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International mediation in low intensity conflicts

Evaluating reputation outcomes for state mediators

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Abstract

Purpose – Success and failure in mediation are widely understood to determine whether a state will receive positive or negative reputation outcomes from undertaking a mediation role in an international conflict. Research from mediation in domestic settings contradicts this view, finding that peer mediators in school and community settings received positive mediator outcomes from undertaking their role, even when they failed to facilitate an agreement between disputants. This paper aims to test this assumption and argues that mediation success and failure are only weakly correlated with observable reputation outcomes for mediating states and proposes an alternative explanatory framework.

Design/methodology/approach – The hypothesis was inductively generated through a comparative analysis of single-state mediation attempts selected from the Uppsala Conflict Database Project MILC data set. The cases selected were South Africa's mediation attempts in Côte d'Ivoire from 2004 to 2005 and Comoros from 2003 to 2004, and Mexico's mediation attempts in Colombia (National Liberation Army) in 2004 and Guatemala (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) between 1994 and 1996. To contextualise the findings and develop the explanatory framework, South African mediation attempts in Burundi and the DRC are discussed in the closing sections of the paper.

Findings – This paper finds that mediation success and failure are only weakly correlated with mediator outcomes. Mediator outcomes are explained by the activity level of the mediating state in providing mediation services; the positive intention of the mediator to assist in resolving the conflict; the scale of the conflict mediated; the severity of spill over effects from the conflict in question; the regional importance of the conflict; the proximity of the government which a mediating state looks to develop relations with to the conflict; the importance of the mediation attempt within the peace process; the level of contestation of the mediation attempt, meaning the extent to which mediation attempts are themselves sites of regional or global international power politics; and the success or failure of the mediation attempt.

Originality/value – An explanatory framework for state mediator outcomes in which the outcome of a mediation attempt for the third-party state is not determined solely, or even primarily, by mediation success or failure bridges mediation research applying to international and domestic issue areas and provides additional information for policy makers regarding the costs and benefits of committing their state to processes of mediation in conflicts with low probabilities of resolution. This is particularly important for state policy makers, given that mediation is successful on average in only one out of every three attempts.

Keywords Mediation, International relations, Foreign policy, Mediator outcomes

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Mediation can be defined as “activities undertaken by a party exogenous to a conflict between two [or more] parties, designed to manage or resolve the conflict by peaceful means” (Terris and Maoz, 2005, p. 565). In international conflicts, third-party states are one prominent type of mediator.

Much is known regarding the differing status of neutrality and impartiality for state mediators compared to domestic mediators, the relative benefits of neighbouring or distant state mediators, and of the way in which economic, moral or military leverage deployed by state mediators increase or decrease the chances of disputants arriving at a negotiated peace agreement or ceasefire, and the subsequent duration of that agreement (Vukovic, 2014; Watkins and Winters, 1997, p. 123; Greig and Regan, 2008; Gent and Shannon, 2011). Less is known about outcomes for mediators and the factors influencing when these outcomes are received by states. Mediator outcomes for states may include reputation gain or damage, favourable peace agreement terms or economic and security outcomes (Wall *et al.*, 2001, p. 372). Understanding the potential reputation outcomes of a mediation role is of particular concern for states in managing their international and regional standing (Touval and Zartman, 2001; Wang, 2006; Camilleri *et al.*, 2013; Martin *et al.*, 2016), and understanding this mediator outcome is the primary focus of this paper.

The puzzle set out in existing mediation literature is that in much of the literature on international mediation, “success” in a state-led mediation attempt, defined as the arrival at a peace agreement or ceasefire, is seen as a prerequisite for positive mediator outcomes. “Failure” in international mediation is understood to act as a disutility and a reputation cost for a mediating state (Greig and Regan, 2008; Wall *et al.*, 2001, pp. 381-382; Watkins and Winters, 1997, p. 123; Bercovitch and Schneider, 2000, p. 152). On the other hand, literature on mediation in school and community settings has identified outcomes of peace and decreased violence (personal safety), enhanced reputation (prestige) and enhanced social skills accruing to mediators even when they are unsuccessful in resolving a conflict (Day-Vines *et al.*, 1996; Shulman, 1996; Wall *et al.*, 2001, p. 381). Success and failure in mediation is here decoupled from the receipt of valuable mediator outcomes.

Although international mediation features unique actors and dynamics distinct from domestic mediation, scholars emphasise that:

[i]nsights derived from domestic mediation are still fundamental for our understanding of international mediation, with a great deal of overlap in the theoretical understanding of both dynamics (Vukovic, 2014, p. 62).

For this reason, the discrepancy outlined above invites us to re-evaluate whether success in international mediation is a precondition for a state to receive positive mediator outcomes. Have states received positive mediator outcomes in cases of mediation failure? What other factors explain when a state receives positive mediator outcomes from their mediation activity? These questions matter, not only because they enhance our theoretical understanding of mediation and mediator outcomes but also because the answers influence how states weigh up the costs and benefits of mediation, and whether states will be more or less likely to offer mediation in conflicts which are particularly hard for disputants to resolve, and therefore have a lower probability of mediation success.

The hypothesis advanced in this paper is that mediation success and failure, when defined in terms of arrival at a peace agreement or conflict termination event, are only weakly correlated with reputation outcomes for mediating states. Failed mediation attempts can result in positive reputation outcomes – particularly when the mediation attempt was influential in the context of the conflict, the mediator’s role was high profile and exhibited a relatively high activity level, the mediation attempt was not contested by another powerful actor and the mediator’s conduct was seen to be procedurally impartial. Conversely, successful mediation attempts at times have few positive reputation outcomes, particularly when mediation attempts occurred in conflicts of limited scale or regional importance or were characterised by a low activity level and prominence by the mediator. Success and failure in mediation are therefore conceptualised as taking their place within a range of factors explaining what reputation outcomes a third party derives from its mediation activity. These explanatory factors influencing mediator outcomes are listed below:

- the activity level of the mediating state in providing mediation services;
- the procedural impartiality of the mediator while undertaking their role;
- the positive intention of the mediator to assist in resolving the conflict;
- the scale of the conflict mediated;
- the severity of spillover effects from the conflict in question;
- the regional importance of the conflict;
- the proximity of the government which a mediating state looks to develop relations with to the conflict;
- the importance of the mediation attempt within the peace process;
- the level of contestation of the mediation attempt, meaning the extent to which mediation attempts are themselves sites of regional or global international power politics; and
- the success or failure of the mediation attempt, defined in terms of arrival at a peace agreement or ceasefire.

An explanatory framework for state reputation outcomes in which the outcome of a mediation attempt for the third-party state is not determined solely, or even primarily, by mediation success or failure bridges mediation research applying to international and domestic issue areas, contributes to scholarly debate on appropriate definitions of mediation success and failure, and provides additional information for policy makers regarding the costs and benefits of committing their state to processes of mediation in conflicts with low probabilities of resolution. This is particularly important for state policy makers, given that mediation is successful on average in only one out of every three attempts – a statistic strongly influenced by a selection effect whereby mediation is often deployed only after a conflict cannot be resolved by other means (Bercovitch and Derouen, 2004, p. 163; Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014, p. 323).

Research design

The hypothesis was inductively generated through a comparative analysis of single-state mediation attempts selected from the Uppsala Conflict Database Project “Managing Intrastate Low-intensity Conflict (MILC) dataset, v. 1.0, 1993-2004”. The

database, which is used here exclusively as a case selection device to enable future researchers to reproduce findings, contains almost 3,500 cases of third-party interventions in conflicts with “at least 25 but less than 1,000 battle related deaths in a year” (UCDP, 2008). Mediation attempts are defined as third-party interventions coded under the following terms within the MILC data set: “indirect talks”, “direct talks”, “unclear talks” and “good offices” and are limited to “single states” as third parties (MILC, 2008). The findings are deliberately limited to single-state mediators in low-intensity conflicts to decrease the potential variables influencing mediator outcomes. This method is in line with Wallensteen and Svensson’s (2014, p. 319) call for “actor-disaggregated analysis” in mediation research because of the distinct decision-making processes, motivations and context-specific advantages of mediators as diverse as non-governmental organisations, inter-governmental organisations, states, individuals or multiparty coalitions of these actors.

Using the MILC-defined parameters of single-state mediation attempts outlined above, the cases selected to demonstrate the initial validity of the hypothesis were South Africa’s mediation attempts in Côte d’Ivoire from 2004 to 2005 and Comoros from 2003 to 2004, and Mexico’s mediation attempts in Colombia (ELN – National Liberation Army) in 2004 and Guatemala (URNG – Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) between 1994 and 1996. The mediating states followed a “most different” selection approach to increase the generalisability of findings within the limitations noted above, whereas the mediation attempts were selected to ensure a successful and a failed attempt was included for each mediating state. In other words, a variety of mediating states were available within the MILC data set – some with records only of mediation success or only of mediation failure – but South Africa and Mexico presented the clearest track records within the time frame to test the hypothesis against varied examples of mediation success and failure in geographically distant contexts. Mediation success was defined as the arrival at a peace agreement, ceasefire agreement or ceasefire agreement with conflict regulation, which is at least nominally implemented. Failure was defined as a failure to achieve any of the outcomes listed as a prerequisite for success. To contextualise the findings and further develop the explanatory framework, South African mediation attempts in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are discussed in the closing sections of the paper.

The definition of mediation success operationalised in the analysis is similar to the approach adopted by Gent and Shannon (2011), Bercovitch and Derouen (2004, p. 161) and Bercovitch and Diehl (1997, p. 300). Success in international mediation is the subject of extensive academic debate, however. Mediation scholars have adopted different measures of mediation success, each with strengths and weaknesses. Wallensteen and Svensson (2014) identify four main measures of success used by scholars:

- (1) acceptance of the mediator by the disputants (in essence meaning that a mediation attempt is successful if it is initiated);
- (2) the impact of the mediation attempt on violent behaviour (whether violence decreases or ends following the mediation attempt);
- (3) the signing of a peace agreement (identified as the most commonly accepted definition of success, partly because the mediator’s mandate is usually defined by an objective “to reach a peace agreement” (Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014, p. 323); and

- (4) more comprehensive measures of success, which included evaluation of short- and long-term outcomes for disputants; measuring success against disaggregated categories of peace agreement such as ceasefires and security agreements, power-sharing and territorial agreements or transitional justice agreements; and distinguishing success in mediation outcomes and mediation process (Wallenstein and Svensson, 2014; Kleiboer, 1996, pp. 361-362; Bercovitch, 2006, 2009).

Vukovic (2014, p. 68) advises scholars grappling with these varying definitions of success that:

Most scholars [...] agree that defining success is generally very difficult because the evidence is almost always vague. Success and failure are mainly a result of interpretation rather than being discovered by the analysts. [...] [T]his potential elusiveness might not complicate the research, as long as “embraced definitions and operationalizations of mediation results” are constrained in a systematic way by the analyst [...] (Kleiboer, 1996, p. 362).

The movement towards more comprehensive measures of mediation success and failure is supported by research in this paper. The findings support the view that, for instance, success and failure of a mediation attempt, defined in terms of arrival at a peace agreement, are largely unconvincing as factors explaining when single-state mediators derive positive or negative reputation outcomes from their mediation activity in low-intensity conflicts. The analysis operationalises a definition of mediation success and failure based on arrival at a peace agreement, because this is the definition used in prior studies to make findings that failure in mediation (not arriving at a peace agreement) is understood to be a disutility and reputation cost for a mediating state, in a context where, under this definition, the majority of all mediation attempts fail (Wallenstein and Svensson, 2014, p. 322). The study therefore adopts this same definition of mediation success to test those findings. At the same time, the paper challenges the utility of this definition of mediation success as it applies to measuring reputation outcomes and supports Bercovitch's (2009) argument that mediation success and failure could more effectively be divided into mediation process and mediation outcome. Building on these findings, the paper also proposes a framework for understanding when mediators receive positive reputation outcomes and when they do not.

To develop this framework, in each of the surveyed mediation attempts, media reporting, tertiary literature and government documents were analysed to establish what reputation outcomes resulted from each mediation attempt and to inductively analyse which factors influenced the attainment of outcomes. Specifically, media reporting was used as a device to evaluate reputation, supported by evaluations of mediation attempts by scholars in tertiary literature. Government documents including bilateral agreements, official statements and peace agreements were also used to verify mediation success and failure in the cases selected from the MILC data set and were used as an indicator of diplomatic outcomes for the mediator. Because of space restrictions and because the cases are explored in greater detail by the author elsewhere (Martin, 2011), analysis of the mediation attempts are necessarily brief, with only the most salient points presented on the conflict, the mediation attempt and the mediator outcomes. Readers interested in the conflict situations and mediation attempts are referred to the excellent secondary sources noted in the references. The analysis was guided by Wall *et al.*'s (2001) division of mediation outcomes between disputant outcomes, mediator

outcomes (which under Wall *et al.*'s, 2001 framework is distinct from the outcome of the mediation process itself) and third-party outcomes and in identifying the range of mediator outcomes that can be derived from mediation attempts. These mediator outcomes, which are also influential in explaining a state's motivation to offer mediation in a conflict (see Touval and Zartman (2001) for a detailed discussion)[1], have been adapted slightly here to include reputation, diplomatic capacity, opportunities for positive interaction, peace and decreased violence and favourable agreements. Although this study only tests the impact of mediation success and failure on one aspect of mediator outcomes – that of reputation – the full range of mediator outcomes is outlined in Table I as a guide for further research.

As the primary mediator outcome to be measured in situations of mediation success and failure, reputation is particularly difficult to measure and deserves further discussion. In relation to a state's foreign policy, Downs and Jones (2002, p. 96) contend that reputation refers to “both (1) the extent to which a state is considered to be an honorable member of the international community, and (2) the degree to which a state reliably upholds its international commitments”. Reputation is a key asset in increasing the willingness of other states to enter into agreements with the state in question and enables substantial benefits through cooperation with other states. However, Downs and Jones (2002, p. 97) emphasise that: “Over time, states develop a number of reputations, often quite different, in connection with different regimes”. With regards to international mediation, three aspects of a mediating state's reputation are examined: as an effective mediator [e.g. whether a state is called upon for future mediation attempts (Maoz and Terris, 2006)[2], the perception of a state within and by its region (measured primarily through qualitative analysis of news reports; polling data was rarely available) and the perception of a state by other governments in the region (measured by analysing official statements and through measures of bilateral interaction such as economic, defence or aid agreements).

This approach to measuring reputation is similar to the methodology used by scholars such as Avraham (2009) and Nisbet *et al.* (2004). The media is an imperfect

Mediator outcome	Explanation
Reputation	Whether a state's reputation (for effectiveness, as a constructive neighbour, as a good international citizen) is enhanced or damaged with key audiences—including governments and parties to the conflict, external stakeholders in the conflict such as neighbouring states, and public opinion within the state subject to conflict, and in third-party states
Diplomatic capacity	Whether a state enhances its capacity to implement diplomatic strategies in forums other than in the mediation attempt
Opportunities for positive interaction	Whether a mediation attempt increases or decreases opportunities for increased economic, cultural or political cooperation with a state experiencing conflict or states neighbouring the conflict zone
Peace and decreased violence	Whether a state experiences an increase or decrease in spillover effects such as refugee flows, terrorist attacks or diaspora tensions resulting from an inter- or intra-state conflict
Favourable agreements	Whether a mediator receives beneficial or negative outcomes from the terms of a peace agreement resulting from a mediation attempt (only applicable in the case of mediation success)

Table I.
Mediator outcomes

device for analysing reputation because of its role in agenda setting, framing and priming; all referring to the ability of media reporting to influence public opinion and to reflect it (Gilboa, 2008, pp. 63-64; Wang, 2006, p. 92). In addition, identifying causality is difficult in the case of mediation attempts and reputation changes, because, by definition, a mediator is a third party which is accepted by disputants in a conflict and will rarely have an overtly hostile relationship with those disputants. Although mediation attempts, as shown in this article, very likely do at times result in enhanced reputation for a mediating state, mediation attempts can also *be the result of* a positive change in relations between a mediating state and parties to a conflict. Mediation attempts may simply enhance or detract from an existing trend in state reputation or a state's bilateral relations rather than be the catalyst for that trend. The research design attempts to correct for this by undertaking analysis of news reporting and tertiary literature six months prior to and six months following the initiation and termination of a mediation attempt[3], but in each of the cases analysed, *correlation* rather than *causality* is the preferred term to describe the relationship between mediation attempts and mediator outcomes.

Research findings

Within the mediation activity of South Africa and Mexico classified in the MILC data set between 1993 and 2004, two sets of examples illustrate succinctly that states have received positive reputation outcomes from failed mediation attempts.

Mediation failure and positive outcomes

In Africa, South African President, Thabo Mbeki, mediated in two regional conflicts, each with very different outcomes for South Africa's bilateral relations and regional standing. In Côte d'Ivoire between November 2004 and August 2005, Mbeki attempted to mediate a cessation of hostilities and roadmap to democratic elections between the government of Laurent Gbagbo and rebel forces located in the north of the country after a long-running dispute subject to peacekeeping attempts by French and UN troops (Chirot, 2006). Despite repeated mediation attempts and a nominal agreement brokered by Mbeki in April 2005 (AFP, 2005a), the mediation attempt failed to arrive at a negotiated agreement between the parties, and Mbeki announced he would play no further part in the conflict on 30 August 2005 (AFP, 2005b).

In contrast, Mbeki's mediation attempt between June 2003 and April 2004 in the Comoros dispute, in which the islands of Anjouan and Moheli attempted to secede from the Comoran state dominated by the largest island of Grande Comore, was a notable success (AFP, 1998; Lehtinen, 2002, p. 63; Svensson, 2008, p. 12). After a series of meetings with Comoran leaders supported by the African Union (AU), Mbeki brokered a deal in partnership with an AU mediation team for democratic elections to be held in Comoros in April 2004 (Mwangi, 2003; Owen, 2003).

South Africa's mediation attempts in Comoros and Côte d'Ivoire, one a success and the other a failure, resulted in very different outcomes in terms of South Africa's bilateral relations and regional standing. In the case of the failed Côte d'Ivoire attempt, South Africa's mediation role was strongly correlated with a range of positive reputation outcomes relating to Burkina Faso, Mali and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), including bilateral defence and cooperation agreements, improved bilateral relations and increased influence in regional organisations and groupings.

For example, South Africa's mediation activity can be traced directly to the first high-level meeting between Burkina Faso (a country neighbouring the larger Côte d'Ivoire) and South Africa on 12-14 July 2004 (BBC, 2004a, 2004b). The presidential meeting focused on the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire and is credited for strengthening bilateral relations between Burkina Faso and South Africa (BBC, 2004a). Despite the failure of the Côte d'Ivoire mediation attempt, relations between Burkina Faso and South Africa continued to improve, with South Africa's mediation attempt acting as a catalyst for continued high-level contact between governments. President Compaore visited South Africa again on 13 November 2004 for direct talks with President Mbeki (PANA, 2004), and on 15 March 2005, President Compaore received South African defence minister Mosiuoa Lehota in Burkina Faso in a reciprocal visit (PANA, 2005). At each visit, broader bilateral ties were discussed along with the Côte d'Ivoire situation. Given that South Africa and Burkina Faso had little reason to cooperate prior to the mediation attempt, there is a clear correlation between the strengthened bilateral relationship with Burkina Faso and South Africa's mediation attempt in Côte d'Ivoire in this case.

There is also evidence to suggest that South Africa improved its bilateral relations with Mali, another state neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire, during the Côte d'Ivoire mediation attempt. The most significant indicator of this was the central role that South African mediation in Côte d'Ivoire played in providing momentum for a May 2005 bilateral defence agreement with Mali designed to enhance peacekeeping capacity through the provision of training and equipment (SAPA, 2005). The failed Côte d'Ivoire mediation attempt is also credited for signalling an improvement in the regional standing of South Africa in the West African region, particularly within ECOWAS, and in relation to South African cooperation in the region with the traditionally influential states of France (a past colonial power) and Nigeria (Lamin, 2005, pp. 21-23).

Contrary to the theoretical view that mediation failure acts as a disutility leading to reputation damage for a state (Bercovitch and Schneider, 2000, p. 152), there is no evidence to suggest that South Africa's reputation for mediation effectiveness suffered any negative outcome from the failure of the mediation attempt to facilitate a ceasefire or peace agreement. Commentators blamed mediation failure on the intransigence of disputants rather than Mbeki's or South Africa's conduct (AFP, 2005b; Bah, 2010, p. 605; Epstein, 2008).

In contrast to Côte d'Ivoire, few reputation outcomes can be traced to the successful mediation attempt in Comoros. According to Lehtinen (2002, pp. 64-65), the mediation attempt signalled a minor improvement in the regional standing of South Africa in the traditionally francophone Indian Ocean, and there is evidence from news reporting that the mediation attempt contributed towards South Africa's reputation for mediation effectiveness (Mwangi, 2003; Owen, 2003). But, no changes were detected in South Africa's bilateral relations with states neighbouring the conflict that can be correlated with the mediation attempt, including in the closest neighbouring territory, Mayotte (which as an overseas department of France and would not be expected to independently develop ties with South Africa in any formal capacity).

Although caution should be applied in assigning causality, the examples above demonstrate that although the Comoros mediation attempt was successful, it is correlated with less impressive mediator outcomes for South Africa than the bilateral agreements with Burkina Faso and Mali and the improvements in regional standing that are correlated with the failed Côte d'Ivoire mediation attempt.

These two examples of South African mediation, therefore, illustrate the initial validity of the paper's hypothesis. In the cases above, success and failure in mediation, defined in terms of the arrival at a peace agreement or ceasefire, acted as poor indicators of reputation outcomes. Mediation failure was no barrier to valuable diplomatic gains bilaterally and regionally. Instead, a range of factors influenced reputation outcomes. These included the severity of spillover effects from the conflict in question, which in the case of Côte d'Ivoire were significant for Mali and Burkina Faso but negligible for even the closest territory – the French department of Mayotte. In the case of the Comoros conflict and the importance of the state experiencing conflict, Côte d'Ivoire was the largest economy within ECOWAS, whereas the Comoros was a minor economy within the International Organisation of Francophonie. In addition, the scale of the conflicts in terms of casualties and military confrontation influenced the relatively significant mediator outcomes in Côte d'Ivoire, already subject to French and UN peacekeeping, and the minor reputation gains in Comoros, with a far lower level of military confrontation and resulting casualties. Overall, these examples of single-state mediation in low-intensity intra-state conflicts challenge the view in sections of the literature that positive reputation gains stem primarily from success in international mediation, defined in terms of arrival at a peace agreement or ceasefire, and that mediation failure is associated with reputation losses for a mediating state (Wall *et al.*, 2001, pp. 381-382).

Mediation success and limited outcomes

To shift now to Mexico, two examples of mediation similarly demonstrate the poor correlation between mediation success and significant positive reputation outcomes for the mediator. The examples of Mexico's mediation attempts in Guatemala between 1994 and 1996 and in Colombia from 2004 to 2005 also expand our understanding of the factors which explain when positive reputation outcomes are received by a state and when they are not.

The first example is the successful mediation attempt by Mexico in Guatemala between 1994 and 1996 in which Mexico received few reputation outcomes of note. Mexico provided good offices for an extended peace process chaired by Jean Arnault, a representative of the UN Secretary General, leading to the settlement of the long-running civil war between the Guatemalan Government and rebel URNG in December 1996. The peace settlement was regarded as one of the most comprehensive accords of any conflict of its type (Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace, 1996; Burgerman, 2000; ICG, 2010, p. 2; Kruijtit, 2008). Despite the success of the mediation attempt, no reputation outcomes correlating with Mexico's mediation attempt were identified in news reporting or tertiary literature, with credit for the peace accord assigned to the office of the UN Secretary General by scholars such as Burgerman (2000) and Kruijtit (2008, p. 32).

In contrast, Mexico's mediation attempt in the conflict between the Colombian Government and the ELN during 2004 is correlated with notable reputation outcomes despite its failure. Mexico dispatched Ambassador Valencia Benavides to engage in exploratory talks and shuttle diplomacy between the Colombian Government and the ELN leadership aimed at establishing an agreement on a humanitarian accord and ceasefire in June 2004 after a request from Colombian President Uribe to President Fox to play an active role in the conflict (Benavides, 2006, p. 4). The mediation attempt took place during continued diplomatic pressure by Colombia for Mexico to list the FARC

militant organisation as a terrorist organisation, an issue which led to the resignation of Colombia's ambassador to Mexico shortly before Mexico's offer to mediate in the ELN conflict (EFE News Service, 2004c; Fieldwork Interview, 2011; MercoPress, 2010; Xinhua, 2004). After slow but promising progress in talks between the ELN and the Colombian Government facilitated by Benavides, the ELN broke from the mediation attempt in April 2005, declaring that they had lost faith in the Mexican Government as an honest broker, after Mexico voted to criticise Cuba's human rights record in the UN and allegedly moved to block the presidential bid of leftist Mexico City mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Benavides, 2006).

The mediation attempt failed. However, reputation outcomes for Mexico correlated with the attempt proved substantial. By playing a productive role in the conflict with Colombia's second largest rebel group, Mexico effectively sidestepped accusations by Colombian diplomats that Mexico was not doing enough to support Colombia in its fight against rebel forces through listing FARC as a terrorist organisation. After being extensively reported prior to the mediation attempt, this issue did not reoccur as a source of diplomatic tension in news reporting following the failure of the ELN mediation attempt (EFE News Service, 2004c; MercoPress, 2010; Xinhua, 2004).

Mexico's mediation role in Colombia is also correlated with increased support for Mexico's contemporaneous bid to lead the Organisation of American States, with Colombia ceasing to support a consensus Central American candidate after Mexican Foreign Minister Derbez announced his bid (Carl, 2004; Cevallos, 2004, 2005; EFE News Service, 2004a, 2004b). Mexico also used the mediation attempt in Colombia as a catalyst to offer mediation during a diplomatic spat between Venezuela and Colombia during the time period, increasing their claim to an increasing role in Latin America politics (APN, 2005). The failure of the mediation attempt did, however, damage Mexico's reputation for mediation effectiveness, and because of the breakdown in trust and neutrality with the ELN, it is unlikely that Mexico will again play a role in the conflict, limiting any future potential outcomes from assuming a mediatory role (Benavides, 2006, p. 17; EFE News Service, 2005; Fieldwork Interview, 2011).

In these two examples of Mexican mediation, the primary factor explaining the divergent reputation outcomes is the activity level of the mediator. In Guatemala, Mexico played a very limited role consisting of the provision of good offices, which, despite contributing to a very successful peace process, did not correlate with any reputation outcomes of note (either positive or negative). In the ELN mediation attempt, although the conflict itself was not of a scale or intensity-sufficient to draw a great deal of regional attention, Mexico's mediation activity level was prominent enough to be correlated with significant diplomatic and reputation benefits, despite the failure of the mediation attempt.

These two sets of examples of mediation activity by South Africa and Mexico in their region between 1993 and 2004 neatly encapsulate the general inadequacy of success and failure, when defined in terms of arrival at a peace agreement or ceasefire, to explain when mediating states receive positive reputation outcomes and when they do not. Despite this point, success and failure are still influential in explaining mediator outcomes. To illustrate this, the section below surveys some more conventional examples of South African mediation where success has led to positive reputation outcomes and where failure has led to negative reputation outcomes.

Re-appraising mediation success and failure

The examples above risk understating the importance of success and failure, defined in terms of the arrival at a peace agreement or ceasefire, as important, but not sufficient factors to explain reputation outcomes for mediators. As examples of more conventional cases where success in mediation is correlated with positive reputation outcomes, two landmark South African mediation attempts in Burundi (December 1999–November 2003) and in the DRC (February–December 2002) leading to major peace agreements are textbook examples (*Global Ceasefire Agreement*, 2003; *Inter-Congolese Dialogue*, 2002). The mediation attempts are correlated with considerable reputation outcomes, including increased regional standing within Southern Africa and globally, gains in bilateral relations with African states neighbouring these conflicts and enhanced reputation for mediation effectiveness (Bentley and Southall, 2005, p. 72; *SAPA News Agency*, 1998; Smis and Oyatambwe, 2002, p. 413). These examples fit well within the theoretical framework of existing scholarship regarding the outcomes from successful mediation attempts in international mediation literature (Greig and Regan, 2008; Touval, 1996; Wall *et al.*, 2001, pp. 381–382; Watkins and Winters, 1997; Bercovitch and Schneider, 2000, p. 152). In the DRC and Burundi, however, factors explaining why positive mediator outcomes were received include the importance, scale and spillover effects of the DRC conflict for the Southern African region and the high profile and high activity level of South African mediators. These factors are key to understanding why South Africa received such valuable reputation outcomes in these cases in comparison to successful mediation attempts by South Africa in the Comoros or by Mexico in Guatemala.

Two cases of mediation failure correlated with negative reputation outcomes for state mediators add to our analysis. The first is the mediation attempt by South Africa under President Nelson Mandela aimed at avoiding a planned Zimbabwe-led military intervention to support the Kabila Government in the DRC amidst a concerted military campaign by Rwanda- and Uganda-backed rebel troops in August 1998. The mediation attempt in Pretoria yielded few dividends amidst a distinct lack of enthusiasm from Zimbabwe and from DRC President Kabila (Russel, 1998). In response, “South Africa was criticised for failing to provide a coherent response [to the DRC], let alone broker a solution” (Taylor and Williams, 2001, p. 266). In one of the lowest points in South African foreign policy in the region, South Africa’s regional standing, bilateral relations and reputation for mediation effectiveness were significantly damaged by the failure.

The second case is the failure in September 2002 by South African Deputy President Jacob Zuma to achieve a ceasefire agreement between disputants in the Burundi conflict during South Africa’s long-running and ultimately successful mediation attempt featuring contributions by Nelson Mandela, Zuma and Thabo Mbeki. During August and September 2002, Zuma’s handling of the mediation attempt was criticised by a range of actors for favouring certain rebel factions and obstructing others during the peace talks. This perception of procedural bias would linger in Zuma’s involvement and contribute to his difficulties in bringing about a ceasefire, resulting in minor damage to South Africa’s reputation for mediation effectiveness (AFP, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d; Morland, 2002; Reuters News, 2002; Xinhua, 2002a, 2002b).

In each of these examples, mediation failure led directly to a reputation cost for South Africa. This aligns with the view of mediation failure as a disutility outlined in international mediation literature (Greig and Regan, 2008; Touval, 1996; Wall *et al.*,

2001, pp. 381-2; Watkins and Winters, 1997; Bercovitch and Schneider, 2000, p. 152). Failure in mediation, defined in terms of arrival at a peace agreement or ceasefire, is clearly a factor in explaining damage to a state's reputation. But, like other cases examined in this paper, mediation failure does not solely explain why South Africa received negative reputation outcomes from the DRC and Burundian mediation attempts during 1998 and 2002. In the case of Burundi, South Africa's reputation was damaged because of the perceived conduct of the mediator, rather than explicitly because of the failure of the mediation attempt. In the case of the DRC, the regional contestation of the mediation attempt by Zimbabwe in particular was critical in explaining why mediation failure harmed South Africa's reputation to such an extent. These are important factors in explaining why failure should at times correlate with negative reputation outcomes and at other times correlate with positive reputation outcomes. Mandela's (1998) DRC mediation attempt was a direct effort to counter moves at military intervention by a rival bloc of countries led by Zimbabwe. Under these conditions, the act of mediating became itself a site of regional contestation. This dynamic can be seen to a less damaging degree in mediation attempts in Burundi, where Tanzania and South Africa compete for the provision of mediation services in the conflict, though far less acrimoniously than in the case of South Africa and Zimbabwe in the DRC (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2003; Net Press News Agency, 2002). In short, during 1998, mediation in the DRC became a *de facto* battleground for the competition between Zimbabwe and South Africa over control of the South African Development Community's peacekeeping organs and, by extension, the competition for the relative power positions of Zimbabwe and South Africa (Alden and le Pere, 2003, p. 40). In contrast, contestation was not a factor in the failed Côte d'Ivoire mediation attempt or in the later successful 2002 DRC mediation attempt under Thabo Mbeki.

Analysis

The mediation cases examined above indicate a range of factors explaining when states receive positive reputation outcomes from their mediation activity and when they do not. In terms of enhanced bilateral relations, these factors include the level of *contestation* of the mediation attempt, meaning that where mediation attempts are themselves sites of regional or global international power politics, failure in mediation is likely to harm a state's reputation. Mediator outcomes are also tied to the *scale* of the conflict mediated, the *regional importance* of the conflict, the *proximity* of the country which a mediating state may develop relations with to the conflict zone and the *activity level* of the mediating state in providing mediation services. In addition, mediator outcomes are strongly shaped by the *severity of spillover effects* from the conflict in question, the *importance of the mediation attempt* within the peace process and the *positive intention* of the mediator to assist in resolving the conflict. Success in mediation, defined in terms of arrival at a ceasefire or peace agreement, was found to be more important in the context of a state's reputation as an effective mediator and crucial for building a reputation as an effective mediator in the long term. But, here too, a range of factors beyond success and failure explain when a state's reputation for effectiveness was enhanced or damaged by mediation activity. Individual cases of failure in mediation are unlikely to harm an established reputation as an effective mediator, and the conduct of the mediator matters, meaning that when mediation failure was blamed on disputants by external commentators, failure rarely damaged the state's reputation

as an effective mediator. This finding is in line with research by [Bercovitch and Diehl \(1997, p. 305\)](#), [Bercovitch and Houston \(2000, p. 181\)](#) and [Bercovitch and Schneider \(2000, p. 145\)](#) and implies that reputation outcomes from failed mediation attempts may be strongly influenced by the perceived intractability of the enduring rivalry or intrastate conflict in question, and that success in mediation is best evaluated by making a distinction between mediation process and mediation outcome ([Bercovitch, 2006, 2009](#)). In the case of intractable conflict, even “failed” mediation attempts by a state may be viewed positively by disputants and third parties. These findings also support moves towards more comprehensive approaches to measuring mediation success and failure, including attention to short- and long-term outcomes, evaluation of success against mediator objectives and participant satisfaction and the contextual factors influencing any outcomes from a mediation attempt ([Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014](#); [Vukovic, 2014](#); [Bercovitch, 2006](#)).

Some factors were more damaging than failure for a state’s reputation as an effective mediator. This included when a state was seen to use mediation as a front for obtaining a favourable agreement in a conflict, which when combined with mediation failure was seriously damaging to the mediating state’s reputation. Likewise, a mediator’s reputation for effectiveness was harmed if it was no longer perceived as procedurally impartial to all parties ([Kleiboer, 1996, p. 369, fn 5](#)), as distinct from any structural bias towards one or both parties by the mediator, which has been found not to detract from a mediator’s effectiveness ([Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014, p. 320](#)). This was the case even if the mediation attempt ended in a limited form of success in the signing of a peace accord or ceasefire.

The activity level of a state in conducting mediation was influential in explaining when a mediation attempt generated positive reputation outcomes. The provision of good offices was not, as a general rule, sufficient for a mediating state to receive positive reputation outcomes, and state officials were usually required to maintain a high profile at the forefront of the mediation attempt for the attempt to affect their bilateral relations and regional standing or to develop a reputation as an effective mediator. High activity level also carried associated risks in the result of mediation failure that was blamed on the conduct of the mediator or contested regionally. Providing good offices was a low-risk, low-reward mediation option in this context, a finding in line with research by [Gartner and Bercovitch \(2006, p. 834\)](#).

For decision makers considering committing their state to act as mediators of a conflict, positive reputation outcomes can therefore be expected from mediation activity, provided the attempt is not seriously contested; the mediator’s role is relatively high profile; and the conduct of the mediator is perceived to be procedurally fair. Under these circumstances, and depending on the scale of the conflict in question and the place of the mediation attempt within the broader peace process, a state can aim to receive mediator outcomes of enhanced bilateral relations with states neighbouring the conflict and improved regional standing even should the mediation attempt fail to result in a peace agreement or ceasefire. In more high-risk scenarios where mediation is desirable, but regional contestation of the mediation attempt is high and the risk of breaching the procedural impartiality of the mediator is significant, the provision of good offices may provide an option which minimises reputation costs in the event of controversial outcomes or mediation failure.

Conclusion

Successfully transforming a conflict remains the central goal for mediators of international conflict. However, state mediators often receive valuable reputation outcomes such as improved regional standing and enhanced bilateral relations from the process of mediation itself under circumstances of both mediation success and failure when defined in terms of arrival at a ceasefire or peace agreement. The circumstances in which states can expect to receive these positive reputation outcomes are constrained by a range of factors, in particular, the level of contestation regarding the mediation attempt, the activity level of the mediator and the profile and scale of the conflict in question.

By challenging the ability of mediation success and failure to explain reputation outcomes for state mediators through a qualitative comparative case study approach selected from MILC data sets and by advancing a list of factors explaining when states receive positive reputation outcomes from their mediation activity, this study bridges theoretical approaches to mediator outcomes in international and domestic settings, supports existing research calling for more comprehensive measures of mediation success and failure and presents finding that can be tested by future researchers on a large range of mediation attempts beyond the low-intensity conflicts occurring between 1993 and 2004 examined here. The findings also offer practical information for state decision makers considering the costs and benefits of committing their government to a mediatory role in conflicts with low probabilities of resolution and, in this capacity, offers perhaps the most valuable contribution in showing a theoretical incentive for states to offer mediation services in a wider range of conflicts than might otherwise be considered.

Notes

1. It is important to note that under Wall *et al.*'s (2001) framework, mediator outcomes are analytically separate from the motivations or incentives of a mediator, which fall under a category Wall terms "determinants of mediation", (Figure 1: The Mediation Framework in Wall *et al.*, 2001, p. 372).
2. See also Kydd (2006, p. 450) for an interesting discussion regarding how reputation outcomes can shape mediation strategies, for instance, by being concerned for their reputation, a state "mediator can acquire a reputational incentive to be honest which is sufficient to overcome a limited amount of bias", and to limit the temptation to communicate with disputants dishonestly to maximise the likelihood of a dispute settlement.
3. A full inventory of the sources analysed is available by entering the following search terms in Factiva.com and customised for each case study: search summary, free text, "[mediating state name]" and free text, "disputant state name"; Source, all sources; date, [six months prior to initiation] to [six months following termination]; company, all companies; subject, all subjects; industry, all industries; region, all regions; and language, English.

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