

EMERGING APPROACHES TO INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD SHIFTING DYNAMICS AND AUSTRIA'S RESPONSE

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Emerging Approaches to International Mediation in a Fragmented World: Shifting Dynamics and Austria's Response

1. Introduction: A Changing International System: (Re-)Emerging Actors in International Mediation

The recent increase in armed conflicts in many parts of the world – including Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, Ethiopia, and Sudan – along with the pandemic and the worsening climate crisis have all added to the unpredictability of the current global landscape. The abrogation of the last remaining arms control treaties and the increasing frequency of documented war crimes further point to the erosion of the existing international order. The paralysis of international organizations further exacerbates this crisis. As a period of US hegemony in the international system has been increasingly replaced by a multipolar international order, actors such as China, Türkiye, and the Gulf States are entering into the field of international mediation, with a significant increase in these countries' involvement. In this text, we briefly discuss possible implications that the changing realities in the field of international mediation bring for Austria's foreign policy.

Today, as meeting venues for conflicting parties, Doha, Istanbul, and Beijing pose viable alternatives to Geneva, New York, and Vienna. But mediation efforts led by these convenors go beyond solely providing platforms for conflicting parties to meet. They now include more active engagement in conflict transformation and dialogue processes, as demonstrated by Qatar's

role in the negotiations between Hamas and Israel at the end of November 2023. Furthermore, these actors' engagement stems from the particular interests and new opportunities presented by a changing geopolitical landscape. Türkiye's role in co-facilitating the 2022 Black Sea Grain Initiative between Russia and Ukraine as well as China's efforts in facilitating dialogue in the Persian Gulf are two examples of this trend. While the methods as well as the ideological and geopolitical underpinnings of these actors' foreign policies may differ, they share common approaches to peacebuilding, which can be broadly referred to as 'illiberal' peace¹.

States that have long been prominent in international mediation – such as Austria, Finland, Norway, and Switzerland – are increasingly positioning themselves in support of specific parties within armed conflicts. As a result, their convening power is shrinking, as conflicting parties increasingly turn towards emerging actors. This change suggests that these conventional mediators need to consider alternative options to remain relevant and effective. Focusing on the case of Austria, this paper discusses the implications of the more active engagement of illiberal actors in international mediation for Austria's peacebuilding efforts and provides recommendations for its policymakers as to how Austria can adjust its foreign policy

¹ Mitchell, C. (2023). 'Illiberal' Peace and the Nature of 'Illiberality': Concepts and Cases. *International Negotiation* (published online ahead of print 2023). <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-20231352>

against the background of a changing landscape in international mediation.

2. Illiberal peace – An Old New Phenomenon?

The post-Cold War period of US hegemony in the international order was the golden era of liberal peacebuilding. This entailed approaches to peace based on concepts such as democracy and human rights. Liberal peace, in line with modern development thinking, articulates a promise of prosperity through universal(ized) norms, based on the assumption that societies that adhere to human rights and democratic standards and pursue economic cooperation are more peaceful than others. However, Western advocacy for the promotion of these values as universalized preconditions for peace have been challenged by the rise of an increasingly fragmented world, in which the West – including the US and the EU – has become just one of many actors. Illiberal actors, in contrast, are articulating alternatives to liberal peacebuilding. They tend to emphasize economic development and hesitate to advocate for political reforms, which they often view as undue intervention into another state's internal affairs.

So far, there have been only limited attempts to study the qualities of these alternative approaches to peacebuilding. Scholars have broadly referred to them as 'illiberal peace'² and 'authoritarian conflict management',³ arguing that liberal and illiberal conflict management processes

differ in the extent of coercion within the process, the types of tools utilized for ending a conflict, and the values, actors, and institutions involved in the process.⁴ However, it should be noted that the rise of illiberal peacebuilding is not a new phenomenon but may instead be seen as a 'revival of imperial strategies of conflict suppression and coercion.'⁵ If anything, in the context of European history, it is liberal peacebuilding that emerges as a relatively new form of conflict management. Nevertheless, contemporary illiberal approaches to mediation warrant a closer investigation – especially on the policy level, as they are (re-) emerging in a changing geopolitical context. As a country that has traditionally served as a mediator, Austria needs to consider how this phenomenon is playing into its own mediation and peace policy. Looking into the practices of other small and mid-size European states that are actively engaged in international mediation provides a helpful anchor point to explore options for Austrian foreign peace policy.

3. Smaller and Mid-Size European States as Peacebuilding Actors

Besides Austria, European states such as Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland have established themselves as credible mediators in many regions of the world. They have integrated peace and conflict transformation into their foreign policy objectives and have invested in implementation through the allocation of considerable human and financial resources. In addition, these states have developed mediation support structures by working with NGOs, think tanks, and universities that conduct practical work and

research on mediation and peacebuilding. This group of states has a track record of successes. This includes the role of Norway and Switzerland in the Colombian peace process, which concluded in an agreement in 2016, and Norway's support to the African Union-led peace process that helped end the two-year conflict in northern Ethiopia. However, in other contexts – such as Europe's East as well as the ongoing conflict in the Middle East – these same actors, Austria included, have lost their image as neutral third parties. Mediation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is now provided by the Gulf States and Türkiye, with China, Israel, and South Africa having also offered their mediation services, while the main convening actors for indirect talks between Israel and Hamas are Egypt and Qatar.

Finland, Norway, and Sweden see their peacebuilding efforts as part of a wider Nordic community, with the ambition of the Nordic Council to make peace the 'trademark of the region.'⁶ While they value the benefits of cooperating with like-minded Nordic states, there is also a push to cooperate more with other, less like-minded actors to 'avoid forming blocks in multilateral institutions and to avoid being seen as a single homogenous group that risks alienating others with a morally superior approach.'⁷ Examples of such cooperation include the 'Group of Friends of Mediation' in the United Nations (UN), initiated jointly by Finland and Türkiye, and Norway's attempt to look for synergies in mediation approaches with Qatar. As another example, Switzerland – despite its strong humanitarian and human rights-based tradition in foreign policy – uses its tradition of neutrality as a convening power, consciously engaging with a broad range of actors that

do not necessarily share its values. From an Austrian perspective, these approaches to mediation in such multilateral formats are of particular interest, as they suggest a pragmatic direction for maintaining impact in a changing global landscape.

4. Austria and the Tradition of Active Neutrality Policy

Austria – and Vienna in particular – has a long-standing tradition of providing platforms for multilateral negotiations and conference formats for conflicting parties. This is most clearly reflected in Vienna serving as host city for the UN's third headquarters as well as several other international organizations, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Among other negotiations, Austria served as the host for the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights (1993), the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons (2014), the Vienna peace talks for Syria (2015), and the conclusion of the Joint and Comprehensive Plan of Action (2015). Austria's conducive atmosphere to international dialogue and mediation has been reinforced by its tradition of talking to a broad range of actors across ideological and geopolitical boundaries. For example, Austrian Federal Chancellor Bruno Kreisky was the first head of a Western government to receive Yasser Arafat in 1986. Austria has also been a committed contributor of qualified staff to UN peace missions. Consequently, the Austrian Federal Government's creation of a Civilian Peace Service (Ziviler Friedensdienst) as well as a Mediation Facility in its 2020–2024 coalition agreement sought to build on this decades-long tradition. In light of the changing international landscape and increasing polarization worldwide, Austria would be well-positioned to once again capitalize on its potential as a mediator. This

² See, for example, Mitchell, C. (2023). 'Illiberal' Peace and the Nature of 'Illiberality': Concepts and Cases. *International Negotiation* (published online ahead of print 2023). <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-20231352> and Ohanyan, A. (2022). 'Illiberal Peace': Oxymoron, Political Necessity, or Old Wine in a New Bottle. *International Negotiation* (published online ahead of print 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10081>

³ See Lewis, D., Heathershaw, J., & Megoran, N. (2018). Illiberal peace? Authoritarian modes of conflict management. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 53(4), 486-506. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836718765902>

⁴ Ohanyan, A. (2022). 'Illiberal Peace': Oxymoron, Political Necessity, or Old Wine in a New Bottle. *International Negotiation* (published online ahead of print 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10081>

⁵ Ibid., p. 36

⁶ Anine Hagemann and Isabel Bramsen, (2019). *New Nordic Peace, Nordic Peace and Conflict Resolution Efforts*. Available at <https://www.norden.org/en/publication/new-nordic-peace>, p. 15

⁷ Ibid. pp.39-40

could contribute to peace and conflict transformation in regions relevant to Austria's security while also promoting a positive perception of Austria in the world and enhancing its ability to contribute to multi-lateral decision-making processes.

However, the more active engagement of other actors in international dialogue initiatives –including China, Türkiye, and the Gulf States – has challenged Austria's role as a convening power and a mediator. For example, Qatar's diplomatic efforts between Israel and Hamas in the ongoing war resulted in a temporary ceasefire and the release of over a hundred hostages. Meanwhile, Austria is hardly any longer viewed as neutral by Palestinians given its domestic and international positioning in the conflict.

For Austria and other European states with a tradition of mediation and dialogue facilitation, this new dynamic in the geopolitical landscape suggests the following possible courses of action. First, Vienna could take an ideological approach and decide not to interfere in international mediation processes if illiberal actors are involved as (co-)mediators or convening powers. This may be justified by concerns over the incompatibility of values between Austrian approaches, which are driven by democracy and human rights, and those of emerging actors, which can be subsumed under the umbrella of illiberal peace. However, this may entail a significant loss in Austria's impact on decision-making processes in international relations. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that in some contexts – such as the war in Ukraine – Austria can only serve as a credible actor if it acts jointly with other third parties that are perceived as neutral by both sides to the conflict. Second, Vienna could opt for interest-based arrangements with emerging actors. This may imply

cooperation driven primarily by national and economic interests, with less regard given to the values, underlying intentions, or foreign policy goals of its partners. However, this approach would come at the risk of compromising on core values, such as human rights or democracy. Third, Austria could opt for a pragmatic approach to forming partnerships with emerging actors. This could occur through proactive engagement in multilateral formats across ideological boundaries. Such an approach may require asking difficult questions before coming to decisions about the form and extent of potential partnerships in international mediation. However, such an approach would likely reduce the risk of being forced to abandon positions that are important from the perspective of a democratic value system.

When weighing the different options, the Austrian Federal Government should also consider the accompanying implications for Austria's national security. As indicated by members of the expert advisory group accompanying the formulation of a new national security strategy, spheres of policy such as development cooperation and international peace policy have direct and indirect implications for Austria's own national security.⁸ The experts clearly underlined the importance for Austria to continuously engage in international dialogue and mediation in order to foster security through multilateral cooperation. Therefore, the ideological approach appears less favorable, as it may compromise this ability.

While several interest groups may advocate for an interest-based approach, one

⁸ Together with partners, the Austrian Centre for Peace (ACP) has been actively engaged in public debates about the development of a new Austrian Security Strategy. For further reading about ACP and the International Institute for Peace's position regarding the development of a new Austrian security strategy, see: https://www.aspr.ac.at/fileadmin/Pictures/Forschung/7_Punkte_Sicherheitsstrategie.pdf

must carefully weigh this option against the core principles of Austrian society, including human rights, free speech, and democracy. Austria's neutrality policy has implied a clear position when it comes to these core values – a stance that has been reflected in Austria's long engagement in the UN's human rights portfolios. An overemphasis of such an approach may therefore undermine Austria's credibility in some other key areas of its foreign policy.

A pragmatic approach, as a third possible option, would perhaps be less agile than the interest-based approach. It would also confront policymakers with difficult choices, which imply questions such as: How does one position oneself towards human rights issues in countries that may act as possible co-convenors of international mediation and dialogue? How can economic independence be ensured for key Austrian actors? What would be benchmarks for determining whether the added value of cooperation with illiberal actors in certain peace processes trumps its downsides?

Considering the absence of a clear option for dialogue between certain conflicting parties, it may be necessary to cooperate with emerging actors in international mediation to explore possibilities for a joint third-party role. This may at some points leave decisionmakers with difficult dilemmas rather than easy answers. However, considering the increasingly fragmented geopolitical landscape, one should seriously consider this option as the most favorable of the three.

5. Conclusion

The increasing fragmentation and polarization of the international system has led in some contexts to the loss of credibility

of traditional third-party mediators. Instead, these mediators have been replaced by emerging actors whose approach to foreign policy in general and to international peacebuilding in particular can be subsumed under the umbrella of illiberal peace. This reality poses questions for countries such as Austria about how they can continue to remain effective in their international mediation efforts. On one hand, joining forces with the emerging actors in mediation would strengthen Austria's credibility as a neutral third party. At the same time, cooperation with these actors may be contradictory to some of Austria's key values in international relations. The choice therefore appears to be between sticking to one's ideology, deprioritizing one's own values, or attempting to reconcile these conflicting interests on a case-by-case basis. The last option would certainly be the most challenging and time-consuming to realize, as it would imply confronting oneself with difficult questions, answering them with practical steps, and continually monitoring their implementation. It does, however, appear the most prudent course of action if Austria wants to remain a relevant and effective actor on the stage of international peace and mediation. It would thus be advisable for the Federal Government as well as relevant non-governmental agencies working in mediation and peacebuilding to explore potential venues of cooperation with non-like-minded states. These investigations should be accompanied by serious consideration about the ethical dimensions that such joint ventures would inevitably raise.

