, "Designing Peace: The Colombian Peace Process," NOREF Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution, February 2018, p. 1.

113 Renata Segura and Delphine Mechoulan, "Made in Havana: How Colombia and the FARC Decided to End the War," International Peace Institute, February 2017, p. 1.

ment of the UN, which later deployed a mission to Colombia to monitor critical elements of the agreement's implementation. The clarity of this architecture and the coherent support it delivered contributed to the government's conviction that a group of friends or contact group was not needed and would risk complicating the management of its international partners.[114]

When formal talks with the ELN, Colombia's second largest insurgent group, began in mid-2016, it was already clear that they would look distinct from those with the FARC. Five regional states—Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, and Venezuela—agreed to serve as both guarantors and hosts of rotating rounds of negotiations, while Norway again was a guarantor. The negotiations eventually broke down under Santos's successor, but when the government of President Gustavo Petro returned to them in late 2022, this basic structure was retained. Mexico was added as a guarantor in place of Ecuador; the UN and the Catholic Church became "permanent accompaniers," and four European states were recognized as the Group of Accompanying, Support and Cooperation Countries (GPAAC) in the Mexico Agreement reached with the ELN on March 10, 2023.[115]

Similar arrangements, with different participants, were agreed upon as separate talks began under the overall umbrella of Petro's ambitious policy of "total peace" (*paz total*). This policy aimed to address the fragmentation of violence in Colombia through simultaneous dialogues with all armed groups and criminal structures in the country. The dialogues proceeded with differing rhythms and impacts, achieving a number of temporary ceasefires and other partial agreements. They also faced considerable challenges, however, including an escalation of conflicts between the different armed groups, their continuing fragmentation, and a more complex regional environment, especially after the disputed election in Venezuela in July 2024 and Trump's return to power in the US in January 2025.[116]

These processes received varying levels of support from external actors. Negotiations between the government and FARC dissidents in the Estado Mayor Central (EMC) began in October 2023 with the support of the Catholic Church, the OAS Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia, the UN, and the World Council of Churches as "permanent accompaniers" and Ireland, Norway, Switzerland, and Venezuela as guarantors.[117] Negotiations between the government and another FARC dissident group, the Segunda Marquetalia–Ejército Bolivariano, began in June 2024 and had the Catholic Church and the UN as "accompaniers" and Cuba, Norway, and Venezuela as guarantors.[118] Meanwhile, the national and international "accompaniers" of the talks with the Comuneros del Sur, a former "front" of the ELN that splintered from the larger organization in mid-2024, were the Catholic Church, the Embassy of the Netherlands, and the OAS Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia.[119]

These support structures responded to the government's desire for logistical and other support and the desire of the ELN and the other armed groups to bring international attention to the processes. They also reflected the interest of these external actors in contributing to the peacemaking efforts.[120] The architecture was complicated and crowded, yet all involved hoped to support the efforts toward peace along pathways set out by the conflict parties themselves. Moreover, the guarantors and accompaniers recognized that they came with a mix of competencies and resources. For example,

114 Interview with Sergio Jaramillo, February 2024.

115 UN Security Council, "Annex to the Letter Dated 27 April 2023 from the Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council," UN Doc. S/2023/299, May 4, 2023.

116 Elizabeth Dickinson, "How to Get Colombia's Peace Process Back on Track," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1, 2024; Laura Bonilla and Francisco Daza, "¿Plomo es lo que viene? Balance y retos de la política de paz total, 2022–2024," Pares, La Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, 2024.

117 "Acuerdo sobre el componente internacional y de acompañamiento a la mesa de diálogos de paz," October 16, 2023. After an internal division, the EMC was renamed the Estado Mayor de los Bloques y Frentes (EMBF) in April 2024.

118 All external actors were originally described as "observers." "Acuerdo para el inicio formal de la Mesa de Diálogos de Paz entre el Gobierno Nacional de Colombia y la Segunda Marquetalia—Ejército Bolivariano," June 5, 2024. In November 2024, a division in the armed group led it to be renamed the Coordinadora Nacional Ejército Bolivariano (CNEB), at which point Cuba ceased to be a guarantor; Switzerland was invited to serve as a guarantor in early 2025.

119 "Comunicado conjunto, instancia para la co-construcción de paz territorial en Nariño," July 19, 2024. Although not present at this first meeting, the Netherlands joined the process as an "accompanier" soon afterwards.

120 This paragraph draws on the author's interviews with international actors and a member of the government's Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, Bogotá, November 2023 and further conversations in Bogotá in March 2025.

the moral authority and reach of the Catholic Church was balanced by the experience and logistical capabilities of the UN and the OAS, while the European states brought resources and their own experience with peace support. Clearly distinct were the political contributions made by Cuba and Venezuela—the latter an essential but not uncomplicated partner for Colombia given the presence of some of the armed groups on its national territory.

In the ELN process, questions arose around the role of the GPAAC states, which were perceived as seeking to have more political engagement than the parties or guarantors believed there was space for. These concerns were eased somewhat when it was agreed in late 2023 that only one of them should attend each round of talks. However, the process broke down in early 2025 after the ELN launched a military offensive against other armed groups in Catatumbo, near the border with Venezuela, leading to an explosion of violence, including the deaths of at least 80 people and the displacement of more than 55,000.[121]

Venezuela, whose spiraling political, economic, and humanitarian crisis has had extraordinarily divisive international repercussions, offers a contrast to Colombia.

Venezuela and Global Divisions

Venezuela, whose spiraling political, economic, and humanitarian crisis has had extraordinarily divisive international repercussions, offers a contrast to Colombia. The "global rift" on Venezuela was rooted in ideological differences over the direction taken by the country's leaders but fueled by its resource wealth, the scale of its migrant and refugee crisis, and policies pursued by the first Trump administration.[122] This rift significantly complicated efforts to resolve the internal disputes between the governments of Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) and his successor Maduro and the fractious ecosystem of political parties and others that opposed them. Diverse groups convened to try to address the crisis, while discussions on forming a group of friends swirled around the on-again, off-again talks between the government and the opposition, which Norway had facilitated since May 2019.

The clear stance against Maduro taken by the OAS, and notably by its secretary general, Luis Almagro, had contributed to Venezuela's decision to withdraw from the organization in 2017. This invalidated any formal regional effort to address the crisis. In August 2017, a dozen OAS member states—Canada and eleven countries from Latin America—met in Lima to constitute themselves as a group determined "to explore ways to contribute to the restoration of democracy" in Venezuela.[123] Tensions escalated after the contested presidential elections of 2018. The US backed the opposition-dominated National Assembly in recognizing the "interim presidency" of Juan Guaidó, and President Trump promised to use "the full weight of US economic and diplomatic power to press for the restoration of Venezuelan democracy."[124] Some sixty other states followed suit in recognizing Guaidó. In the meantime, Maduro's supporters, including Russia, China, Iran, Türkiye, and regional allies such as Cuba, offered assistance to counter the mounting impacts of US financial sanctions and US policy more broadly. After its formation in 2021, Venezuela played an active role in the Group of Friends of the UN Charter, which took a strong stand against "the imposition of unilateral coercive measures."[125]

While many European states rushed to recognize Guaidó, the EU backed the creation of an International Contact Group. The group met for

121 Human Rights Watch, "Colombia: Armed Groups Batter Border Region," March 26, 2025.

122 International Crisis Group, "Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela," February 17, 2022. Concerning the refugee crisis, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported that between 2014 and April 2024, more than 7.7 million Venezuelans had left the country. UNHCR, "Venezuela Humanitarian Crisis," available at https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/venezuela/.

123 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, "Declaración de Lima," August 8, 2017.

124 White House, "Statement from President Donald J. Trump Recognizing Venezuelan National Assembly President Juan Guaidó as the Interim President of Venezuela," January 23, 2019.

125 "Concept Note for the 'Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations,'" March 10, 2021, attached to a letter to member states from the permanent representatives to the UN of Algeria, Angola, Belarus, Bolivia, Cambodia, China, Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Laos, Nicaragua, Palestine, Russia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Syria, and Venezuela.

the first time in Montevideo, Uruguay, in early 2019 and brought together European and Latin American states committed to a negotiated solution and increased humanitarian assistance.[126] However, its influence was necessarily limited by the government's perception of it as "biased, neo-colonial and part of the pressure campaign against" the government, as one diplomat involved in efforts to address the crisis put it.[127]

Between May and August 2019, talks between the delegations of Maduro and Guaidó commenced, facilitated by Norway. Although the talks faltered, the process found broad support from a diverse set of states, including Russia, as well as other actors such as the UN and the Vatican, which met periodically in Stockholm and then virtually. This grouping, known as the Stockholm format, worked to align its positions behind the principles that any solution should be led by Venezuela and backed by global support. Negotiations resumed in August 2021 in Mexico City. An agreed memorandum of understanding stated that Russia and the Netherlands would accompany the process and that the facilitator (Norway) would invite states to join a group of friends and announce its composition.[128]

Some international observers of Venezuela had long recommended the formation of a group of friends. However, agreement on its composition proved elusive.[129] The two parties predictably proposed states closely allied to their own positions, while others pressed their own case for inclusion, and in the end the parties agreed to put the idea aside. As the negotiations faced problems again in late 2022, formal meetings went into abeyance, but diplomatic efforts continued behind the scenes, including direct talks between the Maduro government and the US in Qatar. These talks helped pave the way for an agreement reached in Barbados on October 17, 2023, stating that the government and opposition parties would introduce electoral reforms ahead of presidential elections due in 2024.[130] The US announced the following day that it would lift a number of sanctions against the Venezuelan government.

Maduro's failure to meet his electoral commitments led the US to reimpose some sanctions in April 2024. However, Maduro's backsliding did not deter the opposition. After Maduro blocked the participation of opposition leader María Corina Machado, coalesced around the relatively unknown candidate Edmundo González and developed systems to record the votes cast on election day, July 28, 2024. These demonstrated that the victory quickly claimed by Maduro was overtly fraudulent.[131] The opposition took to the streets in nonviolent protest, but the international response was, predictably, weakened by divisions. The US and many European and Latin American countries immediately stated that they would not recognize the results, while long-time Maduro supporters, including Cuba, Iran, Nicaragua, and Russia, rushed to endorse Maduro's victory. Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, all led by left-leaning governments, offered mediation and requested "impartial verification of the [electoral] results," but their effort soon subsided.[132] Buttressed by the government-controlled Supreme Court's ratification of his claim to victory on August 22nd, and supported by military and security forces inside the country and international allies outside it, Maduro dug in. He was inaugurated on January 10, 2025, while González went into exile in Spain.

Mozambique

Over many years, the incomplete implementation of the 1992 General Peace Agreement between the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and the opposition Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) had contributed to

126 Malena Castaldi, "EU-Backed Group Backs 'Good Faith' Plan to Avoid Venezuelan Chaos," Reuters, February 7, 2019.

127 Interview with diplomat, June 2024.

128 "Memorando de entendimiento," August 13, 2001, available at https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/d62443bc624041238af2902d356f949c/memorando-de-entendimiento.pdf.

129 Geoff Ramsey and David Smilde, "Focused Pressure and Smart Engagement: How the U.S. Government Can Advance a Negotiated, Non-Violent Solution to Venezuela's Crisis," Washington Office on Latin America, January 2019; Chatham House, "Reinvigorating Negotiations in Venezuela: Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations," May 11, 2023.

130 International Crisis Group, "Venezuela: The Perilous Path to a Key Election," January 30, 2024.

131 Greg Howell, "Maduro Stole the Elections Again: The Response to Fraud in Venezuela," USAID, September 20, 2024.

132 Eduardo Castillo and Regina Garcia Cano, "Brazil, Colombia and Mexico in Talks with Venezuelan Government and Opposition on Election Crisis," Associated Press, August 5, 2024; Oliver Stuenkel, "Maduro's Resolution Reflects the West's Limited Influence in Venezuela," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 20, 2024.

tensions and sometimes clashes between the two parties. Efforts were made to negotiate a new accord, first through a nationally led process between 2013 and 2015, and then with external mediation.[133]

International support began in 2013 with the engagement of the Global Leadership Foundation, led by former Botswanan President Ketumile Masire and former US diplomat Chester Crocker. By 2016, what became known as the Avenida process had mushroomed into an unwieldy grouping of some fourteen international actors (chosen by each of the parties) interacting with twelve national party representatives in a joint committee. The complexity of this structure contributed to the principals' decision to move toward a more streamlined process.[134] In December 2016, President Filipe Nyusi and Afonso Dhlakama, the leader of RENAMO, began direct negotiations facilitated by the Swiss Ambassador Mirko Manzoni, international nongovernmental mediators, and a national mediator.[135] In August 2019, the talks concluded with the signature of the Maputo Accord for Peace and Reconciliation. Manzoni was by that time personal envoy of the UN secretary-general, and in this role he led UN support for a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), which was successfully completed in mid-2023.[136]

The peace process had several factors in its favor, including the political commitment of the two principals, the relatively small scale of the DDR required (some 5,200 former combatants), and the readiness of all involved to approach it with generosity and imagination (including, for example, the government's agreement in March 2023 to extend pensions to DDR beneficiaries). There was also, as Manzoni observed, "no international opposition to peace in Mozambique."[137] In this generally propitious environment, the parties and facilitation team made adroit use of both a contact group—formed early in the process on Manzoni's initiative to support the negotiations and formally disbanded at its end—and a separate donor group.

The contact group worked to keep the Maputo-based international community united and to provide targeted support to the process as it moved forward. As in other instances, negotiation of its composition was delicate; the government had begun with a wish list of two to three countries, while RENAMO brought forward twenty-one. In the end, the principals selected a group that included the ambassadors of Botswana, China, Norway, Switzerland, the UK, the US, and the EU. The inclusion of Botswana facilitated direct engagement with an informal group of Maputo-based African ambassadors. Manzoni chaired the group throughout, and due at least in part to his influence, the group's functional relationship to the peace process was analogous to that of some past groups of friends. Separately, in 2020, Manzoni encouraged the creation of a distinct donor coordination group composed of all donors providing financial support to the peace process and chaired by the Canadian high commissioner. Together, the two mechanisms were able to provide strategic and financial support to a process that both geography and the parties' priorities kept insulated from external pressure, including the Islamist insurgency destabilizing Cabo Delgado, Mozambique's northernmost province, during this same period.

The contact group in Mozambique worked to keep the Maputo-based international community united and to provide targeted support to the process as it moved forward.

Myanmar and Afghanistan: Friends in Hard Places

Myanmar and Afghanistan have little in common apart from their long histories of conflict and instability. In recent years, they have especially

133 Alex Vine, "Prospects for a Sustainable Elite Bargain in Mozambique: Third Time Lucky?" Chatham House, August 5, 2019.

134 This point was suggested to the author by Chester Crocker, who reviewed a draft of this report.

135 Mediators included Jonathan Powell of Inter Mediate, Neha Sanghrajka of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (who worked closely with Manzoni throughout the process), and Eduardo Namburete, a RENAMO parliamentarian.

136 Mirko Manzoni, "Mozambique Embraces Dialogue for Lasting Peace," Africa Renewal, May 4, 2023.

137 Interview with Mirko Manzoni and Neha Sanghrajka, July 2023. For more on the Mozambique process, see: Catherine Turner and Julia Palmiano Federer,

differed in the form taken by international involvement. Since dramatic events in both countries in 2021, however, they have both been governed by authorities unrecognized by the UN or its member states as legitimate. On February 1st, a military coup in Myanmar swept aside the civilian government, and with it a decade of hopes raised by the country's remarkable progression away from military rule. In August, the Taliban seized power in Kabul after the collapse of the Afghan army and government, a stunning humiliation that capped two decades of US-led efforts to wage war in and support the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Over many years, a variety of mechanisms had been formed to support the UN's fragile good offices mandate in Myanmar and to foster international engagement on Afghanistan. Since 2021, regional and geopolitical divisions have so far prevented the emergence of structures such as a unified group of friends or contact group in either case.

Myanmar

Sandwiched between China and India, Myanmar is in a region that has long been sensitive to international intervention. The UN's somewhat tenuous good offices mandate is derived from an annual resolution of the General Assembly that was first adopted in 1991 to call on the military authorities to improve the human rights situation and establish democracy. Over the course of three decades, successive envoys worked to support a return to democracy, call for the reintegration of ethnic minorities (ethnic insurgencies have been ongoing in Myanmar since 1948), and address human rights and humanitarian issues.[138] In the early years of UN engagement, envoys encouraged the formation of groups of member states in New York to support their efforts. The groups' composition was a constant concern due to persistent divides between states like-minded in their pursuit of a return to democracy in Myanmar and others such as China that were unhappy with what they saw as intervention associated with the UN's ambitions.[139]

After a gradual ratcheting up of attention, the UK and the US succeeded in placing Myanmar on the agenda of the Security Council in September 2006. However, both China and Russia vetoed a draft resolution the following January, exposing serious differences among council members. (The first and to date only Security Council resolution on Myanmar, Resolution 2669, demanding an immediate end to all violence in the country, was not adopted until December 2022 after months of careful diplomacy.) The Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar was formed in late 2007 and included the P5 as well as four members of ASEAN, itself consistently wary about the role of the UN in its neighborhood. The opening of contacts between the authorities and Suu Kyi, followed by Cyclone Nargis in late April 2008, deepened the possibilities for international engagement. The group, although not operational, was "frequently able to hammer out something approaching an international consensus on the objectives of the [UN's] good offices."[140]

Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 2010, and in 2012 she won a seat in parliament. In 2014, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon reconfigured the group of friends as the Partnership Group on Myanmar, which also included Myanmar's ruling authorities. This group met regularly until September 2016, when he proposed winding down the forum due to the progress it had made and pressure for what he referred to as "the normalization of the country's engagement with the international community."[141] At the same time, the General Assembly decided to discontinue its annual Myanmar resolution. When the crisis in Rakhine state exploded in August 2017, and a crackdown by Myanmar's military forced more than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee to Bangladesh, both decisions looked premature. A new General Assembly resolution that December again sought to engage the good offices of the secretary-general and have him appoint a special envoy.[142]

As the Rohingya crisis unfolded, the Security

138 Anna Magnussen and Morten B. Pedersen, *A Good Office? Twenty Years of UN Mediation in Myanmar* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2012), p. 1.

139 Whitfield, *Friends Indeed*, pp. 225–226.

140 Magnussen and Pedersen, *A Good Office*, p. 60.

141 Ban Ki-moon, "Secretary-General's Remarks at a Meeting of the Partnership Group on Myanmar," September 23, 2016.

142 UN General Assembly Resolution 72/428 (January 23, 2018), UN Doc. A/RES/72/248.

Council met to hear briefings from UN officials, but its members' positions were far apart.[143] Outside the council, Canada convened an Informal Working Group of interested states (including Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia, as well as Saudi Arabia and the OIC) to provide a platform for discussing Myanmar. Liechtenstein coordinated the formation of a smaller and more heavily Western-leaning Core Group in 2021 to advance a General Assembly resolution condemning the February coup.[144]

Beyond these fora in New York, Western states tacitly recognized their impotence in the face of the dramatic developments in Myanmar after 2021. These developments included the February 2021 coup and mass protests against it; the brutal tactics adopted by the military in response and the armed resistance these engendered; the progressive escalation of violence across Myanmar in the following years; and the advances made by ethnic armed groups beginning in the latter half of 2023. China, which had worked well with Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) government, was not happy with the coup and quietly pushed for a return to the constitutional order. It has since re-engaged with the regime while indicating that it would not go so far as to normalize relations with it.[145] Russia supports China in the Security Council on Myanmar. However, especially after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it offered the regime unstinting support and a continuous flow of advanced weapons. In return, Myanmar positioned itself "as Russia's most uncritical post-invasion partner in Asia."[146]

In this complex terrain, the West introduced a raft of sanctions and expressed support for ASEAN as leader of the international response. ASEAN was able to adopt a "five-point consensus" on Myanmar, calling for dialogue, an immediate cessation of hostilities, and the appointment of an envoy.[147] In practice, however, it could make little headway—especially after 2023, when its members began diverging on the question of engagement with the junta.[148]

> Divisions within ASEAN, China's security interests, and the intersection of the geopolitics around Myanmar with global polarization complicated the formation of a group of friends that could lead or drive real change.

Different states and entities considered the creation of a group of friends on Myanmar, and the UK, as the penholder on the file in the council, was particularly active behind the scenes (it circulated a new draft Security Council resolution on Myanmar in August 2024).[149] As the International Crisis Group suggested in March 2025, the complexity of China's position suggests that "there is room for different actors to work together on improving outcomes in Myanmar."[150] However, to date divisions within ASEAN, China's bottom-line security interests, and the intersection of the geopolitics around Myanmar with global polarization have complicated both formal action by the Security Council and the formation of a group that could lead or drive real change.

Afghanistan

The UN first encouraged the formation of "a solid international framework" to address the conflict in Afghanistan in 1997.[151] The Taliban were in control of much of the country, and their conflict with the Northern Alliance was fueled by regional trade in arms and drugs and by political and military support from Pakistan, Iran, and Russia. Lakhdar Brahimi, newly appointed as the UN special envoy

143 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Myanmar: 'Possible War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity Ongoing in Rakhine and Chin States'—UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee," press release, April 29, 2020.

144 UN General Assembly, *Draft Resolution on the Situation in Myanmar*, UN Doc. A/75/L.85/Rev.1, June 14, 2021.

145 International Crisis Group, "Scam Centres and Ceasefires: China-Myanmar Ties Since the Coup,", March 27, 2025, pp. 6–7.

146 International Crisis Group, "Coming to Terms with Myanmar's Russia Embrace," August 4, 2022

147 ASEAN Secretariat, "Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting," April 24, 2021.

148 Brian Harding and Jason Tower, "Myanmar's Crisis Looms Over the ASEAN Summit," United States Institute of Peace, September 7, 2023.

149 As of April 2025, some members of the Security Council supported the resolution and greater council engagement on Myanmar, but the resolution was opposed by China, with backing from Russia. Security Council Report, "Myanmar: Private Meeting," April 30, 2025.

150 International Crisis Group, "Scam Centres and Ceasefires," p. 20.

151 UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for Peace and Security*, UN Doc. A/52/682–S/1997/894, November 14, 1987, para. 45.

on Afghanistan, met regularly with a group he convened as the "six plus two"—Afghanistan's six neighbors plus Russia and the US—in the hope that they might agree to curb arms flows and address regional differences. Yet he resigned in 1999, citing "bitter disappointment" with the mechanism.[152]

After 9/11, a couple of factors militated against the formation of an engaged group of friends, specifically the dominant role of the US in Afghanistan and the number and diversity of other states involved. Other structures mushroomed. A Friends of Afghanistan group, convened by Canada, met regularly in New York in parallel to an International Contact Group that was established in 2009 under the auspices of Germany. Growing to more than fifty member states and organizations, it met in different countries to discuss efforts toward peace, security, stability, and development even as many of its members came to consider it too unwieldy to be effective.[153]

In 2019, a group of women UN ambassadors in New York, including the ambassador of Afghanistan at the time, formed a Friends of Women in Afghanistan group. Another group with a broader scope was the Heart of Asia–Istanbul Process, launched by the governments of Türkiye and Afghanistan in 2011 to promote regional security and cooperation.[154] Like the International Contact Group, it ceased to exist after the Taliban's takeover. A "Moscow Format" of consultations on Afghanistan had also been launched by Russia in 2017, bringing together representatives of Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and other regional actors. The consultations originally focused on counternarcotics and counterterrorism but later developed into a platform to advance peace efforts from a geopolitical perspective opposed to a US or Western security presence. Meetings continued following the Taliban takeover, with the Taliban authorities in attendance.[155]

US policy toward Afghanistan dramatically shifted in 2018 after President Trump appointed former US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as special envoy to Afghanistan and charged him with negotiating with the Taliban to enable a US withdrawal. Direct US engagement with the Taliban in Qatar, without the presence of the Afghan government, shifted into formal bilateral negotiations in early 2019 and concluded in the Doha Agreement of February 29, 2020. In addition to specifying the conditions for US withdrawal, the agreement was designed to pave the way for intra-Afghan negotiations between the government and the Taliban.[156]

Khalilzad took steps to strengthen international support for the process, although NATO partners grumbled about a lack of adequate consultation, and the steps taken were in some respects cosmetic; they were primarily designed to demonstrate to both the Afghan government and the Taliban that the US was acting with broad support.[157] The US asked the UN to reconvene the "six plus two" for a virtual meeting in May 2020 (the UN insisted on the participation of the Afghan government, which complained vociferously about Pakistan's inclusion). It also attempted to form a small Host Country Support Group consisting of states that Khalilzad had "half-promised" could host talks (Germany, Indonesia, Norway, and Uzbekistan). Objections from both Qatar, the actual host of the talks, and regional powers (including China, India, Pakistan, and Türkiye) led this initiative to be dropped.[158] The US instead engaged more regularly with a Troika/Troika Plus format of China, Russia, and sometimes Pakistan (there was an attempt to extend this group to Iran, but the latter would agree to meet with the US only in a format convened by the UN). Troika meetings took place in parallel to US meetings with a like-minded group of European special envoys. They were characterized by perhaps surprisingly constructive engagement as, despite their geopolitical differences, the three global powers were basically aligned on the goal of an

152 United Nations, "Briefing by Special Envoy to Afghanistan," press briefing, October 20, 1999.

153 See, for example: United Nations, "Press Conference on Meeting of International Contact Group," September 20, 2013. A UN official interviewed by the author in July 2023 expressed a similar point of view.

154 See the Heart of Asia–Istanbul Process website at https://www.hoa.gov.af/.

155 Nilofar Sakhi, "Reflection on the 2022 Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan and Regional Security," Atlantic Council, November 17, 2022.

156 Steve Brooking, "Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan? Opportunities and Obstacles, 2001–2021," United States Institute of Peace, August 2022.

157 Interview with US official, November 2023.

158 Brooking, "Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach," p. 23.

orderly US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The Taliban's rapid consolidation of power after August 2021 put an end to any hope of an orderly withdrawal and created profound dilemmas over the question of engagement with the unrecognized "de facto" authorities. International actors could not easily balance their aims in Afghanistan: they sought to push for a more inclusive government and push back against the Taliban's increasing repression of women and girls and civil society (including through sanctions, cuts in aid budgets, and many countries' refusal to engage with the Taliban). Yet they also sought to respond to the humanitarian need of the Afghan population and to advance other interests, such as counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and regional trade and integration.[159] These issues would play out around discussions on the annual renewal of the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). In March 2023, the Security Council requested the secretary-general to commission an "independent assessment" to develop recommendations on "an integrated and coherent approach" to address the many challenges facing Afghanistan.[160]

The Taliban's rapid consolidation of power after August 2021 created profound dilemmas over the question of engagement with Afghanistan's unrecognized "de facto" authorities.

Feridun Sinirlioğlu, a former foreign minister of Türkiye, was appointed to lead the assessment—a strategic choice in that Türkiye represented one of the few states that could bridge the increasingly stark divisions between the West, on the one hand, and neighboring countries and Russia, on the other.[161] The growing engagement of the latter was evident in the Taliban's attendance of forums such the Moscow Format, a new series of meetings of the foreign ministers of neighboring countries and Russia convened by China and Pakistan, and a revived Contact Group on Afghanistan within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.[162] In a diplomatic environment disrupted by divisions between the West and Russia over Ukraine, as well as the breakdown in relations between the US and Iran, the one format in which all interested states were able to meet was that of the meetings of special envoys to Afghanistan first hosted by the UN secretary-general in Doha in May 2023.

The independent assessment submitted to the council in November 2023 looked forward to a roadmap for political engagement to reintegrate Afghanistan into the international community as well as "an engagement architecture" to guide it.[163] The report proposed three mechanisms: a "large group format" composed of the special envoys who had attended the Doha meeting, a "smaller contact group" selected from the Doha group, and a new UN special envoy to focus on diplomacy between Afghanistan and international stakeholders and advance intra-Afghan dialogue.

Although no proposals on the contact group were spelled out, the recommendation reportedly drew on a proposal Uzbekistan first made in October 2022 and raised again at the May 2023 Doha meeting.[164] Russia's response that no countries involved in the destruction of Afghanistan over the last twenty years should be involved encapsulated the potential challenges in identifying a smaller contact group.[165] The US and other Western states welcomed the idea of a smaller group that would allow them to forge consensus with states that had become increasingly difficult to engage with, even as they acknowledged the difficulties in defining its membership; others appeared to prefer engagement with the Taliban without the tutelage of the West. In late December 2023, the Security Council adopted a resolution that "took positive note" of the independent assessment and requested the secretary-general to

159 Kate Clark, "The May 2023 Doha Meeting: How Should the Outside World Deal with the Taleban?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, April 30, 2023.

160 UN Security Council Resolution 2679 (March 16, 2023), UN Doc. S/RES/2679.

161 1nternational Crisis Group, "The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy with Afghanistan," January 30, 2024.

162 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Kazan Declaration of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan," September 29, 2023; Interview with UN official, February 2, 2024.

163 UN Security Council, *Report of the Independent Assessment Pursuant to Security Council 2679 (2023)*, UN Doc. S/2023/856, November 9, 2023.

164 Nazir Shinwari, "Uzbekistan President Suggests Forming Intl Group to Coordinate with Kabul," *Tolo News*, October 13, 2022.

165 Interview with official present at Doha envoys meeting, July 2023.

appoint a special envoy pending further consultations—a critical requirement for China and Russia, which abstained from the resolution on the understanding that the Taliban were opposed to a new envoy and that the proposal would therefore not fly.[166]

The UN's second Doha meeting was held in February 2024. It was attended by envoys from twenty-five countries and regional organizations, representatives of civil society, and Afghan women's groups, but not, in the end, by the Taliban authorities.[167] The meeting revealed full agreement on the shared goal of an Afghanistan at peace with itself and its neighbors. However, it also exposed broad differences on the engagement and recognition demanded by the Taliban, on the one hand, and the lack of progress on fundamental concerns to some in the international community, especially the treatment of women and girls, on the other. Guterres committed to undertake extensive consultations to ascertain whether the conditions for creating the position of a new UN envoy existed. While he was careful to deflect any decisions on a contact group to member states, he conveyed the decision that the Doha format should be a "standing format" able to meet at different levels.[168]

The UN convened a third Doha meeting in June, this time with the Taliban but without the presence of the secretary-general. The UN had faced what Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo, who chaired the meeting, described as a "tough, maybe impossible choice": it prioritized engagement between the Taliban and international envoys, but by acceding to the Taliban's insistence that Afghan women and civil society organizations could not attend, it upset a number of the Western envoys as well as international civil society groups.[169] A compromise was reached by which the UN and envoys met separately with Afghan women and civil society after their meeting with the Taliban. However, the public nature of the debates around the meeting, the differences that surfaced within the meeting on issues such as human rights, and the Taliban's subsequent introduction in August of an oppressive Law on the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice all underlined how difficult the path toward engagement would be.[170] In the following months, consistent with agreements reached at Doha, UNAMA launched working groups on counternarcotics and the private sector, and the UN began developing "a political road map" to help pave the way to "a more coherent, coordinated and structured engagement between the international community and de facto authorities."[171]

Aligning Peacemaking Efforts in Africa: From Multi-actor Mediation to Meltdown in Sudan

More than two decades after the creation of the African Union in 2002, African peace and security has been transformed by broad changes in regional and geopolitical power, politics, security, and economic interests. Persistent armed conflicts and mounting pressure from jihadist violence pose significant challenges, as have the coups across the Sahel and Central Africa that this violence has contributed to. Overtly or through proxies, multiple actors are jockeying for influence and access to resources: the US and other Western actors, including former colonial powers, and (in different contexts) China, Russia, the Gulf states, Türkiye, and others.[172] Along with fellow African states, these states are frequently necessary partners for the leverage they can bring to political processes—and for the disruption they can cause if they choose to undermine them.

166 Security Council Report, "Afghanistan: Vote on Draft Resolution," December 28, 2023; UN Security Council Resolution 2721 (December 29, 2023), UN Doc. S/RES/2721.

167 United Nations, "We All Want an Afghanistan at Peace, UN Chief Says in Doha," February 19, 2024.

168 United Nations, "Secretary-General's Opening Remarks at Press Encounter on the Meeting of Special Envoys on Afghanistan," February 19, 2024.

169 UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, "USG DiCarlo Highlights Afghan Women's Concerns at Doha III Meeting," July 1, 2024; Jacques Follorou, "UN Calls for Taliban Afghanistan to be Reintegrated into the International Community," *Le Monde*, June 20, 2024.

170 OHCHR, "New Morality Law Affirms Taliban's Regressive Agenda, Experts Call for Concerted Action," August 30, 2024.

171 UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for Peace and Security*, UN Doc. A/79/797–S/2025/109, February 21, 2025, para. 17.

172 Institute for Security Studies, "Mercenaries and Private Military Security: Africa's Thin Grey Line," December 1, 2021.

Aligning Mediation Efforts

Peacemaking in Africa has been complicated by the transnational dimensions of most African conflicts. There have also been recurring issues around collaboration between individual states and multilateral organizations with overlapping mandates for mediation, including the AU, subregional organizations (the regional economic communities, or RECs), and, in some instances, the UN.[173] Contributing to the problem are different interpretations of subsidiarity, both with regard to the UN and the AU and with regard to the AU and the RECs. Several factors make turf battles rather than coordination the norm: a lack of clarity in the AU's foundational documents; the different political agendas of organizations and states; and what the RECs perceive as micromanaging by the AU and the AU sees as lack of deference from the RECs.[174]

Peacemaking in Africa has been complicated by recurring issues around collaboration between individual states and multilateral organizations with overlapping mandates for mediation.

Even when there is what one analyst described as "summitry consensus" on the urgent need for a peaceful resolution, aligning mediation efforts has proven difficult.[175] This is evident in the case of eastern DRC in early 2025. Within the space of a few days in March 2025, Angolan President João Lourenço withdrew from the mediation role he had been given by the AU, the East African Community (EAC) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) appointed a panel of five facilitators to merge the mediation efforts of Angola and Kenya (in the Luanda and Nairobi processes), and Presidents Félix Tshisekedi of the DRC and Paul Kagame of Rwanda held a first meeting in Doha under the auspices of the Emir of Qatar.[176]

Over the past decade, the shifting contours of geopolitical polarization have increasingly made themselves felt, including in conflicts that had previously been addressed within regionally led frameworks. Between 2013 and 2016, the International Contact Group on the Central African Republic, cochaired by the AU and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), effectively marshaled efforts to promote the "full restoration of the constitutional order."[177] A smaller group of eight (G8) formed its nucleus, suggesting, as in the distinct case of East Timor, the utility of tiered structures to balance inclusivity and efficacy. Russia was a member of the contact group, yet in later years its growing influence in the country, including through the military engagement of its proxy the Wagner Group, "poisoned relations between the government and its main donors" and contributed to the erosion of international collaboration.[178]

Meanwhile, in Mali, an international mediation team was formed to support mediation led by Algeria. Initially consisting of the AU, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the EU, and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), as well as France and the US, the group exerted significant pressure on the negotiating parties to sign the 2015 Algiers Peace Accord.[179] However, the implementation of this agreement faced difficulties due to its having been imposed on the Malian parties, as well as the growing jihadist threat in central Mali.[180] Following a coup in 2020, another coup in 2021 brought in a military regime that sought increased support from Russia, both officially and through the Wagner Group, and became more confronta-

173 Noel Twagiramungu et al., "Re-describing Transnational Conflict in Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 57, no. 3 (2019); Laurie Nathan, "How to Manage Interorganizational Disputes over Mediation in Africa," *Global Governance* 23 (2017).

174 Amani Africa, "Beyond Subsidiarity: Understanding the Roles of the AU and RECs/RMs in Peace and Security in Africa," August 2023; Institute for Security Studies, "Coordination Flaws Thwart Continental Peace-making Efforts," August 24, 2023.

175 Gwinyayi Dzinesa, "Stabilising Eastern DRC: Strategic Options for the UN, AU and its RECs," ACCORD, February 28, 2025.

176 International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch: Democratic Republic of the Congo," March 2025.

177 Henneberg, "International Contact Groups," p. 457.

178 International Crisis Group, "Russia's Influence in the Central African Republic," December 3, 2021.

179 The group later grew to include the P5, Mauritania, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

180 A broader follow-up committee *(Comité de suivi de l'accord,* or CSA*)* was established to further the agreement's implementation. Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, "A Process in Search of Peace: Lessons from the Inter-Malian Agreement," International Peace Institute, June 2017.

tional with other international partners.[181] French forces left Mali in mid-2022, and MINUSMA was expelled the following year. In January 2024, Mali's military junta declared the 2015 agreement null and void.[182]

In the Horn of Africa, the various actors engaged in the region's "political marketplace," including the UN, the AU, and IGAD and its member states, have had distinct roles, mandates, and coordination mechanisms in each conflict and transition setting.[183] Formal divisions of labor—such as the role of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) working closely with IGAD or the separate AU military and UN political missions in Somalia—have been complemented by ad hoc partnerships, mediation panels, and other means to pool leverage and expertise.[184]

Some of these mechanisms, such as the AU High-Level Implementation Panel for Sudan and South Sudan (AUHIP), established in 2009 and headed by former South African President Thabo Mbeki, lasted many years. Others were more targeted. The AU High-Level Panel on Ethiopia, which facilitated the negotiation of a ceasefire between Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in November 2022, included the AU high representative for the Horn of Africa, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo; former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta; and former Deputy President of South Africa Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.[185] Collectively, however, such efforts have increasingly been subverted by competition among the states in the Horn of Africa, their neighbors across the commercially and geopolitically critical waters of the Red Sea, and others with interests at stake.[186]

Nowhere has the mix of actors, partnerships, and fora proved more complicated than in Sudan in the dramatic period since 2019.

Sudan: From Transition to Turmoil and War

Nowhere has the mix of actors, partnerships, and fora proved more complicated than in Sudan in the dramatic period since 2019. That year saw a popular revolution, sparked by the dire state of the economy, which forced the deposition of President Omar al-Bashir by military leaders. This was followed by a political agreement on a thirty-nine-month transition toward a civilian-led democracy. Coordination mechanisms to support this transition included the long-standing Troika of Norway, the UK, and the US; a broader group of Friends of Sudan; a Sudan-focused manifestation of the Quad already engaged on Yemen, reflecting the extensive influence of both Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and a Trilateral Mechanism composed of the AU, IGAD, and the UN Integrated Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS). While focused on the democratic transition, these and other international actors such as the EU also engaged with the separate peace process with armed groups, which led to the signing of the Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan in October 2020 after negotiations mediated by South Sudan.

The coordination mechanisms supporting the transition were swept aside in 2023. The two dominant military forces in the country—the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) of the former Janjaweed leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti")—had together ousted Bashir in 2019. In October 2021, they upended the transition with a new coup against their civilian partners. A post-coup Framework Agreement was reached in December

181 Paul Stronski, "Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa's Sahel Region," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 28, 2023.

182 International Crisis Group, "Northern Mali: Return to Dialogue," February 20, 2024.

183 Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

184 Barney Afako, "Pursuing Effective Partnerships: Innovation and Collaboration in Peacemaking in the Horn of Africa," *Accord* 30 (2024).

185 In this instance, the panel was created to overcome the Tigrayans' concerns about Obasanjo's partiality. Afako, "Pursuing Effective Partnerships," p. 46.

186 Alex de Waal, "Red Sea Is Today's Arena for Clash of African-Arab Power Politics," *Responsible Statecraft*, January 9, 2024; International Crisis Group, "Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact," September 19, 2019.

2022, but in April 2023 simmering tensions between the two military forces burst into a devastating war. Over the following months, regional and international actors tried to respond to the escalating violence, but with a remarkable lack of coherence, coordination, or impact. Khartoum was ransacked, thousands of Sudanese were killed, and millions more were displaced, while famine loomed and ethnically directed killings in Darfur threatened a return to genocide.[187] There was mounting evidence of external involvement, most obvious in the arming of the RSF by the UAE, but with others, including Chad, Egypt, Libya, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye, also increasingly drawn in.[188] Fear of the conflict's repercussions across the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and the Red Sea region grew.

The Troika, Friends of Sudan, Quad, and Trilateral Mechanism

As an informal mechanism, the Troika had been remarkably resilient. For many years, it had focused on supporting the new state of South Sudan, and in particular efforts to end the civil war that broke out in December 2013. Troika members, as well as the EU, with which they worked closely, had taken part in an IGAD-Plus mechanism established in 2015 to reinforce IGAD-led negotiations that led to an agreement later that year.[189] The Troika remained engaged as the agreement broke down, South Sudan fell back into conflict, and new efforts were launched to secure a "revitalized" agreement in 2018. It worked closely with successive heads of UNMISS and helped to advance strategy with wider groups of international actors. "It was listened to," as UK Envoy Robert Fairweather put it. "People expected us to come out and say things, know things."[190] In time, however, the influence of the Western powers that had led support for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was eroded by the more assertive involvement of regional actors.[191]

Compared to South Sudan, the Troika had been less engaged in Sudan before 2019. But the revolution against Bashir changed everything. Its outcome—a Transitional Military Council (TMC), challenged by protestors demanding a civilian government—created a once-in-a-generation opportunity to help shape a new Sudan. Efforts to coordinate the international response, also championed by Germany, took shape in a first meeting of the Friends of Sudan convened by the US in May in Washington.[192] The friends sought to include all key actors, notably including Gulf states as well as African states, to develop a coordinated position on the dramatic changes underway. The group met seven times over the following year, coordinated by a small Core Group on Sudan headed by Nicholas Haysom, the UN special adviser on Sudan. With an eye to both potential financing and possible influence on Sudan's security sector, the Core Group included not only Germany, the US, and the UN but also Saudi Arabia, the UAE, France, Norway, Sweden, the UK, the EU, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, although, after initial meetings, no African state or organization.[193]

From the beginning, the US and UK, often in partnership with the EU, focused on convincing their regional partners that they needed to accommodate the demands of Sudan's civilians. As one former US official argued, "Sudan is not Egypt; an authoritarian system cannot stabilize it."[194] They pursued this goal bilaterally, through the Troika,

187 In the final days of the Biden administration, the US concluded that the RSF and allied militias in Sudan had committed genocide in Sudan and imposed sanctions on Hemedti as well as seven RSF-owned companies based in the UAE and another individual for their role in procuring weapons. Antony J. Blinken, "Genocide Determination in Sudan and Imposing Accountability Measures," January 7, 2025.

188 Declan Walsh, Christoph Koettl, and Eric Schmitt, "Talking Peace in Sudan, the U.A.E. Secretly Fuels the Fight," *New York Times*, September 29, 2023; Emadeddin Badi, "Sudan Is Caught in a Web of External Interference. So Why Is an International Response Still Lacking?" Atlantic Council, December 17, 2024.

189 International Crisis Group, "South Sudan: Keeping the Faith with the IGAD Peace Process," July 27, 2015.

190 Interview with Robert Fairweather, October 2023.

191 Mateja Peter and Kasia Houghton, "Congestion and Diversification of Third-Party Mediation in Sudan and South Sudan: First Look at Some Longer-Term Trends," Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, 2023; Jan Pospisil, "Post Architecture: The Comparative Marketplace of Transition Management in Sudan," Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, 2023, p. 12.

192 The Washington, DC, meeting in May 2019 was of an initial group of France, Germany, Norway, the UK, the US, and the EU. When the group met in Berlin the following month, they were joined by Egypt, Ethiopia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the AU. Gerrit Kurtz, "An International Partnership for Sudan's Transition: Mobilizing Support, Preventing Instability," German Council on Foreign Relations, June 2020, pp. 7–8.

193 The wider group of friends came to include Canada, Egypt, Ethiopia, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, the Netherlands, Qatar, and Spain, as well as the AU and the African Development Bank.

194 Interview with former US official, November 2023.

and within meetings of the Friends of Sudan. In all fora, they pushed for negotiations between the TMC and the civilians in the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). In late April, the US and UK also opened a separate track by convening the Yemen Quad—consisting of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the UK, and the US—for a side meeting on Sudan in London. But differences on what was required to ensure stability remained. As another official involved in these discussions recalled, "They supported us but kept their relationships with Burhan and Hemedti in their back pocket."[195]

In August, the TMC and the FFC reached an agreement, facilitated by Ethiopia and the AU, on the transfer of power to a civilian-military Transitional Sovereignty Council and the appointment of Abdalla Hamdok as prime minister. The Friends of Sudan became focused on marshaling support for the democratic and economic reforms set out in Sudan's transitional constitution. Meanwhile, the US and UK continued work with the Quad. They recognized it as a valuable partnership with key actors, even as it exposed a "hierarchy of interests" on all sides: the war in Yemen was more pressing to Saudi Arabia, and the US in particular had many other interests at stake.[196] For the US, these interests included its pursuit of the normalization of relations between Sudan and Israel, as well as the maintenance of far-reaching partnerships with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Most immediately, the Trump administration expressly linked normalization between Sudan and Israel to the US decision to end Sudan's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism—a critical step to enable Sudan to secure more financial aid and debt relief.[197]

> From the beginning, the US and UK, often in partnership with the EU, focused on convincing their regional partners that they needed to accommodate the demands of Sudan's civilians.

During this period, the UN embarked on a complex transition between the AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) and a much smaller political mission, UNITAMS, which had a national remit but a deliberately "light footprint."[198] Although UNITAMS was mandated by the Security Council in June 2020, delays in the appointment of the SRSG and head of mission meant that Volker Perthes did not arrive in Khartoum until early 2021.[199] Entering Sudan at a moment when other diplomatic representation was relatively sparse, Perthes assumed a role as convenor of the Friends of Sudan. As one participant recalled, the group lost "oomph" over time but remained the preeminent locus for coordination of international positions behind the transitional government.[200] At the same time, the transitional government was looking increasingly shaky amid growing economic pressures and divisions within both the armed groups and the civilian forces. Most notably, a breach emerged between the more established political actors in the FFC and a younger generation of protestors in the "popular resistance committees" that had been the engine of the revolution.

The transitional government came to an end following the coup on October 25, 2021, which was organized by the military with the support of armed groups and Islamists close to Bashir. General Burhan assumed control of the country and imposed a state of emergency. Sudan was suspended from the AU, and economic assistance ground to a halt. Divisions between pro-coup and pro-democracy forces yawned wide. International actors, including the UN and Western states, lost credibility among some pro-democracy forces, which perceived them as having aligned behind

195 Ibid.

196 Interview with former US official, November 2023.

197 Gabriele Steinhauser and Nicolas Bariyo, "Israel-Sudan Deal: Sudan Removed from U.S. Terrorism List," *Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2020. For analysis of how both the Abraham Accords and indifference to Gulf interests impacted US policy toward Sudan in this period, see: Brittany Gleixner-Hayat, "U.S. Support for Democratic Openings in Conflict-Affected Countries: Lessons from Ethiopia and Sudan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2, 2024, pp. 23–26.

198 Daniel Forti, "Walking a Tightrope: The Transition from UNAMID to UNITAMS in Sudan," International Peace Institute, February 2021, p. 29.

199 UN Security Council Resolution 2524 (June 3, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2524.

200 Interview with former US official, November 2023.

203 Kholood Khair, "The Muddled Diplomacy of Sudan's Tripartite Mechanism," *Arab Center*, June 2022.

"the lowest common denominator of stabilization" in maintaining engagement with the pro-coup forces.[201]

Already-delicate relations between the UN and the AU flared up in early 2022, just after the resignation of Hamdok, when Perthes announced that he was "formally launching a UN-facilitated intra-Sudanese political process" to find a way out of the political crisis.[202] The AU had not been consulted about UNITAMS's "new, post-coup operational pivot" and felt slighted.[203] While UNITAMS moved ahead with its consultations with a diverse range of Sudanese stakeholders, senior officials in New York and Addis Ababa engaged in diplomatic fence-mending and agreed on the creation of a new configuration—the Trilateral Mechanism (TM) of the AU, IGAD, and UNITAMS—to lead the political process.[204]

In the following months, Perthes worked alongside the IGAD envoy, Ismail Wais, as well as the AU envoy to Sudan, Mohamed El Hacen Lebatt, a Mauritanian who was also chief of staff to the AU Commission chairperson, Mahamat Moussa Faki. With the Ethiopian Mahmoud Dirir, Lebatt had led the negotiation of the constitutional agreement in 2019. He was perceived by some Sudanese to have favored the military and Islamists in the process and was also suspected of furthering the interests of his Chadian boss.[205] His relationship with Perthes was not easy. The TM was also hampered by its members' uneven resources, with UNITAMS having much greater capacity on the ground, while the AU and IGAD had only a skeletal presence beyond their envoys. Relations were particularly difficult after a poorly prepared first meeting between the parties, arranged for June 8th in Khartoum's Rotana Hotel, had to be postponed. The meeting was convened at short notice, but the FFC, the Sudanese Communist Party, and resistance committees all refused to participate and instead denounced the process.[206]

After this setback, and with Lebatt less present in Sudan than before, the Khartoum manifestation of the Quad stepped in. An ad hoc support group made up of the Quad, the TM, the EU, the Troika, and other key states not included in these groups held regular meetings at the residence of US Ambassador John Godfrey to exchange information and coordinate support for negotiations between the FFC and the military. These concluded on December 5, 2022, with the signature of a Framework Agreement between the military regime and more than fifty political and civil society groups, but not the resistance committees and other civic and political forces, which protested the lack of inclusivity. The agreement looked toward a return to a civilian-led transition but provided for Burhan and Hemedti to continue heading the SAF and RSF respectively.[207] Regional actors, including South Sudan and Egypt, remained skeptical. Meanwhile, the TM was called on to facilitate negotiations on sensitive outstanding issues as, unlike the Quad, it was not held responsible for some of the failings of the December deal.[208]

In January 2023, the TM and its international partners were plunged into a new round of activity: following the dictates of the Framework Agreement, they organized consultations to ensure "broad public participation" on five key issues, including the contentious issues of transitional justice and security and military reform. Extensive efforts were made to convene inclusive meetings, and the organization of the five workshops in quick session was a considerable achievement. But it was also tinged by a degree of unreality and what Norway's ambassador Endre Stiansen and others would come to see as a degree of "wishful thinking," as hard negotiations among Sudanese took place behind closed doors, and Egypt and

201 Pospisil, "Post Architecture," p. 14.

202 UNITAMS, "Statement Attributable to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sudan—On the Announcement of Talks on Political Transition in Sudan," January 8, 2022.

204 US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Friends of Sudan Joint Statement on the UNITAMS-AU-IGAD Facilitated Political Process," March 29, 2022.

205 "Legal Group Accuses African Union Envoy of Bias and Lack of Neutrality," *Sudan Tribune*, May 9, 2022.

206 "FFC Decide to Boycott Intra-Sudanese Dialogue Meeting," *Sudan Tribune*, June 5, 2022.

207 "Draft Political Framework Agreement (Final)," December 5, 2022, available at https://redress.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Framework-Agreement-Final-ENG-05122022.pdf.

208 US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Joint Statement by the Quad and the Troika," December 5, 2022; International Crisis Group, "Sudan: Rebooting an Endangered Transition," January 31, 2023.

South Sudan launched parallel initiatives.[209] There were rumors of escalating tensions. All the actors involved recognized that the issue of the integration of the RSF into the SAF was extraordinarily sensitive. However, the FFC offered assurances that there was a paper outlining a ten-year process for integration and that the two military forces would reach an agreement.

A New War and "Mediation Mayhem"

The agreement was not to be. On April 15th, fighting between the SAF and the RSF exploded in the streets of Khartoum. Appeals for a ceasefire and for attention to the needs of the Sudanese people, who were stunned by the rapidity with which the violence escalated, made little progress. The international community and most of the Sudanese elites and professional classes fled Khartoum, leaving local resistance committees to organize essential humanitarian assistance and safe passage for civilians. As the war in Sudan reached its two-year mark in April 2025, tens of thousands of people had been killed and more than 8.5 million internally displaced, with a further 3.8 million having fled to neighboring countries; famine conditions were spreading as humanitarian organizations sought resources to support some 30 million people, more than half of Sudan's population.[210]

As war raged, the coordination structures established to assist the transition disintegrated, and regional mediation initiatives proliferated. Daily phone calls among the members of the Quad and the TM were quickly overtaken by ceasefire talks in Jeddah facilitated by the US and Saudi Arabia. These were not uncontroversial. Differences between Saudi Arabia and the UAE precluded the latter's involvement, while some in the US worried that the US had "turned its back on its old allies" in the Troika.[211] From within the AU came complaints that the US had "outsourced Sudan to Saudi Arabia."[212] But the explanation for the Jeddah talks was that the two powers were the only mediators acceptable to the SAF and RSF. Saudi Arabia, critically, was seen as evenhanded, unlike either the UAE, with its deep ties to Hemedti and the RSF, or Egypt, long a backer of the SAF and itself the convenor of a separate initiative of neighboring states to address the conflict.[213] While the talks produced the Jeddah Declaration on May 11, 2023, its provisions on respect for international humanitarian and human rights law were quickly violated.[214]

The "trilateral" approach eventually adopted by the UN, the AU, and IGAD proved no more durable. Perthes was "blamed for letting a fragile transition from decades of dictatorial rule to democracy evaporate" and declared persona non grata by the Sudanese government.[215] He resigned in September, and just two months later the Sudanese authorities demanded that UNITAMS itself be terminated. Meanwhile, the AU had been quick to assert its lead. It convened a ministerial meeting on April 20th and developed the Roadmap for the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan by late May. It also established both a large coordinating body, the Expanded Mechanism for the Resolution of the Sudan Crisis, to oversee the roadmap as well as a smaller core group (made up of the UN, IGAD, the LAS, and the EU) under its direction. Yet in practice, this body was hampered by the continuing (and part-time) role of Lebatt and made little progress.[216]

IGAD also rushed in. At its meeting of heads of state and government in Djibouti in June, it adopted its own roadmap for the resolution of the conflict and, to advance it, put together the IGAD

209 Interview with Endre Stiansen, October 2023; Pospisil, "Post Architecture," p. 8. See also: Jeffrey Feltman, "The Eruption of Violence in Sudan Shows the Generals Can't Be Trusted," Washington Post, April 18, 2023.

210 OCHA, "Marking Two Years of Sudan War—Statement by the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan, Clementine Nkweta-Salami," April 15, 2025; UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal," April 14, 2025, available at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation.

211 Interview with US Sudan analyst, November 2023.

212 Interviews with AU official, October 2023.

213 Ameer Chughai and Theodore Murphy, "Conflicts and Interests: Why Sudan's External Mediation Is a Barrier to Peace," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 8, 2023.

214 US Department of State, "Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan," May 11, 2023.

215 Colum Lynch, "The Sudan Blame Game," *Devex*, July 5, 2023.

216 Amani Africa, "The Situation in Sudan," October 19, 2023

Quartet of heads of state (of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan) led by President William Ruto of Kenya.[217] Late in 2023, after a largely fruitless round of the Jeddah talks, this track appeared to gain momentum. A new IGAD summit was attended by Burhan and joined by the US, UAE, AU, and UN envoys. It was announced that Burhan and Hemedti had agreed to direct talks to discuss a ceasefire, but these did not materialize. Instead, the first high-level talks between the leaders of the SAF and RSF took place in Bahrain in January 2024, with officials from Egypt and the UAE present, as well as Saudi Arabia and the US. The talks reportedly led to an agreement on a "declaration of principles," but this provoked the suspension of any follow-up.[218] Meanwhile, several initiatives emerged to facilitate civilian participation, including efforts by the Troika states, in partnership with several nongovernmental entities, to support the broad coalition of civilian democratic forces known as Taqaddum.[219]

What was lacking, as the International Crisis Group had long argued, was "a major, coordinated, high-level diplomatic effort involving the outside powers that wield the greatest influence in the region."[220] A slew of new appointments took place in late 2023 and early 2024: there was a new UN envoy, Ramtane Lamamra, the former foreign minister of Algeria and AU peace and security commissioner; a new high-level AU panel led by Mohamed Ibn Chambas, a former senior official of both the UN and ECOWAS and the AU envoy on "silencing the guns"; and a new US special envoy, Tom Perriello, appointed by the State Department. These appointments gave some grounds for hope that the unfolding tragedy in Sudan would be addressed with the seriousness it required.

Yet actual coordination remained contentious. The UN Security Council's support for Lamamra's good offices in "complementing and coordinating regional peace efforts" was almost immediately complicated by actions taken by other international actors.[221] In April, France, Germany, and the EU organized an international humanitarian conference in Paris. In June, the AU's Peace and Security Commission directed Moussa Faki to set up an Ad Hoc Presidential Committee of five heads of state to facilitate talks between the leaders of the SAF and RSF and underlined the "imperative" for all to work through the "existing AU-established coordination mechanism."[222] Consultative meetings to enhance the various peace initiatives were convened by the LAS in Cairo and the following month by Djibouti, the chair of IGAD; the latter was followed by a separate Mediators Planning Retreat proposed and chaired by Lamamra.

This retreat (attended by a dizzying thirty-two regional and international stakeholders) reaffirmed the importance of "a more coordinated and collaborative multilateral approach."[223] Yet, in July, while the AU and IGAD held a preparatory meeting for an Inter-Sudanese Political Dialogue, it emerged that the UN and the US were separately planning to facilitate almost simultaneous negotiations between the SAF and RSF in Geneva. Behind the scenes, it was possible to deconflict what became "proximity talks" convened by Lamamra on humanitarian assistance and the protection of civilians, held on July 11th and 19th, from US-convened ceasefire talks led by Perriello and cohosted by Saudi Arabia and Switzerland. These talks ended up taking place between August 14th and 23rd—without the participation of the SAF, but with the additional presence of Egypt, the UAE, the AU, and the UN. Necessarily combining in-person meetings with the RSF and virtual engagement with the SAF, the US had to lower its ambitions. Returning to the "foundation of the Jeddah process," the talks secured agreements on humani-

217 IGAD, "Final Communiqué of the 14th Ordinary Session of the IGAD Assembly of Heads of State and Government," June 12, 2023.

218 "Sudanese Warring Parties Hold First High-Level Talks in Bahrain, Said to Agree on 'Declaration of Principles,'" Arab Weekly, February 1, 2024.

219 These efforts were complicated by the resistance of the warring parties to engagement with civilian forces, the diversity of Sudanese "civilians," and the multiplicity of international actors, including NGOs, with which they were variously engaged. Wilson Center, "How to Support Sudanese Civilian Efforts to Form an Effective Bloc That Will Advocate for Peace, Humanitarian Assistance and Inclusive Democratic Governance in Sudan?" May 2024.

220 International Crisis Group, "Sudan's Calamitous Civil War: A Chance to Draw Back from the Abyss," January 9, 2024.

221 UN Security Council Resolution 2724 (March 8, 2024), UN Doc. S/RES/2724.

222 African Union Peace and Security Council, *Communiqué of the 1218th Meeting of the PSC, Held at the Level of Heads of State and Government, on 21 June 2024, on Consideration of the Situation in Sudan*, AU Doc. PSC/HoSG/COMM.1218, June 21, 2024.

223 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Djibouti, "Retraite de planification pour les médiateurs 25 & 26 juillet 2024 déclaration de Djibouti sur la paix au Soudan."

tarian access and developed a framework for compliance with the Jeddah Declaration.[224]

Like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, the states and institutions participating in the Geneva talks created yet another international mechanism: the Aligned for Advancing Lifesaving and Peace in Sudan (ALPS) Group. The ALPS had the advantage of bringing together the primary external actors in this fragmented and internationalized war, but its hasty formation could not overcome the lack of high-level planning, coordination, and commitment, and its focus remained limited to the coordination of discussions on humanitarian access. Military operations continued unabated, leading to significant changes on the ground. In March 2025, the SAF retook Khartoum from the RSF, even as the RSF signed a constitutional document that looked toward the formation of a parallel government to that of the SAF-backed administration in the territories it held, raising fears of the country's partition.[225]

Hopes for the effective coordination of international efforts suffered a further setback on April 15, 2025, two years to the day since the war had started, when an attempt to form an AU-led contact group to facilitate ceasefire talks fell apart.[226] The contact group had been one of the central goals of a London Conference co-chaired by the UK, France, Germany, the AU, and the EU and attended by the foreign ministers and high-level representatives of interested states as well as the LAS and UN. Insurmountable differences among Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE over the wording of a proposed joint communiqué reflected their support for the SAF and RSF, respectively.[227] The co-chairs fell back on issuing their own statement. They reported agreement on the urgency of efforts to resolve the conflict and emphasized that "for these efforts to be effective, they need to be coherent as well as coordinated and based on comparative advantage and complementarity."[228] But the conference itself had graphically illustrated the challenges of addressing a regionalized proxy war that remained far from a priority for those with the capacity to do something about it.

Conclusions

This critical moment for peacemaking coincides with a profound crisis in multilateralism. That crisis is complicated by geopolitical competition and the volatility of US President Trump, many countries' push for strategic autonomy in a multipolar world, and the perpetuation of internal, regional, and international fragmentation in and around violent conflicts. In this environment, models of "hierarchical" collaboration by a stable group of "friends" coordinated by a single mediator are almost never possible. The era in which the five permanent members of the Security Council could cohere around a "decisive and united plan" for peacemaking, as they did for Cambodia after the Cold War, is a distant memory.[229]

There will always be some exceptions, as demonstrated by the cases of the Philippines, Colombia's negotiations with the FARC, and Mozambique—all countries in supportive regional environments whose conflicts have deep roots in the past. Elsewhere, ad hoc partnerships, such as that between Türkiye and the UN in their mediation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative between Russia and Ukraine in the summer of 2022, have also proven effective.[230] Overall, however, comprehensive peace agreements have become increasingly elusive, and peace processes more iterative, messy, and transactional. This has forced national and international peacemakers to engage creatively and flexibly in conflicts and situations of transition characterized by competing and overlapping relationships. Where peace efforts have been successful, they have entailed long-term engagement by multiple actors. In fragmented geopolitical

224 US Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, "Joint Statement by the ALPS Group Regarding Talks in Switzerland & Progress in Addressing the Crisis in Sudan," August 23, 2024.

225 Moses Chrispus Okello, "Could Prolonged Warfare Lead to the Country Splitting?" ISS Today, March 25, 2025.225 Moses Chrispus Okello, "Could Prolonged Warfare Lead to the Country Splitting?" *ISS Today*, March 25, 2025.

226 Patrick Wintour, "UK Conference on Sudan Fails to Set Up Contact Group for Ceasefire Talks," *The Guardian*, April 15, 2025.

227 Alan Boswell, "London Conference Puts Paralysed Sudan Peace Efforts on Display," International Crisis Group, April 18, 2025.

228 UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, "London Sudan Conference—15th April 2025—Co-Chairs Statement," April 15, 2025.

229 Khan, *When Great Powers Behave*, p. 9.

230 Teresa Whitfield, "Mediation Alongside the Hell of War: The Black Sea Grain Deal," *Accord* 30 (2024).

and national contexts, these include not only multilateral and regional organizations and states but also international and local (or "insider") nongovernmental mediators and civil society organizations working together or in parallel. This complex web of different tracks and efforts has been described by Christine Bell as "multimediation."[231]

In this crowded environment, partnerships between the many actors are key, almost always challenging, and sometimes not possible. When the contours of a peace process have not been defined by the conflict parties themselves, attempts to build "unity of purpose" may be undermined by stark differences in interests among the external actors as well as institutional rivalries. In an interconnected world, states with multiple global and regional engagements are confronted with difficult decisions. The determination of an individual state to further peacemaking in, say, Libya, Sudan, or Yemen may conflict with its competing economic, energy, or security interests, as well as its bilateral relationships with regional actors more directly invested in these conflicts' outcomes. Making peace is hard and will rarely succeed if relegated to a second- or third-tier priority. As interests and institutional rivalries predominate, attention to the craft, professionalism, and principles of mediation can fall by the wayside.

The coming years will be challenging for organizations, states, and other mediation actors that profess to hue to normative commitments, including to human rights, international humanitarian law, inclusive democracy, and attendant frameworks such as women, peace, and security. They will be challenged by the need to collaborate with states with absolute monarchies or authoritarian systems that can bring critical leverage to bear upon the conflict parties but are likely to favor stability over goals such as social justice. They will also have to deal with a US administration charting a path that is as disruptive as it is unpredictable. This will require acknowledging and addressing differences in worldviews and ambitions within conflict theaters while pursuing new, and sometimes even uncomfortable, relationships.

Benefits and Challenges of Minilateral Mechanisms

The shape and form taken by groups of friends, contact groups, and other coordination mechanisms have evolved and in some instances been eroded or impeded by today's adversarial geopolitics. But this report demonstrates that ad hoc groups are an accepted feature of the global peace and security landscape, operating outside established peace processes as well as within them. Like minilateral mechanisms established for other purposes, they can complement divided or dysfunctional multilateral organizations or fill gaps left by them. Yet finding the "magic number" or formula for these minilateral coalitions for peacemaking is rarely straightforward.

> Ad hoc groups are an accepted feature of the global peace and security landscape. They can complement divided or dysfunctional multilateral organizations or fill gaps left by them.

Group structures have not been created in every context or had uniformly positive results. In some cases, such as the peace process with the FARC in Colombia, successful support architectures have reflected a conscious decision not to convene a group of friends. While some groups have been able to bring together states with fundamentally different outlooks, profound divisions have made it difficult to establish and maintain inclusive and effective groups. Like-minded or regionally defined groups have instead been established, whether to build coherence on issues such as the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar or to reinforce a shared interest in a neighborhood-led approach as in Afghanistan or Syria. In the fall of 2023, as regional diplomacy around the war in Gaza gathered pace, the establishment of a Gaza Contact Group was announced at a joint OIC-LAS summit to demonstrate what the Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan described as "regional responsibility for the ongoing war in Palestine."[232] In another attempt to assert regional influence, the

231 Christine Bell, "'Multimediation': Adapting in Response to Fragmentation," *Accord* 30 (2024).

232 "Gaza Contact Group to Meet Nordic Countries' Top Diplomats in Oslo," *Hürriyet*, December 14, 2023; Tuğbar Alton, Can Efesoy, and Bekir Aydoğan, "'Gaza Contact Group' Panel Discussion Stress Need for Permanent Solution in Gaza," Anadolu Ajansi, March 2, 2024.

Arab Contact Group on Syria convened ministerial meetings in Jordan in December 2024.

Group structures can have a number of benefits:

- **Coordinating support to peace processes:** Groups create a format for supporting an ongoing peace or political process, building consensus and unity of purpose, reinforcing the efforts of the lead mediator(s), and marshaling resources (for example, through the inclusion of international financial institutions or donor states). They can both discourage competing initiatives by their members and strengthen their combined leverage.
- **Enhancing legitimacy with key actors:** Groups also provide means for engaging a bespoke set of actors with more legitimacy and potential to have impact in a particular regional context than the UN Security Council or other multilateral entities. A contact group or other joint mediation structure (such as a panel constituted by the African Union or a joint body such as the Trilateral Mechanism on Sudan) can propose and deliver policies or agreements to multilateral bodies and help coordinate other interested actors. In some circumstances it may also compensate for the decreasing number of formal mandates from the UN Security Council.
- **Building internal coherence:** The flexibility of groups can be an advantage, allowing members to build internal coherence while different incarnations or levels of groups meet in the field, in capitals, or at the headquarters of multilateral and regional organizations. Engagement by groups that meet at the ambassadorial, envoy, and principal level can be especially elastic and influential.
- **Elevating public messaging and facilitating information sharing:** Groups' capacity to make public statements and share information is another of their advantages. Smaller and more established groups such as the Troika on Sudan and South Sudan or the Quartet on the Middle East made effective use of public messaging, and their statements carried more weight than those of their individual members. Larger groups may primarily be used for exchanging information, which saves time and can help establish a baseline for joint understanding and support of an agreed strategy.
- **Bridging geopolitical divisions:** Groups can also be effective at convening hard-to-engage diplomatic partners when they share strategic interests (as was the case, at least for a short period, for the Troika/Troika Plus on Afghanistan). At this moment of geopolitical divisions, group structures offer states the possibility of working creatively with others where bilateral relationships might be difficult and to forge consensus beyond the like-minded. There is value to the convening power of the UN, as demonstrated by the establishment of the Doha format of special envoys on Afghanistan meeting under the aegis of the UN secretary-general.
- **Retaining knowledge and commitment in the long term:** Finally, groups recognize and support peacemaking as a long-term endeavor. They offer a means to build and retain institutional knowledge and commitment beyond the relatively short-term diplomatic appointments that are the norm in many national or international structures.

> The benefits groups offer must also be weighed against the challenges entailed in forming them carrying out their business.

Groups are, however, no panacea, and there may be many arguments against their creation or reasons they cannot be formed or deliver the benefits described above. For example, no group should be formed where external actors have fundamentally different ideas and ambitions for how a particular conflict should be resolved or managed and will prioritize their own interests, proxies, or access to resources over what they can bring to a collective effort.

Nor are groups a viable approach where multilateral organizations, states, or nongovernmental entities see themselves as rivals and view participation in a group as primarily as a chance to shine or demonstrate their political worth and legitimacy. In any case, some diplomatic cultures may favor personal relationships and direct diplomacy or side

deals over engaging in group formats.

Groups can also be seen to infringe on sovereignty and be met with pushback and resentment of a "colonial" mindset. This is not true in all settings but is especially a risk where groups are dominated by Western states.

The benefits groups offer must also be weighed against the challenges entailed in forming them and carrying out their business. Notably, determining or limiting membership in a group can be tricky or, in some circumstances, not possible; many structures struggle to maintain the appropriate balance between the effectiveness of a smaller size and the legitimacy of a wider membership. In addition, the maintenance of a group requires work and can be a waste of valuable time if its benefits are not clear.

Finally, like-minded groups carry risks of groupthink (or the wishful thinking experienced in Sudan before April 2023). This may cause groups to neglect internal dynamics and agency and undermine their capacity to support solutions that are both sustainable and perceived as legitimate within the affected society.

Lessons

In the current context of conflict fragmentation, escalating threats to peace and security, unbalanced multipolarity and disruption in the global order, and the proliferation of would-be peacemakers, peacemaking partnerships of some kind are essential. How they will be achieved will vary, and, in many instances, they may not involve the establishment of a group structure. But research conducted for this report suggests that in many, if not most, settings, formation of a group of some sort will be considered.

How should a decision be reached about whether a group is appropriate? A number of lessons identified in the years since 2010 can offer guidance.

- **The "right" group structure depends on the context.** While all groups will be context-specific, the adage of "form follows function" is critically important. In some cases, the "right" structure is no group at all.
- **It is important to set and manage expectations.** Different types of groups can achieve different things. Depending on the context, a wide range of groups may be valid, whether a small group working with conflict parties and other stakeholders or supporting a lead mediator with the parties' consent; a contact group or panel leading a diplomatic effort to move toward an agreed process; a regional grouping engaging with the legitimacy of the neighborhood; a large format group setting strategy among multiple actors or even just sharing information; or a diplomatic mechanism to try to find common ground among key external actors.
- **Several considerations should be weighed before any group is established.** Group leaders and members should be clear about what goals the group is trying to achieve; why these goals would be more achievable through a group than through regular diplomatic engagement; which actors would need to be included and what they would contribute; whether potential participants would be willing to engage constructively in a group format; and what might be the political costs of excluding other actors. They should also consider to what extent the conflict parties will consent to the formation and engagement of this group, whether a broader constituency of conflict stakeholders will perceive it as legitimate, and how its legitimacy can be enhanced.
- **Tiered mechanisms can help balance inclusivity with efficacy.** This can involve a larger, more inclusive group with a smaller core or steering group. Experience in East Timor, in the Central African Republic, and with the Friends of Sudan bears this out.
- **Hybrid mechanisms can leverage different capacities and relationships.** In a context of conflict fragmentation and multiple tracks of mediation engagement, it is useful to think creatively about hybrid partnerships and mechanisms that draw on the different capacities and relationships of different state and other official actors. In some circumstances, these mechanisms can also include NGOs, building on the example of the International Contact Group in the Philippines.
- **Individual mediators play a critical role, whether formally or informally.** Given the

heavy internal bureaucracies of many organizations and states, one key lesson is that informality has its advantages. Examples of successful groups and partnerships all point to the importance of skilled individual mediators—multilateral officials, diplomats, and representatives of NGOs—who are committed to working with each other in the interest of the peace process, whether within a group or without an established mechanism.

- **Some contexts of national, regional, and international fragmentation may defy attempts to design or deliver a coherent international peace architecture.** A long-term approach to peacemaking may entail focusing on modest goals related to specific or localized gains (for example, to reach a ceasefire, secure humanitarian access, or enhance the inclusivity of the process) and embracing opportunities for incremental support to conflict parties and other affected communities. It may also require accepting that multiple initiatives—in the best case complementary but at times competing—cannot be avoided.

What is not in question is that patience, creativity, and political will are all required if international actors are to play effective roles in helping conflict parties move away from violence and toward durable and inclusive peace.

Annex: Major Groups of Friends, Contact Groups, and Related Mechanisms, 2010–2024

Conflict[233]	Primary Mediators	Friends/groups supporting lead mediator or negotiations	Contact groups/ groups leading peace or diplomatic initiatives	Coordination groups
Afghanistan	US, Qatar 2020–2021	Host country support group 2020–2021 Troika and Troika Plus 2020–2022	Six plus two 1997–2001, then less active Heart of Asia–Istanbul Process 2011–2021 Moscow Format 2017–present Neighboring countries and Russia 2021–present Shanghai Cooperation Organization Contact Group 2017–present	Friends of Afghanistan (New York) 2001–present International Contact Group 2009–2021 Friends of Women in Afghanistan (New York) 2019–2021 US and European envoys meetings 2021–present UN-convened Doha special envoys 2023–present
Armenia–Azerbaijan: Nagorno-Karabakh	OSCE Minsk Group (US, France, Russia) 1994–2020 Russia 2020 EU with US 2022–2023			
Central African Republic	AU and ECCAS, with UN and others 2019		International Contact Group (and G8) 2013–2016	
Colombia–FARC	Direct negotiations 2011–2016	Guarantor states; accompanying states 2012–2016		
Colomba–ELN	Direct negotiations 2011–2016; 2022–present	Guarantor states, 2015–2016; Guarantor states; permanent accompaniers; Group of Accompanying Support and Cooperation Countries 2022–present		

233 This table represents the author's best attempt at categorization of these groups as of April 2025. Categorization is complicated by groups' evolution and in some instances a lack of clarity regarding when they were disbanded or became inactive.

Conflict[233]	Primary Mediators	Friends/groups supporting lead mediator or negotiations	Contact groups/ groups leading peace or diplomatic initiatives	Coordination groups
Colombia–EMC/EMBF	Direct negotiations 2023–present	Guarantor states; accompaniers 2023–present		
Colombia–Segundo Marquetalia/ CNEB	Direct negotiations 2024–present	Observers, then accompaniers and guarantors 2024–present		
Colombia-Comuneros del Sur	Direct negotiations 2024–present	Accompaniers		
Ethiopia–Tigray	AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa 2021–present AU High-Level Panel 2022–present		US-led informal Core Group 2021	
Haiti	UN/OAS 1992–present CARICOM Eminent Persons Group 2023–present		Core Group 2004–2021	
Iran (nuclear)	Iran, P5 +1 + EU 2013–2015			
Israel–Palestine	UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process 1993–present		Middle East Quartet (US, Russia, EU, UN) 2002–present Arab Quartet (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, UAE) 2007–present Gaza Contact Group (Arab League/OIC) November 2023–present	

Conflict[233]	Primary Mediators	Friends/groups supporting lead mediator or negotiations	Contact groups/ groups leading peace or diplomatic initiatives	Coordination groups
Libya	UN Support Mission in Libya 2012–present		Friends of Libya/Libya Contact Group 2011 Berlin International Conference process 2019–2021	Troika (UN, AU, LAS) 2016 Quartet (with EU) 2017–present P3 + 2 + 2 + 2 2020–present
Mali	Algeria 2014–2024	International mediation team 2014–2024		Comité de suivi de l'accord (CSA) 2015–2024
Mozambique–RENAMO	Switzerland/UN 2016–2023	International mediation team 2014–2024		Donor Coordination Group 2020–present
Myanmar	UN good offices/special envoy, China, ASEAN	Group of Friends of Myanmar	Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar 2007–2014 Partnership Group 2014–2016	Informal Working Group 2017–present Core Group 2021–present
Philippines–Mindanao	Malaysia 2001–present	International Contact Group 2009–present		
South Sudan (peace process and revitalized peace process)	IGAD (Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan) 2013–2015 IGAD with AU facilitators 2017–2018	Troika 2000–present	IGAD-Plus 2015–present	
Spain–Basque Country	Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue 2005–2018		International Contact Group on the Basque Conflict 2011–2018	

Conflict[233]	Primary Mediators	Friends/groups supporting lead mediator or negotiations	Contact groups/ groups leading peace or diplomatic initiatives	Coordination groups
Sudan	Trilateral Mechanism (AU, IGAD, UN) 2022–2023 Saudi Arabia/US 2023–present African Union 2023–present IGAD Quartet 2023–present Egypt and other bilateral mediation offers 2023–present UN personal envoy 2023–present	Troika 2000–present	Quad (Saudi Arabia, UAE, UK, US) 2019–2023 Aligned for Advancing Lifesaving and Peace in Sudan (ALPS) Group 2024–present	Friends of Sudan and Core Group 2019–2023 AU Expanded Mechanism and Core Group 2023–present
Sudan-South Sudan	AU High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) 2009–present			
Syria	UN Special Envoy 2012–present Astana process 2017–present	Action Group on Syria 2012 International Syria Support Group 2015–present Syria Small Group 2017–present	Friends of Syrian People 2012–2013 Arab Ministerial Contact Group 2023–present	
Ukraine	OSCE 2014–2022		Normandy Format 2014–2022 Trilateral Contact Group 2014–2022	

Conflict[233]	Primary Mediators	Friends/groups supporting lead mediator or negotiations	Contact groups/ groups leading peace or diplomatic initiatives	Coordination groups
Venezuela	Norway 2019–2024 Direct negotiations: US–Venezuela 2023–2024		International Contact Group 2019–present Lima Group 2017–2021 Stockholm format 2019–2020	
Western Sahara	UN personal envoy 1997–present	Group of Friends of Western Sahara 1992–present		
Yemen	UN special envoy 2011–present Oman		Quad (Saudi Arabia, UAE, UK, US) 2016–present Quint (Oman, Saudi Arabia, UAE, UK, US) 2017	Friends of Yemen 2010–2014 Group of 10 (G10) 2011–2016

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