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Quiet Diplomacy And Backchannel Negotiations By Small States: A Comparative Study In Global Conflict Mediation

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Abstract

This paper explains the growing importance of the role of small states in international and internal conflicts as a mediator. The crux of the argument in this study is that even a state with minimal material power may be a good mediator, contrary to traditional views of the great power diplomacy. It is based on a comparative case study of Norway, Switzerland and Qatar, the conditions of small state mediation capacity are defined in this paper such as perceived neutrality, diplomatic flexibility and strategic niche diplomacy. Small states might succeed in facilitation and trust-building particularly in cases where major powers are not engaged, one-sided or unable to make any progress. However, their success is not a certainty but rather needs to be supported by good conflict structures and circumstances that are deemed ripe in addition to indirect assistance by great powers during the implementation stage. The major question that will be addressed in the paper is in which situations, and by which means, will the small states be successful at mediation of global conflicts? It also attempts to analyze the following sub-questions: What are the benefits of small states to great powers as mediators and what are their constraints and dangers? What is their mediation capacity and how do they attain and maintain it? It is that small states cannot be a panacea of conflicts on the global scale; its role in making peace is pragmatic and more significant to secure an effective channel of communication.

Keywords: Small-State Mediation, Niche Diplomacy, Structural Weakness, Trust Building, Facilitation vs. Leverage, Mediation Gap, Honest Broker, Back-Channel Negotiations, Soft Power Leverage, Ripeness & Invitation

Introduction

Great powers have always been prevailing in the international conflict resolution processes. As an illustration, the United States, Russia, and China are virtually presumed to be the dominant players in the process of keeping peace between conflicting sides due to the mere presence of huge military and economic capabilities. This appears to be based on realist international relations theory where power is related to material power and the capacity to coerce agreements. Notwithstanding, the continued occurrence of both internal and international conflicts today coupled with the self-interest of major powers indicate that there can be no constraints to this strategy. It is intriguing to check what small states can be as good conflict mediators.

Based on the example of the facilitation of the Norwegian back-channel Oslo Accords between the Israelis and the PLO, the hosting by Switzerland of important dialogues between the parties engaging in the conflicts, and Qatar hosting the talks between the United States and the Taliban, the examples are wide enough to ask a fundamental question as to what good mediation really is. The next question would be how weak states with minimum levels of coercion manage to succeed when super powers fail on a regular basis.

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The point here is crucial as perceived impartiality, diplomatic skillfulness, and expert knowledge may become the keys to dramatic success in intermediations of conflicts by small states. Small states may be surprisingly effective when great powers are unable or unwilling to

execute these special functions of facilitator, trusted host or influential intermediary. On the whole, this effectiveness actually is context-dependent: it is typically the highest in the initial phases of the negotiation process and in the middle of the process, whereas the success of the long-term type tends to be supported by the efforts of the larger international actors.

It is on this backdrop that this paper shall review the literature on mediation and small states in international relations first. It will formulate a theoretical framework based on the ideas of niche diplomacy and structural weakness and apply comparative case studies of Norway, Switzerland, and Qatar that will exemplify some of the models of a small-state mediation, identify the conditions that must be present to make these models effective, examine the inherent factors limiting them, and draw conclusions about the policy and further research.

Literature Review

Conflict mediation stands at the intersection of international relations, peace studies and diplomacy. The traditional mediation theory has paid attention to the leverage of the mediator, which typically relates to the usage of coercive power or the ability to provide significant incentives and guarantees. ⁽¹⁾This perception clearly applies when great powers force the opposing sides into an agreement by exercising their economic and military powers. Usually, it is the example of the US-mediated Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, where American aid and security was vital.

According to the relational turn, the study of small states has no longer been focused on the purely material conception of international influence. The initial literature characterized a small state chiefly in quantifiable variables including population, GDP and the army. ⁽²⁾ The notion of

¹ Bercovitch, J., & Houston, A. (2000). *Why Do They Do It Like This? An Analysis of the Factors Influencing Mediation Behavior in International Conflicts*.

² Vital, D. (1967). *The Inequality of States: A Study of the Small Power in International Relations*. Oxford University Press.

small states is currently determined in a relative and functional way: a small state is not able to pursue its core interests with the help of its means only and is therefore highly exposed to the alterations in the international setting. This receptiveness has an average interpretation into multilateralism, norm-setting, and avoiding conflict as foreign policy.

This foundation formed the background of the idea of the concept of niche diplomacy as a crucial model of the evaluation of the behavior of the small states. According to Cooper and Shaw, niche diplomacy involves a focus of limited resources on particular problems in which a small state is able to develop known competencies. (³) Consequently, small states can punch above their weight on matters touching on human security, the environment and in particular, peace mediation. Specialization, in these chosen niches, might allow the small states to build up the soft power, to offset the drawbacks of small size.

The literature on small-state mediation has expanded inspired by such high profile cases like the Norwegian Model. It is acknowledged that the lack of colonial historical baggage, geographical isolation, and adherence to an active civil society towards peacebuilding have earned Norway the reputation of an honest broker. It is in a way contradictory to the image of the great powers whose mediation efforts are viewed with suspicion since it is believed that great powers seek their own interests in geopolitical and economic aspects. Small states are therefore not neutral but they are positive, and they are actively attempting to cash in on that.

Nevertheless, there is a dint in the systematic comparison of the various models of small-state mediation and under which circumstances they perform or fail to perform. Although the Norwegian facilitation scheme is not that poorly documented, other models, like the leverage-based mediation in Qatar, are not so thoroughly structured within a single analytical framework.

³ Cooper, A. F., & Shaw, T. M. (Eds.). (2009). *The Diplomacies of Small States*

In an attempt to fill that gap, this paper develops such a framework, and subsequently applies the framework to cases, in a bid to determine both the universal principles and the strategy unique to the context of the case.

Theoretical Framework: Explaining Small-State Mediation Capacity

The phenomenon of mediation by small states is one that needs to integrate different theoretical ideas on how structural weaknesses can be converted into strengths. There are three pillars in the framework which are interconnected:

The original pillar is the idea that structural powerlessness may be a resource. When a state is not a military threat or predominant in the politics of the political environment after the agreement, it is an advantage in mediation. Maoz (2003) also argues that the lack of a hidden agenda will reduce the perceived risk of conflicting parties to engage in dialogue. ⁽⁴⁾The parties which may not believe in the existence of a great power due to its strategic interests may be more ready to put their trust in a small state as an intermediary. This gives the latter an opportunity to be a secret conduit and evoke confidence in assisting in the establishment of an appreciation of the fundamental interests of both parties without the fear that their information will be leaked to an opponent giant. It is a weakness of them that bases their strength on trust.

The second foundation of this trust is long-term niche diplomacy. Mediation is not a one time affair, it must be institutionalized as a component of their foreign policy to be successful in the small states. It invests in the long-term in the following:

- Human Resource: Diplomats have to be trained on mediation, negotiations and cultural sensitivity.

⁴ Maoz, Z. (2003). The Paradox of Small-State Mediation: The Norwegian Case. *International Negotiation*, 8(1), 101-127.

- Intellectual Capital: funds research institutions and NGOs in a way that analyzes in-depth and discusses informal avenues.
- Reputational Capital: It has been able, over its years of intervention in different conflict situations, to create a brand, based on reliability, discretion and neutrality.

This comparative advantage cannot be easily imitated by more bureaucratic and larger states; thus, small states are able to possess their niche of mediation.

The third pillar highlights that small states prosper by a functionalist style to overcome a fundamental set of gaps in the international system that are known as critical mediations. Such gaps can be manifested under a variety of conditions: either when great powers lack interest in conflicts that do not serve their primary interests; when they are biased actors and cannot be considered a neutral mediator; or when they are frozen inert, which is the case with the UN Security Council and cannot act in a concerted international manner. In that case, small states can preserve the processes of peace, mediate in personal contacts, or chair conferences, and thus play an important role to the parties involved in the conflict and to the international community, which major powers disregard.

These are multiplied in a powerful modality whereby a small state grows a niche of personalized and trusted functionality that it is supposed to carry out through the functionalist approach in an international system that requires this assistance. These case studies will be used in the subsequent few case studies and enacted to a set of real-world scenarios.

Case Studies in Comparative Analysis

Norway

Norway mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a classic example of this type of mediation as the facilitator. Norway attempted to be quiet, tolerant and most importantly process oriented and not content oriented during the initial phases. It was organized in terms of a process that would take advantage of the respective Norwegian strengths, that is, the perceived neutrality and close association with the academic and civil society organizations. The Norwegian Institute of Applied Social Science was the first to offer the discreet contact channel, and maintained that as secret on behalf of the state. ⁽⁵⁾ Norwegian negotiators (mainly the Deputy Foreign Minister, Jan Egeland and social scientist, Terje Rod-Larsen) held negotiations with no arbitration in a setting of security and secrecy in which the parties could bargain directly and write their treaties. Norway did not make any substantive proposals but directed the process keeping secrets and assisting in the creation of trust by a high degree of personal involvement. What came was a scathing yet, in most aspects, a tragic experiment on the strength and weakness of the facilitator model. The tact of Norway was most strikingly successful in obtaining what had seemed impossible two of the greatest foes to sign a Declaration of Principles. This triumph was a direct by-product of its miniaturist, its discretion was plausible, and its non-geopolitical interests were credible. Nevertheless, the collapse which ultimately overcame the Oslo process highlights one key constraint, namely, as a small state, Norway had minimal leverage to impose agreements and security assurances and limited capacity to punish a party when it broke the deal. This was later to be passed to the United States which was ineffective due to the political bias that the United States had. The Oslo case shows quite clearly that small states can unequivocally have a difference at the

⁵ Waage, H. H. (2004). Peacemaking is a Risky Business: Norway's Role in the Peace Process in the Middle

initial stage of negotiation and breakthrough, but it is only at the implementation stages that a change in mediator can be necessary or a group of actors.

Switzerland

Switzerland is a kind of an example of a mediation model institutionalized and legally based. It lacks a policy of under wraps discoveries, but it establishes a sound platform of international discussion. The neutrality policy followed by Switzerland during several years is not only a means of the diplomacy but a principle which is based on the international law and the national constitution. The Swiss model has two dimensions worth bearing on today: the historical aspect of it being a Protecting Power: it has served in the past to serve the diplomatic interests of those states that have lost contact with one another. As an example, Switzerland has been acting on behalf of the US interests in Iran and the Iranian interests in Egypt since 1980. ⁽⁶⁾ This role involves trust on all sides, and indicates its possibility of discretion and trustworthiness those are all crucial in effective mediations. The second dimension defines Switzerland as a business host of discussions. The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs has a Peace Policy Section which provides a systematic assistance to the peace processes in the world. It is enriched with material and mental resources: the United Nations in Geneva, the Geneva Centre of Security Policy, and the Centre of Humanitarian Dialogue are just but a few examples. Switzerland does not only provide a platform on which to converse but also a full-fledged ecology of conflict resolution, including judicial know-how and technical support as well as neutral territory. A typical example is its role in facilitating the Geneva peace negotiations on Syria. These negotiations have not produced any tangible outcomes and kept a political process led by the UN alive over years and maintained contact among various stakeholders. The Swiss have the added value of being able to

⁶ Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). (2021). Swiss Peace Mediation Guidelines. Bern: FDFA.

keep the process going even in cases where the conflicts cannot be resolved. What Switzerland does demonstrate is that mediation may be a long term investment in the reputation of its country, and its successes may be dramatic, but they are unmeasurable, only appreciated by the critical role that it plays in ensuring that open international diplomatic lines remain open. It has become so neutral that it became an international public service rendering a kind of support that no other country is as believable to render.

Qatar

However, another type and a more disputable kind of small-state mediation is Qatar. Qatar mediated as the recent Pakistan and Afghanistan war was witnessed between the two nations. In contrast to both Norway and Switzerland, Qatar is a prolific consumer of material resources and strategic relations as the instrument of leverage, and the distinction between the honest broker and strategic actor is even less obvious. The small-state mediators have several advantages in Qatar: it possesses vast reserves of natural gas, hence substantial funding to encourage compromise or supply post-conflict reconstruction assistance; it owns the global news outlet Al Jazeera, which gives it an edge in controlling the narratives and giving or withholding international legitimacy to the conflict sides. In addition to this, the foreign policy of Qatar is open to a broad spectrum of actors such as Hamas and the Taliban groups among the other actors which the western states shun⁽⁷⁾. This was best seen in its mediation with the United States and the Taliban which has seen the signing of the 2020 Doha Agreement. Although Qatar was only a host offering a neutral ground, it was not restricted to facilitation. It relied on the political contacts it had with the Taliban, whereby it had over several years housed their political office and maintained communication

⁷ Ulrichsen, K. C. (2020). *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Mediation and Regional Power Dynamics*. Oxford University Press.

lines. It used its reputation with the U.S. as one of its non-NATO allies to assure both parties of its stance. It was not an Inactive hostage diplomacy, but leverage-based active diplomacy. Nevertheless, the Qatari paradigm is fraught with reputational risks: its relations with non-state actors have led to its being accused of spreading a dangerous Islamist agenda, which destabilizes the region by the regional competitors, Saudi Arabia and the UAE- a charge that questions its impartiality. The leverage-based model operates, in its turn, according to its potential to sustain this delicate balance. Qatar derives its power by the networks and resources they dispose of, but when it seems that the latter is being utilized in a partisan fashion, it will lose its credibility as an intermediary quickly. The success of Qatar highlights the fact that, small-state mediation is not something that is confined to the benign and neutral actors but can also serve as an instrument used by the resource endowed and ambitious states to expand their influence

Estonia

Estonia is the contemporary development of small-state mediation that will create a new niche in the digital environment. Being one of the most digitalized societies and having suffered a severe state-sponsored cyberattack in 2007,⁽⁸⁾ Estonia had turned its experience into becoming a significant actor in mediating cyber wars and regulating the cyber environment. It takes the form of a norm entrepreneur, being more concerned with establishing the rules and confidence-building strategies in this new and uncertain field. Estonia has been leading with regards to the initiation of the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts and Open-Ended Working Group processes related to cybersecurity; it brokered between rival camps of states the so-called U.S./EU, Russia, and China in their effort to discover the commonalities in the application of the international law

⁸ Tikk, E., & Kerttunen, M. (2020). Estonia and Cyber Diplomacy: The Practice of Norm Entrepreneurship. In Routledge Handbook of International Cybersecurity. Routledge.

to the cyberspace. In addition, it also hosts the Geneva Dialogue on Responsible Behaviour in Cyberspace an initiative that gathers states, technology companies together with the civil society. The mediation ability of Estonia is based on the established reputation of being a victim country, technical capabilities, and viewing cybersecurity as a global public good. It is a good example of how a small state recognizes and attempts to resolve an emerging, complicated mediating gap by utilizing specialized knowledge to facilitate dialogue and norm-making that safeguards its interests, but also that of the larger international society.

Singapore

The Singapore case of mediation which is not grounded in the conventional neutrality, but rather in its reputation of efficiency, legal professionalism and strategic value is interesting. Having no natural resources like Qatar, having no historical neutrality like Switzerland, Singapore has found itself a functioning manager and trustworthy convenor, most of all in the complex multilateral and great-power negotiations. Its approach is a by-product of its achievements as a multiethnic state and its consistent then unwavering commitment to a rules-based international order⁽⁹⁾. The greatest illustrative example of this role is that of the ASEAN-China dialogue on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea organizer. The careful, process-based strategy may be slow and cumbersome but it provides a stable bargaining platform on which tensions do not run out of control among its more powerful neighbors. It has also found its way to becoming one of the top venues of high-profile diplomatic discussions like the Trump-Kim summit held in 2018. In the latter scenario, the utility of Singapore was pegged on the capacity to deliver quality security, logistical accuracy, and a measure of political neutrality- though it is very close to the United

⁹ Chong, A. (2018). The Politics of Mediation in a Mediating State: Singapore's Balance between Internationalism and National Self-interest. *The Pacific Review*, 31(6), 799-815.

States. It is useful because it is a stable body that is accredited to be rational and orderly, particularly when dealing with uncertain diplomatic scenarios.

Oman

This rare status of Oman enables it to become the end-game mediator of the Gulf, as with non-aligned approach having promised a stern approach of non-alignment Oman is still free to keep free lines of communication between all the stakeholders, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and others. By so doing, Oman has been able to bargain the release of detainees and to initiate initial talks that have resulted in the U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations. It relies on its power on an unconditional discretion and non-partisanship. (¹⁰)

Algeria

Algeria is a historic case of the Liberation Ally mediator who has engaged in a war of independence herself and is already trusted by other liberation movements. This is evident in the Iran-Iraq ceasefire of 1975 which was extremely active in Algeria and more recently in the 2015 Mali Peace Agreement where it clearly understands the politics of the Sahel region. (¹¹)

Finland

Finland, along with its Nordic neighbors, is the exemplary one of the so-called Expertise-Based Mediation. This is institutionalized by its Crisis Management Initiative, a special Helsinki based NGO, which is chaired by ex-President and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Martti Ahtisaari. The

¹⁰ Worrall, J. (2014). Oman: The “Forgotten” Corner of the Arabian Peninsula. In *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*. Routledge.

¹¹ Zoubir, Y. H. (2020). Algeria and the Sahel: A Key Regional Player. *Mediterranean Politics*, 25(5), 669-676

CMI gives technical guidance in complicated post-conflict scenarios like Kosovo to the minute detail that can provide peace in Myanmar. (¹²)

Kenya

Kenya had become a mediator in East Africa. It is a bigger state in the region, but it fits the functional definition of a mediator because it resolves local conflicts in areas where external forces are not involved. It has been taking the forefront in the quest of establishing peace in Somalia and South Sudan by holding negotiations and sending its forces to AMISOM. It has its advantage due to its economic power and stability in direct investment in regional security. (¹³)

Prerequisites for Success

Small-state mediation requires several conditions in order to be successful. First, it must be a conflict that is ready to conclude (¹⁴). Parties need to arrive at a hurting stalemate as Zartman (2001) puts it and at this point; parties consider negotiation as a better deal as compared to further violence. No mediator no matter how skillful cannot force reluctant parties in negotiations. It must have an invitation and some degree of trust. Small states are not usually allowed to forcefully mediate; they must be invited or at least welcomed by the principals. Trust is therefore a part of this process. Lastly, there is implicit or explicit international backing which is a prerequisite most of the times. The actions, even when not in the international limelight, of a small state have a greater chance of bearing fruits when the major powers are not actively taking action against it. In

¹² Kivimäki, T. (2014). The CMI and the Finnish Model of Mediation. In Northern Security and Global Politics. Routledge

¹³ Anderson, D. M. (2014). Kenya and Regional Peacekeeping: A Complex Engagement. African Studies Review, 57(1), 83-105.

¹⁴ Zartman, I. W. (2001). The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments. The Global Review of Ethnopolitics, 1(1), 8-18.

addition, this means that like in the Oslo case, any agreement that is the result will tend to require security and economic assurances by bigger powers or global institutions.

7. There are a number of different approaches to mediation for small states; often they combine several approaches:

- **Facilitation:** It is a process facilitated by a third party mediator or facilitator as in the case of Norway; this facilitator organizes, sustains the process, ensures communication, and inspires confidence without giving solutions at any given time.
- **Formulation:** The mediator is the person who actively tries to come up with proposals and give practical suggestions, like the case of Switzerland with its enormous legal experience.
- **Manipulation:** The leverage of changing the interests of the parties. These are the financial aid and media influence of Qatar. More risky, but at times useful in getting out of impasses. Nonetheless, there are a number of intrinsic constraints, which indicate the adversities that small states must endure:
 - **The Enforcement Gap:** This is their primary weakness because there can be no guarantee or enforcement of an agreement. They are capable of facilitating a peace agreement but not its policeman.
 - **Geopolitical Vulnerability:** Their operation is a sensitive one to the international dynamics. A small state mediator will be easily marginalized when a great power suddenly develops an interest in a conflict.
 - **Reputational Risk:** A notorious failure will seriously tarnish the reputation of a small state that has been heavily cultivated. Any fault of the breakdown of a peace process is usually placed directly on the shoulders of the mediator and there can also be suspicion on whether it was impartial or not as has been the case with Qatar.

- The Free-Rider Problem: Great powers might well like to leave small states to do first and frequently risky mediation efforts. In case of failure, the great power has nothing to lose in the process; in case it appears promising, the great power may then come in to take credit and influence the process.

Conclusion

This paper has contributed by bringing to light the huge role that small states play in the mediation of conflicts in the world. They are not only an additional component of great power diplomacy, but a separate, significant one of international peace and security. The perceived neutrality and malleable diplomacy that countries like Norway, Switzerland, and Qatar have put to use have been used to engage in dialogues, generate trust, and make breakthroughs to some of the most difficult conflicts in the world. The theoretical basis of these concepts is the structural powerlessness, niche diplomacy, and functionalism that describe how the feeling of perceived weakness could be transformed into a strategic asset. The case studies indicate that no one model of a small state exists. Instead, we can find a number of strategies: Norway is specialized in discreet facilitation, Switzerland in institutional hosting, and Qatar in leveraging in its diplomacy. They both have their relative advantages and dangers, and their success will largely be dependent on time of the conflict and the political climate in international relations. The one common thing that they all have is the fact that they lack the power to enforce. This goes some way to explain the fact that most of the best contributions made by small states are made during the initial and middle steps of a peace process. The implications of the policy are evident. To enable small states to have influence, they must make the commitment of a long-term investment on mediation capacity building: training diplomats, nourishing civil society, and building a reputation of fairness. To the international community, which is mostly the great powers and organizations, there is a necessity

of identifying, financially funding, and politically empowering such competent small-state mediators. Their partners in a more heterogeneous and stronger system of international conflict settlement should not be regarded by the great powers as their competitors, but as partners. Research channels that are opened may, as an example, concern how regional clusters of small states, such as ASEAN, approach conflict mediation in their region. It would also be informative to examine how digital diplomacy and the new communication technologies are impacting the approaches of the small-state mediators. Third, a qualitative study (which could be large in magnitude) could follow the relationships between tangible small-state features and mediation success rates, in-depth qualitative case studies to larger generalizations. With the ongoing and evolving conflicts around the globe, the small but persistent attempts of small-state mediators are a more and more welcome respite as compared to power politics. They demonstrate that, at any rate, in some cases, trust is a more potent tool of peacemaking than force.