

The Role of Mediation Support Structures

Mediation is effective, under certain conditions. Yet the increase in geopolitical polarization and armed conflict raises the question of how mediation can be sustained and improved. Mediation support is one option, albeit not the only one.

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Exploring how states develop and use mediation support structures is part of the puzzle in trying to understand how to improve non-military responses to armed conflict. Finland, Germany, Norway, South Africa, and Switzerland all have mediation and peace promotion as foreign policy goals. These states developed formal mediation support structures in recent years, with Switzerland being one of the first to do so in 2005. Similarities between these structures indicate that the role of mediation support consists in the professionalization of mediation as a method-based approach. This goes hand in hand with training, research, networking, and operational support for ongoing mediation processes. Divergences between the mediation support structures of these states stem from the different role that mediation plays in each country's peace and foreign policy.

Understanding Mediation Support

Mediation is a non-military approach to dealing with conflict, where conflict parties accept the assistance of a third party to help them negotiate a mutually acceptable agreement. According to the United Nations (UN), the appropriate conditions for mediation to be effective include parties' willingness to try negotiations, a regional and international consensus to back the process, and a well-supported third party. It



In-class simulation exercise in the MAS ETH Mediation in Peace Processes. *Eemeli Isoaho / MAS ETH MPP*

is on this last factor that the development of mediation support structures focuses.

The Mediation Support Network, a network of more than 20 primarily non-state mediation support structures, refers to mediation support as activities that support and “improve mediation practices, e.g., training activities, developing guidance, carrying out research, working on policy issues, offering consultation, backstopping

ongoing mediation processes, networking and engaging with parties.” The establishment of the UN's Mediation Support Unit in 2006 as a support structure for good offices, conflict prevention, and mediation efforts inspired other international organizations to create their own support structures. Relatedly, individual countries have also created dedicated mediation support structures to leverage mediation as a foreign policy tool.

Mediation support structures can be set-up *within* foreign ministries, or as an *external* independent entity, or a mix of these two approaches (see graph). Mediation support structures within foreign ministries are generally better resourced, have direct access to information and actors, and can leverage their country’s political capital to gain access to peace processes. In contrast, external mediation support structures, such as those hosted by NGOs or universities, generally enjoy greater independence and flexibility, often leading to more method-based, critical, and inclusive approaches. They have less state-centric networks and benefit from less political exposure, but may struggle to obtain high-level access to key actors and maintain sufficient resources. The hybrid model of mediation support that includes structures both inside and outside foreign ministries is therefore often the model of choice, as it allows states to leverage the benefits of the two aforementioned approaches.

States’ Mediation Support

The following cases represent a selection of three small states (Finland, Norway, Switzerland) and two mid-sized states (Germany, South Africa), all of which have peace promotion as foreign policy goals. The selection of cases was based on how far the state works within or outside regional mechanisms to promote peace.

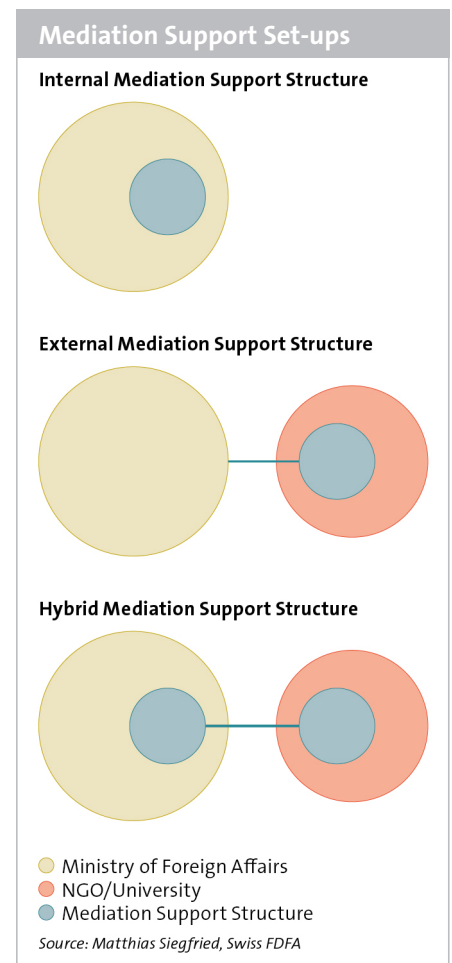
Finland: The role of former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari in numerous peace processes, including in Indonesia, Kosovo, and Namibia, was key to elevating mediation as a foreign policy tool. Finland developed its centralized mediation support structures relatively recently. In October 2020, the Foreign Ministry established a Center for Peace Mediation within the Ministry to serve as a hub for the planning,

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development, and coordination of the Ministry’s peace mediation activities and building the Ministry’s in-house capacities in mediation. The Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has programmatic partnerships with different national organizations active in peace mediation (e.g. Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) – Martti Ahtisaari Foundation, Finn Church Aid (FCA), and Finnish Evangelical

Lutheran Mission (FELM)) and also funds international non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations. The-matically, key priority areas for Finland’s support work are water diplomacy; women, peace, and security; youth, peace, and security; and religious and traditional peacemakers. Finland’s mediation support focuses on policy through support of the UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Group of Friends of mediation as well as UN resolutions; networks (such as the Nordic Women Mediators Network and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (NRTP)) to foster coordination, cooperation, and complementarity; and capacity building. There is also a push to become more operationally active to link work on mediation policy, networks, and practice. This is illustrated by Finland’s longstanding cooperation with the African Union (AU) to support the coordination of mediation-support activities and networks, including through training and experience sharing.

Germany: While Germany traditionally has not been a visible actor in the field of mediation (with certain exceptions, such as the activities of the Berghof Foundation as an implementing organization), it meanwhile has a considerable track record of supporting mediation. In the last 15 years, it has become more strategic in its approach. Germany’s engagement includes cooperation with and funding of other actors, as well as direct supply of know-how, training, secondment of experts, political support, and serving as a meeting place. Germany has particularly focused on mediation support at the OSCE and on the establishment of multilateral partnerships. Prominent public cases of German mediation support include Yemen, Libya, Cyprus, and Ukraine. Germany actively engages civil society and academic partners (e.g. the European University Viadrina, Berghof Foundation, Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF), Inmedio, Berlin Center for Integrative Media-tion), both in the development of its mediation and mediation support approach and in the implementation of this approach. Germany also works with regional and sub-regional mediation support actors in Africa. Linked to its Feminist Foreign Policy outlook, the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO) has shown a special interest in advancing the Women Peace and Security Agenda, with several high-level



engagements that intentionally seek to promote women’s participation. Germany’s more strategic approach, both at the state and non-state levels, has helped elevate mediation as a foreign policy tool.

Norway: The promotion of conflict resolution and reconciliation is a core component of Norway’s foreign policy. Norway has provided facilitation, financial and/or technical support for negotiations and peace processes in Afghanistan, Burundi, Colombia, the Middle East, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Venezuela. Support has also been provided to peace processes, for example in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Mozambique, Syria, Uganda, and Yemen. Norway works through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs and also funds Norwegian and international civil society actors and academic partners to enhance its mediation-related work and the mediation of the UN and others globally. These partners include for instance the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF), the Norwegian Institute of In-

ternational Affairs (NUPI), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Its support activities focus mainly on direct support to peace processes as well as on capacity building and knowledge management. This allows Norway to leverage the networks of existing national civil society actors to lead or support peace processes in a timely, responsive, and relevant manner. The flexibility and agility of Norway's approach has allowed it to second experts to the UN, the AU and other mediation actors, provide research, capacity-building, and other technical support as well as financial and operational support for peace processes. Norway also uses platforms such as the Oslo Forum

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(with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD)) to facilitate experience-sharing and networking. A recent example of the successful use of its expanded approach is Norway's support to the AU-led peace process, which helped end the two-year violent conflict in northern Ethiopia. Norway's flexible hybrid approach to mediation support structures has generated direct access and influence even in peace processes where Norway would not ordinarily have a direct role. Due to its high-level policy support and long-term and large investments in peace work, it is often seen as a model for a comprehensive approach to supporting peace through mediation, humanitarian, and development efforts.

South Africa: Since the introduction of democracy in 1994, South Africa's foreign policy has, among others, focused on building African unity and shared prosperity, including through the advancement of conflict prevention and peace and security. Over the years, South Africa has invested in conflict resolution in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, South Sudan, Zimbabwe, and other contexts. Although its role as a leading mediation actor has diminished over the years, South Africa established its Mediation Support Unit (MSU) within the Foreign Ministry following approval by the country's International Cooperation, Trade and Security (ICTS) Cluster in March

2015. The creation of the MSU builds on South Africa's legacy as a peacemaker in Africa and seeks to further its high-level foreign policy objective of contributing to continental security, stability, and sustainable development. Created to support South African-led or -supported mediation efforts, to date the MSU has mainly been involved in capacity building and policy development. In addition to training hundreds of African women mediators and working with established nongovernmental mediation support actors such as the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) and the Centre for Mediation in Africa (CMA), the MSU also played a key role in the development of South Africa's first National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. The NAP seeks to "enable meaningful participation for women in peace processes; and prioritise their needs, experiences and agency in all conflict and non-conflict contexts". South Africa focuses its mediation and mediation support work primarily on conflicts in Africa, but its recent offer of mediation services related to the Ukraine-Russia war, even if not accepted, points to a potentially more global role as a non-aligned state in a polarized geopolitical context.

Switzerland: The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) includes peace promotion as one of its foreign policy objectives and has accompanied over 30 peace processes in more than 20 countries in recent years. Prominent cases include the FDFA's negotiation support in the Colombian-*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) process, which led to the peace agreement in 2016, or its mediation role leading to the agreement between the Government of Mozambique and the *Resistencia Nacional Mocambicana* (Renamo) in 2019. Switzerland follows a hybrid mediation support model, having developed both in-house and external mediation support structures over the years. The Mediation Support Project (MSP) was established in 2005 as a joint venture between the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich and swisspeace in partnership with the FDFA. One of Switzerland's characteristics in the field of mediation has been its focus on expertise and mediation methodology, as opposed to simply convening and bringing different actors together since a method-based approach tends to lead to more legitimate and sustainable outcomes.

Further Reading

David Lanz / Jamie Pring / Corinne von Burg / Mathias Zeller, "Understanding Mediation Support Structures," *swisspeace*, October 2017.

Simon J A Mason, 2020, "Development of State Mediation Profiles: Key Dimensions and Guiding Questions," in: Kirchhoff, Lars Kirchhoff / Anne Holper (eds.), *Friedensmediation: Spannungsfeld aus Methodik, Macht und Politik* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020).

Mediation Support Network

United Nations, United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation, July 2012.

The FDEA complements its track one mediation endeavours and in-house expertise with partnerships with other Swiss actors, for instance for expertise development and training. Switzerland has for decades also been a hub for applied research related to mediation for instance in the case of mediation methods, power sharing, religion in conflict and mediation, dealing with the past, wealth-sharing, ceasefires, and security arrangements. According to the 2023 annual ETH Zurich study *Sicherheit* (Security), 78 per cent of the population is in favour of strengthening Swiss mediation work, indicating that there is a cross-party consensus on this topic.

Discussion and Lessons

The similarity between the mediation support structures of these different states is striking, involving mediation support to ongoing processes, training, research, policy outreach, and networking. Most mediation support structures follow variations of a hybrid model, allowing for a combination of the benefits of internal and external structures to a Foreign Ministry.

Differences between the various mediation support structures stem from the different foreign policy goals and resulting mediation strategies of the various countries, which is related to their geopolitical size, position and historical trajectories. For example, Finland's focus on mediation networks and policy development is in line with its overall foreign policy goal of multilateralism. Germany is faced with the question of how much mediation and mediation support work should be done through the EU, and how much in other bilateral and multilateral cooperation formats. Norway's focus on peace promotion is motivated by humanitarian interests and the importance of peace

Examples of Training Courses

Peace Mediation Course (Swiss FDFA, Swisspeace, CSS ETH Zurich)

UN Ceasefire Mediation Course (Swiss FDFA, UN, Norwegian MFA, Norwegian Ministry of Defense)

UN Religion and Mediation Course (Swiss FDFA, UN, Finnish MFA, CSS ETH Zurich, N RTP)

UN High-Level Seminars on Gender and Inclusive Mediation (UN DPPA, CMI Martti Ahtisaari Foundation, PRIO)

University courses such as the **Master of Advanced Studies ETH Mediation in Peace Processes** (MAS ETH MPP) at ETH Zurich (with the Swiss FDFA, UN, Finnish MFA, German FFO as partners); **Master Study Mediation and Conflict Management** (Europe University Viadrina); **National Dialogue and Peace Mediation Course** (University of Basel)

and security globally for Norway as a relatively small country with an open economy and society. South Africa sees its economic and security futures as intertwined with the stability and prosperity in the rest of the African Continent, although this has somewhat decreased in recent years in the face of competing national demands, pressures, and interests. South Africa's mediation efforts build on its historical solidarity obligations stemming from African countries' support to the anti-Apartheid

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struggle. Switzerland has a long tradition of humanitarian work and Good Offices. Its consensus-based democracy matches the logic of mediation. As it is limited in its military peacekeeping efforts (see [CSS Analysis No. 330](#)), it compensates in part through civilian peace promotion endeavors. Thus, the role of mediation support is often a derivative of how a state profiles its mediation work in terms of geographic and thematic focus, or with whom it cooperates.

Outlook

Looking ahead, there are both challenges and opportunities. The challenges arise from the changing nature of conflict and mediation in today's world. The key question is how to keep mediation approaches from the past that have proven to be effective, while also adapting them to the current global context. Further questions at the domestic level raise the issue of how to maintain a cross-party consensus to invest in long-term peace promotion and how to build and maintain the necessary structures, both within and outside of a foreign ministry. At the same time, the changing

nature of the conflict and mediation landscape also provides opportunities, as some conflict actors may refuse a specific media-

tor (for fear of losing autonomy or because there is no acceptable mediator) but still seek more technical negotiation support, that can be provided by mediators and mediation support actors.

In summary, the two factors of effective mediation – the willingness of parties to try negotiations, and regional and international support for a process – provide the opportunity space for mediation and mediation support to be effective. The role of mediation and mediation support is to work towards and maximize this window of opportunity.

For more on perspectives on Mediation and Peace Promotion, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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