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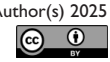
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Disaggregated mediation: the localisation of peace processes amid global and domestic fragmentation

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Abstract

In recent years, comprehensive peace agreements have reduced in frequency, and international mediation initiatives have become 'disaggregated' focused on brokering localised, sub-state dialogue processes, with issue-specific discussions, alongside attempts at national-level processes. This article focuses on three aspects of this shift: it (a) proposes disaggregated mediation as a conceptual framework to understand these processes, (b) outlines drivers of disaggregated mediation and (c) considers implications for peace outcomes. In doing so, it contends that disaggregated mediation derives from at least two key dynamics. First, the rising fragmentation of conflicts, with multiple conflict actors, amid rising geopolitical competition, means that a single external mediator controlling a singular process is unlikely to be acceptable to all parties. Second, the increased number of external third parties with diverse motivations, interests and connections to conflict actors, who now compete in the mediation space, incentivises external actors to selectively seek to resolve discrete aspects of a broader conflict based on their geostrategic and economic interests. The article also highlights the potential of disaggregated mediation to create 'islands of stability' marked by temporary

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cessation of hostilities, which may shift the geography of conflict rather than resolving it. Empirically, the analysis draws on a comprehensive review of dialogue processes in Myanmar since the 2021 coup, 19 interviews and 12 study groups involving over 230 stakeholders. The new framework and the Myanmar analysis reveal the complexity of modern mediation, with implications for the feasibility of cohering all actors and issues into a single comprehensive framework for peace.

Keywords
Mediation, peacemaking, Myanmar, global fragmentation, conflict fragmentation, impact of mediation

Introduction

In the last decade, comprehensive peace agreements have become less frequent, and this seems at least in part owed to two inter-related trends, namely the increased conflict fragmentation in contemporary conflicts and structural shifts in the norms and practices of global peacemaking (Bell and Badanjak, 2019). Regarding the first, conflict in many states now often involves multiple armed actors engaged in multiple conflicts and divided in terms of what they want, rather than a state and one coherent rebel group or 'side'. In Myanmar an excess of 1,500 distinct conflict actors were recorded in 2024, with India, Syria, Mexico and Venezuela each involving more than 100, and at least four different active rebel groups or political militias recorded in the remaining 45 active conflicts (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data [ACLED], 2024). The number of active non-state armed and organised groups recorded by ACLED (2023) almost doubled between 2019 and 2022, while analysis of UCDP data reveals a significant rise in the number of conflict dyads over the last 15 years (Figure 1) (Davies et al., 2024).[1] Recent studies have also noted an in increase in the number of, and divisions within, contemporary armed groups (Nyadera et al., 2024). This context of rising conflict fragmentation has made national-level comprehensive peace processes that seek to cohere all actors and issues into one framework increasingly difficult.

Similar fragmentation is also evident in the global landscape of mediation. Indeed, increasing engagement with mediation as a matter of geopolitical strategy, has seen an increased mediation profile for actors such as China, Turkey, Qatar and more recently Saudi Arabia (Hellmüller, 2022; Peter and Rice, 2022). Since 2017, for instance, both Sudan and South Sudan have seen a significant increase in mediation activities by a range of mediators, despite this recent period not representing a point of departure in terms of heightened crisis points for either country (Peter and Houghton, 2023). This follows longer-term gradual growth in third parties and disconnected mediation efforts since 1990 in Sudan (Badanjak and Peter, 2024). Such efforts have led to at least 17 agreements mediated in Sudan in the last 5 years with the involvement of the multiple mediators, including, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Saudia Arabia, the African Union, Ethiopia, Egypt, Qatar, the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EE), the League of Arab States and the United States (US) (Bell et al., 2014). The proliferation of mediators also challenges the normative underpinnings, practices, coherence and effectiveness of mediation processes. Many of these international actors are also increasingly

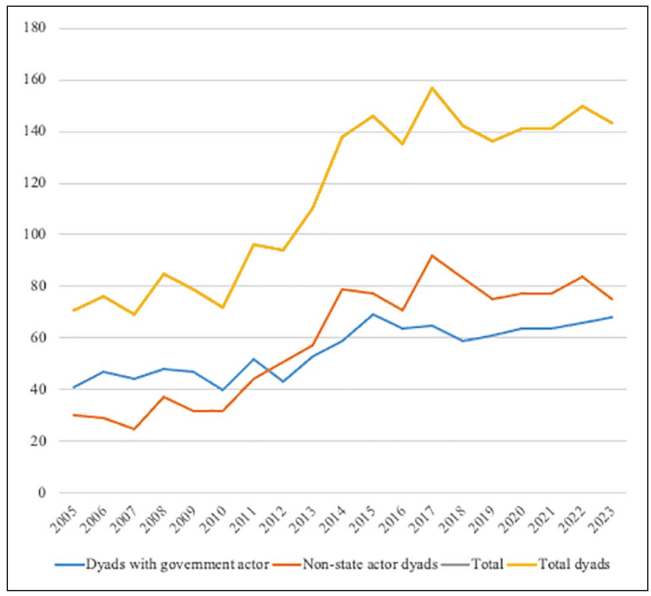

Figure 1. Number of conflict dyads over time.
Source: UCDP Armed Conflict and Non-State Actor Conflict datasets.

invested in local or sub-national forms of mediation efforts, negotiated by local or non-national actors, that focus only on particular geographies and/or issues (Turkmani, 2022b).

In practice, these dual levels of fragmentation have led to multiple mediation processes, often at different scales (Hellmüller, 2022). In Syria, at the national level, the mediation process has been defined by the Russian-led Astana process, in cooperation with Turkey and Iran, which had an uneasy relationship with the UN-led Geneva process (Costantini and Santini, 2022). At the sub-state level, at least 72 local ceasefire agreements were signed and collected between 2011 and 2017 in different geographic areas of Syria, involving third-party mediation and facilitation by countries including Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Qatar (Karakus and Svensson, 2020). In Yemen, at least 27 agreements have been signed since 2016, 11 of which aim to resolve local issues rather than conflict-wide issues, with third parties such as the UN and Saudi Arabia (Bell and Badanjak, 2019). While neither conflict fragmentation nor geopolitical ambitions in peace processes are new, there is a rare consensus among peace practitioners that the scale and intensity of such fragmentation is novel and fundamentally altering the peacemaking landscape (Bell, 2024; Lanz and Lustenberger, 2024).

In this paper, we contribute by bringing two research strands together – (a) the domestic fragmentation of conflicts and the (b) global fragmentation of mediation processes – into a coherent framework that captures these contemporary dynamics, which we define as disaggregated mediation. We note that while existing studies on multi-track or multi-party mediation incorporate domestic complexity and fragmentation (e.g. Vukovic,

2019), these literatures conceive of mediation as contributing to a *singular conflict or peace process* that involves two primary conflict parties or 'sides' – the state and rebel groups (Bell and Wise, 2022). Multiparty mediation examines the presence of two or more mediators working on ***a*** peace process, either simultaneously or sequentially, to support conflict actors reach a settlement (Crocker et al., 2015; Vukovic, 2019). Similarly, multi-track mediation focuses on linkages between multiple 'tracks' of dialogue initiatives, with Track II – the middle-range leadership – and Track III – grassroots and community-based peace-building – influencing and supporting official high-level Track I negotiations (Lederach, 1998; Palmiano Federer et al., 2019). Like multi-track mediation, disaggregated mediation may also involve multiple concurrent tracts, and like multi-party mediation, disaggregated mediation may also involve different sets of third parties. However, at least three aspects distinguish disaggregated mediation, namely that (a) the aims of disaggregated mediation attempts are more limited, in that third parties seek to resolve discrete geographic or thematic elements of ongoing conflict or to cohere a specific subset of conflict actors rather than the whole, (b) relatedly, unlike multi-track and multi-party mediation, which conceives of mediation efforts as geared towards the resolution of a singular conflict, often involving two primary sides – the state and a rebel group – disaggregated mediation is a response to conflict fragmentation, which involves multiple competing parties or sides engaged in multiple discrete conflicts that may or may not include the state, and which may overlap, (c) much of the multiparty literature conceives of multiple mediators intervening in a conflict *as part of a coalition* (Bohmelt, 2012; Dell'Aguzzo, 2018; Vukovic, 2019), yet our concept captures contemporary reality, in which multiple mediators often intervene *independently* with geographically or thematically discrete remits involving distinct constellation of conflict actors (which is more aligned with an element of Crocker et al'.s (2015) conceptualisation of multiparty mediation).

Opening the 'black box' of the variety of objectives and scopes of disaggregated mediation seems an effort worth making, since mediation attempts to resolve discrete geographic or thematic aspects of a broader conflict are likely to differ from mediation attempts that grapple with resolving the 'whole'. Not only might mediation efforts that seek to resolve discrete aspects of a conflict be expected to have greater success in achieving their more limited goals in the short term, but their implications include potentially increasing conflict complexity and making the field of mediation more competitive. With more concurrent mediation efforts in play, conflict actors can pick and choose between rival thematic and geographically limited processes depending on their strategic interests.

We define disaggregated mediation as

> 'multiple discreet mediation or dialogue processes, brokered by different sets of international third parties, with varying strategic motivations and normative foundations, involving different constellations of domestic actors, aimed at resolving violence in various local sub-state territories and/or with regards to specific issues, within broader conflicts that may overlap'.

In particular, we suggest that conflict fragmentation and global fragmentation has led contemporary mediation efforts to be disaggregated across (a) scales or geography (with

some dialogue processes focused on the national level while others at sub-state or local), (b) themes (with dialogue efforts focusing on specific issues, such as humanitarian relief, or ceasefires rather than comprehensive settlements) and (c) actors (with multiple domestic groups party subscribing to different initiatives). In doing so, the article calls for a new imagination of peace processes that moves beyond seeing mediation as contributing to a single peace process. Instead, contemporary mediation efforts involve multiple processes varied in terms of the domestic groups attending, issues that each process seeks to address, and territories that each seeks to impact.

Our concept of mediation in disaggregated mediation includes *publicised formal events mediated by third parties which lead to agreements*, as well as other sets of dialogue efforts convened as a part of ongoing confidence building measure which have yet to result in a signed agreement between conflict parties (Kartsonaki et al., 2022). Furthermore, while many dialogue processes continue to be led by domestic groups, we focus on dialogue efforts with direct international facilitation or mediation, whether international institutions or third-party state representatives.

We suggest that disaggregated mediation derives from at least two key dynamics. First, we argue that in fragmented conflicts with multiple parties a single external mediator controlling a singular process is unlikely to be acceptable to all parties. In such contexts, conflict actors are likely to have different preferences for the involvement of different third parties, such as due to their socio-economic connections, perceptions of partiality or impartiality or the leverage that different mediators have on arming and providing logistical support. Second, with increasing numbers of external actors with diverse motivations interests and connections to conflict actors now engaged in mediation and dialogue processes, the external states involved have incentives to invest in discrete aspects of a conflict, including sub-state disputes, based on their economic and geostrategic priorities, while also often supporting national-level processes. Finally, in discussing the impacts of disaggregated mediation in Myanmar, we argue that while it has the potential to create 'islands of stability' marked by temporary cessation of violence, if not managed such 'islands' may shift the geography of conflict rather than resolving it, be used tactically by groups to rearm and can potentially undermine the prospects for a comprehensive peace process.

Methodologically, we investigate the phenomenon of disaggregated mediation with a detailed study of multiple dialogue initiatives supported by different external actors and involving various constellations of domestic actors. The article first outlines a comprehensive review of all publicly known dialogue/mediation processes, involving international actors, in Myanmar since the military coup on 1st February 2021, including processes incepted prior that have continued through the post-coup period. Then, to assess the impact of disaggregated mediation, the article hones in on one particular dialogue process in the Rakhine state in Myanmar, facilitated by Japan between the Ararkan Army (AA) and the junta's State Administrative Council (SAC). Empirically, we draw on secondary data, including news articles and reports, and triangulate with 19 open-ended interviews with individuals directly and closely following the post-coup situation (Appendix 1) and 12 Myanmar Study Group discussions involving over 230 participants drawn from a wide range of stakeholders from Myanmar (Appendix 2). We empirically

examine peace outcomes at the country and state level using the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Myanmar Conflict Map.[2]

The remainder of the article is outlined as followed. In section II, we situate the concept of disaggregated mediation within existing literature and present the framework. In section III, we outline factors driving its rise and consider its impact on peace outcomes. In section IV, we present the research design, and in section V, we conduct the empirical analysis. The article concludes with implications for policy and practice.

Conceptualising and situating disaggregated mediation within the conflict fragmentation and mediation literature

Our concept of disaggregated mediation builds on and fills gaps in the established multi-party mediation and multi-track mediation literatures, connects to the recent proposal of multi-mediation and draws from existing literature on conflict fragmentation.

State of the scholarship: moving beyond the 'single-process'

Scholarship on conflict fragmentation distinguishes fragmentation both in terms of the number of 'sides' and in terms of the cohesion of the actors that make up each 'side' (Cunningham, 2016). When multiple non-state armed groups fight the state or each other, the conflict can be described as fragmented. The fragmentation of actors on each 'side' can also be assessed by considering the number of its constituent organisations, and the distribution of power between them, as well as the strength of ties between its political and military wings (Bakke et al., 2012). Competition among different groups can incentivise spoiling of peace efforts to maximise outcomes for their particular organisation, in the absence of a dominant actor on one of the negotiating 'sides' (Cunningham, 2016; Trumbore, 2018). Moreover, the number of distinct agendas, political motives and varied and overlapping disputes characteristic of fragmented conflicts makes the task of successfully negotiating the end of violence by all parties more challenging.

Yet, despite recognition of conflict 'fragmentation', the existing mediation literature continues to view these mediation actors as operating within a *singular conflict* or *peace process* that involves two protagonists, 'on one side a dysfunctional, authoritarian, or 'ethnically owned' state; on the other, 'armed opposition groups and their supporters' (Bell and Wise, 2022). Two distinct bodies of scholarship on mediation have been central to highlighting the fragmented nature of actors and mediation processes.

First, the scholarship on multi-track processes examines the fragmented nature of mediation processes, with the simultaneous use of 'multiple' tracks – involving private and public meetings with conflict actors and stakeholders of different types (Böhmelt, 2010; Boutellis, 2020). Influenced by Lederach's highly influential pyramid model of peace-building, multi-track mediation approach highlights the linkages between the three 'tracks' of dialogue to holistically contribute to the peace process encompassing initiatives on different societal levels, ranging from community-based peace-building to high-level negotiations (Lederach, 1998). Here, Track 1 centres on formal talks between the key political-military elites at the heart of the conflict, Track 2 focuses on unofficial,

informal interactions between conflict parties and Track 1.5 comprises public or private interactions between official representatives of conflicting actors mediated by a third party not representing a political institution. Different types of actors are often involved in various tracks to make the process legitimate, inclusive and effective. Existing works highlight that concurrent use of 'multiple' tracks of mediation can help to pool resources, enhance the legitimacy of the peace process and secure grassroots buy-in (Böhmelt, 2012; Boutellis, 2020). This approach is understood to enhance the effectiveness of a process by promoting linkages between various tracks, reducing spoiling by actors that may otherwise be excluded from the process and increasing domestic ownership of the process by including civic groups (Palmiano Federer et al., 2019; Pring, 2023). The focus on interaction between the various tracks of mediation, notably how Track III and II can contribute to Track I, reflects an inherent assumption of there being *a singular peace process* that needs to be supported by multiple initiatives at different societal levels if it is to succeed.

Second, a burgeoning body of work on multiparty mediation highlights the entry of increasing numbers of states, and an array of international organisations, which have crowded the mediation landscape and brought with them varied norms and incentives (Crocker et al., 2015; Hellmüller, 2022; Lanz, 2021). Multiparty mediation captures the phenomenon where two or more third parties cooperate or compete in helping conflict parties negotiate a conflict settlement (Crocker et al., 2015: 370). In other words, it centres on the 'presence of multiple mediators working on a peace process'. Multiparty mediation may involve a coalition or group of external third-party states that pool together to engage in a peace process (Crocker et al., 2015). Examples include the Dayton Agreement mediated by the Contact Group and the OSCE Minsk Group in Ukraine. Even competing states like Russia and the US were both part of the coalitions that mediated the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s (Dell'Aguzzo, 2018). The framework highlights the rise of third-party mediation actors in at least three ways: it identifies the simultaneous intervention of multiple mediators that may or may not coordinate efforts, assesses sequential mediated interventions that involve more than one third party and focuses on mediation initiatives that involves composite actors such as coalitions of states (Crocker et al., 2015). An increase in multiparty mediation is attributed to clashing interests of the mediating states, overlapping mediation mandates, incompatible norms guiding conflict resolution and the underperformance of mediators (Lanz, 2021). Despite these challenges, well-coordinated multiparty mediation efforts are seen to offer an opportunity to pool resources, share costs and allocate tasks and roles to different parties based on their comparative advantages (Vukovic, 2019).

Most recently, in her short think piece in Accord, a publication by Conciliation Resources, Christine Bell (2024) suggests that new adaptations in the global mediation space are evident, a dynamic she terms 'multi-mediation', which involves 'a collection of mediation and dialogue innovations, taking place through ad hoc initiatives across contexts and organizations' (p. 27). We draw on these ideas to conceptualise how features of this trend intersect, with what effect and their impact for peace outcomes.

This paper fills crucial gaps in the multi-track and multiparty literature and offers a key contribution. While the existing scholarship is cognizant of how changes in the world order shape the context of mediation (Crocker et al., 2015; Hellmüller, 2022), it runs short

of examining how competition among external third parties interacts with domestic fragmentation in conflict-affected contexts. The disaggregated mediation concept thus builds on the insights of the multiparty literature, with its acknowledgement of the multiplicity and competing types of mediation actors (Hellmüller, 2022), and the conflict fragmentation literature, which highlights the internal complexity of armed conflicts, by seeking to better understand the disaggregation of mediation efforts at the international, national and sub-state levels. In doing so, we also build on scholarship on local peace agreements, which are limited in their scope to a 'geographic area smaller than the entire conflict zone, and involve at least some local actors' (Bell et al., 2021; Bell and Wise, 2022). The 'local' here is applied not as a distinct territorial space but as a relative term – one that inevitably connects the 'national', the 'transnational' and the 'international' in non-hierarchical ways (Bell and Wise, 2022). In many conflict contexts, national and local dynamics intersect and influence each other, but in others – notably where the state is absent – localised conflicts can develop in relative isolation from national-level political dynamics and may even be linked to other regionalised conflicts through competition for power and resources (Boutellis, 2020). The disaggregated mediation concept integrates insights from this literature, reflecting the local disaggregation of contemporary mediation, but also the ways in which third-party states and international organisations now see local – rather than national-level – mediation as a key area for intervention.[3]

The argument: explaining the rise and impacts of disaggregated mediation

Factors that engender the rise of disaggregated mediation

We suggest that disaggregated mediation emerges in response to changing contemporary conflict and mediation dynamics. First, the 'fragmentation' of conflict landscapes means that multiple contending groups or 'sides' may have diverse perceptions of how different potential third-party mediators could help their cause, due to various factors such as pre-existing social or cross-border relationships to certain external states, views on the partiality of third parties or varying levels of leverage mediators have on different conflict actors (Bohmelt, 2012). Mediators themselves can enjoy multiple competing roles, for example, acting as mediator, guarantor and implementor of agreements that are forged alongside underwriting the conflict by covertly or overtly aiding different sides (Turkmani, 2022b). Research also indicates that third parties are likely to be accepted and effective if they are either thought to be *powerful and have leverage over key conflict actors* or otherwise are considered legitimate because they bring a level of *impartiality* (Menninga, 2020; Reid, 2017). Effective mediating states are often those that can demonstrate credible staying power, greater resources and coercive capacity and historical ties with one of the conflict actors (Melin and Svensson, 2009; Menninga, 2020). However, in the context of increasing geopolitical competition, a single external third party is less likely to be perceived to either have leverage or influence over *all* conflict actors. As Michiels and Kızılkaya point out with regards to the Syrian peace processes, 'the Astana process guarantors were considered as credible only by the parties they were sponsoring, with the opposition trusting Turkey and Damascus having faith in Iran and Russia' (Michiels and Kızılkaya, 2022: 121). They further highlight how the Geneva

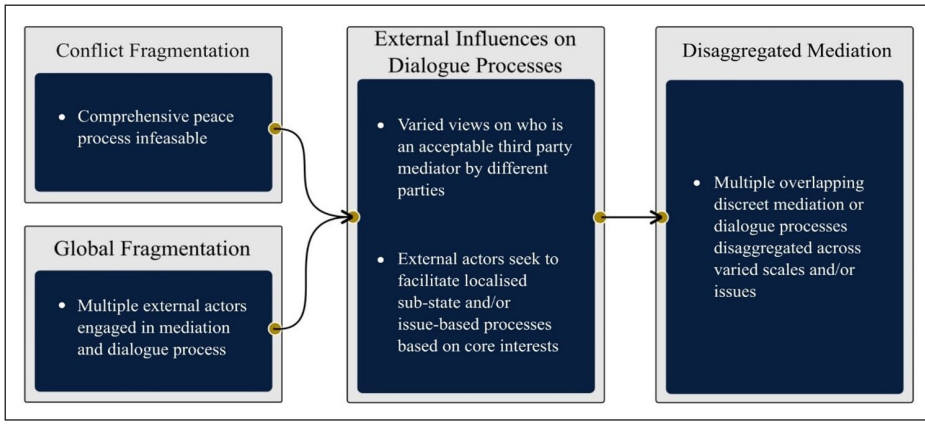

Figure 2. Factors leading to the rise of disaggregated mediation.

process, under the first UN mediator, was viewed by the Syrian government as 'partial' owing to the process's non-inclusion of Iran, the regime's trusted backer, in the Geneva peace negotiations along with other factors like its focus on establishing a transitional government (Michiels and Kızılkaya, 2022). Contradictorily, the UN's invitation to Iran to join the Geneva processes initially had to be withdrawn as the Syrian opposition threatened to boycott the talks if Iranian officials attended (Withnall, 2014). This highlights how varying preferences of domestic actors for different third parties can shape the disaggregation of peacemaking processes. A result of the array of conflict actors, with varying motivations and different levels of international exposure and foreign support, is that there is the potential for various conflict actors to have different preferred third parties, as Lanz (2021) notes. Conflict fragmentation may thus increase the number of perspectives on who is an acceptable third party.

Second, where a comprehensive national-level settlement seems unlikely, external third parties may have greater incentives to selectively seek to resolve discrete thematic aspects of the conflict, or relating to distinct sub-national disputes, and engage with a certain constellation of armed groups based on their core geostrategic and economic interests (Parlar Dal, 2018; Sun, 2017). Furthermore, intense geostrategic competition in the mediation space itself, makes it more likely that third-party states focus on processes and engagement with conflict actors where they have comparative advantage over others. At the same time, rising mediation ambitions of diverse states with different approaches to international norms has brought a diversity of models of mediation and dialogue support, allowing for assemblages of various processes underpinned by different motivations, norms and practices (Peter and Rice, 2022). The overall relationship between these factors and the rise of disaggregated mediation is summarised in Figure 2.

The impact of disaggregated mediation

If disaggregated mediation is on the rise, what might we expect for its impact? The effectiveness of mediation processes has been evaluated by scholars in varied ways, including

their ability to successfully broker a formal peace agreement, capacity to reduce tensions, enshrine certain institutional provisions in peace agreements and their influence in promoting liberal norms in peace agreements (Beardsley et al., 2006: 200; Hellmüller et al., 2020; Svensson, 2009). Given the increasing number of external actors engaged in mediation and dialogue processes, with diverse motivations, interests and connections to conflict actors, and the lack of coordination between them, external states have incentives to invest in discrete processes, including relating to sub-national territories, that benefit their core security, economic and geostrategic priorities. Thus, we expect one impact of disaggregated mediation to be greater stability in localised geographies or on certain thematic areas that align with the geostrategic or economic priorities of external third parties involved. However, such localised agreements, narrow in thematic scope, can lead to peace in one territory while simultaneously fuelling conflict in another (Bell and Wise, 2022). The scholarship on local peace agreements highlights how such localised and thematically focused agreements are often 'tactical', representing a strategic compromise that enables each side to concentrate its military power elsewhere, or to rearm and rebuild (Bell and Wise, 2022; Kaldor et al., 2022). Thus, we anticipate that the temporary cessation of hostilities in certain territories, and not others, may perpetuate a conflict status quo by shifting the geography of conflict rather than resolving it. We outline the methodology and data sources for the paper next.

Methodology and sources of empirical evidence

To investigate the phenomenon of 'disaggregated mediation' we conduct a detailed case study of post-coup Myanmar. We expect to observe disaggregated mediation in internally fragmented states with multiple conflict theatres and armed actors, as such contexts invite the disaggregation of mediation to the sub-state level. Myanmar is one of the most internally fragmented of the 34 countries identified in the Coup Agency and Mechanisms (CAM) dataset (Powell and Thyne, 2011: 252) and the most fragmented conflict of 2024 (ACLED, 2024). The conflict involves a significant number of distinct armed actors, with more than 20 ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), and multiple Peoples Defence Forces (PDFs) that have sprung up to fight the military since the military coup on 1st February 2021. While for decades, Myanmar has witnessed multiple insurgencies, the scale, intensity and the geography of the conflicts have changed since the coup in 2021. Since the early days of independence, Myanmar's multiple resistance movements were led by ethnic armed groups representing different ethnic minority groups and limited to multiple borderlands of the country. However, post-coup, the heaviest fighting has been between the multiple PDFs and the military regime, in central Myanmar, which has historically not witnessed violence and is dominated by the Bamar Buddhist majority, escalating conflict fragmentation of the country (Loong, 2022). Furthermore, conflicts between different EAOs, notably with regards to territorial control in areas newly liberated from the military, have been a new feature of the recent fragmentation (Tuseng et al., 2024).

Disaggregated mediation is also anticipated in conflict contexts involving multiple distinct third-party mediators. Known processes in Myanmar to date have involved many states and international organisations including China, Thailand, Japan, Association of

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the UN (Alexandra and Adhikari, 2023; Heyzer, 2023; *The Irrawaddy*, 2022).

Empirically, we conduct a comprehensive review of publicly known dialogue/mediation processes in Myanmar since the coup in February 2021 until April 2023, including those that continue on from pre-coup processes.[4] Within this broader mapping, we consider the peace impacts of disaggregated mediation by honing in on one process in Rakhine state in Myanmar, facilitated by Japan between the AA and the SAC. This process involved international intervention in a discrete aspect of the conflict, where a ceasefire regime negotiated before the coup held following the post-coup tectonic changes.

We draw on several sources of data. First are online secondary data, including news articles, reports and public statements from ethnic armed/resistance organisations (EAOs), the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) and the National Unity Government (NUG). We triangulate these data with 19 open-ended interviews with EAOs, civil society, practitioners and think tanks directly following the post-coup situation (Appendix 1), as well as one dialogue session and 12 Myanmar Study Group discussions involving over 230 participants drawn from a wide range of stakeholders from Myanmar (Appendix 2). These include civil society groups, representatives of various EAOs, political leaders, and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), among others. We also draw from the IISS Myanmar Conflict Map to empirically examine peace outcomes at the country and state level.[5]

As Myanmar is a particularly fragmented conflict, it is plausible that findings in this case may not generalise to less-fragmented contexts, and there is a risk of bias towards observing particularly pronounced effects, which may not be representative of the wider population of fragmented conflicts. To mitigate this concern, we supplement the article with empirical examples from other less fragmented conflicts throughout the analysis to confirm or disconfirm the logic of the argument, in other cases.

Mapping disaggregated mediation in Myanmar: overlapping processes, multiple players and competing motivations

Since the early days of independence, Myanmar has experienced multiple conflicts, involving different EAOs representing various ethnic groups that have waged insurgency against a centralised state dominated by the Bamar ethnic group and, at various times, fought one another. In this context, attempts at mediation, either domestically driven or with the involvement of external third parties, is not new in Myanmar. The 1990s saw multiple informal local ceasefire agreements between the military and EAOs, including the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) among others. Some remained in place until the late 2000s while others collapsed. Furthermore, since 2011, the then Thein Sein government embarked on a peace process anchored around a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) which was initially signed by ten EAOs.[6]

Then, on 1st February 2021, the military coup reversed a decade-long experiment with partial democratisation and a peace process and prompted renewed nationwide armed resistance, aggravating existing conflict fragmentation.

The coup and the subsequent arrest of democratic leaders amid increasing repression propelled nationwide protests centred around demands for the release of all political prisoners and reinstatement of the elected civilian government. The alliance of democratic opposition formed the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), which later – with additional representation from NLD, EAOs, civil society, ethnic and women leaders – formed the NUG. Locally, multiple armed resistance movements also formed over 300 community-based Local Defence Forces (LDFs) and PDFs, many loosely allied with NUG.

Thereafter, neither the military nor the opposition have prevailed, in spite of military gains by EAOs and PDFs since October 2023. While some groups that had signed the NCA stuck to it, others have not. A comprehensive process to cohere the multiple visions of a desired future among the anti-military opposition, and with the junta, has not been possible, with each EAO having slightly different relationships with the military, the NUG and the PDFs.

We next illustrate disaggregated mediation by setting out all known mediation or dialogue processes in Myanmar, brokered by different international third parties, including regional organisations like ASEAN, multilateral bodies like the UN, as well as regional neighbours like China, India, Thailand with varying objectives and motivations, since the military coup. These attempts, as outlined below, were varied in their geographic focus and thematic priorities and accordingly engaged with different sets of EAOs and related groups in Myanmar.

Regional multilateral mediation: ASEAN focus on regional peace and security

At the regional level, the most prominent and comprehensive form of mediation is the ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus (5PC) framework. Many Western states have backed the ASEAN process, as a part of their wider commitment on 'letting ASEAN lead' on Myanmar (Alexandra and Adhikari, 2023). The ASEAN Declaration states that one of the key purposes of the Association, of which Myanmar is a member, is to, 'promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries in the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter' (ASEAN, 1967). Engagement in the country is driven by ASEAN's founding objectives of regional stability and acceleration of economic growth in the region but also by immediate concerns over regional spillover of the conflict, especially across the Thailand and Bangladesh border (Thuzar and Seah, 2024). The 5PC was forged with this overall objective and focused on five key themes including the cessation of violence, dialogue among all parties concerned, the appointment of the ASEAN Special Envoy to facilitate dialogue, humanitarian assistance by ASEAN and an ASEAN visit in Myanmar to meet all relevant parties (Caballero-Anthony, 2022).

In the initial period of post-coup, under the chairmanship of Brunei and Cambodia, the focus of dialogue attempts was centred on two primary actors, the SAC and NUG. After criticism from multiple quarters, in 2023, under the Indonesian Chairmanship of ASEAN, there was a notable shift with active outreach and talks with multiple stakeholders as part of its 'quiet diplomacy' approach to foster de-escalation of violence and

dialogue (Shofa, 2023). As under the Indonesian Chairmanship, Malaysia, as ASEAN Chair for 2025, is reaching out to multiple constituencies.[7] During the 2022 Cambodian Chair of ASEAN, Prime Minister Hun Sen led a high-level delegation to engage Min Aung Hlaing and move the 5PC implementation forward (Strangio, 2021). While Min Aung Hlaing signed a joint statement with Prime Minister Hun Sen on the cessation of hostilities, the SAC continued bombings and airstrikes throughout the visit (Rainsy, 2022). The SAC also prevented ASEAN delivery of humanitarian assistance to EAO and NUG-controlled regions and denied several requests by the ASEAN Envoy to meet NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi (Caballero-Anthony, 2022). As a response to the substantial lack of progress by the SAC in implementing the 5PC, ASEAN since blocked Myanmar's participation in high-level ASEAN meetings, although Myanmar civil servants representing the SAC continue to participate in ASEAN meetings that do not require ministerial representation (Bandial, 2021).

ASEAN is organised around fundamental principles of consensual decision-making and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states (Alexandra and Adhikari, 2023). These principles and objectives offer ASEAN significant legitimacy to mediate in the Myanmar conflict yet also limit the scope of possible actions to enforce implementation of the 5PC.

Multilateral initiative focused thematically on humanitarian assistance: UN supported dialogue on delivery of humanitarian aid

Dialogue processes led by international organisations have also taken place alongside ASEAN's but focused on humanitarian access. Similar to ASEAN, UN engagement, led by the UN Special Envoy and backed by UNGA resolutions on June 2021 and UN Security Council Resolution 2669, called for the immediate end to all forms of violence in Myanmar and urged restraint, de-escalation of tensions and release of all prisoners (Nichols, 2022). Along with trying to meet all 'concerned parties', the UN's dialogue attempts have focused on instituting an Inclusive Humanitarian Forum (IHF), which aims to increase the operational space available for the delivery of humanitarian aid through all available channels including cross-border (Heyzer, 2023). In terms of dialogue, the UN envoy was not given access to the NLD leader, only meeting the SAC leader. With Myanmar neighbours like Thailand and India not allowing large scale deployment of aid via their borders (Radio Free Asia, 2022), the UN's engagement has been constrained. Meanwhile, UN agencies like the World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) have engaged the junta, notably on humanitarian and development assistance, to sustain their operations inside the country (ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, 2022).

External third parties focused on the reviving or assessing the NCA process: Japan, Switzerland and Finland

Since the coup, Japan's envoy for Myanmar Yohei Sasakawa has sought to revive the stalled NCA process. In March 2022, he met EAOs who had earlier signed the NCA,

including, Karen National Union (KNU), Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), New Mon State Party (NMSP), Pa-O National Liberation Council and Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. The attempts to revive the NCA process has been critiqued for overlooking the fact that some former NCA signatories are now fighting the SAC, making its prospects rather bleak (*The Irrawaddy*, 2022).

Similarly, some European countries have been criticised for directly engaging the Myanmar military in dialogue processes by seeking to revive the NCA process. The Government of Finland, through the CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, invited members of the Myanmar military junta's Peace Committee to a secret meeting in Helsinki, Finland, and met with them there in 2023 (Justice for Myanmar, 2023). The Government of Switzerland, in conjunction with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and Swisspeace, organised a workshop on the NCA peace process in Naypyitaw 16–18 October 2023 (Justice for Myanmar, 2023).

Regional bilateral mediation: focus on the theme of cross-border stability, borderland EAOs and discreet territories

Multiple overlapping bilaterally-led dialogue processes have also taken place alongside processes by bodies like ASEAN and the UN. While all regional states, including India, China and Japan have formally articulated their support for the 5PC, they have continued multiple bilateral processes, either focused on distinct themes, constellation of actors, territories or a combination of these. The poor prospects for ASEAN 5PC implementation has led the neighbouring countries of Myanmar to pursue alternatives to the 5PC, given concerns about spillover of the conflict across their borders. These include:

Thailand and India supported Track 1.5 dialogue processes. ASEAN members, like Thailand, have pursued their own bilateral process, aimed at stability, delivery of humanitarian assistance and aiming to reach out to civic networks along with key conflict actors (Alexandra and Adhikari, 2023). In December 2022, Thailand hosted a meeting, 'to support ASEAN attempts to help Myanmar on the path back to peace and normalcy'. This meeting was attended by top diplomats from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and the SAC Foreign Minister, setting the momentum for an informal Track 1.5 (Radio Free Asia, 2022). On March 13, 2023, Thailand secretly convened the first Track 1.5 meeting in Bangkok. An Indian think tank convened the second meeting in New Delhi on April 25, 2023. The meeting was attended by think tanks and working-level government officials from India, China, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Indonesia (Chau, 2023). A representative from the SAC also participated, but the NUG representative was not invited. The meeting in New Delhi discussed reducing violence, creating dialogue space and delivering humanitarian aid, but there was no significant outcome (Chau, 2023). The extent to which these bilateral national-level processes are coordinated with one another, and other externally and internally-led processes, is unclear. In 2024, India also convened a series of workshops on constitutionalism and federalism which brought together EAOs from the India-Myanmar borderlands, including, the NUG and ethnic minority rebels from the states of Chin, Rakhine and Kachin bordering India, along with another session for SAC representatives (Lone and Ghoshal, 2024).

China- supported sub-state process focused on stability in the Northern borderlands. Between the coup and March 2024, China has engaged in at least sixteen rounds of formal negotiations, notably with EAOs based in the Northern Myanmar-China borderlands.[8] Some have resulted in concrete settlements, including the agreement signed between the Myanmar military and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in January 2025, while others have not (Martin and Hogan, 2025). These dialogue initiatives have focused geographically on Myanmar's northern borderlands, including parts of Shan and Kachin state, and appear unlikely to affect other parts of the country. Furthermore, these initiates recentre engagement with EAOs in the borderlands, including, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), MNDAA, KIA, with the focus limited to ceasefires and not a comprehensive solution to conflict drivers.

China has incentives to guarantee stability in Northern Myanmar along its border to protect its bilateral investments located in these territories, as well as prevent conflict spillover into its territory. To this end, the Chinese Special Envoy for Asian Affairs, Deng Xijun, brokered a meeting between seven of Myanmar's EAOs, including some of the most powerful – the KIA, TNLA and MNDAA – in 2022 who are grouped as the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC). Following the meeting the FPNCC commented it would 'continue working together with the Chinese government to improve the stability of border areas', while the Chinese Special Envoy travelled to Naypyitaw to meet junta leaders (*The Irrawaddy*, 2023). China's dialogue processes are underpinned by its support of the 2008 Constitution of Myanmar as a framework for political solution and ASEAN's 5PC framework. China has historic precedent of fostering dialogue in Myanmar multilaterally as part of the nationwide NCA process, as well as through bilateral talks with EAOs in Northern Myanmar along China's border.

Japan supported sub-state process focused on a ceasefire between the AA and the SAC. Japan has also continued to engage in dialogue efforts in particular sub-state regions of post-coup Myanmar. Japan's motivation for engagement ranges from its history of providing aid in Rakhine to countering China's entrenched investment in the state, to the keen interest of Japanese businesses to invest in the state and to its prior engagement in the Rohingya refugee crisis between Bangladesh and Myanmar (Seekins, 2015; Strefford, 2021). In Rakhine, the Arakan Army (AA) had been fighting the military junta since late 2018 until Japan's Special Envoy for National Reconciliation in Myanmar, Yohei Sasakawa, facilitated an informal ceasefire in November 2020.

The mediation effort by Japan was sub-state given its focus on Rakhine state, and also largely issue-specific on cessation of violence, without broader linkages to the wider conflict in Myanmar, and on other issues such as federalism which have been touted to be key priorities for the AA.

The mediation effort was preceded by cancellation of voting for the 2020 elections in certain areas of Rakhine state on grounds of security threats (International Crisis Group, 2020). However, after Sasakawa's engagement, the AA declared that it would allow for elections to be held by December, working with the government. Following the Japanese Envoy's visit, the military and AA also held direct talks on 25 November during which they discussed holding elections, the potential resumption of ceasefire negotiations and plans for in-person discussions (International Crisis Group, 2022). The impact of the

ceasefire in 2020 remained even after coup. Unlike other places in Myanmar, Rakhine State was relatively stable until October 2023 (Hlaing, 2023). The AA declined to join the NUCC process, though it has supported the people's revolution by training PDFs, maintaining bilateral engagement with the NUG and engaging different EAOs. Briefly, on 9 November 2021, fighting re-erupted between the AA and Tatmadaw in the northern part of Rakhine state, the first since the ceasefire in 2020. In response, Sasakawa flew to the country to help soothe tensions, and no further clashes were reported then on until October 2023 (International Crisis Group, 2022). It needs noting that while dialogue attempts were focused on negotiations between the AA and the SAC, it did little to mitigate fighting between AA and another EAO, the Chin National Front, highlighting conflict fragmentation in Myanmar and the limited impact of disaggregated meditation (Lei, 2020).

Drivers of disaggregated mediation in Myanmar: empirical analysis

Conflict fragmentation and preferences for third parties

To recap the first part of the argument: we suggest that in fragmented conflicts with multiple parties or 'sides', conflict actors are likely to have different preferences for the involvement of different third parties, due to various factors such as pre-existing social or cross-border relationships to certain external states, views on the partiality of third parties or the leverage that different mediators have on arming and logistical support. And indeed, in Myanmar we find that conflict actors differ in terms of who they find acceptable external third parties across different scales of disaggregated mediation.

For one, the Myanmar military has been accepting of Japan's role in dialogue processes, with Sasakawa as envoy having engaged with both the military and EAOs, including Rakhine State-based AA. From the military perspective, Japan is a preferable intermediary to China, who otherwise may have taken up the role given its leverage with EAOs. The military has reportedly been discontent with China's involvement, accusing the country of not preventing supply of arms to EAOs (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Both the military and the AA also consider Japan relatively impartial and benign compared to countries like China, as a, 'major international partner, that has no direct interest in the Rakhine state conflict and has also been relatively muted in its criticism of Myanmar following the 2017 Rohingya crisis' (International Crisis Group, 2020). During the Rohingya refugee crisis, this perception was underlined by Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina when she suggested that, 'Japan, with its benign influence in the region, could mediate and help return these Rohingyas to their homes in Myanmar' (*The Japan Times*, 2023).

Some EAOs, such as the KIA and KNU are well-versed in human rights and democracy discourses and are often more comfortable engaging with Western states in the dialogue space, with whom they have historic ties (Ong, 2021). This was evident during the NCA process, when the KNU expressed a preference for expanding the list of international witnesses to the process to include Western actors like the EU and Norway (Institute for Security & Development Policy, 2015). Similarly, in 2013, when Lieutenant General Gun Maw, from the Kachin Independence Organisation, (KIO) the political arm of the KIA, visited the United States (US) Embassy in Yangon and met then-Ambassador

Table 1. Mediation and dialogue processes in post-coup Myanmar.

Dialogue / mediation process	External actors	Themes, territories and actors
Regional multilateral mediation: ASEAN's focus on regional peace and security	ASEAN members: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand & Vietnam.	Delivered as a part of ASEAN's Five-Point Agreement Framework Focused initially at national-level, and on the NUG and SAC, later involving multiple stakeholders, including NUG, SAC and EAOs. Thematically focused on cessation of violence, dialogue among all parties, appointment of ASEAN Special Envoy to facilitate dialogue, humanitarian assistance by ASEAN, an ASEAN visit in Myanmar to meet all relevant parties.
Multilateral initiative by the UN focused thematically on humanitarian assistance	UN agencies: WFP, UNHCR, UNOCHA.	Actors: Largely through SAC's administrative channel Thematically, focused on instituting an IHF, which aims to open operational space to deliver humanitarian aid.
External third parties focused on the reviving or assessing the NCA process and engaging with signatories of the NCA: Japan, Switzerland and Finland	Switzerland, in conjunction with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and Swisspeace (& SAC)	Focus on the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) peace process
	Finland through the CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation (& SAC)	Focus on the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) peace process and centred on Myanmar military junta's Peace Committee
	Japan through the Special Envoy	Discussions with various EAOs who were signatories to the NCA
Regional bilateral mediation: Focus on the theme of cross-border stability, borderland EAOs and discreet territories	Thailand and India led bilateral Track 1.5 initiative	Focused on national-level and SAC, to support 'ASEAN attempts to help Myanmar on the path back to peace and normalcy.' With key openings for EAOs, civic groups and think tanks.
	China-led FPNCC and the Brotherhood Alliance	Focused thematically on ceasefire in Northern borderlands of Myanmar across the China border, including, areas of Shan and Kachin state. Centred on dialogue efforts between the military and EAOs based largely in the North, including Ta'ang National Liberation Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, Kachin Independence Army,
	Japan in Rakhine	Focus on Rakhine State, and centred on the AA and the SAC. Thematically, focused primarily on humanitarian issues, helping the ceasefire arrangements to continue.

Derek Mitchell, he sought an avenue for US involvement in talks (Kumbun, 2019). The KIO has economic dependencies on China. At the same time, the EAO has particular ties to the West due to the group's Christian identity, a significant Kachin diaspora in the West, their history of cooperating with the US and UK during World War II, as well as the need to balance their dependency on China (Sun, 2017).

Other Northern EAOs, such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA), NDAA and MNDA, whom enjoy formal and informal socio-economic connections to China and to whom China has provided significant arms, have indicated their support for the involvement of China as a third-party mediator (Ong, 2021). In March 2023, the powerful FPNCC – which represents these and other EAOs – issued a statement welcoming mediation by China (Michaels, 2023). Likewise, the UWSA lobbied against the involvement of the US, the UK, the EU and Japan in the NCA process (Institute for Security & Development Policy, 2015). From the perspective of these EAOs, participating in talks with China offers a means of sustaining their existing bilateral economic and commercial relationships .

Overall, various conflict actors in Myanmar deem different mediators acceptable, for reasons such as perceptions of their impartiality, socio-economic connections and leverage on provision of arms.

Global fragmentation: geostrategic and economic competition in mediation

To recap the second part of the argument: we suggest that external states involved in mediation and dialogue processes have incentives to invest in discrete aspects of a conflict, including sub-state disputes that benefit their economic and geostrategic priorities, while also often supporting national-level processes. In Myanmar, we find that multiple external states have engaged in conflict resolution processes that secure their geostrategic and economic interests across different disaggregated mediation efforts, amid competition between external actors in the mediation space.

On China's engagement, its competition with the West has meant that historically it has opposed the involvement of other states in peace processes in Myanmar, while also seeking to leverage its position by pursing distinct sets of dialogues with EAOs that China has close connections with, like UWSA. Prior to the coup, during the NCA process, when different EAOs proposed seven countries – including the US, the UK and Norway – to sign as witnesses to the NCA, China only supported the UN and itself to be formal witnesses (Sein, 2016). Post-coup, the Chinese Special Envoy has been actively involved in high level visits and bilateral meetings with EAOs amid Chinese sensitivities about other Western donors or special envoys being involved, especially in Northern borderland areas with China (Roy, 2020). In these meetings, China's envoy appears to have articulated to EAOs of the need to limit weapons flows to some pro-democracy actors and asked them to engage with the military and not Western states (*Voice of America*, 2023). Writing of China's engagement in discrete localised processes in Kachin state in 2013, Yun Sun attributed China's involvement to the belief that, 'comprehensive peace is unattainable for the foreseeable future' and thus the current priority was to maximise flexibility through multiple processes at both local and national level (Sun, 2017).

Beyond global competition, Chinese mediation attempts have also been driven by economic interests. China's engagement with the FPNCC coalition of EAOs is based

upon its need to ensure security for Chinese investments, notably under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in borderland areas governed by EAOs in the FPNCC coalition, as well as cross-border stability. After the coup, Chinese state-owned firms continued with infrastructure projects, creating stimuli for the Chinese government to continue to invest in mechanisms that would guarantee security of such investments (Strangio, 2021). China has thus engaged in sub-state processes focused on the specific issue of cross-border stability linked to the achievement of their economic objectives and associated management of the border with Myanmar, while a national-level process (which it had invested in until 2021) remains distant.

Similarly, Japan's active engagement in Myanmar, and Rakhine state in particular, is influenced by its competition with China, as well as the legacy of its investment interests in the region (Kuhn, 2021). In fact, scholars note how the Japan-China contest for influence in Southeast Asia has defined the scope of Japan's engagement in dialogue processes in Myanmar. Differentiating itself normatively from China, Japan has cautiously called for return of democracy and rule of law in Myanmar (Khaliq, 2021). However, Japan has sought not to rock the boat too much to avoid potential backlash from the military and associated loss of influence (Kuhn, 2021). In 2018, Japan announced assistance of over 20 million USD for the conflict torn region. While Japanese government investment in Myanmar, and Rakhine in particular, is dwarfed by China's, the former has seen potential further interest from its private sector for investing in the region. In 2019, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Japan External Trade Organisation (JETRO) organised the Rakhine Investment Fair together with the Rakhine state government and the Myanmar Investment Commission. Moreover, Chinese and Japanese investors demonstrate interest in investing in the state (Ko, 2019).

Overall, both powerful states have prioritised distinct processes that benefit their economic and geostrategic interests, while continuing to ostensibly support idea that ASEAN is responsible for a national-level process.

Impact of disaggregated mediation on peace outcomes. Our final argument is that disaggregated mediation may create 'islands of stability' that shift the geography of conflict rather than resolving it. To evaluate the argument we examine one discreet sub-state process between the AA and the SAC in Rakhine state, focused specifically on the issue of ceasefire or cessation of violence. We focus on this process as it represents the only successful mediation to date that led to a concrete ceasefire, unlike the China-backed processes elsewhere in which some of its members rallied around an informal 'no-active' fighting clause, while others continued with fighting.

Successful mediation by Japan in November 2020 halted fighting between the AA and the SAC in Rakhine State until October 2023, creating an 'island of stability'. Longitudinal data analysis from conflict data and mapping produced by IISS shows that in the months leading up to the first ceasefire between the AA and the SAC, violence in Rakhine State was relatively high compared to Myanmar as a whole, but with the ceasefire regime in place the situation reversed (IISS, 2024). Conflict-related events diminished in the three months following the 24 November 2022 ceasefire, compared to the three months prior.[9]

Aside from a flare up of violence during the breakdown of the ceasefire briefly in November 2022, this territory enjoyed relative stability in comparison to the rest of post-coup Myanmar. Despite the eruption of local PDFs, conflict events in Rakhine remained

consistently low in the three months following the coup with only 13 attacks identified (IISS, 2024). This compares to Myanmar as a whole, with an average of 151 attacks recorded in each state over the same period (IISS, 2024). Empirically, this demonstrates that the informal ceasefire between the military and the AA held despite sea-changes across the national context of Myanmar. Thus, the sub-state process resulted in creating an 'island of stability' within the broader post-coup Myanmar conflict.

Though conflict events have been relatively sparse in Rakhine State since the coup, this localised outcome differs from the broader implications of truces between the AA and the SAC on the broader Myanmar conflict. This bears out conclusions that localised agreements focused on certain actors and narrower objectives or themes often stop conflict in one direction, in ways that can enable it in another (Bell and Wise, 2022). With the SAC avoiding expending significant resources to fight the AA in Rakhine State due to local ceasefires, the junta instead concentrated their military in other territories of Myanmar. For instance, after the ceasefire in Rakhine state, the SAC was able to redeploy its military forces to Shan state which saw significantly high number of attacks (Loong, 2022). Cessation of hostilities in Rakhine state also meant the SAC could shift its attention to Chin state, Myanmar's central belt and Thai-Burma border where EAOs and PDFs are actively engaged in armed conflict. In terms of economic benefits, the informal ceasefire in Rakhine state also allowed China and India's investments to continuously operate keeping the flow of revenue to SAC. Thus, while our analysis indicates that this particular sub-state process led to the temporary cessation of hostilities in certain territories of Myanmar, it also reveals how doing so can shift the geography of conflict elsewhere rather than resolving it. Moreover, this particular process reveals both the opportunities of disaggregated mediation in unravelling pieces of a broader conflict system, as well as its possible risks in perpetuating conflict as a status quo.

Conclusion

In this article, we have proposed 'disaggregated mediation' as a conceptual framework that aids better understanding of how contemporary conflict resolution functions amid the increasing scale and pace of fragmentation in conflict and mediation practices. We also suggest that disaggregated mediation derives from at least two key dynamics. First, rising conflict fragmentation means that a single external mediator controlling a singular process is unlikely to be acceptable by all relevant parties amid rising geopolitical competition, owing to the perceptions of how different potential third-party mediators may help each conflict actor with their cause, such as due to perceptions of partiality or impartiality, socio-economic connections or the leverage that different mediators have on arming and logistical support. Second, with comprehensive national-level settlements unlikely, and an increased number of external third parties competing to engage in mediation, with diverse motivations, interests and connections to conflict actors, external actors are incentivised to seek to resolve discrete aspects of a conflict, including sub-state disputes, based on their core geostrategic and economic interests. While mediation efforts have always involved multiple third parties, our analysis reveals that such actors are engaging in new ways in parts of the conflict system, in ways that do not readily contribute to a 'national peace process' strategy. Furthermore, although disaggregated mediation may create 'islands of stability' within broader conflict settings, our analysis reveals that its impact on the wider prospects for national-level peace may be less straightforward.

We evaluated the argument in the case of post-coup Myanmar, a highly fragmented conflict that involves multiple ongoing discrete mediation initiatives. A potential limitation of the study is that the significant levels of fragmentation observed in Myanmar might limit the generalisability of the findings to other less fragmented contexts. To mitigate this concern, we validate the patterns observed in Myanmar with supplementary empirical examples to confirm the argument in the less fragmented cases of Syria and South Sudan. While the article is centred on the case of Myanmar, we find similar evidence from Syria and South Sudan on how different elements of disaggregated mediation have impacted peace outcomes in similar ways: eliciting stability in the short term but not improving prospects for the broader peace settlement. For instance, studying the impact of localised/geographically discrete peace talks in Hom, Syria, Turkmani asserts how local talks and agreements in Hom, Syria, had an immediate effect on violence with people being '26 times more likely not to be killed and 31 times more likely not to be injured as a result of violence, and service restoration and aid delivery were 16 times more likely to take place' during periods of ongoing talks' (Turkmani, 2022b). However, she also points to the fragility of the localised dialogue processes highlighting how stalling of talks led to periods of increased violence and how these localised efforts were insufficiently connected to other national-level dialogues (Swisspeace, 2016; Turkmani, 2022b). Writing on South Sudan, Boswell highlights the mixed record of such disaggregated peacemaking, which despite some successes in creating 'pockets of stability' in areas such as the Panyijar Yirol border and progress on issues including, freedom of movement for civilians, it failed to be durable and linked to a national peace process (Boswell, 2019). Likewise a localised peace agreement in Abyei, a border town between Sudan and South Sudan, was lauded for 'reducing the number of killings and incidences of violence conflict', but in the absence of a national solution has continued to be entangled with competing political and economic interests of Sudan and South Sudan (Lino, 2020).

The article has three conceptual and empirical implications for the study and practice of contemporary dialogue or mediation processes. First, it questions the very idea of a singular conflict marked by two-opposing parties, that is implicit or explicit in much of the mediation literature to better address the nature of fragmented conflicts with multiple parties and discreet yet overlapping conflicts in different parts of the country. It also calls for moving beyond multi-track or multiparty dialogue processes, to understand the ways in which multiple discreet mediation initiatives have been mounted, without attempts or capacity to cohere them into a singular multiparty supported peace process. Second, disaggregated mediation as a concept also illuminates the competing normative and motivating factors that increased engagement in mediation by a range of third-party states with different interests, regional and neighbourhood connections to the conflict bring to these processes. Increased disaggregated mediation thus is likely to signal a departure from liberally orientated mediation projects to more pragmatic processes where the interest and ability of actors are guided by narrow economic and strategic interests, in part due to the difficulty of achieving comprehensive settlements. Third, while some processes focused on discrete aspects of a conflict may facilitate short-term 'islands of stability' marked by reduction of fatalities, such localised and issue-focused practices may not necessarily build support for a longer-term national-level peace process. This underlines a key dilemma for mediation practitioners that in the absence of a macro-level national mediation process, disaggregated mediation may offer a better

solution than waiting for a 'grand bargain' peace or transition moment, yet such attempts will need to factor in the unintended consequences that may follow from the same. The question then is, whether anything more can be done, to try to help these processes to cohere, to maximise its potentials or to mitigate the potential risks they bring.

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Notes

1. It is plausible that the observed increase in conflict actors and dyads may be attributed to improved data collection and media visibility over time, rather than substantive changes in conflict dynamics.
2. IISS (2023) draws from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) Project, which collects and reviews weekly data from local and international media, including Burmese sources, and has adapted its data to the Myanmar context.
3. For example, the UN has recently published guidelines for local mediation.
4. Myanmar's peace process started in 2011 and was anchored to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). It was interrupted by the coup in 2021; however, some legacies of the NCA remain.
5. IISS (2023) draws from the ACLED Project, which collects and reviews weekly data from local and international media, including Burmese sources, and has adapted its data to the Myanmar context.
6. In October 2018, two of the main signatories, the KNU and the Restoration Council of Shan State, withdrew from the process.
7. Interview with a Myanmar interlocutor engaging with ASEAN, Chiang Mai, February 2025
8. Interview with EAO representative who attended one round of the formal negotiations, Bangkok, 19 March 2024
9. There were 169 attacks between 24 September and 24 November 2022, compared to six attacks in the following 3 months (IISS, 2024).

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Appendix 1

Interview data

Data collection. Data were collected through formal and informal interviews with 15 individuals (EAOs, Civil Society, Practitioners, Think Tanks) directly and closely following the post-coup situation, as outlined below.

Interview ref	Date
IV1	23 February 2022
IV2	27 February 2022
IV3	27 February 2022
IV4	24 March 2022
IV5	24 March 2022
IV6	26 May 2022
IV7	15 September 2022
IV8	01 December 2022
IV9	09 March 2023
IV10	09 March 2023
IV11	09 March 2023
IV12	18 July 2023
IV13	13 July 2023
IV14	13 July 2023
IV15	20 March 2023
IV16	27 March 2023
IV17	21 March 2024

Appendix 2

Study group session data

Myanmar Study Group sessions were held between November 2021 and March 2024 and were convened by the Edinburgh Centre for Constitutional Law (ECCL) and Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep).

The Table 2 outlines the theme of each of the 10 Myanmar Study Group Sessions, as well as one dialogue session:

Table 2. Data from Myanmar study groups and 1 dialogue session.

Reference	Date	Study group theme
MMSG1	17.11.2021	• International support to the constitutional deliberation process in Myanmar
MMSG2	7.12.2021	• Understanding the Constitutional Deliberation Process in Myanmar
MMSG3 D1	13.01.2022	• Joint Analysis Session on Dialogue Processes in Myanmar: Post February 1 Coup
MMSG4	04.02.2022	• Recognition, legitimacy, and its impact: Comparative insights from Myanmar
MMSG5	25.03.2022	• Understanding Evolving Governance Frameworks in Myanmar Through the Study of COVID-19 Relief
MMSG6	25.10.2022	• Where next for Myanmar?: Reflections on the political transition, assessment of recent developments and identifying areas for international support
MMSG7	17.11.2022	• Understanding evolving governance frameworks in Myanmar through the study of Covid-19 responses–Part II
MMSG8	17.01.2023	• Dialogue of the revolution in Myanmar
MMSG9	16.02.2023	• Indonesian Chairmanship and role of ASEAN in the Myanmar Crisis: Breaking the Stalemate
MMSG10	23.03.2023	• Emergent Federalism from Below: A New Look at Federal governance in Myanmar
MMSG11 D2		• Pathways out of Conflict: Options, Sequencing, and prospects of Dialogue
MMSG12 D2		• Pathways out of Conflict: Options, Sequencing, and prospects of Dialogue

Myanmar study group questions. The following forms a list of questions to attendees of each of the Myanmar Study Group Sessions.

1. **Session 1:**

- Why is international support to the process pertinent?

2. **Session 2:**

- What are the challenges of making the process making participatory and how does the NUG plan to overcome them?
- What are the most critical issues still requiring agreement between different domestic stakeholders?
- What are the areas of international support within the constitutional deliberation process? Are there gaps and concerns? How can these be addressed?
- Are there plans to interweave the constitution-making process with peace-building/reconciliation and democratic education to ensure long-term durability of constitution?

- How does the NUG plan to incentivise the military to participate in the constitution-building process? Also, how can the constitution be fortified against future attempts by the military to undermine or destroy it?

3. **Session 3:**

- Considering the dynamics and different stakeholders involved in the Myanmar conflict, what are practical ways to engage?
- How can dialogue processes be supported?

Dialogue Session 1:

N/A – no guiding questions.

4. **Session 4:**

- What forms of 'recognition' or 'engagement' are happening, and by who?
- What other forms of recognition or engagement are being withheld?
- What types of leverage are recognition/ non-recognition practices assumed to bring, do they bring this leverage?
- What are the consequences of these forms of recognition and non-recognition for the legitimacy and resources?
- What are the consequences for humanitarian and human need issues?

5. **Session 5:**

- Who (actors-EAOs, NUGs, EAO-affiliated CSOs) is doing what and where (regions and states/EAO controlled territories/territories with PDF currently fighting etc) in terms of COVID-19 recovery?
- How is domestic and international support being mobilised by these actors?
- How are these actors talking/dialogue process to get these reliefs underway?
- Has/how has such humanitarian initiatives and openings opened larger dialogue between various actors?
- How is the military operationalising Covid relief? Have there been discussions between other actors on the ground with the military in terms of administering relief?
- What difficulties post-coup do humanitarian actors/doctors in particular dealing with Covid relief have in navigating the post-coup terrain?

6. **Session 6:**

N/A – no guiding questions.

7. **Session 7:**

- What are the various governance mechanisms and institutions that people have relied on for Covid-related issues, considering the fragmented and contested public authority in Myanmar?
- How and in what ways has the coup impacted the pandemic response, both the supply and uptake of Covid-relief-related measures in Myanmar?
- How are local actors (charities, NGOs, religious organisations) supporting community responses to Covid-19?

8. **Session 8:**

N/A – no guiding questions.

9. **Session 9:**

- What is ASEAN's role in post-coup Myanmar?
- How has ASEAN interpreted its mandate? What are the member state points of view within ASEAN on Myanmar?
- How has ASEAN handled the question of who represents Myanmar at the international level?
- What other factors limit the engagement of ASEAN, and what opportunities exist for being more effective?
- How and in what ways can the international community work with ASEAN in Myanmar?
- What next for ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus (FPC) for Myanmar? What are entry points and creative solutions for a re-vitalised FPC?
- How might Indonesia's chair offer risks and opportunities for ASEAN's approach to Myanmar?
- How will domestic elections in ASEAN countries impact ASEAN's approach to Myanmar?

10. **Session 10:**

N/A – no guiding questions.

11. **Session 11**

- What issues will determine the pathways towards ending the conflict? Could they also contribute to wider positive thinking in Myanmar?
- What are the core problems at the heart of the conflict? What are the core sources of conflict on these issues? Beyond the headlines, what are the sub-issues that can be identified? Be as granular and practical as possible.

- How do we address these?
- What will be the priority in the immediately period following the end of violent conflict?
- How can an end to conflict and centralisation be staged and sequenced (e.g. justice and accountability, transitional governments, institution-building)?
- What challenges are you seeing that might also exist in the immediate period following the end of violent conflict, and how might they be overcome?
- What lessons can be learnt since last November from Myanmar itself?
- What incentives can there be for a federal democratic state in the context of there being the possibility of a series of highly self-determined political entities?
- What can be learnt from Myanmar's history of peace and dialogue processes, and international role in it?
- What types of international support can create safe spaces for brokering conversations? Including what types of models of support – e.g. groups of friends etc., are possible and have been used comparatively?

12. **Session 12**

Questions same as for Session 11