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BACKGROUND PAPER

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Soldiers walk past damaged buildings in Yarmouk Palestinian camp in Damascus, Syria, 22 May 2018. © REUTERS/Omar Sanadiki

The world is no longer making many peace agreements. The United Nations, in particular, has almost lost an art that it once mastered.

Les vingt glorieuses

During the 20-year period beginning in 1988, most of the world's major armed conflicts were resolved by agreement. There were as many mediation processes in the 1990s as during the entire Cold War period.[1] This led to a dramatic drop in both the number of wars being fought and the number of people killed in war.[2]

The United Nations was at the forefront of this, starting with the process leading to the end of the Iran-Iraq war in August 1988 and the Tripartite Agreement to end the war in Namibia later the same year. The UN then went on to play a central role in political settlements in Lebanon (Taif, 1989), Nicaragua (Tela, 1989), and Cambodia (Paris, 1991). Many of these efforts had been animated by the now-somewhat-forgotten UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar, but continued under his successor, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, with the landmark agreements that ended the civil war in El Salvador (Chapultepec, 1992), Croatia (Erdut, 1995), and Guatemala (Guatemala City, 1996).

In almost all of these early processes, UN diplomacy was personalised rather than institutionalised, discreet rather than public, neutral to an almost obsessive degree, and informed by a deep knowledge of the context.[3]

Bumps in the road

A string of disasters with peacekeeping forces on the ground did nothing to slow UN diplomatic efforts to broker peace agreements, and may even have given it something of a boost.

The first was the 1993 'Black Hawk Down' episode in Somalia, which precipitated the departure of US forces and the collapse of the UN peacekeeping mission on the ground. The main lesson drawn by the international community, however, was that even the United States could not bring peace where there was "no peace to keep," and that peacekeepers could not succeed when they crossed "the Mogadishu line."[4] With Somalia still violently unstable a quarter of a century later, the lesson is still painfully evident.

Somalia was followed a few months later by the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Much of the international debate about this episode has focused on what could have been done to prevent the genocide after the assassination of President Habyarimana: UN forces failed to pass on warnings to the Security Council; when the Council did learn about it, the US blocked any reinforcement of the mission; and Belgian troops pulled out when ten of its soldiers were killed. At the root of all this, however, was the absence of a viable peace agreement.[5]

Bosnia was another case of no peace to keep. The United States opposed an early attempt at a negotiated agreement, brokered by the EU, on the grounds that the Bosnian Muslims should get a better deal than the Serbs were willing to accept. But, in the absence of a peace agreement, the UN peacekeeping force on the ground was unable to have much effect on the military balance which informed the sides' negotiating options. This changed when the 1995 massacre at Srebrenica prompted a US-led military intervention and a move towards 'peace enforcement', but the Dayton Accords that followed offered the Muslims even less than before.[6]

These crises created a rupture between the United States and the UN Secretary-General, with the US ultimately forcing Boutros-Ghali out of office. The installation of Kofi Annan as the new Secretary-General could have signalled an end to the US wish to manage international security issues through the multilateral system, however, as he was America's preferred choice, his arrival instead sparked further US interest in the UN. The US remained the 'indispensable power' but its involvement in peacemaking – except when US national interests were directly involved – would mainly be channelled through the UN.[7] The UN, it was hoped, would advance the common interest in the shadow of American power.[8]

And so it was for much of Kofi Annan's ten-year tenure as UN Secretary-General. The UN, at varying distances from off-stage US power, was central to ending wars, or implementing peace agreements, in Tajikistan (1997), East Timor (1999), Kosovo (1999), Sierra Leone (1999), Afghanistan (2001), Angola (2002), Liberia (2003), Sudan (2005), Nepal (2006), and a number of other places. Afghanistan and South Sudan never became completely stable, or have lapsed back into violence, but most of the rest have continued to move forward.

Nor was the UN alone during this most productive period of peacemaking. The US, despite the preference of the Clinton Administration to operate through the multilateral system, was sometimes required to engage directly. The US brokered the Dayton Accords (1995) and, along with others, played a supporting role in the Good Friday Agreement that ended the conflict in Northern Ireland (1998), as it did in Macedonia (2001).

More exotic actors also played a role. The Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic lay association, played a central role in the Rome Agreement that ended the war in Mozambique (1992).[9] The Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) mediated the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement that brought an

end to the most violent phase of the war in Aceh, Indonesia (2002).[10] This was followed by a more lasting agreement signed in Helsinki (2005) under the auspices of yet another non-governmental organisation, the Crisis Management Initiative.[11]

Problems emerge

Things began to go wrong in 2007. Speaking to the Munich Security Conference in February of that year, Russian President Vladimir Putin denounced 'uni-polarism' and the US domination of the international system as "unacceptable but also impossible."[12] While publicly focusing on US-led military interventions, the new Russian doctrine also seemed to challenge the efforts of the UN and others to settle disputes in the shadow of US power.[13]

Later the same year, veteran Finnish mediator Martti Ahtisaari presented the results of his UN-sponsored mediation of the Kosovo crisis. Ahtisaari asked the UN Security Council to endorse his proposal for 'supervised independence' for Kosovo, predicting 13 positive votes out of a possible 15, two abstentions, and no vetoes from any of the Council's five permanent members. He could not have been more wrong. Not only did Russia make it clear that it would veto the plan, but China also indicated that it would veto, and four of the ten elected members of the Council also indicated that, if put to a vote, they would vote against. Even the EU was split over the UN proposal, with five members refusing to recognise Kosovo's new status.[14]

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon managed, with considerable difficulty, to extract the UN from the failure of the Ahtisaari Plan in the Security Council. The UN, which was governing Kosovo at the time, informed the Council that, in the absence of agreement between the parties, or within the Council, Kosovo would henceforth be 'status neutral'. Under this new arrangement, the UN would co-operate both with those countries wishing to recognise Kosovo's independence, as well as with Serbia, Russia and the large number of countries opposing it. This allowed, as Ban Ki-moon put it, for 'the river of history' to flow, and prevented any further escalation of the crisis.

Ban's manoeuvres on Kosovo did not, however, lead to an agreed settlement, and it did not augur well for future peacemaking efforts. It was a sunset: briefly agreeable, but marking an end.[15]

An end to the successful model?

Since 2008, the number of successful peace agreements has declined.[16]

International mediation efforts failed to prevent a bloody *dénouement* to the civil war in Sri Lanka (2009), and likewise failed in Libya (2011).

The UN continues to be called upon as a mediator, but these processes have not, on the whole, led to successful outcomes. South Sudan became independent in 2011, but on the basis of an agreement made five years earlier and, anyway, was soon followed by a relapse into conflict (which continues at the time of writing). An agreement signed in Doha the same year attempted to end the long-running conflict in Darfur, but with mixed results.

When Libya lapsed back into conflict, the UN brokered the Libyan Political Agreement (2015). But fighting has continued and the country remains politically divided. Yemen has likewise seen a number of agreements, none of which have prevented a widening of the war and an escalation in its intensity. The UN provides the framework for official negotiations to find a settlement to the war in Syria, but these have been markedly unsuccessful.

What peacemaking there has been since 2008 has largely been led by non-UN actors. The Basque armed group ETA agreed to end its armed struggle in 2011, with no role for the UN.[17] An International Contact Group of eight countries and organisations supported the Philippines in putting in place an agreement in 2014 which aimed to end the long-running war in the south of the country. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe brokered the Minsk protocol that ended the main fighting phase of the war in Ukraine (2014), as well as the follow-up protocol (2015). The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar was directly negotiated between the parties, with minimal roles for third parties (2015). Cuba and Norway played the main support roles in the peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the FARC (2016).

While notching up some successes, however, the non-UN actors did not replace the UN. The number of first-order conflicts on which they were able to broker agreements was small, and in other cases their successes were related to marginal conflicts, or they had supporting roles in larger processes. These non-UN processes can be interesting for their technique, and occasional niches are open to them, but their roles remain limited.

What went wrong?

This is not a case of good work having finished the job.

Wars have been starting, or re-starting, at a roughly similar rate for the past thirty years.[18] There are more wars now than there were a decade ago, driven by an uptick in the number of new wars, but also by the fact that there are fewer peace agreements ending old wars.[19]

If the declining number of successful peace agreements cannot be explained by a fall in the number of wars which need ending, then what explains the lack of agreements? Several possible reasons present themselves:

First, *the return of geopolitics*. The management of war – the prevention of new wars and the resolution of old wars – is still heavily influenced by a small number of powerful countries. If those countries are willing to co-operate, through the United Nations or otherwise, and see war as a 'public bad' rather than an arena into which the political competition between states is extended, then much can be achieved. This was often the case during the last decade of the 20th century – the US 'uni-polar moment' – after which geopolitical competition has become more acute again.

This return of geopolitics is visible not only in the Cold War-like conditions between Russia and the West, but also in a number of other contexts: China and the United States, Sunni versus Shi'a, and a number of others. Proxy wars, which had largely disappeared during the immediate post-Cold War period, are back. This is most visible in Syria and Ukraine, but is also evident elsewhere, such as in Somalia, where that apparently endless conflict is now exacerbated by rivalry between a Qatar-Turkey bloc and a Saudi-Emirati bloc.[20]

Second, *the atomisation of conflict*. The challenge posed to traditional hierarchical organisations by networks of physically-dispersed individuals is nowhere more evident than in the pattern of insurrection. Although states have recently developed a range of counter-measures, a number of the world's most violent conflicts emerged from popular uprisings enabled by social media and other forms of mass communication. These were initially seen as specific to the Arab world, but later included many non-Arab cases, from Ukraine to Venezuela. Whether successful or not, and whether Arab or not, these 'Twitter revolutions' have been characterised by a huge proliferation of groups, many of them lacking any clear organisational shape, often with undefined or rapidly changing agendas, and some of them leaderless.[21]

Third, *the spread of conflicts across borders*. While the number of inter-state conflicts has remained roughly steady over the past generation, and the number of purely internal conflicts has also remained steady, the number of 'internationalised internal conflicts' has surged over the past decade.[22] This is partly related to the resurgent geopolitical factors mentioned above – for Syria's neighbours, Syria is another battleground in a wider struggle. And partly it is driven by the technological factors, also mentioned here, which make it easier for jihadi groups to recruit in one country for operations in another. But partly it is related to the changing 'business model' of armed insurgency. Whereas in the Cold War most armed groups received some direct support from an external sponsor, most armed groups must now sustain themselves through some form of trafficking, which is necessarily trans-boundary.[23]

Peacemaking principles

These explanations, however, seem incomplete. These headwinds bear on all peacemaking efforts, yet it is largely UN peace efforts that have fallen back over the past decade. To date, peace agreements involving non-UN actors, although more modest in number and scope, have not been as negatively affected. The recent peace process shepherded by Cuba and Norway in Colombia, for example, faced the same obstacles but was nevertheless able to make progress. The still-murky arrangements that led to the end of ETA may be another example. A first task, therefore, is to understand what the UN did differently when it was more productive, and to understand what other actors still do differently, that has apparently allowed them to maintain and, in some cases, to expand their roles.

Four features of the more successful phase of UN peacemaking stand out as having eroded over time: independence, openness, discretion, and agility.

- *Political independence.* The United Nations tried to maintain an equidistant position between Iran and Iraq, as it also tried to do between the parties in El Salvador and Guatemala. The success of the UN relied, above all, on the ability of the UN to position itself as an 'honest broker'. By the mid-1990s, however, this positioning was already under strain, and this strain increased in the post-post-Cold War period to a degree that challenged the good faith foundation of UN mediation efforts. By the time Ahtisaari was appointed Special Envoy for Kosovo, Council members were passing 'private messages' to the parties, advising them on the outcome of the process that was about to begin.[24]

- *Openness.* The first generation of UN mediators insisted on hearing from all those who were needed for a war to end. Over time, however, the policy of *not* speaking to certain conflict parties became dominant. Lakhdar Brahimi, whose management of the 1989 Taif Accord on Lebanon had relied heavily on an openness to all parties, was not able to bring the Taliban into the Bonn Agreement that tried to end the war in Afghanistan in 2001. Alvaro de Soto, who had brokered the 1992 Chapultepec agreement on El Salvador, later quit as UN Middle East Envoy when he was barred by the organisation from speaking with Hamas.[25]

- *Discretion.* Early UN mediations were often conducted in secret. From Hammarskjold's negotiations with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1954 and 1955 to Ban Ki-moon's efforts to unravel the Kosovo crisis, the UN room for manoeuvre was normally inversely proportional to the level of public attention. Both politics and technology now prevent such discretion.

- *Agility.* Prior to the mid-1990s, UN envoys were usually supported by a small personal staff. Over time, the envoys came to preside over much larger 'special political missions', with staff sometimes numbering in the hundreds, including advisers dedicated to everything from gender equality to the demobilisation of child soldiers. Each of these advisers has a mandate and budget designed to ensure that their issue is incorporated in any final peace agreement, and each one has developed a set of institutional interests of their own.[26]

The largest of the current UN peacemaking efforts face challenges in all four areas. The Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, for example, lacks any real room for political manoeuvre. Its foundational mandate is the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, which stipulates that the Assad government should be replaced by a "transitional governing body" with "full executive powers."[27] But the Assad government was not a party to the Communiqué and has no interest in settling the conflict on that basis. It has, therefore, stonewalled the process.

Nor is the UN's Syria process open to the main parties. As well as being mandated in a way that discourages the Syrian government from participating in good faith, the UN has also accepted Turkish demands to exclude the most powerful Kurdish party. The 'Geneva process', therefore, involves no substantial participation by either of the two parties that dominate the country.[28]

Nor is the process either discreet or agile. The UN Special Envoy, his itinerary and spoken words, are all under constant scrutiny by the media. There has been a proliferation of opposition representatives to the official process, many of whom have no real influence over events on the ground. There are large, formal meetings, supported by a sprawling cast of staffers, national envoys and others. All of which has made the space for real mediation very small.[29]

Some non-UN actors, by contrast, seem to have retained features of earlier mediation efforts – they come with less defined views of the outcome, they are open to all parties needed for peace, and they can sometimes operate with minimal public scrutiny. Some have also adapted to the growing complexity of the conflict by developing multi-layer processes, or processes that can pivot quickly from discreet to inclusive and unofficial to official.[30]

These differences have not led to the replacement of one set of actors by another, but the different approaches have led, at least in a number of cases, to different outcomes.

The future of peacemaking

The role of third parties in the prevention and resolution of armed conflict is almost as old as the historical record of armed conflict itself. While such mediation has always been intricate in practice, the principles that support it are reasonably simple: the third party must be trusted by the parties to the conflict, and be able to keep confidences; the third party must be willing and able to engage with all those whose exclusion from a process might prevent a successful outcome, and must be willing and able to adapt its work to the context of the conflict.

The United Nations has a number of advantages as a peacemaker, starting with the fact that it was created by the world's governments to promote "international peace and security," including through the "pacific settlement of disputes," which explicitly includes mediation.[31] The UN is also unusually well-placed to help implement the agreements it brokers. Uniquely among would-be mediators, the UN developed an approach and related capacity, which helped push the number of conflicts, and the number of people killed in conflict, to the lowest level in recorded human history. For all the criticism levelled at the UN, this was an historic achievement.[32]

But over the past decade, peacemaking successes have become rarer. Much of this can be ascribed to structural factors, such as the membership of the now-sharply-divided Security Council. And some can be ascribed to exogenous factors, such as the growing complexity of conflict which calls for a more layered response. Non-UN actors have found ways to address some of these issues, but have not been able to entirely fill the gap left by the UN. Any further progress in the field would appear to require a better combination of the efforts of the UN and non-UN actors.

Endnotes

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3   As exemplified in Alvaro de Soto's *End of Mission Report*, May 2017.

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