



Mediation as Strategy: India's Missed Opportunity?

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By Nimisha Kesarwani

SYNOPSIS

International conflict mediation provides distinct tactical advantages. As countries like the United States, Norway, Qatar, and China expand their roles in global peace diplomacy, India should do likewise in international conflict resolution. To lead in a multipolar world, India must enhance its institutional capacity, develop a team of skilled negotiators, and formulate a strategic doctrine that frames mediation not as idealism, but as pragmatic statecraft – a tool for influence, stability, and global relevance.

COMMENTARY

President Donald Trump's ambitions for the Nobel Peace Prize and his self-declared role in the India-Pakistan border skirmish reignited debate over India's aversion to third-party mediation. Rooted in historical trauma – particularly in Kashmir – India's doctrine of bilateralism and non-intervention remains defensible yet increasingly misaligned with its global ambitions.

This stance has often been interpreted as strategic passivity. The imperative now is not to be mediated, but to become a mediator. As India's economic, diplomatic, and normative stature rises, its absence from global conflict resolution is conspicuous. Despite championing multilateralism, Global South solidarity, and a rules-based order, India hesitates to engage directly in peace negotiations. Institutionalising mediation would align its strategic posture with its aspirational leadership.

What is Mediation?

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) defines mediation as “a mode of negotiation in which a mutually acceptable third party helps the parties to a conflict find a solution that they cannot find by themselves.” Unlike adjudication or arbitration,

mediation is informal, flexible, and confidential – allowing parties to explore creative solutions beyond legal constraints.

Successful mediation requires more than just technical skills; it also demands credibility and ability to bring specific benefits to contending parties and the international community. A state becomes a viable mediator when it possesses the following attributes:

- Economic leverage through trade, investment, or aid,
- Diplomatic access to all parties,
- Political neutrality or perceived impartiality, and
- Historical or cultural ties that foster trust.

These attributes do not guarantee success, especially in conflicts rooted in identity or historical grievance. In such cases, the mediator's role is to facilitate dialogue, build confidence, and create space for compromise.

India meets several of these criteria. In Yemen, it maintains strong bilateral ties with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, enabling discreet engagement without causing geopolitical backlash. In the Israel-Palestine conflict, India's principled support for a two-state solution and balanced relations with both sides lend it moral and diplomatic credibility. Its anti-colonial legacy further reinforces its legitimacy as a potential facilitator of dialogue in an increasingly polarised world.

Why Mediation Matters

There are compelling reasons why India must now embrace mediation as a strategic tool. Most importantly, it signals global maturity – projecting India's capacity to shape outcomes in regions long dominated by Western powers. Initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) require regional stability, which mediation can quietly foster without overt intervention.

Mediation efforts and dividends will align with India's normative identity. Rooted in *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("the world is one family"), India's ethos of principled peace – echoed in Prime Minister Modi's assertion that "India is not neutral; it is on the side of peace" – enhances its soft power and moral credibility.

Furthermore, mediation offers low-cost diplomatic hedging. In a fluid multipolar world, it enables engagement across rival blocs without binary alignment. Such efforts will also help India preempt spillover risks – from terrorism to instability – through early, non-intrusive engagement.

India's Quiet Diplomacy

Although India has rarely positioned itself as a formal mediator, it has played quiet yet consequential roles in global diplomacy – favouring stabilisation over intervention and dialogue over arbitration. During the Sri Lanka peace process, India's

backchannel influences complemented Norway's formal mediation, shaped by regional proximity and domestic sensitivities. In Afghanistan post-2001, India supported Afghan-led initiatives, hosted leaders, and invested in reconstruction – deliberately avoiding direct involvement in US-Taliban talks.

India has also acted as a discreet intermediary in Iran-US tensions, leveraging balanced ties to advocate de-escalation. In the Russia-Ukraine war, it has maintained channels with both sides, offered humanitarian aid, and called for peace – its UN vote abstentions reflecting calculative moves to preserve dialogue space.

Beyond bilateral efforts, India engages through platforms like BRICS and SCO and remains the largest contributor to UN peacekeeping missions.

However, these are ad hoc diplomatic engagements – not institutionalised mediation strategy. India has yet to establish a formal reputation as a third-party facilitator in global conflicts.

Building Institutional Capacity

India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) handles a wide spectrum of diplomatic responsibilities but lacks a dedicated unit for mediation. While the Policy Planning & Research Division within MEA engages in strategic foresight and conflict diplomacy, what remains absent is a dedicated unit focused exclusively on mediation.

Global peers provide instructive models. The US Bureau of Conflict and Stabilisation Operations (CSO) offers a compelling model. It supports conflict resolution efforts worldwide by providing diplomats with tailored analysis, negotiation support, and strategic engagement tools. Within the CSO, the Negotiations Support Unit (NSU) stands out – a specialised team of subject-matter experts with extensive experience working with governments, non-state actors, civil society, and multilateral organisations. This layered architecture enables the US to engage in complex political negotiations with agility and precision.

Norway coordinates mediation through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, supported by the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF) and Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). These organisations provide research, field expertise, and logistical support, enabling Norway to deploy tailored mediation teams across diverse conflict zones.

Qatar institutionalises mediation via its Foreign Ministry, which houses dedicated ministerial portfolios, special envoys, and senior officials tasked specifically with conflict resolution and mediation.

China has taken a more ambitious, system-building approach, with the launch of the International Organisation for Mediation (IOMed) – an intergovernmental legal body aimed at resolving international disputes through mediation. It reflects Beijing's aspiration to shift from being a participant to a rule-maker in global governance, particularly in the eyes of the Global South. Its long-term goal is to establish a

permanent institutional presence, akin to an UN-style secretariat but with “Chinese characteristics”.

India can draw from these models to institutionalise mediation as a strategic tool – enhancing its credibility, agility, and normative leadership in global conflict resolution.

Conclusion

To establish itself as a credible mediator, India must move beyond ad hoc diplomacy and invest in dedicated infrastructure for peace facilitation. A specialised mediation wing within MEA – staffed by trained negotiators, regional experts, and conflict analysts – could serve as the backbone of India’s peace diplomacy, reinforcing both its strategic autonomy and its normative leadership. From available information, India already has a significant faculty of area studies experts and diplomatic specialists who can certainly contribute to a sustainable mediatory process towards conflict management.

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