

# From Crisis Management to Conflict Resolution in Mediated International Crises<sup>1</sup>

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This paper will focus on mediation, and how its practice has been impacted by critical emerging features of the international system. The focus will be on mediation as one of the mechanisms available to the international community for deal with crises. Three interacting characteristics of contemporary international crises will be examined in depth: protracted conflicts, gray zone crises, and the role of proxies in crisis situations.

Let's begin first by clarifying our thoughts on **crisis**. In the context of this research, conflict/crisis is conceived as a continuum. At some point in an ongoing conflict, perhaps over land or resources, control of government, borders between states, etc. that conflict, whether interstate or intrastate, reaches crisis proportions – widespread protests, threatening troop movements, violations of cease fires, or actual violence. That is, there has been a change in the disruptive interactions between the parties, resulting either in hostilities or in a higher than normal likelihood of violent hostilities. At that point, the conflict has escalated to crisis. It need not entail violence, but there is a heightened probability that violence may ensue. From the perspective of an individual actor, there is a perception of increased threat to basic values, a finite time for response, and an increase in the probability of violence (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 2000)<sup>3</sup>.

The first emerging feature of the contemporary international system is the decline in the number of international conflicts and crises between states, coupled with the increasing prevalence of intrastate conflicts and crises. This, in turn, is forcing us to rethink the

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<sup>3</sup> All citations in **bold** refer to chapters in Wilkenfeld, Beardsley, and Quinn (eds.) 2019, *Handbook on Mediating International Crises*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

institutions and mechanisms that served mediation roles for disputes between nation states. The phenomenon of **interstate conflict**, involving two or more states, has all but disappeared from the international system during the course of the past 4 decades. Conflict in the system today is made up almost entirely of internal or **intrastate conflict**, or conflict within states. One of the key outcomes of the shifting of crisis to the intrastate level is the frequency with which crises recur – a sure symptom that mediation and others interventionist mechanisms are not doing their job. The greatest threat of armed conflict today comes from countries that recently managed a serious armed conflict. One of the greatest challenges facing the international community today involves achieving real and lasting resolution of these recurring and seemingly intractable conflicts.

The second emerging feature of the contemporary international system is the **gray zone**. This has been conceptualized as a space between war and peace where major powers spar with each other indirectly or through the actions of their proxies. The gray zone is a conceptual space, occurring when actors purposefully use multiple elements of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict. These actions challenge, undermine, or violate international customs, norms, or laws (Bragg et al. 2016). The link between gray zone and crisis could not be clearer: in the decade ending in December 2015, 15 of the 28 international crises were directly related to gray zone conflicts, including the North Korea crises of 2009, 2010 (2), 2013, 2015; Syria 2012 (2), 2013, 2015, and South China Sea (2012, 2014). And the trend is increasing with time: 9 of the 10 international crises in the past 4 years have their origins in a gray zone conflict.

A third central feature of the international system today is a class of crises arising from **transnational threats to human security**. Climate change, human rights violations on a massive scale, refugee flows, cybersecurity threats, and massive inequality within and between nations, have contributed to a sense of crisis that is beyond the ability of single states to address. The challenges and opportunities facing the international system today are easily recognized. They differ from those identified by previous generations only to the extent that their impact is on a grander scale – organizations with conflicting agendas and interests become societies and nations with the use of violence and war at their disposal; local pollution becomes a contributor to global warming and climate change; and poverty and income disparities become a flood of illegal immigration into Southern Europe and the southwestern United States (Wilkenfeld 2016). A key question is whether aspects of these transnational crises can be mitigated through mediation, and if so, how must mediation practice be adapted to more successfully address this class of crises. Or do issues like sovereignty and enforcement stand in the way of crisis management in these areas?

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. In the area of climate change as a transnational threat to human security, such seemingly insurmountable challenges as differential treatment for the developed and developing world, mitigation versus adaptation, and even an agreement on the science of climate change itself have stood in the way of addressing this imminent threat. Can mediation techniques be implemented where other crisis management tools have failed?

For several years now research teams that have attempted to identify those conflict environments where mediation strategies are most effective, and where they can be adapted in order to ensure greater success. Over the course of this exploration, we have come to identify four core areas where the type of mediation most likely to lead to positive outcomes differ from one context to another. These core areas are near international crisis (James 2019), international crises in general (Wilkenfeld and Brecher 2019), crises that occur in an environment of gray zone conflict (Stevenson 2019), and sub-national crises that have the potential to or have actually spilled over into the international system (Kishi et al. 2019). Since these categories are not mutually exclusive, what we have at this stage is a rather fluid beginning of an understanding of how mediation applies to each. One thing we know for sure – a large proportion of crises at all of these levels remain unresolved for many years, and the current state of conflict and crisis recurrence is a major contributing factor to international instability.

The focus of this paper is on crises at the international level, including those crises that began at the intrastate level and spill over into the international system. In this context, we will attempt to better understand the impact of mediation in gray zone crises in general, and in particular, when such crises are occurring in the context of a protracted conflict. We will then turn to how mediation efforts might be adapted to become more effective.

The remainder of the paper is presented in two parts. First, we will present some very preliminary findings from a new dataset on crises occurring in the context of gray zone and protracted conflicts. In particular, we are focused on the issue of how a crisis actor makes the decision to escalate, deescalate, or match the behavior of its adversary in a crisis.

Next, we'll discuss several of the major conclusion from a set of studies that have been included in a new *Handbook on Mediating International Crises* edited by Jonathan Wilkenfeld, Kyle Beardsley, and David Quinn recently edited. Many of the contributors to the handbook are also affiliated with the Folke Bernadotte Academy and specifically with the Conflict Prevention Group.

Figure 1 presents a general picture of our approach.

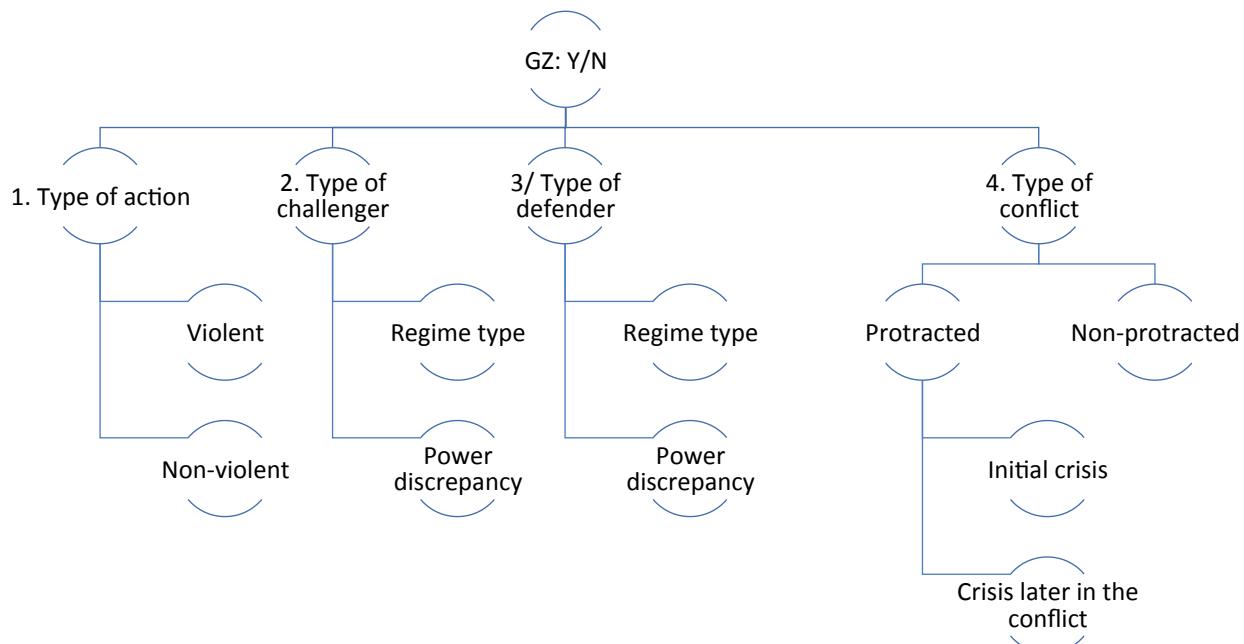


Figure 1: Research Approach

Consider a sample crisis path: a challenger launches a crisis with a non-violent trigger, which we interpret as a gray zone action; the challenger is a non-democracy while the defender is a democracy; power discrepancy favors the challenger; this crisis is part of a protracted conflict and it is the first one in a series of crises. Under the given circumstances, we look first at the defender's preferences for a response: de-escalate, match with violence or non-violence, or escalate the crisis further. In the quantitative portion of the project, we look at historical behavioral patterns, using the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) data beginning with the period 1990-2015 and expanding in the outyears of the project back to the end of WWII.

## Preliminary Analyses

We are in the process of assembling a new dataset on escalation management in gray zone crises. This work is being undertaken under the auspices of the Minerva Initiative through a

grant to the University of Maryland titled “Escalation Management in the Gray Zone: Shaping Decision Calculus.” As part of this ongoing work, we have coded variables that examine the different ways in which crisis actors interact, depending on the factors we identified in Figure 1 above. That is, does the fact that the crisis is occurring in the midst of an ongoing protracted conflict make a difference in terms of how an actor responds to an initial trigger? Is the effectiveness of the type of mediation employed in such crises impacted? When crises occur in the context of a gray zone conflict, is one type of mediation or another most appropriate and effective? Does the existence of proxy actors in gray zone crisis impact the effectiveness of crisis mediation?

Three caveats. First, this phase of the data collection pertains only to 1990-2015, i.e., post-Cold War. Second, we are determining whether or not a crisis is gray zone solely on the basis of the initial interactions between the crisis actors, that is, initial triggering act and the response it generates. And third, data collection is ongoing, so the results reported below should be viewed as preliminary.

While this will not in general be a hypothesis testing exercise at this point in the development of our conceptual framework and the collection of data, there are several assumptions we are making about the difficulty in successfully mediating crises that occur in the midst of protracted conflicts. Without going into detail at this point, here are some of these assumptions about critical characteristics of protracted conflicts that can impact the effectiveness of intervention tactics, including mediation.

- Each instance of a crisis within a protracted conflict comes with a legacy of how the previous crisis ended
- Non-state actors are often veto players
- The composition of mediation teams will change over the course of a protracted conflict
- The nature of the international system is evolving, along with its power distribution
- Many crises contain both domestic and international elements
- There is a tendency to go for overall resolution of the underlying conflict

### **Protracted Conflict**

Brecher and Wilkenfeld (2000) and Brecher (2016) define protracted conflict as involving frequent and regularly recurring conflict among the same adversaries. These crises present tremendous challenges to peacemakers, who have to navigate entrenched positions on multiple issues and mutual mistrust between the parties. Protracted conflicts rarely end because of some landmark accord that is struck between the adversaries. While expecting mediation attempts to bring about an end to the protracted conflict is in most cases unrealistic, the short-term ability of mediation to help manage tensions in crises within protracted conflicts can shed light on the relevance of third parties in the most salient crises of our time.

So how do protracted conflict and mediation fit together in terms of crisis abatement and conflict resolution? For the entire 1918-2015 period, the incidence of mediation is no higher for crises occurring in the midst of an ongoing protracted conflict than it is for non-protracted conflict cases. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of mediation in terms of abating intra-crisis violence is considerably higher in protracted conflict crises for this period (see Figure 2).

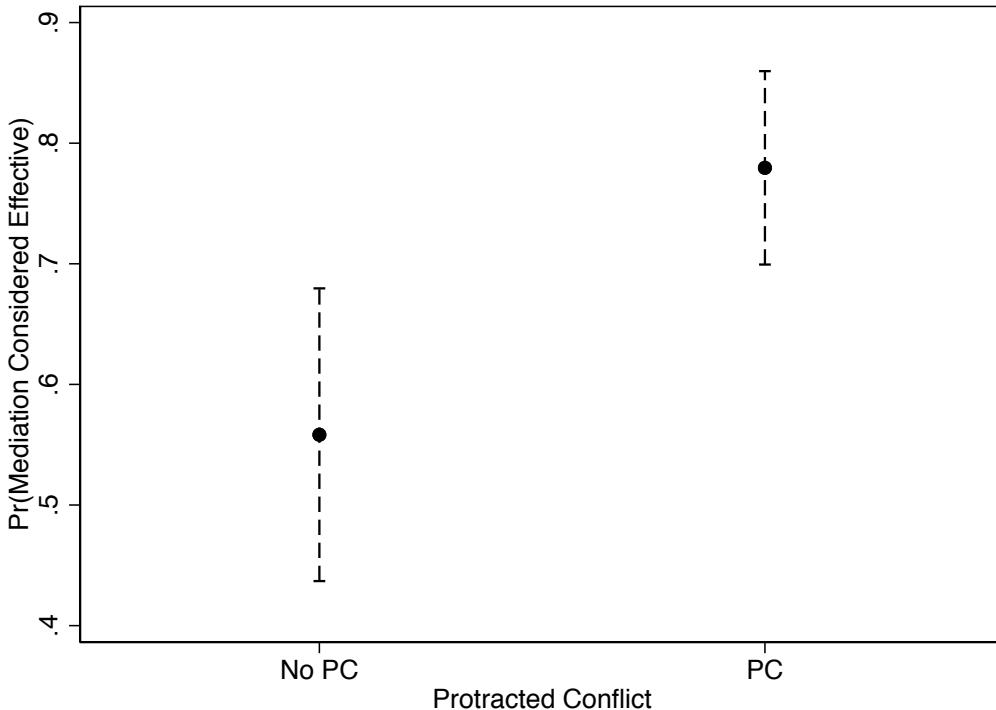


Figure 2: *Relationship between mediation efficacy and protracted conflict (PC)*

This encouraging finding must be tempered when we look specifically at a comparison between Cold War and post-Cold War crises: while crises occurring in Cold War protracted conflicts exhibit a strong positive impact for mediation, no such impact is evident in post-Cold War cases. Protracted conflicts/enduring rivalries are marked by inertia, intransigence, and intractable negative views of one's opponent. These characteristics of protracted conflicts are exacerbated by gray zone conflict, one of the defining characteristics of crisis in the post-Cold War period. It appears that crisis actors need a mediator to help them when they are on the brink of crisis escalation because they can't do it themselves very well. But the nature of these gray zone protracted conflicts simultaneously acts as an albatross, pulling them back into repeated crises and diminishing the positive effect that mediators can have on long-term tension reduction. This finding for interstate crises is consistent with earlier findings on intra-state African PC crises.

## Gray Zone

The data show two patterns that offer insight into gray zone triggers and responses. For all non-gray zone triggers, both violent and non-violent, the most common response was an attempt to match the trigger. However, those crises triggered by gray zone acts, the most common response was de-escalation. This difference in response between gray and non-gray triggers suggests that gray zone triggers are often successful in terms of their intent – actors engage in gray zone tactics in order to reduce the risk of escalation that might be incurred if direct action was taken. De-escalation in terms of the major response undertaken by the adversary signifies successful escalation management on the part of the initiating party. Matching is appropriate when the intent of the triggering entity is unambiguous, resulting in a tit-for-tat dynamic. When the action is ambiguous, leaving the targeted actor to try to interpret the triggering actor's intent, greater care must be taken in formulating a response, hence de-escalation is an appropriate response.

More generally, a gray zone response, no matter what the trigger, is extremely uncommon. Actors are more likely to engage in gray zone acts in the beginning of a crisis, rather than once the crisis is ongoing. In the midst of a crisis, actors have a reduced incentive to be covert or ambiguous in their intent. Rather, these subsequent actions are meant to reflect clear intent on the part of the parties to the crisis. Additionally, once an actor's crisis has been triggered, covert or ambiguous counter-action will not be necessary to justify that action.

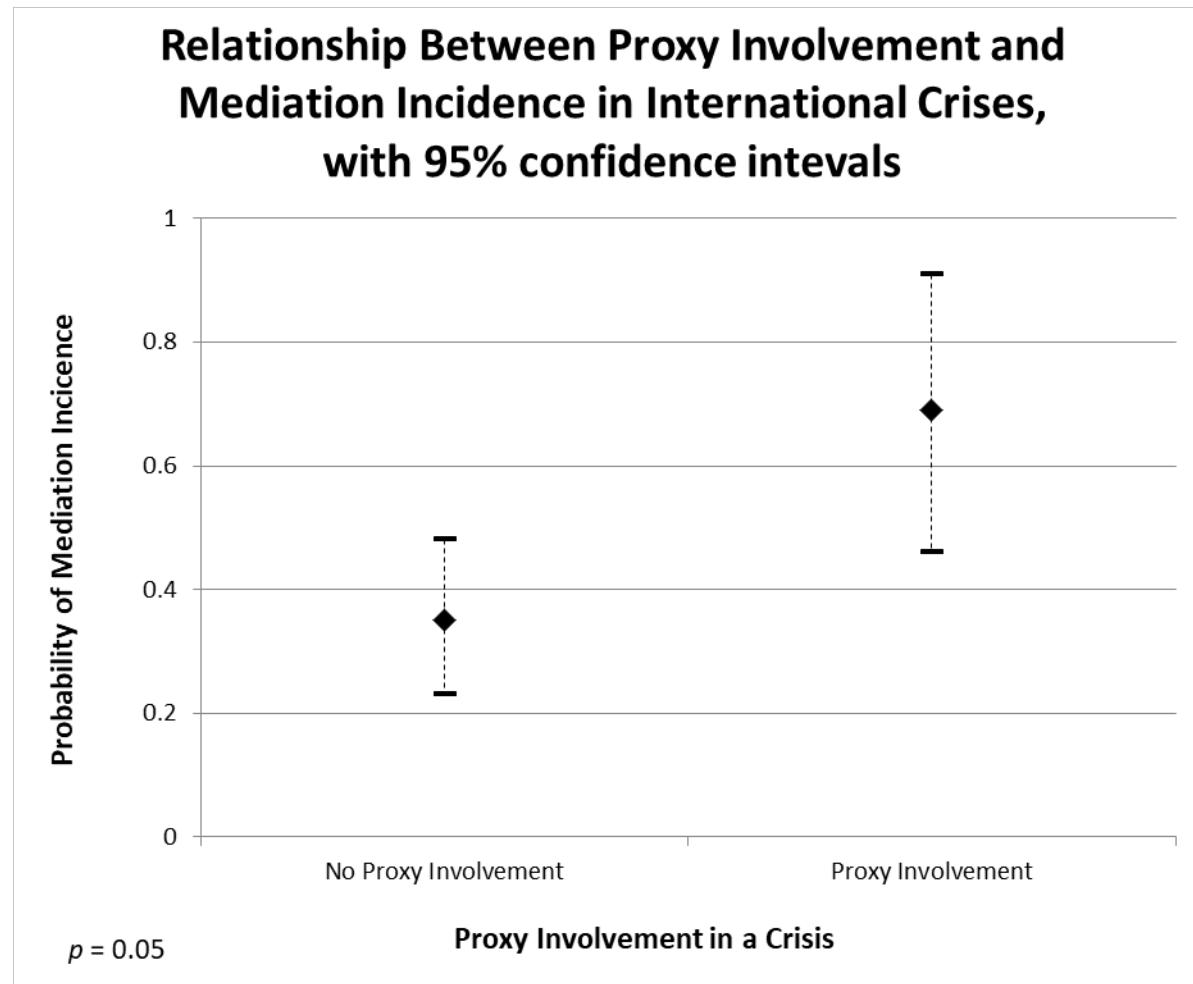
Let's delve a little further into the characteristics of gray zone crises and post-Cold War protracted conflict. One of the factors leading down the road to effective crisis management is whether or not the actor whose crisis has been triggered responds proportionally to that trigger. A response that is stronger than the initial triggering event is more likely to lead to an escalation of the crisis. Overall for the post-Cold War period, 64% of actors showed either matching or de-escalation in their responses to triggering events. However, when we consider only those cases in which a gray zone trigger has occurred, we find that an overwhelming majority of those cases (25 of 30 or 83%) did not exhibit matching behavior. Further, only 9 of 34 cases with gray zone triggers exhibited escalation to violence in the major response. And 22 of 30 crises triggered by a gray zone action (73%). Finally, for crises experiencing non-gray zone triggering acts, 48 of 64 or 75% showed no move to gray response to a non-gray trigger.

## Proxies

Proxies can often play an outsized role in gray zone conflicts and crises. Usually unhindered by international “rules of the game,” and focused more-narrowly than state actors on a small number of specific and zero-sum interests, their presence in the mix of actors involved in a crisis can create serious difficulties for negotiators and mediators. It may be that it is the existence of proxies in the mix, rather than gray zone per se, that impacts whether or not mediation occurs. So on the one hand the existence of proxies in the mix makes mediation

more likely, but it makes achieving agreements more difficult. Some preliminary regression analyses show that while the existence of proxies has a negative impact on crisis management, mediation has a positive impact. While mediation makes achieving agreements more likely, its impact can be dragged down by the existence of proxies in gray zone crises, the predominant type of crisis in the international system today. See Figure 3 for the impact of proxy involvement - *positive* - on the likelihood of mediation, and Figure 4 for the impact of proxy involvement – *negative* – on likelihood of agreement.

Figure 3: Proxy Involvement and Mediation Incidence

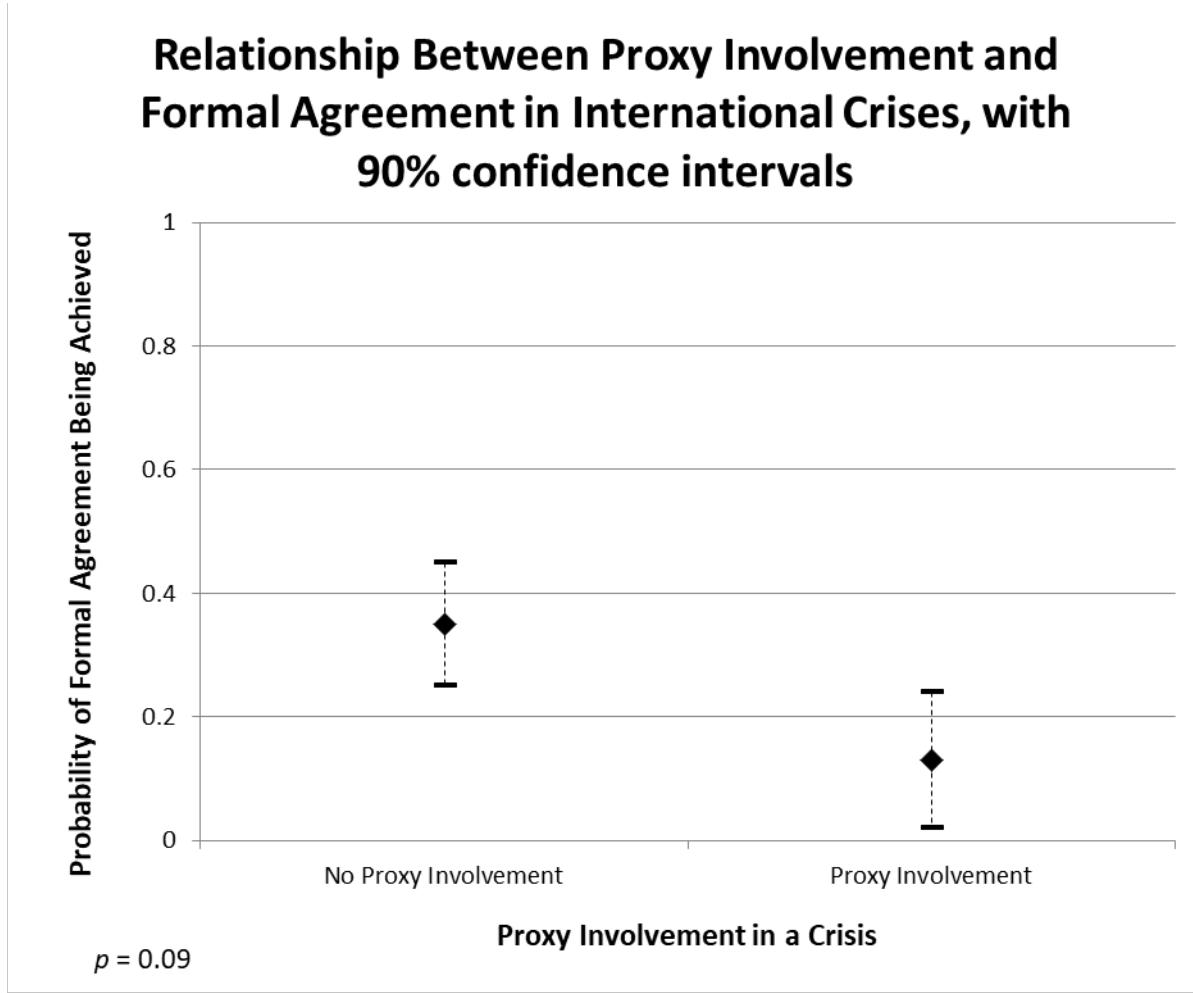


Likelihood of mediation in case with proxies: 0.6859301

Likelihood of mediation in case without proxies: 0.3546943

Change in likelihood: +.32

Figure 4: Proxy Involvement and Formal Agreement



This preliminary finding for proxies may lead us back to protracted conflict. Proxies typify gray zone crises, and gray zone crises are the most common form of crisis in protracted conflicts. How national decision makers handle gray zone crises is thus critical. An important lesson learned here is that actors use gray zone tactics with care when initiating action against an adversary, using ambiguity and covert action as a way of controlling the response. And the data show that the most common way of doing this is through the actions of a proxy. This proxy gray zone action requires that the targeted actor choose its response carefully, so as not to escalate to a level of hostility not intended by the triggering actor. So while this dynamic makes

for a somewhat controlled interaction pattern between the triggering actor and the responding actor, where one might think that a mediator could move in to help manage the crisis, success on the part of the mediator can be elusive precisely because a proxy is in the mix. While the actions of a proxy might be partially under the control of the patron, the narrow interests of proxies might be more difficult for mediators to accommodate in a negotiation.

## **Lessons for Mediators in Protracted Gray Zone Crises**

### **1. Mediation Achieves Results Despite Facing Significant Challenges in the Current International System<sup>4</sup>**

Crises in the international system have become increasingly complex over time, and are perhaps even more complicated nowadays than the peak of ethnic conflict during the early-to-mid-1990s. This is exemplified most clearly by the wide array of actors and interests involved in many recent crises such as those 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 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 may even act via proxies in order to avoid attribution and undesirable international attention.

Gray zone elements complicate crises by increasing the number of actors and the number of competing interests. Many of these interests are zero-sum, stemming in large part from the involvement of non-state actors with more limited sets of interests. In addition, mediation is increasingly likely to involve multiple third parties, acting in cooperation with one another, independent of one another, or at times in competition with one another. Many of these third parties can be seen as veto players.

Rivalry between major powers, often carried out through proxies, is also a key element of gray zone crises that makes life difficult for mediators. **White, Cunningham, and Beardsley** give a clear assessment of the present situation, pointing out that many future conflicts have the potential to take on “gray zone” characteristics due to heightened competition between the United States and both Russia and China. **Stevenson** notes that potential mediators face difficulties when dealing with situations where “gray zone actors” violate common conventions and norms but stop short of violating international law, where attribution is difficult due to either active avoidance of penalties for violation of international law or states use violent non-state actor proxies to advance their interests, and where escalation to full-scale violence is not the intent of the conflict itself. In situations such as the latter, Stevenson points out that

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<sup>4</sup> All citations in this section refer to chapters in Wilkenfeld, Beardsley, and Quinn, 2019, *Handbook on Mediating International Crises*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

mediators will need to focus on returning conditions to ordinary rival competition, a task that may be at odds with the “classic” goal of mediation, which is broad and deep conflict settlement.

**Reid, Gartner et al.**, and **Beardsley et al.** show that mediators tend to select into the most difficult, intractable conflicts, most often protracted conflicts where mediation has had a poor track record, and with a mixture of state and non-state actors, as well as crises in which the prospects for agreement are low.

Despite the long odds that mediators face in the current international system, mediation still has an important contribution to make to crisis management and conflict resolution. **Beardsley et al.** point out an important supply-side factor: 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

Protracted conflicts are likely to have significant domestic conflict issues in the mix, complicating the role of the mediator in assisting the parties in arriving at sustainable conflict resolution. This is particularly true with the increasing frequency of crises involving non-state actors and “gray zone” elements which call for greater attention to domestic conflict in the study and practice of mediation. **Wilkenfeld and Brecher** demonstrate that many recurring conflicts in the international system are rooted in intrastate conflict and a concomitant lack of attention to sub-group grievances. And in many cases, the inability of the international system to respond to intrastate crises has allowed them to spill over into international conflict.

The good news is that mediators appear to be getting involved in crises that have domestic elements. **Beardsley, Quinn** and **Wilkenfeld** provide evidence that in the case of Africa at least, a large proportion of intrastate crises are mediated. Many of these crises also involve nearby state and non-state actors acting as patrons providing material and/or military support to one or more sides, often directly in the form of troops-on-the-ground. Hence, in Africa, mediators are getting involved in internationalized intrastate crises. On the flipside, **Beardsley, Quinn**, and **Wilkenfeld** also find evidence that the likelihood of an international, state-to-state crisis being mediated increases sizably with the significant involvement of one or more non-state actors. To be effective in these contexts, mediators will need to focus attention on both the domestic and international aspects of these crises. More research is needed as to whether mediators are achieving a sufficient balance.

There is a dearth of scholarly attention paid to the subject of intrastate crisis mediation. There is some evidence that various attributes of mediators themselves and the context in which mediators get involved have a positive effect on the outcomes of intrastate crises. Mediation by

*domestic third parties* is another related and under-studied phenomenon, and the outlook is similarly moderate regarding the effectiveness of this form of mediation. Both **Kishi, Quinn, Wilkenfeld, and Gelfand** and **Hoffman and Christie** find some evidence that domestic mediators can help to produce positive results during intrastate peace processes, but both sets of authors find the statistical and substantive effect of domestic mediators to be limited and dependent to some degree on external support of the domestic mediation effort.

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

While mediators may wish to intervene in a protracted conflict with a drastically new approach to overall resolution - see for example the Trump Administration's efforts at yet another grand Israel-Palestine peace agreement – it is often more reasonable to measure the success of mediation in terms of the management of a particular crisis that is part of this protracted conflict. That is, maybe all we can expect is to manage rather than resolve. Under some circumstances, mediators may try to approach a conflict with ultimate resolution of underlying issues and grievances as a goal, but may confront the need to manage first. In other cases, the mediators may begin with only management in mind. This is particularly true of protracted conflicts. In fact, focusing predominantly on resolving the underlying conflict when more pressing humanitarian and security issues are at stake may prolong the crisis or conflict and cause mediators to miss chances for more reasonable achievements along the way.

Focusing, or perhaps re-focusing, on achieving short-term outcomes may in fact be naturally inevitable for mediators. **Vukovic and Hopmann** argue that mediators face “systemic, procedural, and relational constraints” that often naturally push them toward focusing on achieving short-term outcomes. **Gent** also highlights the role of reputational concerns: mediators have incentives to seek easier, short-term success in order to boost their bona fides as mediators.

**Vukovic and Hopmann** argue that 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. They also argue that such agreements are inherently valuable if they provide greater payoffs to the parties or help to avert full-scale war. 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 civilian populations affected by the fighting.

**White, Cunningham, and Beardsley** find that mediation, particularly when conducted by the United Nations, has important conflict *prevention* effects. They find that the UN is able to effectively manage non-violent self-determination disputes in a way that prevents such disputes from escalating to civil war, particularly when it uses diplomatic means of intervention, including mediation. War prevention is perhaps an even more imperative goal of third-party

intervention than resolving a war that has already begun, and these results provide hope that mediators can achieve positive results toward that end.

At the international level, **Beardsley, Quinn, and Wilkenfeld** find that despite the tendency of mediators to get involved in international crises that are difficult and complex, they are able to surmount these obstacles and increase the likelihood of such crises terminating in agreement. As a further testament to their efficacy, mediators seem to be most effective at achieving agreements in crises that are part of the most endemic, protracted conflicts. **Gent** contends that mediator incentives to pad their resumes with successes do not promote long-term resolution. **Kishi et al.** (also find that mediators in African intrastate crises contribute very little to long-term conflict resolution. While crisis management is important, it should not work at cross-purposes with conflict resolution.

**Kemp** notes that mediators seeking short-term agreements may be counterproductive when it comes to negotiations on climate change, an issue that has been particularly prone to an approach that “kicks the can down the road,” perhaps purposely to avoid addressing the roots of a global problem. Kemp argues that addressing the roots of conflict on climate change may exacerbate conflict in the short-term but will ultimately be productive in the long-term.

#### 4. 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. This is particularly true of protracted conflicts, which are often characterized by an inability of the parties and mediators to account for the views of all critical veto players. 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. Expanding the set of actors that are given effective veto power decreases the likelihood that a mutually satisfying compromise can be reached.

As **Wilkenfeld and Brecher** highlight, it may in fact be necessary for mediators to identify and bring to the table only the most important disputants and the veto players—the key stakeholders—to attempt to resolve their issues, and then broaden the number of actors at the table. Including only a subset of actors in the negotiation, at least initially and particularly in crises that require a global solution, means that some actors and issues will be excluded, particularly non-state actors whose issues tend to be zero-sum and who therefore find compromise difficult. In this vein, **Carment, Nikolko, and Belo** argue for an approach to the Ukraine conflict that actually reduces the number of veto players at the table. If the US and Russia were to prioritize a bilateral settlement and sideline both Ukraine and the rebels, the negotiations would be simpler and potentially more constructive.

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. To this end, mediators can shape the proposals being considered to reflect some of the key preferences of the excluded actors, as well as to engage the excluded actors on secondary issues. The intended goal of the mediator is to secure some minimal buy-in from at least some elements of the excluded actors to proactively prevent spoiler behavior or at least to minimize the scope of the behavior.

## 5. Weigh the Composition of the Mediation Team

As a protracted conflict evolves, the composition of the mediation team needs to adapt to those changes. Over the course of a lengthy protracted conflict, some actors - either individuals, states, or organizations - who have served as mediators at one stage may no longer be suitable further on. For example, due to the Trump Administration's perceived strong tilt toward the Israeli positions in the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Palestinians have excluded the US from a role in any future negotiations. Were mediation efforts to resume, it is likely that other heretofore lesser involved third parties may need to step up and fill the void left by the US – these could include Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who's own conflict with Iran has pushed them toward a more moderate position in regard to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Or Russia might step into the void left by the US and take on a mediation role.

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. **Crocker, Hampson and Aall** argue that solo mediators are less likely to be successful than in the past, while **DeRouen and Barnett** highlight the potential for multiparty mediation to enhance flexibility and versatility and contribute to long-term success. **Svensson** points to 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, and **Wilkenfeld and Brecher** contend that this poses potential challenges for mediators.

While multiparty mediation has some key advantages, it also carries important tradeoffs that practitioners must consider. **Menninga** has found that more mediators, which are especially likely in intense conflicts, decrease the chances of coordination and the achievement of agreement. Well-intentioned third parties need to make sure that their attempts to get involved in the most troubling situations do not further complicate mediation efforts already underway.

The relationships that the mediators have with the disputants can be a key component in guiding the disputants in crisis management. **Svensson** shines light on how 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. **Reid** similarly highlights the positive role that credibility leverage—which is

crucially tied to the nature of the relationship that a third party has with the crisis actors—has on the formation of peace agreements in civil wars.

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 (**Hoffman and Christie; Crocker et al.; Kishi et al.**) 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.

Finally, **Wilkenfeld and Brecher** posit that 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. In the same vein, **Kishi et al.** contend that, in African intrastate crises, 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. The potential for international actors to bring leverage to bear on their efforts dovetails with the discussion below about important tradeoffs in the substance and style of mediation.

## 6. The Disputants are Sensitive to Mediation Style and Bias

A mediation style that may have been successful in a previous crisis as part of a protracted conflict may not be appropriate for a new crisis. For example, where manipulative mediation may have brought about the termination of a preceding crisis, the legacy of manipulation may cause one or more parties to enter a new phase needing a different approach. This is particularly true when one of the parties to a past mediated crisis may feel that it did not fare as well in the ultimate agreement as other parties did, and this legacy of dissatisfaction may carry over into future mediated negotiations. We have seen in our research on crises in general that it is facilitation and formulation that stand the best chance of producing long term tension reduction in crises, and therefore a way out of a protracted conflict.

Consistent with **Beardsley et al.**’s discussion of mediation style, **DeRouen and Barnett** and **Kishi et al.** find that 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 resolution of the underlying crisis. This lack of understanding of the difference in the impact of mediation style on short term crisis management and long-term conflict resolution is one of the most important contributing factors to a lack of progress in bringing about the termination of protracted conflicts.

## 7. Mediation is Not Appropriate or Effective in Certain Contexts

Whether or not to undertake mediation may depend on the type of crisis, whether it is a first among crises in a PC sequence or occurred later in that sequence, and the types of issues in dispute. **Zartman** for example, argues that 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 movement’s commitment and motivations soften over time or if delayed mediation could help to put public pressure on disputants and create standards for future mediations in the conflict. **Greig, Owsiak and Diehl** point to 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. **Valeriano and Maness** also argue that 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 excluded from crisis mediation. Citing Libya and Syria, **Crocker et al.** 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.

## Conclusion

The research reported here began with the assumption that the recognition of the emergence of gray zone crises during ongoing protracted conflicts was going to be a key to understanding how to better address these conflicts through mediation. What has emerged is a more complicated picture, with the identification of the important role being played by proxy actors in these conflicts. In fact, as we delved more deeply into these conflicts and crises, it became clear that it may very well be the existence of proxies in the mix of crisis actors, rather than the somewhat ill-defined phenomenon of gray zone, that may be critical to both the better understanding of how these crises emerged and evolved, but also how they might ultimately be addressed through such tools as mediation.

The concept of gray zone is somewhat unclear – much is left for interpretation and hence it provides little guidance for either policy makers attempting to develop strategy and tactics for their countries, or for the international community attempting to manage the crisis or resolve the underlying issues. But if we shift our focus to international crises characterized by the existence of proxies, and concentrate on their role in the crisis and what it would take to address their unique concerns, we have a somewhat clearer path to management and resolution.

If proxies are heavily involved in the crises that typify the contemporary international system, where do negotiation and mediation fit into this picture. First, since we know from our research that proxies play critical roles in the evolution of the protracted conflicts that are typical of our current system, we need to adapt some of our basic understandings of effective tools for management and resolution. For example, who sits at the negotiation table with the mediators is critical – should the issues contested by the state actors be addressed first, and then the proxies and their more intense but more limited issues brought in later, or is the reverse the best way for mediators to proceed? Are there particular mediation styles that are more effective when proxies are at the table? Under what circumstances should mediators go for a global solution to the underlying crisis, and when should they tackle instead the management of the crisis and leave resolution for another day? And perhaps most important, when is a crisis of this type ripe for resolution through mediation, and when should it be left to other tools such as intervention and adjudication? Sorting through these questions will help us make the best choices as we advise the international community and its mediators as to the best approach to take.