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# HORIZONS

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## GEOPOLITICS OF CONFUSION HOW LONG CAN THIS LAST?



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# THE LOST ART OF PEACEMAKING

David Harland

THE WORLD is forgetting how to make peace agreements. The United Nations, in particular, has almost lost an art that it once dominated. During the 20-year period from 1988 onwards—let’s call these two decades *les vingt glorieuses*—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. This led to an immediate drop both in the number of wars being fought and the number of people killed in those wars.

The United Nations was at the forefront of this, starting with the facilitation of 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 that same year. The UN then went on to play a central role in political settlements in Leba-

non (Taif, 1989) and Cambodia (Paris, 1991). Much of this 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 wars in El Salvador (Chapultepec, 1992), Croatia (Erdut, 1995) and Guatemala (Guatemala City, 1996).

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

## 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 provided something of a

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*Blue helmets at rest*

Photo: United Nations

boost. The first was the 1993 “Black Hawk Down” episode in Somalia, which precipitated the departure of American forces and the collapse of the UN peacekeeping mission on the ground. However, the main lesson drawn by the international community, according to General Sir Michael Rose’s writing in *Fighting for Peace: Lessons from Bosnia* (1999), was that even the United States could not bring peace where there was “no peace to keep,” and that peacekeepers could not succeed once they crossed “the Mogadishu line.” With Somalia still violently unstable a quarter of a century later, that lesson is regularly rehearsed.

The Somali episode 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 that followed the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana: UN forces failed to pass on warnings to the Security Council; when the Council did learn about it, the United States 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.

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 change the basic equation. And when the 1995 massacre at Srebrenica prompted an American-led military intervention, the agreement that followed offered the Muslims even less than what had been originally envisioned.

These crises created a rupture between the United States and the UN Secretary-General, resulting in the United States ultimately forcing Boutros-Ghali out of office. Rather than signaling an end to America's wish to manage international security issues through the multilateral system, however, it was only reinforced with the arrival of Kofi Annan, as America's preferred UN Secretary-General. The United States remained the "indispensable power," but—except when American national interests were directly engaged—American engagement in peacemaking would be done mainly via the United Nations. The Organization, it was hoped, would advance the common interest in the shadow of American power.

And so it was for much of Kofi Annan's ten-year tenure as Secretary-General.

The UN, at varying distances from off-stage American 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 others. Afghanistan and South Sudan never became completely stable, or lapsed back into violence, but most of the rest have continued to move forward.

Nor was the United Nations alone during this most fructuous period of peacemaking. The United States, despite the preference of the Clinton Administration to operate through the multilateral system, sometimes chose to engage directly. The United States 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). 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), which was followed by the signing of a more lasting agreement in Helsinki (2005),

under the auspices of yet another non-governmental organization, the Crisis Management Initiative.

### PROBLEMS EMERGE

Things began to go wrong in 2007. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February of that year, Russian President Vladimir Putin denounced "unipolarism" and America's domination of the international system as "unacceptable, but also impossible." While focusing on American-led military interventions, the new Russian doctrine also seemed to some to challenge the efforts of the UN and others to settle disputes in the penumbra of American power.

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Later that same year, Finland's Martti Ahtisaari presented the results of his UN-sponsored mediation on Kosovo. 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 too, and four of the ten elected members of the Council also indicated

that, if put to a vote, they would vote against. Even the European Union split over the UN proposal, with five members refusing to recognize Kosovo's declared independence.

UN 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, it would henceforth be "status neutral."

Under this new arrangement, the UN would cooperate both with those countries wishing to recognize Kosovo's independence, as well as with Serbia, Russia, and the large number of other 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, as did Serbia's initiative to shift the debate to judicial ground by asking the General Assembly to refer the issue to the International Court of Justice. But it did not lead to an agreed settlement, and it did not augur well for future peacemaking efforts. It was a sunset: briefly spectacular, but marking an end.

**AN END TO THE SUCCESSFUL MODEL?**

Kosovo was the turning point: since 2008, the number of successful peace agreements has declined. 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 this was on the basis of an agreement made five years earlier, and, anyway, this did not prevent a relapse into conflict—one that continues at the time of writing. An agreement signed in Doha the same year attempted to end the long-running conflict in Darfur, but ended up producing mixed results. Following the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” the UN was given major roles in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, but these have not, so far, yielded lasting results.

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 left for the UN to play. The Philippines was supported by an International Contact Group of eight countries and organizations in its 2014 agreement, which aimed to end the long-running war in the country’s

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south. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) 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, with minimal roles for third parties (2015). Cuba and Norway played the main supporting roles in the peace agreement between Colombia and the FARC (2016).

While notching up some successes, however, the non-UN actors remain secondary

players in the system, more useful in complementing the United Nations than in driving first-order processes of their own. And, in a growing number of cases, wars ended without any agreement, despite vigorous efforts by both UN and non-UN actors, such as Sri Lanka (2009), where Norway had tried to facilitate agreement, and Libya (2011), in which the African Union undertook efforts to broker a managed transition from the Gaddafi regime.

**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. According to data presented in a 2017 *Journal of Peace Research* article co-authored by Marie Allansson, Erik Melander, and Lotta Themnér, there are more wars now than 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 existing wars.

If the declining number of successful peace agreements cannot be explained by a fall in the number of wars that need ending, then what explains the lack of agreements? Several possible reasons present themselves, and each will be examined in turn.

First, *the return of geopolitics*. The international context was propitious from 1988 to 2008; it is no longer so. The management of war—the prevention of new wars and the resolution of existing ones—is still heavily influenced by a small number of powerful countries. If those countries are willing to cooperate, through the United Nations or otherwise—and see war as a “public bad,” rather than as an arena into which the political competition of states is extended—then much can be achieved. This was the case during the last years of the 1980s, with George

H.W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev, and remained the case during the “unipolar moment” of the Clinton years. Since then, the rise of China and the reassertion of Russian military power have led to renewed competition for global influence, largely closing the space for cooperative peacemaking.

Second-order geopolitical conflicts have also become more virulent. In Somalia, for example, an apparently endless conflict is now being exacerbated by rivalry between Qatar-Turkey and Saudi-Emirati blocs. Recent Sunni-Shi’a violence in Nigeria likewise appears to be a proxy conflict of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Second, *the atomization of conflict*. The challenge posed to traditional hierarchical organizations by networks of physically dispersed individuals is nowhere more evident than in the pattern of insurrection. Although states have recently developed a range of countermeasures, 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,

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and whether Arab or not, these “Twitter revolutions” have been characterized by a huge proliferation of groups, many of them lacking any clear organizational shape, often with undefined or rapidly changing agendas, and some of them even leaderless.

Third, *the spread of conflicts across borders*. Whereas both the number of inter-state and purely internal conflicts has remained roughly steady

over recent decades, the number of “internationalized internal conflicts” has surged over the past decade, as noted in a joint UN-World Bank report, entitled *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, that was released earlier in the

year. This trend is related in part to the resurgence of geopolitical factors, as noted above. Thus, for Syria’s neighbors, the country is another battleground in a wider struggle. And it is in part connected with technology, as also flagged here, which makes it easier for jihadi groups to recruit in France, Tunisia, and elsewhere, and then to move those recruits to Syria, Iraq, and other arenas.

But it is also related to the changing “business model” of insurrection. Whereas in the Cold War most armed groups received some level of direct

support from one or more external sponsors—as James Cockayne argues in *Hidden Power: The Strategic Logic of Organized Crime* (2016)—most armed groups must now sustain themselves through some form of trafficking, which is necessarily trans-boundary.

**PEACEMAKING PRINCIPLES**

Such explanations, however, seem incomplete. The aforementioned headwind factors bear on all peace-

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making efforts, but it is largely UN peace efforts that have fallen back over the past decade. Peace agreements involving non-UN actors have so far not been as negatively affected in the same ways. 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 process that led to the dissolution of ETA, described by Teresa Whitfield as “virtual peacemaking,” 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, so as to uncover how such conduct has apparently allowed them to maintain, and in some cases 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.

First, *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 role relied, above all, on the ability of the Organization to position itself as an “honest broker” in the dispute to be mediated. By the mid-1990s, however, this was already under strain, and became more so in the “post-post-Cold War” period, to a degree

that challenged the good faith foundation of UN mediation efforts. As I wrote in 2010, by the time Ahtisaari was appointed special envoy for Kosovo, UN Security Council members were passing “private messages” to the parties (both the Serbian government and the authorities in Pristina), advising them as to the outcome of the process that was about to begin.

Second, *openness*. The first generation of UN mediators insisted on hearing from all those who needed to be heard for a war to end. Over time, however,

the policy of not speaking to certain parties became dominant. Lakhdar Brahimi, whose management of the 1989 Taif Accord on Lebanon relied heavily on an openness to all parties, was not able to bring the Taliban into the Bonn Agreement that sought to end the war in Afghanistan in 2001. Alvaro de Soto, who had brokered the 1992 Chapultepec Agreement on El Salvador,

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later quit as UN Middle East envoy when he was barred by the Organization from speaking with Hamas.

Third, *discretion*. Early UN mediations were often conducted in secret. From Dag Hammarskjöld’s negotiations with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1954 and 1955

to Ban Ki-moon’s efforts to unravel the Kosovo crisis, the UN’s room for maneuver was normally inversely proportional to the level of public attention. Both politics and technology now militate against such levels of discretion.

Fourth, *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,” sometimes numbering in the hundreds, and including staff members dedicated to everything from gender equality to the

demobilization of child soldiers. Each of the advisors 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.

The largest of the UN's current peacemaking efforts are challenged on all four counts. The Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, for example, lacks any real room for political maneuver. 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." But the Assad government was not a party to the Communiqué, and thus obviously has no interest in settling the conflict on that basis. It has therefore, predictably, 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 among the two parties that dominate the country militarily.

In addition, the process is neither discreet nor agile. The UN Special Envoy, as well as his itinerary and spoken words, are under constant media scrutiny. There has been a proliferation of prolix 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. The space left for real mediation is small.

**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 undergird it are reasonably simple: the third party must be trusted by the parties to the conflict, and must 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 its successful outcome;

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and the third party must be willing and able to adapt his or her 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 "peaceful settlement of disputes," which, according to Article 33 of the UN Charter, includes mediation explicitly. The UN is also unusually well placed to help with the implementation of the agreements it brokers or facilitates. Uniquely among would-be mediators, the UN developed both an approach and a set of capacities that 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 leveled at the United Nations, this was an historic achievement.

But the United Nations has largely lost the art of peacemaking over the past decade. Much of this can be ascribed to structural factors, such as renewed competition between members 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. The UN has also strayed from core mediation principles. Non-UN actors have found ways to address some of these issues, but they 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. ●

