Challenges to Crisis Management in the Current International System

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This address will focus on some critical challenges facing the international system today, and how these impact on our work in the field of crisis management.   But first some good news:

The current human condition presents us with an unparalleled opportunity to address pressing issues on a global scale. The frequency of interstate conflict is on the decline and casualties are way down. There are dramatic improvements in agricultural production and means of distribution.   There has been a significant decline in global birthrates and increases in life expectancy.   The proportion of people living in extreme poverty across the globe has shown an enormous decline. Our ability to communicate freely through a wide range of easily accessible social media has increased opportunities to identify and track key challenges to the human condition by creating global communities that cross national boundaries, cultures, and languages.

Yet key long-term challenges to human security remain stubbornly in place:

* Unstable governments, often coupled with underperforming economies and unresolved domestic tensions, and these conditions can become a threat to regional and even global security through the cross-border spread of violence and terrorism.

* Even as we have seen a dramatic decline in conflict between states in recent decades, conflict recurrence in intra-state conflict is on the rise with the accompanying localized human suffering.

* Uncoordinated global development strategies, insufficient or mismanaged funding, and corruption have resulted in uneven development and a widespread public perception that development aid is a waste of precious resources.

* Insufficient focus on the tensions that diversity can spawn in multiethnic societies can often lead to political, social, and economic exclusion and a rise in tensions and conflict.

* Our inability to deal with the impact of human activity on climate in a timely manner has meant that we leave unaddressed very clear deterioration of environmental conditions.

* And the list of challenges goes on: outdated global financial institutions that are ill-equipped to deal with crises; inattentiveness to obvious threats to health and wellbeing; mass migration and the attendant human rights issues that both spawn them and then accompany them to their next destination; and terrorism which has sown fear and suspicion, and diverted resources from more productive endeavors.
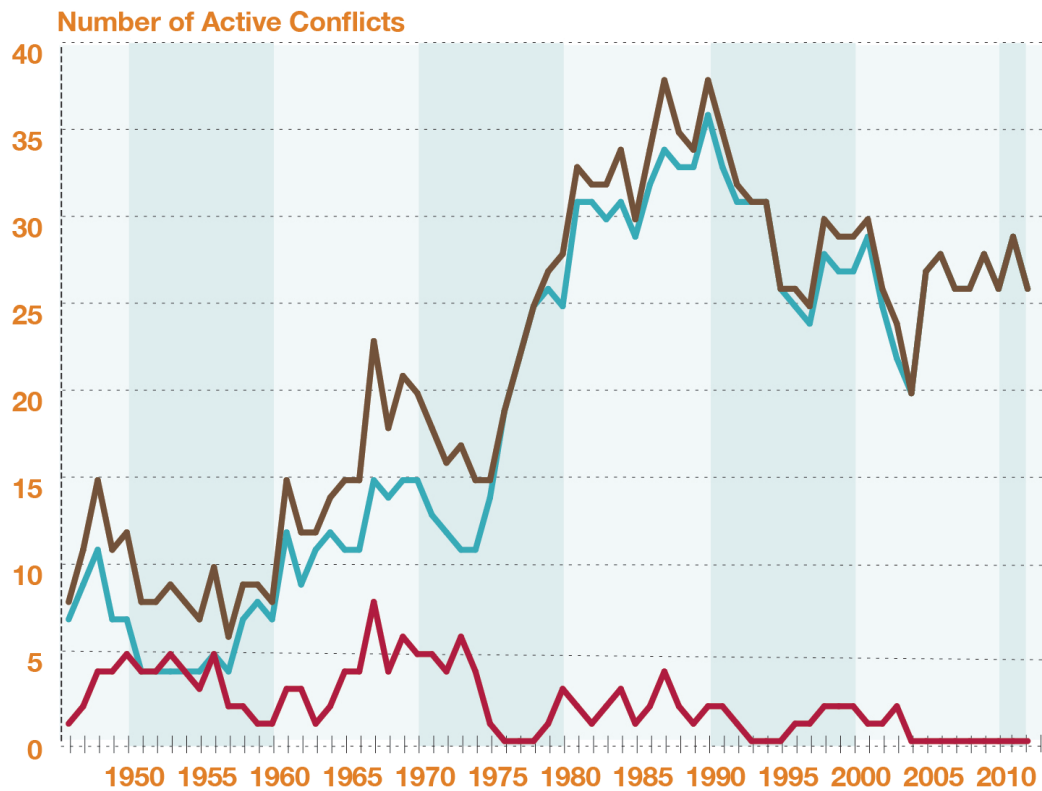
We can't cover all of this this morning. So I am going to focus in on conflict trends, and one particular way in which the international community has addressed conflict management - through mediation.

The Conflict Myth and Reality: Setting the Scene
Ask anyone on the street pretty much anywhere in the world, and they will tell you with certainty that conflict around the world is up. In fact way up. Just look at Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Yemen, South Sudan, Ukraine. Yet the statistics tell a different story - less active conflicts than any time in the last three decades, less casualties, less lethal terrorism, etc. As of December 2012, there were 26 armed conflicts in 22 countries, down from 38 armed conflicts involving more than 40 countries at the end of the Cold War in 1989-90. So why is there this widespread misperception? What is it that people are sensing that is somehow at odds - drastically - with the evidence?

Conflict in the system today is made up almost entirely of conflicts within states. And after peaking in 1990 with 38 active conflicts, the system has reached something of a steady state of

between 25-30 conflicts. In many respects, the end of the Cold War brought in an era of reduced conflict. Here's a graph.

Number of Active Conflicts

Red = interstate conflict

Blue = intrastate conflict

Brown = total conflict

Conflict Recurrence

But here's what we also know.

Those conflicts that are around have been around for awhile – they are what the experts call intractable. That is, "conflicts that have persisted over time and refused to yield to efforts to arrive at a political settlement – through either direct negotiations by the parties or mediation with third-party assistance (Crocker, Hampson and Aall 2005). A list of intractable conflicts today usually includes Sudan, Kashmir, the Korean Peninsula, Israel-Palestine, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Afghanistan. Conflicts that have been in our perceptions for a while tend to get overblown.
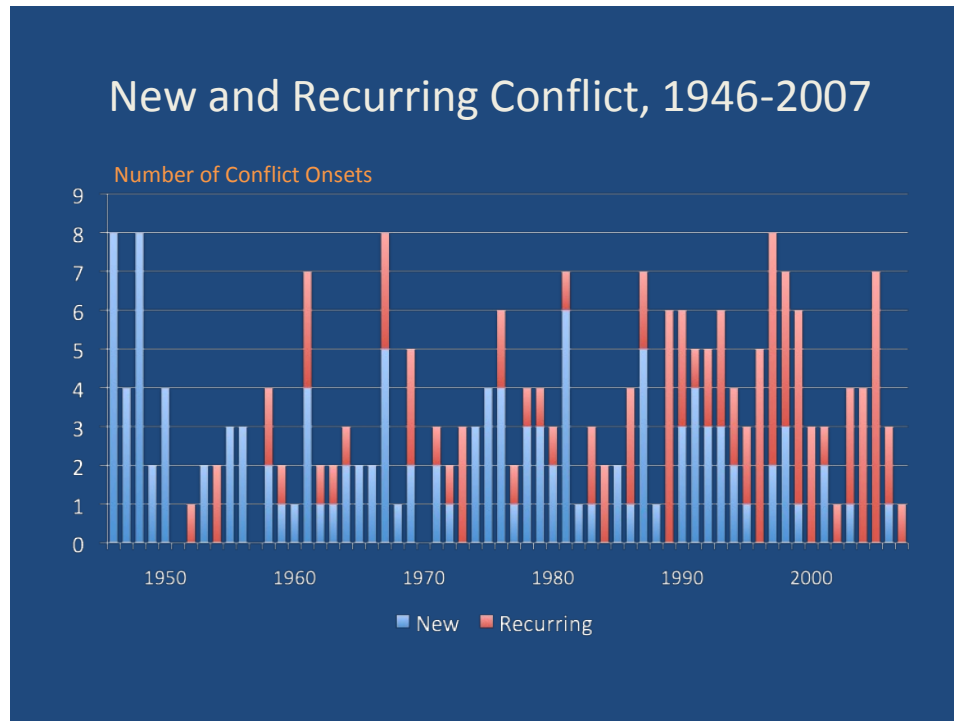
- **Reality: Of the 39 armed conflicts that became active in the last 10 years, 31 were conflict recurrences – instances of resurgent, armed violence in societies where conflict had been largely dormant for at least a year.**

So during this current period, the greatest threat of armed conflict has come from countries that recently managed a serious armed conflict. The current rate of conflict recurrence is at its highest level since World War II. One of the greatest challenges facing the international community involves achieving real and lasting resolution of these recurring and seemingly intractable conflicts.

In the post-Cold War era, civil wars last almost four times longer, are less likely to terminate in agreement, and are more likely to recur than interstate wars. 57% of states that experienced a civil war since the end of WWII also experienced a civil war recurrence. And some civil wars have recurred *multiple* times. Walter (2013) lists the following cases: Iraq, Afghanistan, Burundi, Rwanda, Angola, Chad, DRC, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines, Somalia, Sudan, and Sri Lanka.

The next figure shows the evolution over time of the mix between new and recurring conflicts in the system. As can be seen quite vividly, there has been a clear shift in the balance between new and recurring conflicts over time, dramatically bringing into focus the general failure of the system to deal effectively with conflicts in order to prevent their recurrence. Simply put,

despite the proliferation of institutions, we are not getting it right in terms of conflict resolution.

New and Recurring Conflict, 1946-2007

Number of Conflict Onsets

(Bar chart showing number of conflict onsets from 1946 to 2007, with bars for "New" and "Recurring" conflicts. Y-axis ranges from 0 to 9. X-axis labeled 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000.)

■ New ■ Recurring

The Shifting Nature of Conflict and the Role of Mediation

As the distribution of conflicts has shifted in the post-Cold War era from a predominantly interstate phenomenon to one dominated by intrastate rivalries and as conflict recurrences have become fixtures of this environment, scholars and practitioners of international politics have scrambled to adapt conflict management and conflict resolution tools to meet this shifting challenge. This shift toward an increased need for the international community to become involved in intrastate conflicts is especially challenging as intrastate conflicts can prove to be more difficult to address than interstate ones, for a variety of reasons.

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- Due to their nature, intrastate conflicts tend to include "significant power asymmetries," with one side being more powerful and better prepared than its adversary (Gartner 2011). This can become especially problematic as often one side is a non-state actor, and hence has "fewer constraints on their behavior" as a result of being less institutionalized and less accountable to a domestic constituency.

- This also means that they may not feel themselves as bound by the same international norms regarding the use of violence as are their state adversaries (Gartner 2011). The "invasion" of Iraq by the Sunni-dominated Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in June 2014 follows this non-state actor pattern.

- Furthermore, state governments are often hesitant to allow third parties to intervene as "conflict management provides status, [especially as] negotiating as equals attributes credibility to civil war leaders" (Gartner 2011).

- The presence of apparently zero-sum issues in intrastate conflicts makes them particularly difficult to resolve.

- Finally, commitment problems are more likely to occur in mediation attempts at the intrastate level because parties can have insincere motives. Instead of using mediation to arrive at a durable solution, parties may use it to justify approaches to nationalism, to achieve legitimacy, or simply to buy time to mobilize resources as they regroup (Beardsley 2011).

The Role of Mediation in International Crisis Management

These circumstances require a systematic approach to crisis management whereby we can attempt to match the conditions of conflict with appropriate conflict management mechanisms

as we seek more effective control of conflict. Mediation is but one of a number of tools available for addressing conflict and crisis – others include arbitration, adjudication, and intervention in the form of peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping, sanctions, and of course direct negotiations between the parties themselves. I focus on mediation because when it is applied to the confluence of conditions that typify todays conflict and crisis arena, mediation - either alone or in combination with other intervention mechanisms - can make a crucial difference in whether or not the international community will be successful in limiting conflict and crisis.

The management of international crises has evolved over the years as the nature of the international system has changed. The current system is characterized by a proliferation of non-state actors, spillover from internal to international conflict, and conflicts and crises occurring in the *gray zone*, that is, crises and conflicts that contain elements of both international rivalry, including among great powers, and domestic conflict, in which actors deliberately keep hostilities at a level short of war and act via proxy in order to avoid attribution and undesirable international attention.

Mediation can of course occur at any point in the continuum, from the onset stage of a conflict (let's call it pre-crisis), or as it escalates and reaches a crisis stage. And just as mediation can occur at various stages of the conflict/crisis continuum, there is also a continuum in terms of the goals of mediation. At one end, crisis mediation might seek short-term violence prevention or the abatement of hostilities if they have already occurred. The goal of mediation then can be crisis management, i.e., possibly rolling back the crisis to the pre-crisis state of the conflict through the achievement of a cease fire or some other form of agreement. Or, the goal of mediation can be conflict resolution in general, in which case not only is the immediate crisis terminated, but we have the possibility of resolution of the overall conflict which gave rise to the crisis in the first place.

How does crisis mediation differ from conflict mediation in general?

     1) For crisis mediation, the practitioner's objective is more related to short-term abatement of the hostilities and less about the long-term durability of peace.

     2) For crisis mediation, the status quo has been rejected by one of the parties as less desirable than fighting; other periods of mediation are ones occurring when the status quo is acceptable relative to the prospects of fighting.

     3) In crisis mediation, the calls for third-party intervention are most acute.

     4) In crisis mediation, the potential for conflict parties to use the peace process for strategic advantage is heightened.

In the case of both the rise in prevalence of intrastate crises and the increasing prominence of gray zone conflict, the international system is faced with new actors and new modes of interactions that are not necessarily part of internationally accepted norms of behavior. In the Syrian civil war, for example, a toxic mix of major and regional powers, non-state actors, and international and regional organizations, have stood in the way of effective negotiation for years.   Mediation under such circumstances must adapt to these changed and changing conditions. Can mediation techniques be implemented where other crisis management tools have failed?

I've recently concluded the editing of a handbook on mediating international crises in the contemporary international system. Jonathan Wilkenfeld, Kyle Beardsley, and David Quinn (eds.), 2019, *Handbook on Mediating International Crises*, Edward Elgar Publishers, UK. I'd like to share with you some of the major findings, with particular relevance to the international policy community.

1. **Mediation Achieves Results Despite Facing Significant Challenges in the Current International System**

Crises in the international system have become increasingly complex over time. A dizzying array of actors and interests involved in recent crises in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Ukraine. The trend toward increasing complexity can largely be attributed to a related increase in crises with characteristics of "gray zone" conflicts, a recent term developed to describe crises and conflicts that contain elements of both international rivalry, including among great powers, and domestic conflict, in which actors deliberately keep hostilities at a level short of war and act via proxy in order to avoid attribution and undesirable international attention.

Even in these difficult circumstances, mediation has a significant effect on helping to prevent conflict; achieve peace agreements, as well as an effect on the form and content of those agreements; and at the very least managing crises in the short-term, with some potential for long-term success as well. The fact that mediators are getting involved in the most difficult crises means that they tend to go where they are most needed, rather than wasting scarce resources on conflicts that the disputants themselves can resolve.

2. **Effective Crisis Mediation Requires Attention to Both the Domestic and International Levels**

The increasing frequency of crises involving non-state actors and "gray zone" elements calls for greater attention to domestic conflict in the study and practice of mediation. Many recurring conflicts in the international system are rooted in intrastate conflict and a concomitant lack of attention to sub-group grievances. In many cases, the inability of the international system to respond to intrastate crises has spilled over into international conflict. Mediators of international crises need to address domestic conflict issues as well. The study of crisis mediation could also benefit from dual attention to domestic and international conflict.

3. **Mediator Reputations, Gender, and Ties with Disputants are Important Factors Influencing Mediation Incidence**

    Characteristics of mediators and how they match up with disputant demands are also important factors that influence the occurrence of mediation and the type of mediator that becomes involved.

    Experienced and effective mediators are more likely to mediate again. Disputants want prestigious mediators and mediators desire prestige. Disputants prefer third party mediators that have had experience and success as mediators in the past, and particularly ones with more recent successes.

    The potential payoffs of mediating are higher when ties exist between disputants and potential mediators. These payoffs can take the form of increased strategic or political benefits among allies or increased economic benefits among trading partners. Mediation is more likely when disputants and potential mediators share cultural characteristics.

4. **Managing a Crisis, Despite Being a Short-Term Solution, Is Important and Should Not Be Undervalued**

    Attempting to resolve all underlying issues at stake in a conflict is a virtuous goal for a mediator, and success in pursuit of that endeavor would be the ultimate achievement of a mediation process. However, not all situations allow mediators the leeway to focus their efforts on such high-minded outcomes, and in some cases, focusing predominantly on resolving the underlying conflict when more pressing issues are at stake can prolong the crisis or conflict and cause mediators to miss chances for more reasonable achievements along the way.

    Short-term and smaller-scale agreements can set the stage for more comprehensive agreements down the road and instill confidence in the broader mediation process. Humanitarian concerns should also not be understated: sometimes managing a crisis to an

agreement that halts violence, even if temporarily, is a prerequisite for aid to be delivered to civilians populations affected by the fighting.

Even if violence has erupted, mediators are often able to effectively manage crises and conflicts by helping to achieve peace agreements. Civil wars that experience mediation are more likely to produce agreement provisions that reduce fear (in the form of security and implementation guarantees) and enhance trust (in the form of attending to justice and reconciliation issues) than those that do not.

5.   Make Sure the Right Players Are at the Table

With increasing complexity of conflicts worldwide, fewer conflicts have a simple symmetry of side A versus side B. One key consequence is that difficult choices often have to be made over which actors to include in a peace process. Putting more seats at the table may not lead to more positive results as it becomes more difficult to find a bargain that is acceptable to all the parties at the table.

It may in fact be necessary for mediators to identify and bring the most important disputants and the veto players to the table first—the key stakeholders—resolve their issues, and then broaden the number of actors at the table.

At the same time, excluding certain actors can lead to extremist violence intended to spoil the peace process. Skillful mediation will be needed to thread the needle in a way that tackles the core issues first among a constrained set of stakeholders but minimizes the antagonism felt by excluded players and the potential for spoiling behavior.

6.   Weigh the Composition of the Mediation Team

Just as it is common to have multiple stakeholders involved in a conflict and peace process, it is also common to have multiple third parties with interests in being at the bargaining table. **Solo**

mediators are less likely to be successful than in the past, and there is the potential for multiparty mediation to enhance flexibility and versatility and contribute to long-term success. There is also the potential for teams of mediators to be configured so that they maximize the potential for biased relationships to be used as a resource without unfairly favoring one side in the talks. Mediation teams may especially become the norm as crises get more complex and have gray zone characteristics.

While multiparty mediation has some key advantages, it also carries important tradeoffs that practitioners must consider. More mediators, which are especially likely in intense conflicts, decrease the chances of coordination and the achievement of agreement.

As disputing parties and potential mediators consider the composition of the mediation team, it is important to consider the potential role of domestic mediators in civil wars, which have a set of strengths that external mediators do not. Domestic mediators can send signals, empathize with parties, serve as trusted communication channels, and have access to both information and the parties themselves in ways that other mediators cannot. Their response time is also quicker. They can be especially effective in the short term, particularly when they have sufficient convening power, resources to conduct their efforts, and, relatedly, can use situational pressure and leverage.

Domestic mediators, however, also carry some potential drawbacks. Their effectiveness is generally limited, particularly when they receive little external support for their efforts—they often lack sufficient leverage of their own to push the parties toward agreement. They also may lack formal training or experience gained from mediating other crises.

Regional mediators carry their own comparative advantages. They are more effective at managing intrastate crises once violence has erupted than the UN and domestic mediators. Regional organizations have quicker response times than global actors such as the UN.

Finally, mediators from outside the domestic or regional contexts—especially those with power and leverage—may be especially needed to coordinate efforts or seal the deal. Western mediators are more effective at managing crises and securing agreements than regional African and domestic mediators because of their potential to exert leverage in manipulative mediation.

7.   There Is a Need for Multi-faceted and Coordinated Intervention

In light of the common practice of multiparty mediation, coordination among third parties on a mediation team is often essential. To be effective, mediation teams in civil wars will need to be more multi-faceted, draw upon different experiences of their members, communicate effectively, successfully avoid (or at least reduce) intra-team competition and increase intra-team coordination, develop trust and respect, and learn additional team skills in order to work with other, diverse mediators effectively.

Mediators also need to coordinate with other, non-coercive third-party efforts. The delivery of humanitarian aid to refugees should be complemented with mediation as a partnership between governments, NGOs, and the private sector. There is a need for external parties to be prepared to provide adequate support to resource-deficient domestic mediators in intrastate conflict. Effective mediation in intrastate crises will require sustained consultation with and perhaps resource contributions from other members of the international community that can perform functions more effectively than the mediator.

8.   The Disputants are Sensitive to Mediation Style and Bias

The use of directive (manipulative) mediation increases the effectiveness of most types of mediators, at least in the short-term. But mediation that relies heavily on leverage has little to no effect on long-term success. Manipulative mediation leads to more agreements, but not necessarily to long term conflict resolution.

The relationships that the mediators have with the disputants can be a key component in guiding the disputants in crisis management. Biased relationships can be harnessed as a resource related to leverage that third parties use to shape peace processes, especially if multiparty mediation teams are designed to account for the different directions of bias.

9.   The UN Must Continue to Lead as a Peacemaker

The UN is the standard bearer for third-party efforts to manage international crises. By and large, the UN has been serving this role well. That being said, there is plenty of room for improvement in the efficacy of the UN as a peacemaker. The UN is less effective as a mediator in terms of managing and resolving conflicts that are already underway. Because the UN is so active, any structural improvements to UN efforts will have widespread positive consequences.

With its own limitations (P-5 for example), effective coordination, among actors within the UN and outside the UN becomes paramount. Importance of focusing on UN coordination and collaboration with other actors in domestic crises, such as other mediators, regional powers, and local groups with more developed contextual understandings and specialized capabilities.

10.   Mediation is Not Appropriate or Effective in Certain Contexts

Mediation should often be avoided in crises related to "inspired movements" with non-negotiable aims/motivations and strong commitment to those goals, at least until the movements' commitment and motivations soften over time. Arbitration and adjudication as more effective than mediation when the actors are facing high domestic audience costs, since these legal mechanisms allow actors to relinquish control of the process to the third party that can then be held culpable. Mediation is ill-suited to prevent or resolve cyber incidents and disputes, in part because the resort to cyber tactics is already an indication of actor restraint.

Certain types of mediators should also be precluded from crisis mediation. Citing Libya and Syria, advise that the UN should not be brought in as a mediator in conflicts reflecting high degrees of system polarity. When powerful UN members are on opposite sides of a crisis and exert a strong influence on the direction of the conflict, UN mediation is not likely to help de-escalate the situation.