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Agents of peace or enablers of violence? The proximal effects of mediators in international disputes

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ABSTRACT

The international relations literature typically portrays mediators as effective agents of dispute de-escalation. Upon mediation onset rivals are expected to lower the flames of conflict and enter into negotiations. We argue, however, that the mediator's presence may actually prompt and facilitate conflict escalation, particularly immediately following the onset of mediation. Hostilities, which may be motivated by rivals' strategic need to signal resolve, may be further energized by the belief that the mediator will curb retaliatory actions. In this sense, the mediator is perceived as an "insurance policy," reducing both the perceived likelihood and the potential costs of escalation. To explore this phenomenon, we track rivals' behavior patterns in the six-month period after mediation onset in intrastate conflicts, 1995–2010. We find that in 42% of the conflicts, the arrival of the mediator was significantly associated with increased hostilities. We discuss this pattern and examine factors that might be linked to its occurrence.

KEYWORDS

mediation, negotiation; conflict escalation; insurance effect, bargaining

La literatura sobre las relaciones internacionales suele representar a los mediadores como agentes efectivos de la desescalada de conflictos. Luego del inicio de la mediación, se espera que los rivales disminuyan la intensidad del conflicto y entablen negociaciones. No obstante, sostenemos que la presencia del mediador en realidad puede provocar y facilitar la escalada del conflicto, en particular, inmediatamente después del inicio de la mediación. Las hostilidades, que pueden verse motivadas por la necesidad estratégica de los rivales de indicar su determinación, pueden avivarse aún más con la creencia de que el mediador limitará las represalias. En este sentido, el mediador se percibe como una "póliza de seguro" que reduce tanto la probabilidad percibida como los posibles costos de la escalada. Para estudiar este fenómeno, hacemos un seguimiento de los patrones de conducta de los rivales en el período de seis meses posterior al inicio de la mediación en los conflictos intraestatales entre 1995 y 2010. Observamos que, en el 42% de los conflictos, la llegada del mediador se relacionó de manera significativa con un aumento en las hostilidades. Analizamos este patrón y examinamos los factores que pueden asociarse a su existencia.

La littérature sur les relations internationales décrit généralement les médiateurs comme étant des agents efficaces de désescalade des conflits. Les rivaux sont supposés réduire les flammes du conflit et entrer en négociations dès le début de la médiation. Nous soutenons cependant que la présence du médiateur peut en réalité inciter et faciliter l'escalade du conflit, en particulier immédiatement après le début de la médiation. Les hostilités, qui peuvent être motivées par le besoin stratégique des rivaux de signaler leur détermination, peuvent être ravivées par la conviction que le médiateur réfrénera les actions de représailles. En ce sens, le médiateur est perçu comme une « police d'assurance » réduisant à la fois la probabilité perçue et les coûts potentiels de l'escalade. Pour explorer ce phénomène, nous avons suivi les modèles de comportement de rivaux durant les six mois suivant le début de la médiation dans des conflits intra-étatiques qui sont intervenus entre 1995 et 2010. Nous avons constaté que dans 42% des conflits, l'arrivée du médiateur était significativement associée à une augmentation des hostilités. Nous abordons cette tendance et examinons les facteurs qui pourraient être associés à son apparition.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, an increasing number of conflicts have relied on mediation as an expedient instrument of conflict resolution. At the same time, a voluminous body of literature has developed on the process and outcome of mediation that aims to provide a better understanding of the conditions that facilitate its success. Factors such as the timing of intervention, the mediator's rank, mediator leverage and strategies, political systems of the parties involved, and power relations between the protagonists have all been found to influence mediation (for reviews see Nagel and Clayton 2017; Wall, Stark, and Standifer 2001; Wallensteen and Svensson 2014). However, the extant research largely focuses on the final outcome of mediation as a criterion for assessing its success (see Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014, 322–323; Frazier and Dixon 2006; Svensson 2009). Little attention is given to the influence of the mere inclusion of the mediator on the conflict dynamics and actions of the disputing parties. Thus, while mediation track-records in terms of final outcomes may seem to be on the rise, we do not know much about what happens along the way. Without knowledge pertaining to the conflict dynamics prompted by mediation onset, we are unable to inform mediators' expectations and preparedness. In the current research we seek to remedy this gap by exploring the impact of the entrance of the mediator on conflict dynamics, focusing on the six-month period after the mediation process begins.

In the international relations literature, a mediator's presence is typically perceived as a pacifying factor that allows the sides to de-escalate or completely cease hostilities, while the mediator paves the way toward an

acceptable settlement. Toward this goal, mediators are able to provide assurances, guarantees, incentives and sanctions, which act to reduce risks and uncertainties throughout the negotiation process and make the goal of achieving a viable settlement more attractive to parties (Bilder 1981; Cohen 2001; Terris and Maoz 2005; Touval 1982; Zartman and Touval 1997). Even in cases wherein one or both of the disputing parties do not genuinely intend to sign an agreement, the presence of a mediator can provide a temporary respite (Beardsley 2011). Yet, this is not the only possible scenario. Aside from the mediator's pacifying influence, we argue that the mediator's presence may at times trigger conflict escalation. This effect, we suggest, is facilitated by two mechanisms that might be triggered by mediation onset. The first involves strategic motivations to increase conflict. After agreeing to a mediation process one or both of the disputing parties may be motivated to increase hostilities as a way to demonstrate a position of strength and to signal to the opponent, domestic audiences or political rivals that embarking on a mediation process does not entail a weakening of their claims. Such signaling, we argue, is particularly likely shortly after the mediator arrives on the scene, a period which might be imbued with volatility due to the shift in the status quo precipitated by the mediator's arrival. Similarly, rivals may seek to use escalation for practical purposes in the hope of improving their bargaining positions and acquiring "bargaining chips" (Zartman and Faure 2005). Again, this process might be particularly relevant upon the beginning of mediation to create an anchor against which possible concessions will be judged.

The second mechanism is psychological and refers to the influence of the entrance of the mediator on the perceptions of the primary parties, making conflict escalation seem like a more feasible option. Specifically, the presence of the mediator might have the effect of reducing the perceived risks the disputants associate with provocative actions as the mediator is conceived as a "responsible adult" who takes charge, and in this role absorbs some of the risks entailed in a possible flare-up. This dynamic is akin to the phenomenon of Moral Hazard in insurance, whereby people who are insured may sometimes act negligently (e.g, fail to lock their valuables) because under the policy, the costs of the loss are transferred onto the insurance company. Moreover, research on the "insurance effect" in psychology, suggests that insurance policies and protective means often provide a psychological sense of safety, which in turn distorts people's perception of the probability of misfortune. Given such assurances and the sense of safety they inspire, actors often underestimate the likelihood of negative outcomes they may face. This thinking process is not unlike the naïve belief that if I have an umbrella it's not going to rain. Drawing on above, we argue that in the context of conflict situations, disputants might perceive a mediator as a form of insurance policy inspiring a sense of safety, which in turn will reduce both the perceived likelihood and

the severity of possible negative outcomes resulting from escalation of hostilities. Consequently, disputants might be tempted to take risks entailed in increasing hostile actions.

Thus, through the above strategic and psychological mechanisms, the presence of the mediator may both enhance motivations for escalation, and lower the perceived risks associated with provocations. As these mechanisms are particularly relevant in the first phases of the mediation process, investigating the proximal effects of mediators is of both theoretical and practical importance.

The above interpretation does not negate or ignore the possible beneficial pacifying effects of the mediator's intervention that has been demonstrated in past research. Rather, we suggest that aside from these effects there are plausible reasons to expect shifts in the opposite direction.

We begin this paper with a discussion of the impact of mediation on conflict dynamics and the strategic and psychological mechanisms that may trigger and facilitate conflict escalation. Then, to empirically explore the proximal dynamics incited by mediation onset, we compare conflict levels within 109 intrastate conflicts (1995–2010), in the six-month period before and after mediation onset. To measure conflict levels we rely on conflict density scores derived from the ICEWS events data. We explore the impact of variables typically used in mediation research on the change in conflict levels following mediation onset. We conclude with a discussion of our results and their policy implications, and directions for further research.

Mediation and Conflict Dynamics

Mediation concerns activities undertaken by a party exogenous to a conflict between two or more parties, designed to manage or resolve the conflict by peaceful means (Bercovitch 1992, 4–5). Mediators may be states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations or individuals.¹ Beardsley (2011, 3) writes that the task of the mediator is to help the belligerents “abandon the status quo of armed hostilities,” and to “foster a relationship between the combatants that precludes the return to violence.” In other words, a mediator's function is to de-escalate the conflict situation and help the sides agree to a stable and sustainable peace settlement. Irrespective of the final outcome of the mediation process, this expectation holds even when actors participate in a mediation process merely for – domestic or international – political reasons, as they are expected to behave like states looking toward resolution of their conflict (Beardsley 2011, 3).

¹The literature on mediation in inter and intrastate conflicts is vast. For theoretical discussions on the who, when, and why of mediation see Beardsley (2011); Bercovitch and Regan (2004); Nagel and Clayton (2017); Sisk (2009).

Yet, although it is widely recognized that the introduction of a third party alters the strategic structure of the relations between the protagonists and their incentive for violence, the mediation literature does not in fact empirically explore the immediate impact of the entrance of the mediator on the relationship between the disputants or on the level of hostilities. Typically scholars concentrate on whether or not mediation ultimately led to an agreement (e.g., Beardsley et al. 2006; Bercovitch, Anagnoson, and Wille 1991; Savun 2008) and on the stability of agreements reached (e.g., Beardsley 2008; Beardsley et al. 2006; DeRouen, Lea, and Wallensteen 2009; Gartner and Bercovitch 2006; Hartzell and Hoddie 2003). Empirical research on the impact of mediation largely ignores the first task to which Beardsley (2011) refers, i.e., to help the belligerents “abandon the status quo of armed hostilities.” Instead it is often assumed, inferred or rhetorically implied that this is what happens while an agreement is sought after.

Against the view of the mediator as an effective actor who lowers the flames of dispute while paving the road to peace, one may contemplate a conceptualization, which paints this picture in a very different light, especially in the short run. According to this view, the entrance of mediators may both create an incentive for conflict escalation and, at the same time, inspire the rivals to underestimate the likelihood that provocative actions will be met with serious repercussions. In other words, paradoxically, the entrance of the mediator creates a type of “safe space” for increased hostilities.

Mediation and Motivation for Conflict Escalation

Although to the best of our knowledge, the extant mediation literature does not explore the entrance of the mediator as a factor that may actually prompt an increase in hostilities, such a contingency is consistent with the dynamics discussed in the bargaining literature. According to this literature, hostile actions and threats may constitute bargaining tools used by parties in negotiations to signal resolve and collect bargaining chips in the hope of improving the terms of an expected settlement (Brams 1990; Fearon 1994; Holl 1993; Kydd and McManus 2017; Pillar 1983; Sisk 2009). All these motives are relevant to mediated negotiations. However, we argue that the appeal of such tacit bargaining tools is in fact enhanced in the context of mediation onset. Accepting a mediator may present the leader as particularly weak and lacking in resolve. A key reason for this is that in mediated talks disputants yield to the third party some control over how the negotiations will proceed and they become susceptible to pressure by the mediator (Gartner et al. 2006; Terris 2017, 5–6). To counteract these costs of accepting mediation, leaders may be motivated to increase hostilities. Provocations may serve to restore an actor’s appearance of strength, control, and resolve, signaling to domestic audiences, political rivals, and the opponent that accepting a mediator does not mean a softening of positions.

Mediation and Risk Perception

Independent of the underlying motivation for an escalation of hostilities, such behavior will be perceived as more feasible and less risky once a mediator arrives on the scene. This process is triggered by the perception of the mediator as an “insurance policy,” and the sense of safety it inspires. We discuss this process below.

The insurance effect

Well known in the insurance industry is the phenomenon known as Moral Hazard, whereby upon purchasing an insurance policy, individuals become more likely to act in ways which increase their exposure to risk (Dave and Kaestner 2009; Stanciole 2008). For example, after purchasing auto insurance people may be less careful about locking their cars or drive more recklessly, thereby increasing the risk of theft or the likelihood of an accident. Insurance companies’ explanation for this behavior is that insured people believe that if something happens the insurance company will pay for the damages. The cost of negligent behavior is transferred to the insurance company. To dampen this perceived shift of the risk onto the company – insurance policies often include “deductibles.”

A different explanation for the moral hazard phenomenon is presented in the psychological literature. Recently Tykocinski (2008, 2013) argued that there is another factor that could contribute to the negligent behavior of the insured. The possession of an insurance policy (or, any protective measure) diminishes the perceived threat of potential misfortune not only by reducing the potential severity of negative outcomes (through indemnities), but also psychologically, it reduces the perceived probability of any misfortune happening in the first place. Anxiety plays a key role in this process. Intuitively, people judge the probability of negative outcomes according to the magnitude of the anxiety they experience when contemplating these events. An insurance policy or other protective measures work to reduce anxiety and consequently, makes the negative outcomes appear less likely to occur. For example, people who were reminded of the fact that they possess health insurance perceived lower likelihoods that they will need surgery, nursing care, or physical therapy in the near future, compared to people who were also insured but were not reminded of that fact (Tykocinski 2008; experiment 1). Similarly, an experiment conducted in Israel showed that reminding citizens of the gas masks in their possession² reduced their perception of the likelihood that Israel would be attacked by Iran (Tykocinski 2013). According to the insurance effect, people seek insurance policies and protective measures once a threat looms large in their minds. These measures inspire a sense of safety, which in turn

²Between the years 1991 (the Gulf War) and around 2010 all Israeli citizens were required to have in their possession gas masks.

reduces the subjective sense of threat. The result is paradoxical. Greater threats motivate the quest to obtain protective measures, but these same measures cause the perceived probability of harm to shrink (Tykocinski 2008, 2013).

In the context of international relations, the concept of Moral Hazard was applied by Crawford and Kuperman (2006) and Kuperman (2008) to the effects of humanitarian intervention, or 'the responsibility to protect' on the likelihood of rebellion. According to Kuperman, R2P's "call for intervention to aid groups suffering from state violence can lead nonstate actors to view rebellion as a no-lose proposition . . ." (2008, 75), thus encouraging excessively risky behavior on part of rebel groups. If the state does not strike back, the rebels stand to gain from their actions; if the state does retaliate, the international community intervenes, and the rebels still stand to gain. However, Kuperman (2008) also points out that the prospect of humanitarian intervention has also proved sufficient to prompt some rebellion without deterring state retaliation, thereby causing genocidal violence that otherwise would not have occurred.

When it comes to third party intervention in international disputes, a mediator could be thought of as an insurance policy or protective measure, who arrives in the midst of conflict and inspires a sense of safety. A responsible, clear thinking, adult is now in the region. Moreover, this responsible adult, also has a vested interest in keeping things under control. Although the sense of safety which is inspired by the involvement of a mediator and the assurances provided may help to unlock a conflict stalemate, it may also have a darker side – like an insurance policy, this sense of safety on part of the disputants is likely to reduce the perceived likelihood of negative outcomes resulting from hostile actions.

Given that in some cases, disputing parties going into negotiations may be motivated to increase hostilities for political reasons or because they believe this will strengthen their bargaining positions, these tendencies are likely to be exacerbated when contingent risks are underestimated. Based on the above theoretical analysis we expect that the arrival of mediators to a conflict zone, aside successful interventions, might also cause an increase in hostilities at least in the short run.

After establishing the motivations for increasing hostilities upon the arrival of a mediator and discussing how the mediators themselves may be perceived as providing a protective umbrella for increased hostilities, we suggest three conditions that might be linked to shifts in conflict levels upon the entrance of the mediator. These conditions, which have been linked in the literature to mediation outcomes, pertain to characteristics of the conflict (conflict duration), characteristics of the conflict state (regime types), and characteristics of the mediator (mediator power).

Conflict duration. A great deal has been written about the importance of the timing of mediation in determining the likelihood for bringing the sides to a negotiated settlement.³ Intervention at a later stage in a conflict usually means that the rivaling parties have already invested considerable resources in the dispute and that they are more entrenched in their positions. Under such conditions, the very arrival of a mediator could particularly enhance concerns on part of the rivals that cooperating with the mediator would be perceived as a sign of weakness. To prevent this impression, hindering negotiations could serve as an effective signal of strength. Moreover, conflicts that continue for prolonged periods without resolution might serve as indication that the costs involved in the conflict are bearable for both sides. In such cases, a mediator might be accepted into the conflict merely “for show,” with no intention of abating hostilities. This discussion suggests that mediators who enter in the later stages of conflict are more likely to be associated with enhanced hostilities, at least initially, compared to mediators who enter the conflict in its earlier stages.

Mediator rank. The mediation literature suggests that strong mediators are on average more successful than weak mediators at peacemaking, as they have the resources with which to influence and motivate the disputing sides to reach an agreement (Beardsley et al. 2006; Bercovitch et al. 1991; Maoz and Terris 2006, 411–12). While this is true, we suggest that under certain circumstances, strong mediators might also be more likely to trigger a flare-up in hostilities upon their arrival for two reasons. First, stronger mediators are more likely to undermine the perceived strengths of the rivals due to the greater resources in their possession with which to exert pressure on disputing parties to make concessions. Thus, faced with a strong mediator, disputants will more likely be motivated to signal resolve by increasing hostilities. Second, the resources available to stronger mediators are also likely to inspire a greater sense of safety that in turn may lead parties to adapt risk-taking behavior. Thus, we expect that if mediation onset is associated with increased hostilities it is more likely to happen with stronger – rather than–weaker mediators.

Regime type. The literature on mediation in interstate conflicts shows that democracies are more amenable to peaceful conflict resolution than non-democratic states (e.g., Dixon 1994; Dixon and Senese 2002; Greig 2005). Peaceful conflict resolution is more in line with democratic values and norms. Therefore, political leaders who are accustomed to nonviolent

³The research focusing on mediation outcomes is divided regarding the question of whether mediation is more likely to succeed when it takes places in the earlier – or later – stages of a conflict. For theoretical discussion on the different approaches and supporting empirical evidence, see (Bercovitch , Anagnoson, and Wille 1991; Edmead 1971; Greig 2001; Mason and Fett 1996; Regan and Stam 2000; Wickboldt, Bercovitch, and Piramuthu 1999; Zartman 2000, 2001).

procedures of conflict resolution in domestic affairs, will be more cooperative in mediation processes in their external disputes. With respect to internal disputes et al. (2009) found that in territorial conflicts in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, some level of democracy was necessary for a meaningful mediation process to take place. We suggest that similar to states, rebel groups within democratic states might also be more open than their counterparts in non-democracies to accept mediation as they will be more familiar with democratic norms and procedures at least to a certain extent. Thus, consistent with the literature we expect that the onset of mediation in more democratic states has a higher likelihood of prompting de-escalation than mediation onset in less democratic states.

Research Design

Data Sources and Variables

To examine the proximal impact of mediators on conflict in civil wars we compared conflict levels between rivaling parties in the six-month period before and after the onset of mediation in intrastate wars between 1995 and 2010.

The mediation data was taken from the Civil Wars Mediation (CWM) Dataset of DeRouen, Bercovitch, and Pospieszna (2011). This data set provides detailed information on the dates, characteristics, and outcomes of civil war mediation.

The data, from which we derived weighted conflict density scores that reflect the conflict levels before – and after – the onset of mediation, were taken from the Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS) project. Using computerized natural language processing techniques, ICEWS records all events between and within global actors on a daily basis.⁴ In addition, each event is assigned a Goldstein value (ranging from –10 to +10), which represents the intensity of the event on a conflict-cooperation continuum (Goldstein 1992). Thus, by relying on the ICEWS data we were able to capture a nuanced picture of the relations between parties on a conflict-cooperation continuum and not only whether one party used military force against its opponent. Some examples of events included in the dataset and their values, ranging from more negative/conflictual to more positive/cooperative include: Assassinate (–10), Veto (–5), Make Statement (0), Make an Appeal (3), and Provide Aid (7). As can be seen in these examples, the Goldstein values essentially reflect weights of the events. We used these Goldstein values to

⁴ICEWS is an early warning system designed to help understand and predict inter and intra-state instability across countries. See (O'Brien 2010); Ward et al. 2013b; (Shilliday and Lautenschlager 2013) for reviews and evaluation of ICEWS. Ward et al (2013a) present an illuminating comparison between GDELT and ICEWS events data. The ICEWS data is available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/28075>.

construct a weighted conflict density score (henceforth, conflict density scores) for the six-month period before each mediation onset in our database and one for the six-month period after each mediation onset date. The conflict density scores measure for each time-period, the portion of conflictual interactions out of the total interactions (cooperative and conflictual) between the two parties. This measure has been employed widely in international relations studies to measure state characteristics and relations between states, such as alliance density, the proportion of a state's alliance ties of all possible alliance ties in the system, and ethnicity density, reflecting the size of an ethnic group as a proportion of all ethnic groups in a given state (Maoz et al. 2005). Although we chose to use density scores, there exist numerous alternative techniques for measuring interparty relations based on events data (see D'Orazio and Yonamine 2015). For example, we could have focused solely on events with negative Goldstein values, tracking changes in conflictual events over time (indeed, as a robustness test we repeated our main analysis using only average negative Goldstein values, which yielded similar results, see footnote 6). Yet because of the greater scope of density scores we judged it be a truer representation of the overall interparty dynamics and the way it changes with mediation onset.

The conflict density score runs from 0 to 1: the closer the conflict density score is to 1, the higher the level of conflict. The density score is calculated as follows:

$$D = \frac{|\sum_{i=1}^n CON_i|}{|\sum_{i=1}^n CON_i| + \sum_{i=1}^n COOP_i}$$

As an example, consider a hypothetical scenario, presented in Table 1, during which the following events took place over a given period:

The conflict density score for the above period is derived from the sum of the conflict events between the protagonists in absolute values multiplied by their Goldstein values, [CON = (5*5) + (4*4) = 41] divided by the sum total of all of their interactions, conflict and cooperation, in absolute values, multiplied by their Goldstein value [CON+COOP = (5*5) + (7*2) + (4*4) = 55]. 41/55 = 0.75. The conflict density score in this case would be: 0.75.

Our rationale for comparing the conflict density in the six-month period before mediation against the score in the six-month period following the entrance of the mediator, is that this period is long enough for the influence of the mediator to appear and at the same time, not too long so that it would be difficult to link the observed impact to the mediator. In our analysis, we did not include observations, where in the focal period of time an additional mediation attempt started. The reason for this is that for such observations the impact of mediator x could be confounded by the actions of mediator y , i.e., what is considered to be “after” mediator x could be perceived as “before”

the subsequent mediator y , and the impact of mediator x would thus be practically impossible to discern. After weeding out these confounding cases, our research population included 109 mediation attempts in which no other mediator was involved in the six-month period following the mediation onset.

In addition to the above, we constructed a separate database of randomly selected observations to serve as baseline data. The purpose of the base-line data, which includes both mediated and non-mediated conflicts, was twofold. First, we wanted to be able to differentiate naturally occurring fluctuations in conflict levels as a function of the passage of time alone (which we expected to see in the base-line data) and systematic changes due to mediation (which we expected to see in our main database). Second, because some may argue that mediated conflicts are distinct in some ways, it was important to include in the base-line data both mediated and non-mediated conflicts, and to examine them within a timeframe which did not necessarily include mediation. Although this approach does not entirely resolve the threat of selection bias, we feel it goes some way toward alleviating this concern, especially since our generalization goals were to examine the effect of mediation once it does take place.

A related issue which merits consideration is the possible existence of interrelations between conflict density scores and mediation onset. For example, one could argue that a mediator will be summoned when the parties can no longer contain the costs of the conflict. Consequently, we would expect to see mediation onset at the highest levels of conflict density, and consequently we could perhaps observe subsequent de-escalation as a way of cutting losses, if nothing else (Young 1967; 1969). This view is consistent with Gartner and Bercovitch (2006), who suggest that disputants that require mediation are more likely to be involved in conflicts that are more hostile and difficult to resolve bilaterally. An opposite approach in the literature to this question contends that the greater the level of hostilities in conflict, the more entrenched the parties will become in their positions and the more determined each party will be to reject any mediation offer (Brockner 1982; Modelski 1964). The same logic has been applied to the perspective of mediators as well. As rational actors seeking to maximize their benefits, mediators will prefer to offer mediation when the conflict has yet to reach high levels of hostility and polarization, and the probability of success is higher (Melin 2011; Terris et al. 2005). Systematic analysis of large- n conflict databases has produced mixed results. Exploring the relationship between conflict costs and mediation, Bremer (2004) found that “Long, bloody disputes are more likely to end in a negotiated settlement” (2004, 211). Other research has found a negative relationship between conflict intensity and mediation success (Bercovitch and Langley 1993) and when mediation does result in a settlement, a negative relationship between conflict intensity and the duration of that settlement (Bercovitch and Gartner 2006). Finally, Greig and Regan (2008) find no

evidence that the willingness of rivals to accept mediation is tied to the number of annual battle deaths. Given the complex pattern of motives involved in mediation at different levels of conflict as well as the mixed empirical findings, we find no justification to expect mediation onset to be associated uniformly with either high – or low – conflict density scores.

To construct the base-line data, we randomly sampled 100 dates from the conflicts in the DeRoeun, Bercovitch, and Pospieszna (2011) data.⁵ Of the 100 observations, we had to drop 15 cases either because the conflict lasted for less than a year or because ICEWS event data was missing for the conflict. For each observation in the base-line data, we calculated conflict density scores for six months before and six months after a randomly chosen date.

Analysis Overview

We conducted our analysis in two stages. In the first stage we focused on the distribution of changes in conflict density and compared two different databases: the mediated conflicts and a baseline dataset of randomly selected dates, with the goal of establishing that the changes observed in the mediated conflicts database are different from chance. In the second stage of the analysis we focused only on the dataset of mediated conflicts and compared *mean* density scores before and after the entrance of the mediator. In this analysis we also tested for possible contributions of additional variables (duration, mediator rank, and democracy level) with the goal of finding more about the direction of the effects of the mediator.

Analysis

Stage 1

Dependent variable: Difference scores

Our dependent variable reflects the change in conflict level after the entrance of the mediator. In order to determine whether the conflict level decreased, increased or stayed the same in the six-month period following the introduction of a mediator, we calculated a measure *difference score* by subtracting for each observation the conflict density score after the arrival of the mediator from the pre-mediation density score. *In this manner, positive difference scores represent an overall improvement or de-escalation in the conflict, whereas negative difference scores reflect conflict escalation. The higher the difference scores the greater the change in conflict level.* The same procedure was used on our baseline data of randomly selected dates.

⁵To generate random dates, we used an online random date generator. For cases in which six months after or six months before the random date fell outside the start/end dates of the conflict, we randomly chose another date.

Figure 1 presents the distributions of the difference scores in both of our datasets. The histogram in the upper part of the figure depicts the distribution of these scores following mediation onset; the bottom histogram depicts the distribution of the difference scores in the baseline dataset of randomly chosen dates.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, the observed conflict density changes (tapped by the difference scores) in our data of mediation onsets ranged from -0.55 (reflecting the greatest conflict escalation) to $+0.61$ (reflecting the greatest de-escalation) (Mean $.311$; Std. Dev = $.15544$; $N = 109$). In 3.66% of the observed cases (4 cases) there was no change at all (scores of zero). A positive change (de-escalation) was observed in 54.12% of the cases ($N = 59$). Notably, 42.2% of the cases showed escalation of conflict ($N = 46$), suggesting that conflict escalation following the entrance of a mediator is hardly a rare event.

Our baseline data, presented in the bottom histogram in Figure 1, produced a different picture. In this data, we can see that the range of the change in the conflict density scores was noticeably smaller, running from $-.33$ to $+.26$ (Mean: $.0032$; Std. Dev. = $.09576$; $N = 85$). In this dataset, in 2.35% of the observed cases (2 cases) there was no change at all (scores of zero). A positive change (de-escalation) was observed in 50.58% of the cases ($N = 43$). However, 47.05% ($N = 40$ cases) of the cases showed escalation of conflict.

Before turning to further analysis of the observed changes in conflict density following mediation, we wanted to ascertain that the obtained pattern does not reflect random changes as a function of time. To this end, we conducted two separate Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests. Each test compared two related

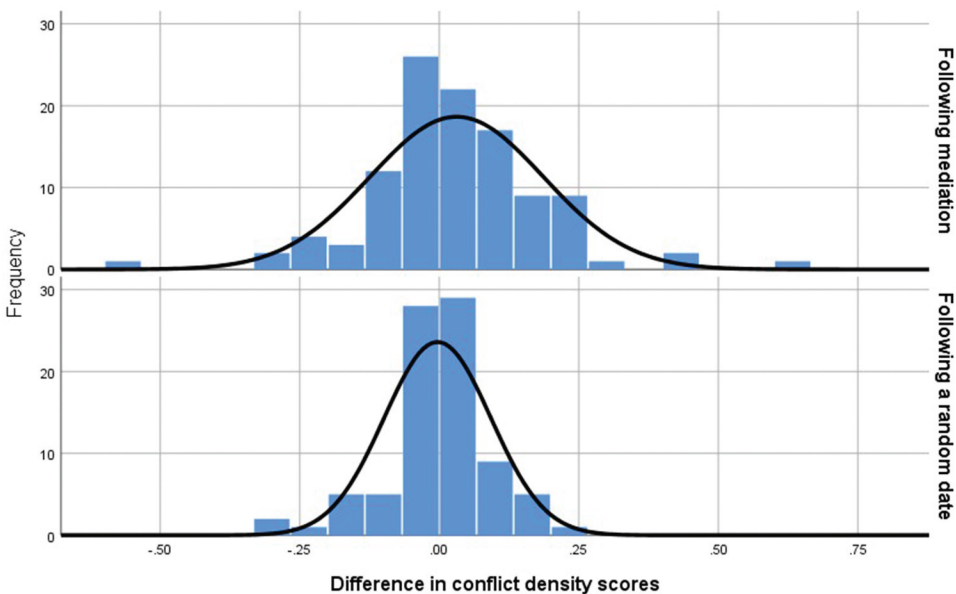


Figure 1. Distribution of difference scores.

samples: the first compared the distribution of the difference scores before the entrance of the mediator to the difference scores after the entrance of the mediator. The second test was conducted on our base-line data and compared the distribution of the difference scores before the randomly chosen dates to the distribution following the random dates.

The results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test conducted on the baseline data did not allow us to reject the null hypothesis, suggesting that the two distributions are not significantly different from one another ($p = .96$). However, the same analysis conducted on our mediation database revealed a significant difference ($p = .03$). These analyses suggest that the observed difference in the conflict density scores in the mediated conflicts are attributable at least to some degree to the entrance of the mediator. In other words, the mediator indeed has a systematic impact on conflict levels upon his or her entrance, which we now turn to explore.

Stage 2

Dependent variable: Mean conflict density scores before and after mediation onset

In an attempt to further explore the effect of the mediator, we conducted a single repeated measure analysis using the mean conflict density scores before mediation and the mean conflict density scores after mediation as a repeated factor in a repeated measure design. To explore conditions under which mediators would be likely to trigger conflict de-escalation or escalation upon their entrance, we also included in this analysis three independent variables: 1) conflict duration at the time of mediation onset 2) the democracy level of the conflict state and 3) the mediators rank.

Independent variables

Conflict duration. The variable *conflict duration* is taken from the DeRouen et al. civil war mediation (CWM) data and reflects the number of months that passed in the conflict up until the entrance of the mediator. In our data, the variable *conflict duration* ranges from 1 month to 93 months (mean 45.87; Std. Dev. 28.465). With regard to this variable, we expected that mediators entering conflicts at later, rather than earlier stages of conflict, would be less likely to have an immediate moderating effect on conflict levels.

Regime type. We use here democracy scores of the conflict states taken from the Polity IV Project. The scores range from -10 (hereditary monarchy) to $+10$ (consolidated democracy). In our data, democracy scores ranged from -7 to 10 (Mean 1.47; Std. Dev. 5.719). As discussed earlier, we expected that, consistent with the extant mediation literature, states that are higher up on the democracy scale will have less of a tendency to escalate conflict.

Mediator rank. Different mediators have the ability to employ different levels of mediation strategies. We base our ranking of mediators' power on different mediator-types frequently referred to in the literature: individuals, NGOs, Regional Organizations, International Organizations, State representatives (e.g., Bercovitch and Gartner 2006). Because in our data, the NGO and private individual categories were small compared to the other categories (only 9 and 10 cases respectively), in order to construct relatively uniform categories, we combined these two categories, both of which are fairly weak mediators in terms of tangible resource. We rank mediators from weakest to strongest as follows: private individual/NGO = 1; Regional Organization = 2; International Organization = 3; State representative = 4. In our data the variable *mediator rank* ranged from 1 to 4 (mean 3; Std. Dev. 1.174). In line with the discussion above, we suggest that stronger mediators are more likely to be perceived as an insurance policy and therefore their mere presence is more likely to prompt escalation.

The mediation data were analyzed in a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance, presented in Table 2. In a repeated measures analysis, a repeated factor is defined. For our analysis, we defined a factor ("mediation") that has two levels: conflict density before and conflict density after. We included in this analysis three independent variables to capture their impact on the "mediation" repeated factor.

Consistent with the results of the Wilcoxon test we conducted in stage 1, the repeated measures analysis yielded a statistically significant effect for "mediation." In other words, the entrance of the mediator into the scene is responsible for systematic shifts in conflict levels.⁶ The results in Table 2 demonstrated that none of the examined independent variable had a statistically significant impact on mediation. In view of this finding, we did not explore the democracy level and mediator rank variables any further. However, because the effect of duration seemed to have a meaningful (although not statistically significant) impact, we wanted to look at it more closely. To visualize the impact of conflict duration on mediation we conducted a simple correlation between the duration scale and the difference scores variable, which was used in stage 1 of the analysis ($r = -.131$). The negative relationship between duration and density change is

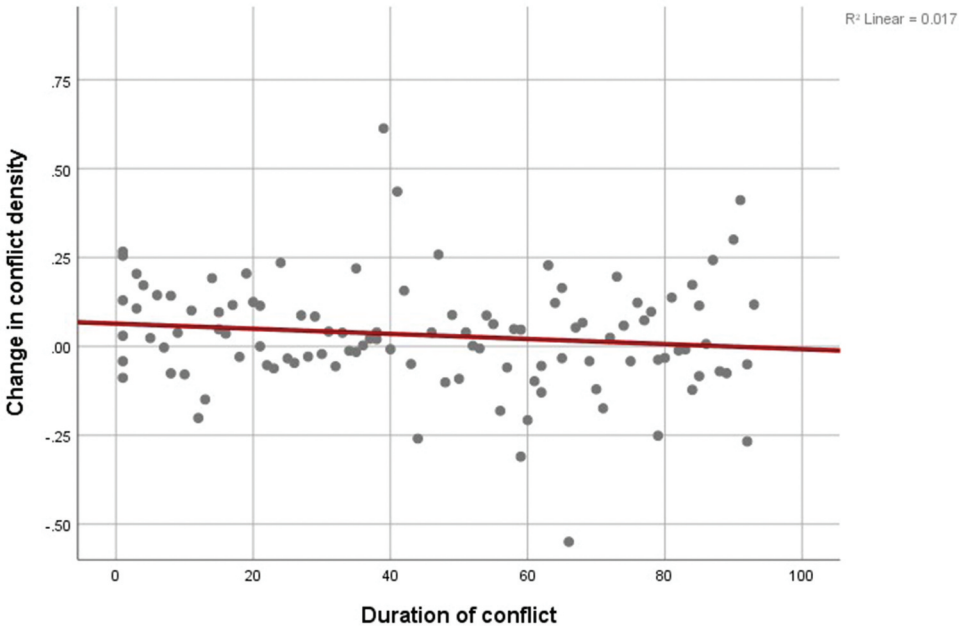
Table 1. Events and goldstein values.

Event	Goldstein value	Event frequency in the six-month period
Veto	-5	5
Provide aid	7	2
Threaten with military action	-4	4

⁶As we noted earlier, conceptually, we prefer density scores to simple averages based only on conflict events. However, in order to ascertain that the use of density scores did not skew our findings, we repeated our analysis using only average conflict scores before and after mediation. In general, this analysis yielded a similar pattern to that observed for the density scores: In 55% of the cases mediation was associated with reduction in hostilities; in 42% there was an increase in conflict events following mediation, and in three cases there was no change. A one-way repeated measures analysis yielded a marginally significant effect for mediation on conflict events $F(1,108) = 3.136, p = .079$.

Table 2. One way repeated measures analysis.

	Wilks' Lambda	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
Mediation	.954	4.453	1.000	92.000	0.038
Mediation*Duration	.980	1.852	1.000	92.000	.177
Mediation*Polity IV	1.000	.021	1.000	92.000	.885
Mediation*MediatorRank	.991	.285	3.000	92.000	.836

**Figure 2.** Change in conflict density by conflict duration.

reflected in the fit-line in the scatter-plot in [Figure 2](#) below, demonstrating that mediators entering conflicts at later stages are less likely to achieve an immediate positive effect. This finding is consistent with numerous studies in the mediation literature that focus on mediation outcomes (e.g. Greig 2001).

Discussion and Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War, a growing number of disputes have involved some form of mediation designed to aid their peaceful resolution (Dixon 1996; Greenberg, Barton, and McGuinness 2000; Greig and Diehl 2012, 32–38). Many such interventions have led to successful settlements. In fact, almost all negotiated agreements ending civil war have involved a third-party mediator (Walter 1997). The increased reliance on mediation for the resolution of disputes may create an over-optimistic impression that mediation is a powerful cure for the ills of conflict. One may expect that immediately upon the arrival of the mediator on the scene the parties will lower the flames of hostility and embark on constructive negotiation. Whereas this optimistic

portrayal may be supported by research exploring the contribution of mediation to conflict termination in many places around the world, little is said in the extant literature about what happens along the way. This oversight is problematic because for some of the factors involved in mediation we cannot assume a uniform effect on conflict dynamics throughout the process. Clearly the need to strengthen positions or signal resolve to domestic and external audiences are particularly important in the beginning of mediation processes, rather than at later stages. In this paper, we attempted to tap the proximal dynamics, which take place between rivals immediately upon the onset of mediation. Our findings make it clear that whatever positive dynamics are elicited by the mediator, they do not necessarily occur immediately upon the onset of mediation. Although in our data indeed we observed many cases of conflict de-escalation, we also see cases wherein there was little or no change, and numerous cases denoting dramatic escalation of the conflict upon mediation onset. In fact, in 42% of the cases in our dataset, hostilities actually increased following the entrance of the mediator, despite, or perhaps because, of the mediation onset. A vivid illustration of such dynamics is apparent in the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians where it is often the case that the timing of hostile acts coincides with mediated talks. For example, in the beginning of March 2010, then American Vice President Joe Biden arrived in the Middle East with the goal of re-energizing the stagnated talks between Israel and the Palestinians. Shortly after his arrival in Israel the Israeli government announced its approval of a plan to erect 1600 new housing units in an area of the occupied West Bank Israel had annexed to Jerusalem. The timing of this announcement was not surprising as it was most probably aimed to signal resolve and to appease the right-wing parties in Israel, who strongly opposed any territorial concessions on Israel's part. Biden responded by scolding the Israeli government, claiming that Israel was undermining the US-mediated talks. Notably, the reaction of the Palestinians, who clearly perceived Israel's announcement as an act of hostility, was to transfer the responsibility to the American mediator, the "responsible adult" on the scene. "The American administration must put pressure on Israel so the indirect talks are not obstructed," said an aid to Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian National Authority.⁷

In explaining possible sources for proximal escalation, we drew on the literature in international relations, economics, and psychology. We argue that mediators may provide both a motivation and an opportunity for conflict escalation. Upon arrival of the mediator, disputants may be tempted to escalate hostilities, at least in the short run, for political or strategic reasons. Moreover, the mere presence of the mediator on the scene may facilitate conflict escalation in three ways: First, the mediator may be perceived as the "responsible adult" allowing the disputing parties to "misbehave" with

⁷Nabil Abu Rdainah, quoted in Entous and Assadi (2010).

impunity. Second, mediation may provide a symbolic “insurance policy,” a protection device, which may distort the parties’ perceptions of the magnitude of the risks involved in increased hostilities. Finally, mediation may trigger a process akin to “moral hazard” in the context of insurance, wherein the disputing parties’ hostility-related risks are partially imparted upon the mediator. These processes together or each on its own may contribute to conflict escalation triggered by the introduction of the mediator.

In our statistical analysis, we examined the influence of variables commonly tapped in the extant mediation literature. Conflict duration, mediator rank and democracy score, factors which have been linked in studies to the success of mediation, were not found to play a statistically significant role (although the duration of the conflict appears to have some systematic and meaningful impact). It is possible that the factors influencing disputing parties’ proximal responses to the onset of mediation are not necessarily that same as those typically linked to mediation outcomes. The immediate motivations to escalate hostilities may have a greater impact than traditional factors, such as political systems. For example, the likelihood for a show of strength upon the onset of mediation may be influenced by the strength of the political opposition to the mediated talks. As with the example above, the political power of right-wing parties in the Israeli government, whose support was critical for its stability, increased the motivation for a show of strength upon entering mediated negotiations. The fact the US constituted a strong mediator, with relevant leverage to impose concessions on Israel, enhanced this motivation even more. Further research, which would allow scholars to make inferences about specific motivations, is needed to gain a better understanding of this puzzle. Additionally, while the ICEWS importantly covers all actions taken between two rival parties, including actions that are below the threshold of actual violence yet are nevertheless conflictual (such as provocative statements and threats), it is possible that certain types of actions are more relevant than others in capturing the dynamics between the primary parties before and after the mediator’s entrance. While beyond the scope of this article, the weeding out of actions to identify those most relevant is a worthy endeavor for future research.

The above notwithstanding, the finding that mediators have an immediate statistically significant impact on conflict levels once they enter the scene, and that this impact is not always positive, is an important one. Recognizing this pattern is significant in both theoretical and practical terms. Conceptually, our work draws attention to the proximal effects of mediation, which to the best of our knowledge, have received little, if any, explicit attention until now. For practitioners, having a realistic empirically-informed view of the conflict environment and dynamics will allow third parties to adjust their expectations

and become more attuned to possible conflict ebbs and flows upon embarking on a mediation process.

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