INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION AS THE MANAGEMENT OF COMPLEXITY

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International mediation in civil wars is a hugely important activity in terms of its political, social and humanitarian potential and impact. It is often the only viable bridge from hostilities to peace and, if successful, it can forge among mortal enemies a consensual platform for long-term reconciliation, reconstruction and state-building. Where it fails, as in Darfur from 2004 to the present, Syria from 2012 to date and Rwanda prior to the 1994 genocide, the fatalities, destruction and displacement of people can reach catastrophic proportions. By contrast, in 1996 United Nations (UN) mediation ended the long-running civil war in Guatemala, in 2005 the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) mediated an end to the decades-long civil war in Sudan and in 2008 the African Union (AU) mediation in the Kenyan electoral conflict prevented a descent into protracted violence.

Given the importance of international mediation, there are a wide range of efforts to boost its effectiveness. The UN seeks to enhance the prospect of success through training, after-action reviews, policy guidance and support of various kinds to the AU and other regional bodies.[1] The UN Department of Political Affairs has established a mediation support unit, co-ordinates the deployment of the Standby Team of Mediation Experts and in 2012 set up the Academic Advisory Council on Mediation. The Group of Friends of Mediation, co-chaired by Finland and Turkey, has been formed in the UN General Assembly, which passed its first resolution on mediation in 2011.[2] In addition, a growing number of non-governmental organisations undertake training, policy research and other activities related to international mediation.[3] Academic research on international mediation has long been a focus of peace

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[1] See, for example, UN, 2009, 'Report of the Secretary-General on enhancing mediation and its support activities', UN document S/2009/189; and UN Department of Political Affairs, 2011, 'Mediation start-up guidelines', New York.
[2] UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/65/283.
[3] The activities and policy reports of these NGOs can be viewed via the website of the Mediation Support Network at http://mediationsupportnetwork.net/.

studies.[4] It has not had much of an impact on the practice of mediation, however. In the assessment of Peter Wallensteen and Isak Svensson, 'mediation research seems to remain remote from the world in which actual mediators find themselves'.[5]

If we are interested in improving the quality and efficacy of international mediation in civil wars, whether through research, training, policy guidelines or organisational innovation, it is vital that we have a good grasp of the essence of the enterprise. What, then, is the essence – that is, the central, dominant and most significant characteristic – of this form of peacemaking? A simple way of answering this question is to conceive the essence in terms of the mediator's main activities, namely the *facilitation of dialogue and negotiations among adversaries*. Alternatively, the essence could be derived from the primary goal of mediation in civil wars and framed as the *challenge of ending hostilities and resolving the conflict.*

These formulations might be technically accurate but they seem too bland to capture the formidable crux of the matter. In this paper I argue that the essence of international mediation in civil wars is the *challenge of managing complexity.* In my experience as a practitioner,[6] mediating in an intra-state conflict feels somewhat like playing high stakes chess in multiple dimensions rather than merely two, where the knights, bishops and other pieces are not waiting passively to be moved but have volition, where there is no consensus among the players on the rules of the competition and the boundaries of the board, and where the game itself appears to have a life of its own. If mediation practice, training, research or policy guidelines fail to comprehend the complexity of peacemaking in civil wars, they are at risk of being too superficial to be useful.

A brilliant visual depiction of peacemaking and peacebuilding complexity can be found in a PowerPoint graphic on the situation in Afghanistan, prepared by US military officers in 2010. The graphic became the butt of viral jokes about the army's obsession with convoluted

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[4] For review articles, see Marieke Kleiboer, 1996, 'Understanding success and failure of international mediation', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40(2), pp. 360-389; and Peter Wallensteen and Isak Svensson, 2014, 'Talking peace: international mediation in armed conflicts', *Journal of Peace Research* 51(2), pp. 315-327.

[5] Wallensteen and Svensson, 'Talking peace', pg. 324.

[6] I was a member of the AU mediation team for Darfur in 2005-6 and provided technical support to the UN-AU mediation for Darfur in 2010, the Southern African Development Community mediation for Madagascar in 2011 and the UN Office in Mali in 2013. In 2009 I facilitated UN-AU 'lessons learnt' workshops on the mediations undertaken for Darfur, Kenya, Guinea Bissau and Somalia.

slides.[7] When it was presented to General Stanley McChrystal, Commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, he remarked: 'When we understand that slide, we'll have won the war'.[8] The slide appears at the end of this paper. Take a look at it. Contrary to the derisory view of its detractors, it makes a potent point about the complexity of international endeavours to stabilise countries mired in war. The succinct portrayal of a blizzard of groups, organisations, processes and other factors, all in continuous interaction, gives the lie to the delusion of external actors that imagine they can bring such situations under their control and solve the problem of intra-state conflict.

This paper motivates and explores the argument that international mediation in civil wars should be understood as the management of complexity. I use the term 'complexity' not as a synonym for 'complicated' or 'difficult' but with the richer meaning afforded by complexity theory. I seek to show that this theory offers valuable conceptual and practical insights into mediation. The paper begins with an outline of the theory and then examines international mediation in civil wars through the lens of that theory. The final section discusses the failure of international mediation to respond adequately to the challenge of complexity.

Overview of Complexity Theory

Complexity theory is an exciting field of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary inquiry into complex natural and social phenomena, such as the brain, memory, language, evolution, weather, economies and cities. It has taken hold in disciplines as varied as mathematics, biology, psychology, sociology, management sciences, physics, philosophy and economics, each of which investigates complexity with its own particular orientation, methodology and set of theories.[9] In general, according to Melanie Mitchell, complexity studies attempt to explain 'how large numbers of relatively simple entities organise themselves, without the

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[7] Elisabeth Bumiller, 2010, 'We have met the enemy and he is PowerPoint', *New York Times*, 26 April, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/27/world/27powerpoint.html?pagewanted=print.
[8] Bumiller, 'We have met the enemy'.
[9] For overviews of complexity theory, see Paul Cilliers, 1998, *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems*, Routledge, London; Paul Cilliers, 2000, 'What can we learn from a theory of complexity?, *Emergence* 2(1), pp. 23-33; Melanie Mitchell, 2009, *Complexity: A Guided Tour*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Diane Hendrick, 2009, 'Complexity theory and conflict transformation: an exploration of potential and implications', *Working Paper* 17, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford; Jake Chapman, 2002, *System Failure*, Demos, London; and Steven Manson, 2001, 'Simplifying complexity: a review of complexity theory', *Geoforum* 32(3), pp. 405-414.

benefit of any central controller, into a collective whole that creates patterns, uses information, and, in some cases, evolves and learns'.[10]

One of the most fascinating aspects of complex systems is that disparate phenomena like cities, stock markets and ecosystems have common fundamental features. Paul Cilliers sets out the general features of complex systems as follows:[11]

- Complex systems comprise a large number of interconnected elements that might themselves be simple. These elements interact dynamically by exchanging information or energy. The interactions are rich: even if some elements interact with only a few others, the effects of these interactions are propagated throughout the system.

- The system as a whole has properties that its components do not have. These 'emergent properties' arise from the interactions between the components. The system's behaviour is determined by the nature of these interactions, not by any of the components on its own.

- The interactions are nonlinear, meaning that the outputs of the system are not directly proportional to the inputs. Small inputs may generate large outputs, large inputs may yield small outputs and the sum of the inputs is not proportional to the sum of the outputs. The same kinds and amounts of input might have different effects because the effects are a consequence of many inputs and interactions.

- Because the interactions are dynamic, rich and, most significantly, nonlinear, the system's behaviour, and its emergent properties in particular, cannot be predicted from an investigation of its parts. The existence of emergent properties does not imply that there is no causality but it precludes deterministic forms of prediction.

- Complex systems are open systems, exchanging energy or information with their environment.

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[10] Mitchell, *Complexity*, pg. 4.
[11] The summary that follows is based on Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*; and Cilliers, 'What can we learn from a theory of complexity?'.

- The systems operate at conditions far from equilibrium.

- Complex systems have memory, which is distributed throughout the system rather than being located at a specific place. The system's history is therefore of great relevance to its behaviour.

- Complex systems organize and rearrange their internal structure without having an internal or external designer or controller. They are self-organising and adaptive. This is clearly evident in complex systems like language and evolution, which have structure and organisation and which adapt and evolve in the absence of a designer.

Although the terms 'complex' and 'complicated' are used interchangeably in common parlance, the former has a specialised meaning in complexity theory. Complex systems share certain features with complicated systems but they also have distinctive features. By way of example, a watch is a complicated system. It comprises numerous parts that interact with each other in intricate ways to produce effects, such as conveying the time, that none of the parts can achieve on its own. The interactions adhere to causal rules that are simple, exact and constant, and the system as a whole performs consistently and as specified by its designer. Consequently, the system's behaviour is stable and predictable. On the other hand, a crowd of people moving along a busy sidewalk is a complex system. Like the watch, the crowd has many components whose interactions generate effects, such as bottlenecks, stampedes and flows of varying speed and density, that are not produced by any single component. But unlike the watch, the causal rules that shape the movements of the individuals in a crowd are not simple, precise or unchanging; the system does not behave consistently; it has no designer; and it is self-organising. The net effects include instability and unpredictability.

The Complexity of Mediation in Civil Wars

Although different kinds of complex system display common features, each kind of system also has its own peculiar characteristics. This section of the paper identifies the distinctive characteristics of a civil war conceived as a complex system. It examines these characteristics

from the perspective of the mediator and highlights the difficulties they pose for her.[12] The section considers the components of the system; the relationships and interactions between these components; the behaviour of the system; and the mediator in the system.

The components of the system

The components of a civil war system are the individuals, organisations and political and social groups that attempt to shape the trajectory of the conflict and the nature of its outcome. They are not confined to the belligerent parties and constituencies but encompass a range of secondary actors that have different objectives, interests and types of engagement in the war and its termination. The mediator must naturally concentrate on the belligerent parties but she dare not ignore the secondary actors since their actions and interactions impact on the system and its evolution. In order to minimise their harmful activities and maximise their positive contributions, she will have to persuade them of the merits of a negotiated peace.

Foremost among the secondary actors are the belligerents' allies and patrons in neighbouring states and further afield, which sustain and perpetuate the war through the provision of arms, sanctuary and diplomatic assistance to one side or another.[13] Despite their substantial influence and involvement, however, these regional and global players are usually not classified as 'parties to the conflict' and therefore do not participate directly in negotiations to end the war. The mediator will have to traverse numerous diplomatic channels repeatedly if she wants to dissuade them from reinforcing hostilities and instead support a peace process.

As if this were not trouble enough, the mediator also has to worry about a galaxy of international 'friends', some of them genuinely supportive but others quite meddlesome and bothersome. Most of the international mediators in today's civil wars are appointed by the UN or a regional organisation. Although this organisation is then formally the mediating body, responsible for backing the mediator politically and financially, it is also a forum of states that may have competing economic, strategic or ideological interests in the conflict. A

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[12] Considering the system from the mediator's perspective does not imply that the system is subjective. Civil wars are objective phenomena but are viewed differently by different actors. Arms dealers, for example, might see them as opportunities.
[13] For example, Michael Brown (ed), 1996, *The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

divided principal poses a severe predicament for the mediator, which savvy parties are bound to manipulate, diminishing her authority and credibility.[14]

Another set of friends are the donor countries that finance the peace process but might also harry the mediator to speed up and broker a 'quick accord', regardless of how unrealistic that is.[15] In addition, there is usually a swarm of inter-governmental, governmental and non-governmental peacemaking organisations jostling to get in on the game. Cooperation and a sound division of labour among these organisations can be synergistic, increasing the mediator's reach and capacity, but competitive peacemakers can also undermine the mediator through their separate dealings with the parties.[16] The UN encourages mediators to bring together the donors, neighbouring states and other external actors in a 'friends of mediation' forum intended to promote co-ordination and harmonisation of efforts.[17]

In the domestic arena the relevant secondary actors include political parties, civil society groups and security forces, some of which have considerable sway and some of which demand a say in any negotiations to end the war. The UN insists that mediation processes in civil conflicts should be inclusive.[18] This is meant to ensure that the needs of affected communities are taken into account and to heighten the legitimacy and sustainability of the negotiations and resultant settlement. Sometimes, though, the legitimacy of the civil society groups is questionable,[19] and the greater the number of negotiating parties, the harder it is for the mediator to forge consensus among them.

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[14] For example, the divisions within the UN Security Council over the Syrian crisis contributed to Kofi Annan's resignation in 2012 as the joint UN – League of Arab States mediator for Syria. See J. Michael Greig, 2013, 'Intractable Syria? Insights from the scholarly literature on the failure of mediation', *Penn State Journal of Law and International Affairs* 2(1), pp. 48-56.

[15] For a case study of the negative impact of donor pressure on the mediator, see Laurie Nathan, 2006, 'No ownership, no peace: the Darfur Peace Agreement', *Working Paper* 2(5), Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics.

[16] See Teresa Whitfield, 2005, 'A crowded field: groups of friends, the United Nations and the resolution of conflict, *Occasional Paper* 1, Center on International Cooperation, New York University; and David Lanz and Rachel Gasser, 2013, 'A crowded field: competition and coordination in international peace mediation', *Mediation Arguments* 2, Centre for Mediation in Africa, University of Pretoria.

[17] The UN Secretary-General places a premium on attaining 'coherence, coordination and complementarity' in relation to multi-actor mediation efforts in a given conflict. See UN, *Guidance for Effective Mediation*, pp. 18-9.

[18] UN, *Guidance for Effective Mediation*, pp. 11-12.

[19] For example, Jerome Tubiana, 2014, 'Civil society and the South Sudan crisis', In Pursuit of Peace Blog, International Crisis Group, available at http://blog.crisisgroup.org/africa/2014/07/14/civil-society-and-the-south-sudan-crisis/.

Viewed as a whole, the conglomeration of primary and secondary actors described above has two attributes that amplify the complexity of the system from the mediator's perspective. First, the actors are diverse in terms of their composition, status, culture and power, ranging from local militia and civil society groups to major powers and international organisations. They are all part of the conflict system but they operate in relatively discreet sub-systems at local, regional or global levels. It is highly unlikely that the mediator will be able to bring them together in a single forum and she cannot adopt the same approach to working with them. Instead, her mediation team must have the capacity and be agile enough to employ different strategies and styles as befits the different actors.

Second, as discussed below, the system is defined by intensely conflictual relationships and interactions. The mediator's mission is to facilitate cooperation, consensus and agreements among adversaries that are implacably resistant to this mission. They mistrust and hate each other deeply and perceive cooperation across the lines of enmity as heretical.

The nature of the relationships and interactions

Most social systems, like schools, organisations and communities, have a combination of cooperative and conflictual interactions, the mixture and intensity of which could be arranged on a spectrum from least to most conflictual. Civil wars are located at the far end of the spectrum. They might contain some fraternal relations, such as between peacemakers and between the belligerents and their allies, but the dominant dynamic is violent conflict. The protagonists are locked in a deadly zero-sum game, determined to defeat their opponents. Their feelings of hatred and enmity are so intense that atrocities and other destructive acts occur often. While many inhabitants of the war zone and many observers might see mass violence as the worst-case scenario, the belligerents regard it as a means of preventing or overcoming a worst-case scenario. They may consequently be willing to mete out and endure an enormous amount of pain before they are prepared to contemplate a negotiated settlement.

The defining aspects of international mediation, on the other hand, include the elements of consent and cooperation.[20] A productive process of negotiations and an enduring peace settlement necessarily depend on the consent and cooperation of the conflict parties. Yet international mediators in civil wars are confronted by parties, leaders and other individuals at their very most uncooperative, intransigent, adversarial and bellicose. What the mediator has to offer – facilitated negotiations in order to broker a settlement – is precisely what the parties to intractable conflict do not want. They view negotiations with their enemy as anathema, their differences with their opponents as irreconcilable, their own demands as self-evidently non-negotiable and the prospect of a negotiated settlement as unimaginable.

The features of the system

Political disputes arise in all countries from time to time. When they occur in stable democracies, they tend to be contained and restrained. They take place within a governance system comprising rules, structures and authorities that are robust and legitimate. Even if a dispute relates to the system itself, there is broad agreement on the appropriate processes for resolving it. At the very least, there is usually consensus that the methods of addressing domestic conflicts should be non-violent. Whatever the mistrust of politicians and officials, there is also consensus that the competent authorities for managing and overcoming major disputes include parliament, the executive, local municipalities, the police and the courts.

In civil wars, by contrast, the system of governance is not viable or legitimate. Both its content and its leadership are strongly contested. More often than not, the system is broken. In particular, there is no societal consensus on the rules for political competition and certainly no consensus that the competition should be pacific. On the contrary, the belligerents' conduct is not only violent but largely unrestrained in the use of violence. To a greater or lesser extent, the governance system has been subsumed into the conflict system. Consequently, the mediator cannot rely on domestic laws and authorities to support her efforts, contain the conflict and provide a normative frame of reference for its resolution.

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[20] The UN Secretary-General defines mediation as 'a process whereby a third party assists two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict by helping them to develop mutually acceptable agreements'. See UN, *Guidance for Effective Mediation*, pg. 4.

One of the distinctive features of complex systems is that they are 'far from equilibrium'.[21] Civil wars are an extreme manifestation of this, wracked by instability and volatility as a result of the conflictual exchanges between the adversaries. Instability and volatility are the emergent properties of the system. There might be a very large number of people, both within and outside the war zone, that fervently desire an end to the violence and this desire might well be shared by the belligerents, most or all of which would prefer political and social order to ongoing destruction of lives and infrastructure. Yet instability and volatility persist because the belligerents have incompatible conceptions of political and social order and because violence begets violence and reinforces hatred, polarisation and intransigence. Like complex systems more generally, civil wars are self-reproducing, both generating conflictual interactions and being perpetuated by them.

As with other complex systems, civil wars are open systems and react to their environment. Most important in this regard are the structural problems that led to the war. These problems might include, for example, authoritarianism, marginalisation, underdevelopment and weak states.[22] Unless they are addressed adequately in the negotiations to end the war, the potential for violence will remain high even if a cessation of hostilities is attained in the short-term.[23] This creates a tough agenda for negotiations since the adversaries have different perspectives on the structural problems and most suitable solutions. The agenda is also ambitious, amounting to a blueprint for a wholly new kind of state and society, covering numerous sectors and issues, many of which are politically sensitive and/or technically complicated.[24]

The mediator in the system

The mediator is not separate from the conflict system. From the moment of her appointment she becomes part of the system, interacting with the other components, trying to influence them and being influenced by them. Her primary tasks are to get the main protagonists to agree to negotiations and then reach a settlement that ends the war. In systemic terms, her daunting job is to convince the key components of the system of the need to change the

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[21] Cilliers, 'What can we learn from a theory of complexity?', pg. 24.
[22] For example, Laurie Nathan, 2001, 'The four horsemen of the apocalypse: the structural causes of crisis and violence in Africa', *Track Two* 10(2), Centre for Conflict Resolution, University of Cape Town.
[23] UN, *Guidance for Effective Mediation*, pp. 20-21.
[24] For example, the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Sudan runs to 260 pages. See http://unmis.unmissions.org/Portals/UNMIS/Documents/General/cpa-en.pdf.

system fundamentally, from one of war and instability to one of peace and relative stability. Yet neither she nor any of these components is in control of the system and none of them is able to redesign it on its own.

In relation to the armed belligerents, the mediator's influence is in fact quite limited. The assets she has closest to hand are soft, intangible attributes: stature, credibility, persuasiveness, empathy, affinity, etc. Even if she is backed by states and international organisations that offer attractive inducements and ratchet up the pressure in order to push and pull the adversaries towards the negotiating table, she will not make progress unless they believe that their interests are served by going to, and staying at, the table. In the midst of the life-and-death struggle of a civil war, the mediator, unable to command the belligerents' attention by resorting to violence herself, is easily ignored or brushed aside.[25] Her posture might be akin to that of an impartial referee but she is treated by the players as a spectator.

Implications of Complexity for Mediation Practice

This section seeks to draw out some of the implications of complexity theory for the practice of international mediation in civil wars. I suggest that international mediators do not always take adequate cognisance of complexity. On the contrary, the field appears to suffer from several organisational and strategic tendencies that are antithetical to managing complexity. These tendencies, discussed below, can be summarised as too much ignorance, too little intelligence; too much inflexibility, too little planning; and too much haste, too little attention to relationships.

The discussion relies on published case studies and the reflections of two experienced UN diplomats, Lakhdar Brahimi and Salman Ahmed, who have written an illuminating exposition on the 'seven deadly sins of mediation' committed by UN and other senior peacemakers.[26] In the absence of a thorough investigation of a sufficient number of cases, however, it is not possible to ascertain with any exactitude how well mediation teams deal with complexity, whether there are significant differences between different mediating organisations and whether the situation is improving over time. The discussion is therefore

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[25] For example, between February 2012 and May 2014 two of the most accomplished international mediators, Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi, were unable to launch a negotiating process for Syria.
[26] Lakhdar Brahimi and Salman Ahmed, 2008, *In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace: The Seven Deadly Sins of Mediation*, Center on International Cooperation, New York University.

exploratory, aiming to show at least that the insights of complexity theory are worthy of consideration by mediators.

Too much ignorance, too little intelligence

Because the interactions in a complex system are non-linear, the behaviour of the system cannot be predicted in a deterministic fashion as it can with a mechanical system. Cilliers, writing about business companies as complex systems, points out that 'the prediction of complex behaviour is only possible as a form of generalisation'; if the managers of a company wish to influence its performance, they 'can never escape the necessity of facing the *particular* nature of the system at any given moment'.[27] There is no model or method that would allow them to predict the exact outcome of their decisions or the future behaviour of the system.[28] Robert Jervis provides numerous domestic and international examples to demonstrate that the effects of public policy and foreign policy decisions can similarly not be predicted with certainty; these decisions always have multiple effects, some of which are unintended, and the unintended effects may be positive or negative.[29]

In the context of a civil war, the unintended consequences of a mediator's decisions might be extremely deleterious. By way of example, the AU mediation for Darfur in 2005-6 had a number of counter-productive effects.[30] It not only failed to end hostilities in western Sudan but also provoked violent clashes because many Darfuris resented the pressure that was put on their leaders to sign the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA). The one rebel leader who succumbed to the pressure and signed the DPA, Minni Minawi, lost his support base in Darfur and was co-opted and then sidelined by Khartoum. This deepened rebel suspicion of mediation as a means of addressing popular grievances. The AU mediation also contributed to the fragmentation of the rebel movements, hindering later peacemaking efforts, and it was so negative an experience for Abdul Wahid el Nur, Darfur's most iconic leader, that he boycotted subsequent mediations for the region.

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[27] Cilliers, 'What can we learn from a theory of complexity?', pg. 28 (original emphasis).
[28] Cilliers, 'What can we learn from a theory of complexity?', pg. 28.
[29] Robert Jervis, 1997-8, 'Complexity and the analysis of political and social life', *Political Science Quarterly* 112(4), pp. 569-593.
[30] Nathan, 'No ownership, no peace'; and International Crisis Group, 2006, 'Darfur's fragile peace agreement', *Africa Briefing* 39.

The Darfur rebellion itself was, in part, an unforeseen consequence of another mediation initiative. While the rebellion had its structural roots in decades of oppression and marginalisation by Khartoum, its proximate cause was the IGAD mediation launched in 2002 to end the war between north and south Sudan. This peace process purported to restructure the entire country, constitutionally, politically and economically, but it was limited to just two parties, the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. Excluded from the process, Darfuri communities were convinced that their marginalisation was being cemented and their future foreclosed by the IGAD mediation.[31] Their rebellion, intended to compel Khartoum to negotiate a settlement favourable to Darfur, was met with vicious force by the government and cost over 300,000 lives.

Since the consequences of a mediator's decisions cannot be predicted in a deterministic way, the risk of unintended harm may be inescapable. But it is likely to be greatest when mediators lack adequate knowledge and understanding of the conflict system. Perhaps surprisingly, this is not uncommon. According to Brahimi and Ahmed, 'ignorance-based decision-making' is the norm rather than the exception in international mediation, especially in the early phase when mediators are least familiar with the conflict.[32] At the start of many UN mediations, the mediators do not have the benefit of accumulated knowledge and learning. They are sent to regions with which they are unfamiliar, without an adequate team of regional specialists on their staff, unable to rely on satisfactory knowledge systems in the field or at headquarters and surrounded by interlocutors who have an interest in passing on biased information.[33] Ignorance is the 'original sin of mediation', leading to poor judgement and flawed decisions that can result in serious political mistakes with long-lasting effects.[34]

The importance of deep knowledge is reinforced by the positive example of the British government's mediation of the Rhodesia/Zimbabwe negotiations at Lancaster House in 1979. Stephen Stedman observes that one of the reasons for the success of the negotiations was the mediators' extensive cumulative knowledge of the parties and individual leaders.[35] This knowledge, acquired from unsuccessful attempts at mediation over the previous decade,

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[31] Author's discussions with leaders of the Darfur rebel movements, Abuja, 2005-6.
[32] Brahimi and Ahmed, *In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace,* pg. 6.
[33] Brahimi and Ahmed, *In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace*, pg. 6
[34] Brahimi and Ahmed, *In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace,* pp. 5-6.
[35] Stephen Stedman, 1991, *Peacemaking in Civil War: International Mediation in Zimbabwe, 1974-1980*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder (Colorado), pg. 224.

enabled the mediators to apply bargaining leverage within and between the parties with great precision and forethought. By the time of Lancaster House, the British government had 'compiled information that directly affected their choice of strategies and tactics. Their learning was extensive and was divided into knowledge about the actors, politics within the actors, possible solutions, bargaining tactics, and sources of leverage'.[36]

One major implication of complexity theory, then, is that mediation teams should have an expert monitoring and analysis capacity, able to develop and maintain a comprehensive and fine-grained understanding of the conflict and its history, components, interactions and relationship to its environment. It may also be necessary for mediators to have access to intelligence as the belligerent parties do not readily disclose their positions and intentions.[37] Their pronouncements before and during negotiations invariably encompass much posturing and bluff. Since the mediator does not control the conflict system, but rather has to influence the parties' attitudes and behaviour, her strategies and tactics will be based on her assessment of the parties' perspective on the likely outcome of the conflict and the potential risks and benefits of negotiations. In short, as one UN mediator put it: 'What I want to know, above all, is the hidden agenda, that is to say, the *real agenda*, of the parties'.[38] Mediators are hamstrung if they cannot discern this accurately.

There are many instances of state mediators being assisted by their intelligence services, including the US in relation to Arab-Israeli negotiations since the mid-1950s;[39] the British government at Lancaster House;[40] and the South African government when mediating an end to the Burundi conflict between 1999 and 2006.[41] The UN, on the other hand, does not have a mandate and structures to collect political intelligence for mediation. Proposals that it should acquire this capability have been rejected because political intelligence is associated with

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[36] Stedman, *Peacemaking in Civil War*, pg. 225.

[37] See Laurie Nathan, 2014, 'The intelligence requirement of international mediation', *Intelligence and National Security* 29(2), pp. 208-226.

[38] Author's interview with UN official, Addis Ababa, July 2011.

[39] Shlomo Shpiro, 2003, 'The CIA as Middle East peacebroker?', *Survival* 45(2), pp. 91-112.

[40] Jeffrey Davidow, 1984, *A Peace in Southern Africa: The Lancaster House Conference on Rhodesia, 1979*, Westview, Boulder (Colorado).

[41] Johann Mostert, 2010, 'Mediation: The need for intelligence', presented at a seminar hosted by the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria, 14 May.

spying, dirty tricks and thwarting an adversary, activities that are incompatible with the ethos and goals of the UN.[42]

Too much inflexibility, not enough planning

If an engineer has the requisite expertise and tools, he can fix or change a complicated mechanical system, achieve precisely the intended outcome and repeat the exercise ad infinitum with the same result. This cannot be done with complex social systems because they are self-organising, they do not perform consistently, the relationship between their inputs and outputs is non-linear and their behaviour is the product of numerous interactions between numerous actors. They therefore cannot be altered or fixed through a mechanical or formulaic approach. Those who want to influence a complex system in a targeted manner must themselves be dynamic, flexible and responsive. Even if they have found a good method to deal with a specific problem in a given case, they cannot be sure that this method will yield the same outcome if they repeat it in the same case or a similar one.

A significant implication for mediators in civil wars is that a formulaic or mechanical approach is inappropriate. It is not unusual, though. Brahimi and Ahmed highlight two negative traits in this respect. The first is the 'sin of arrogance', being a lazy lack of rigor when mediators analyse the conflict and determine their strategies on the basis of a conviction that 'I have seen this all before' and 'we already know what works and what doesn't'.[43]

The second negative trait is the 'sin of inflexibility' whereby a mediator, having prepared a map of the political terrain and designed a peace process, fails to adapt to the fast moving pace of the conflict.[44] Brahimi and Ahmed attribute this malaise to the mediator's personal rigidity and indifference to the changing context.[45] But where the mediating body is the UN, the problem also appears to derive from an organisational culture that is overly bureaucratic and averse to creativity, responsiveness and adaptability. When large UN missions are established in countries in crisis, the mediation component, which ought to have the mobility

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[42] See, for example, Mark Curtis, 1998, *The Great Deception, Anglo-American Power and World Order*, Pluto, London, pp. 200-1.
[43] Brahimi and Ahmed, *In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace,* pg. 6.
[44] Brahimi and Ahmed, *In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace,* pg. 10.
[45] Brahimi and Ahmed, *In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace,* pg. 10.

of a windsurfer, can instead have the obduracy of an ocean liner.[46] The structure and functions of these field missions are shaped as much by UN politics and bureaucracy at headquarters in New York as by the politics of the civil war. Like all organisations, the UN itself is a complex system that is not controlled by any single individual or entity.

Ironically, international mediators sometimes draw the wrong lesson from the need for flexibility by eschewing the need for proper planning. On several occasions I have heard members of a UN or AU mediation team complain that 'if the boss has a plan, we haven't been told what it is'.[47] The chief mediator seems to believe that a plan is too constraining given the volatility of the conflict and the imperative of being responsive to changing circumstances. This reasoning is fallacious. National armies and international peacekeeping missions, by way of contrast, recognise that sound planning is an indispensable means to achieving objectives, mobilising and organising human and financial resources, minimising risks and mitigating uncertainty in volatile conditions. That the plan will never be perfect, will not anticipate all eventualities and will have to be revised periodically do not constitute good reasons to avoid planning. Without a viable strategic and operational plan, the mediation may experience a lack of direction, assertiveness and consistency, overwhelmed by complexity rather than making a meaningful attempt to influence it.

Too much haste, too little attention to relationships

As noted above, complex systems, unlike mechanical systems, cannot be changed or fixed in accordance with relevant expertise, known causal rules and predictable outcomes. Lacking a central designer or controller, complex systems are self-organising, their ever shifting behaviour the result not of any single component's actions but rather of the many interactions between the components.

The mediator cannot control the civil war system. The most she can do is influence it. More specifically, she must try to facilitate a seismic shift in the relationship between the main protagonists from one of mortal enmity to one of willingness to pursue a negotiated settlement. It is improbable that this can be done quickly. Negotiations to end major conflicts, and the consultations that should precede those negotiations, typically require months, even

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[46] These observations are based on my involvement with UN mediations and discussions with UN officials. See note 6 above.

[47] This observation is based on my mediation engagements with the UN and the AU. See note 6 above.

years, of effort by the mediator, the mediating organisation and its partners.[48] There are at least three reasons for this: the protagonists hate each other so much, and see their respective positions as so incompatible, that they cannot conceive of the possibility of cooperation and coexistence; their intransigence and enmity are constantly reinforced by reciprocal violence; and because of these dynamics, as well as the history of the conflict and the environmental factors that led to the war, the system as a whole tends to be self-perpetuating.

The intractability of civil wars is ignored by UN and other senior mediators who commit the 'sin of haste'.[49] Too often they rush prematurely to negotiations and then prematurely to conclude peace agreements, which quickly unravel. This occurred with the peace efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) during the Liberian civil war in the early 1990s. Employing a mixture of mediation and use of military force, ECOWAS brokered fourteen short-lived peace agreements between 1990 and 1995.[50] The UN's peacemaking endeavours in Somalia in the same period were similarly flawed. The mission was propelled by timetables set in New York, it did not comprehend the magnitude of the crisis, it misunderstood the authority and legitimacy of local leaders and it had no feel for traditional reconciliation practices.[51] The unsuccessful Darfur Peace Agreement of 2006 is a further example of unproductive haste. Mediated by the AU under relentless pressure from donors and the UN Security Council to 'wrap up promptly', the process was driven by deadline diplomacy. The deadlines, blithely ignored by the parties, had the effect of inhibiting the mediators from developing plans and strategies for a lengthy engagement.[52]

The undue haste is motivated by international distress over the humanitarian impact of hostilities and, in some instances, by donor concerns that their funding of a peace process is bearing no fruit. It also derives from a hubristic belief among international actors that warring

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[48] Brahimi and Ahmed, *In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace,* pg. 9.
[49] Brahimi and Ahmed, *In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace,* pg. 9.
[50] Anthony Nyakyi, 1998, untitled paper, presented at Learning from Conflict Resolution in Africa: Workshop on the Experience of Individual and Institutional Mediators, Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation and the Tanzanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation, Arusha, 21-23 January, pg. 1; and Herbert Howe, 1996/7, 'Lessons of Liberia: ECOMOG and regional peacekeeping', *International Security* 21(3), pp. 145-176.
[51] Ken Menkhaus, 1996, 'International peacebuilding and the dynamics of local and national reconciliation in Somalia', *International Peacekeeping* 3(1), pp. 42-67; and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Life and Peace Institute and Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 1995, 'Comprehensive report on lessons-learned from the United Nations Operation in Somalia: April 1992 - March 1995', Sweden.
[52] Nathan, 'No ownership'.

parties can quickly be brought to their senses through a combination of carrots, sticks and reason. This hubris is evident in an expression favoured by Henry Kissinger: 'If you have them by their balls, their hearts and minds will follow'.[53] In 1976 Kissinger, then US Secretary of State, tried to broker a settlement between the Zimbabwean liberation movements and the minority regime in former Rhodesia, certain that he could achieve this in a few weeks.[54] The confidence was entirely misplaced. According to Martin Meredith, 'by ignoring the complexities of the conflict [Kissinger] ensured the eventual failure of the mission'.[55]

A corollary of the problem of haste is the mediator's mistaken fixation with the text of the peace agreement rather than with the relationship between the parties. In systemic terms the error is to assume that the civil war system can be changed simply by designing a blueprint for a different system. It is true that the mediator must help the adversaries negotiate the details of a settlement to their collective satisfaction and that the content of the settlement must be conducive to long-term peace and stability. But the 'magic' in crafting a stable peace through mediated negotiations lies less in the content of the formal agreement than in a transformation of the relationship between the parties, which must abandon their zero-sum disposition and embrace political cooperation. Whatever the content of any peace accord, without this transformation the system will remain mired in chronic instability and conflict.

This logic was appreciated by the Community of Sant'Egidio, the Catholic lay community that mediated an end to the Mozambican civil war in 1992. The mediators were put under strong pressure by international actors to end the peace talks quickly since 'every additional day more of war meant more killings'.[56] They resisted this pressure on two grounds: 'the pathology of memory' was a 'heritage of almost a generation and could not be easily cancelled'; and 'there is no use in forcing people to agree on anything. The only way the process could have been successful and the reason that made it successful was that all the actors involved gained ownership'.[57]

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[53] Quoted in Stedman, *Peacemaking in Civil War*, pg. 118.
[54] Stedman, *Peacemaking in Civil War*, pp. 85-123.
[55] Quoted in Stedman, *Peacemaking in Civil War*, pg. 119.
[56] Angelo Romano, 1998, 'Peace is possible: lessons from the Mozambique peace process', presented at Learning from Conflict Resolution in Africa: Workshop on the Experience of Individual and Institutional Mediators, Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation and the Tanzanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation, Arusha, 21-23 January, pg. 5.
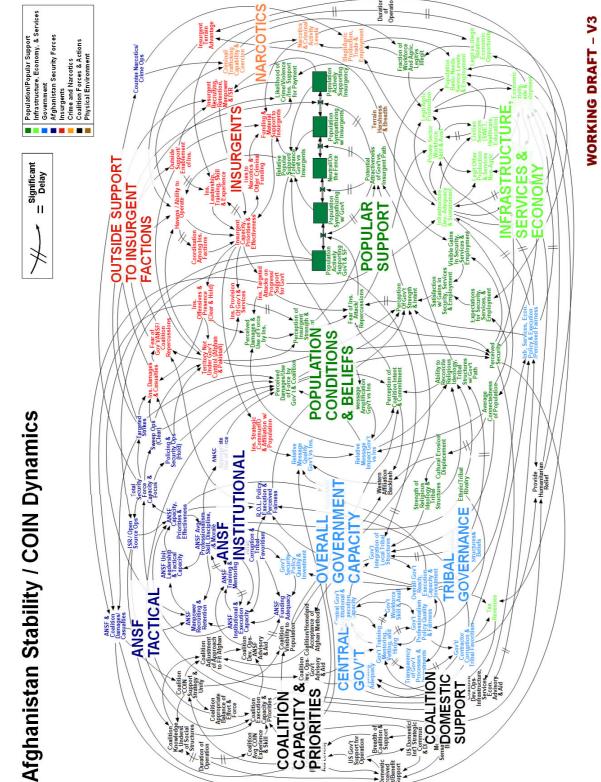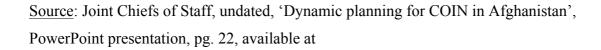[57] Romano, 'Peace is possible' pg. 5.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to show that the essence of international mediation in civil wars can be conceptualised as the management of complexity and that useful insights can be gained from complexity theory. This perspective throws up a host of questions about the ways in which the quality and efficacy of mediation could be enhanced. The commentary by Brahimi and Ahmed on the 'seven deadly sins of mediation' suggests there is considerable room for improvement. Further reflection and research would profit from exchanges with active and retired mediators and their staff. Many of them would have been struck, and at times felt overwhelmed, by the challenge of complexity. They might have tried various strategies to deal with it and found creative approaches.

Complexity theory is illuminating but it does not offer peacemakers an elixir to the problems of intractability and intransigence in civil wars. On the contrary, it insists that there is no quick fix, no 'one size fits all' and no obvious or simple solution. The overarching point is rather that the mediator must confront and not ignore the complex nature of the conflict system. Complexity cannot be wished away but must instead, to the extent possible, be managed. This has significant implications for the quality of the mediator's knowledge, understanding, planning and resources.

Afghanistan Stability / COIN Dynamics

Source: Joint Chiefs of Staff, undated, 'Dynamic planning for COIN in Afghanistan', PowerPoint presentation, pg. 22, available at

http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/MSNBC/Components/Photo/_new/Afghanistan_Dynamic_Planning.pdf.