

The Effectiveness of Multi-Track Diplomacy in Managing Contemporary International Conflicts Post-2011: Case Studies

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Receipt date: 13/1/2026

Accepted date: 12/5/2026

Publication date:1/6/2026

<https://doi.org/10.30907/jcopolicy.vi71.937>



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Abstract:

International conflicts have become increasingly complex in the post-2011 era due to the interaction of domestic and international (intermestic) variables driven by political, security, economic, and technological dynamics. These developments have exposed the limitations of traditional state-centric diplomacy and highlighted the need for more flexible and multi-actor frameworks. Accordingly, this study examines the effectiveness of Multi-Track Diplomacy (MTD) in managing complex contemporary international conflicts and identifies the structural constraints that may limit its performance.


MTD has emerged as a significant approach by extending mediation beyond official governmental channels to include non-state actors such as international organizations, civil society organizations, think tanks, and private-sector participants. The study analyzes the role of MTD in conflict management, with particular emphasis on the interaction between formal and informal diplomatic tracks in facilitating de-escalation and negotiation processes.

Methodologically, the study employs an analytical framework and a comparative case-study approach focusing on the Iranian nuclear negotiations and the Colombian peace process. The findings demonstrate that MTD enhances trust-building, broadens communication channels, and supports adaptive negotiation environments. However, its effectiveness ultimately depends on the degree of coordination and integration among participating actors.

The study concludes that MTD plays a significant role in de-escalating conflicts through the integration of multiple actors and diplomatic tracks. Nevertheless, its success remains contingent upon effective coordination and broader structural conditions.

Keywords: Multi-Track Diplomacy (MTD), peacebuilding, conflict Management, Track II diplomacy, non-state actors.

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فعالية الدبلوماسية متعددة المسارات في إدارة الصراعات الدولية المعاصرة بعد عام 2011: دراسات حالة

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الملخص:

أصبحت الصراعات الدولية أكثر تعقيداً في مرحلة ما بعد عام 2011 نتيجة لتفاعل المتغيرات الداخلية والدولية (Intermestic) المدفوعة بالديناميكيات السياسية والأمنية والاقتصادية والتكنولوجية. وقد كشفت هذه التطورات عن محدودية الدبلوماسية التقليدية المتمركزة حول الدولة، وأبرزت الحاجة إلى أطر أكثر مرونة وتعدداً في الفاعلين. وبناءً على ذلك، تبحث هذه الدراسة في فاعلية دبلوماسية المسارات المتعددة (MTD) في إدارة الصراعات الدولية المعاصرة المعقدة، وتحدد القيود البنوية التي قد تحد من أدائها.

برزت دبلوماسية المسارات المتعددة بوصفها مقاربة مهمة من خلال توسيع نطاق الوساطة بما يتجاوز القنوات الحكومية الرسمية ليشمل فاعلين من غير الدول، مثل المنظمات الدولية، ومنظمات المجتمع المدني، ومراكز الفكر، والقطاع الخاص. وتحلل الدراسة دور هذه المقاربة في إدارة الصراعات، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على التفاعل بين المسارات الدبلوماسية الرسمية وغير الرسمية في تسهيل عمليات خفض التصعيد والتفاوض.

منهجياً، تعتمد الدراسة إطاراً تحليلياً ومنهج دراسة الحالة المقارن، مع التركيز على المفاوضات النووية الإيرانية وعملية السلام الكولومبية. وتُظهر النتائج أن دبلوماسية المسارات المتعددة تساهم في بناء الثقة، وتوسيع قنوات الاتصال، ودعم بيئات تفاوضية أكثر تكيفاً ومرونة. ومع ذلك، فإن فاعليتها تعتمد في النهاية على مستوى التنسيق والتكامل بين الفاعلين المشاركين.

وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن دبلوماسية المسارات المتعددة تؤدي دوراً مهماً في خفض التصعيد في الصراعات من خلال دمج الفاعلين والمسارات الدبلوماسية المتعددة، إلا أن نجاحها يبقى مرهوناً بفعالية التنسيق والظروف البنوية الأوسع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دبلوماسية المسارات المتعددة (MTD)، بناء السلام، إدارة الصراعات، دبلوماسية المسار الثاني، الفاعلون من غير الدول.

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Introduction:

Over the past two decades, the international system has undergone profound structural transformations that have reshaped the nature of conflicts and expanded their political, economic, security, and technological dimensions. Contemporary disputes increasingly unfold within complex environments characterized by transnational threats, hybrid warfare, and multidimensional challenges such as terrorism, energy insecurity, health crises, climate change, and migration. These developments have exposed the limitations of traditional state-centric diplomacy, which has historically relied on formal negotiations conducted exclusively through official channels. Consequently, modern conflicts require more adaptive and inclusive diplomatic frameworks capable of integrating diverse actors and instruments into conflict management processes.

MTD has emerged as a significant paradigm for addressing contemporary disputes by expanding the range of actors involved in mediation and peacebuilding. While Track I diplomacy represents official governmental engagement, MTD incorporates a broader spectrum of participants, including international organizations, civil society actors, academic institutions, think tanks, private-sector representatives, and informal dialogue platforms. Through the interaction between formal and informal tracks—particularly Track II and Track 1.5 diplomacy—MTD facilitates communication, builds confidence, prevents escalation, and creates flexible negotiation environments in which policy options can be explored prior to formalization. In practice, the combination of official negotiations with informal backchannels, expert dialogues, and societal engagement mechanisms has proven effective in overcoming negotiation deadlocks and generating alternative pathways for conflict resolution.

Technological advancements have further reinforced the relevance of MTD. The expansion of digital networks, social media platforms, and data-driven analytical tools has enabled faster and lower-cost transnational interaction, thereby enhancing informal

diplomacy through dialogue facilitation, narrative construction, and crisis communication. Moreover, the emergence of AI-based analytics and predictive modeling has strengthened early warning systems, escalation monitoring, and scenario planning. As a result, the international system is increasingly characterized by a networked diplomatic environment in which state and non-state actors interact through interconnected channels rather than hierarchical structures alone.

The importance of this research lies in analyzing the evolving role of MTD in managing complex international conflicts after 2011 – a period marked by increasing conflict complexity and the growing involvement of non-state actors. This research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of MTD by examining how interactions among formal diplomacy, informal channels, and societal actors contribute to de-escalation, trust-building, and adaptive negotiation processes.

The study addresses the central problem of assessing the extent to which MTD can effectively manage complex international conflicts in the post-2011 environment. Despite its growing prominence as a flexible multi-actor framework, questions remain regarding its actual effectiveness, the limits of its impact, and its sustainability in light of coordination challenges among tracks, competing actor agendas, and intensifying geopolitical rivalries. Accordingly, the study seeks to conceptualize the role of MTD, measure its effectiveness, and analyze the influence of multiple actors within contemporary conflict management.

The study hypothesizes that MTD constitutes an effective approach to conflict management by integrating formal and informal diplomatic tracks and engaging non-state actors in processes of de-escalation, trust-building, and adaptive negotiation. However, its effectiveness is contingent upon the degree of coordination among tracks, the alignment of actor interests, institutional support, and the broader geopolitical context shaping conflict dynamics.

Methodology:

The research adopts an analytical approach combined with a comparative case study design, focusing on the Iranian nuclear negotiations and the Colombian peace process. It systematically examines the mechanisms of MTD and evaluates their impact on negotiation dynamics. In addition, the study employs a forward-looking analytical perspective to explore future scenarios shaped by technological developments, digital diplomacy, and the increasing complexity of conflict environments. Structurally, the research is organized into three main components: the conceptual framework, the practical application of MTD through selected case studies, and a critical evaluation of its effectiveness in contemporary conflict management.

1 -Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of MTD

1-1 Evolution of Diplomatic Models and the Transformation of Actors in the International System

Diplomacy has undergone a structural shift from a traditional state-centric model—where the state functioned as the exclusive actor in managing international relations—to a networked, multi-actor model driven by structural changes in the international environment and the growing interconnection of transnational issues. In the traditional model, diplomacy operated through closed and official channels between governments, focusing primarily on representation, negotiation, and the protection of sovereign interests. However, the end of the Cold War and the acceleration of globalization reshaped the diplomatic landscape, diminishing the state's monopoly on international communication and influence (Slaughter 2004, 12-14).

The globalization of transnational challenges—such as energy insecurity, terrorism, cyberspace, climate change, health security, and migration—has expanded the range of actors involved in conflict management. These challenges require coordination beyond purely governmental channels. As a result, the growing complexity of interdependence has fostered more participatory diplomatic practices based on networks and multilateral

cooperation rather than relying exclusively on traditional bilateral negotiations (Scholte 2017, 25).

The rise of non-state actors has been particularly significant, encompassing international organizations, non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, community groups, and cross-border networks and think tanks. As argued by Keohane and Nye (2012, 27–28), conditions of complex interdependence demonstrate that power and influence are no longer confined to military or governmental instruments but are distributed across multiple channels, thereby reshaping diplomatic practices and approaches to conflict management.

This shift coincides with a relative erosion of the state's monopoly over mediation and influence functions. Many peacebuilding and mediation processes are now conducted through hybrid arrangements that involve both official and non-official actors utilizing parallel non-governmental negotiation tracks. Contemporary mediation literature indicates that numerous post-2000 peace processes relied on multilevel mediation structures with engaging international organizations, civil society initiatives, and independent experts alongside governmental actors (Crocker et al. 2015, 9).

The digital and communication revolution has played a decisive role in expanding diplomatic space through digital and networked diplomacy. Real-time communication technology, cross-border platforms, and data analytics have created new opportunities for interaction, influence, narrative-building, and crisis management. Consequently, this transformation has contributed to a gradual transition from closed diplomatic practices to more open and interactive environments where media, societal, and knowledge dimensions intersect with formal negotiation tracks (Bjola and Holmes 2015, 6-8).

1-2 The Concept of MTD and Its Operational Structure

The field of conflict resolution evolved during the 1970s and 1980s when scholars and practitioners recognized the limitations

of formal diplomatic channels in addressing complex and protracted conflicts. Joseph Montville introduced the concept of "Track II Diplomacy" as a framework for informal dialogue among academics, experts, and non-governmental mediators, aimed at reducing tensions and fostering mutual understanding outside official constraints. This concept laid the groundwork for expanding diplomatic practice into a broader model that transcends the binary distinction between formal and informal diplomacy (Montville 1993, 164-170).

The concept evolved further with the work of Louise Diamond and John McDonald, who articulated MTD as an integrated system for conflict management and peacebuilding. Their framework extends beyond governments and informal mediators to include a broad network of social, economic, and knowledge-based actors. Diamond and McDonald proposed a structural model viewing peace as a societal process requiring the interaction of multiple, parallel, and integrated tracks implemented through a systems approach rather than narrow sectoral strategies (Diamond and McDonald 1996, 3-15).

Definition: MTD is an interactive framework for conflict management and peacebuilding that utilizes multiple formal and informal channels, including governments, NGOs, the private sector, research institutions, local communities, and media actors. MTD differs from Track I diplomacy, which is limited to direct governmental negotiation, and from Track II diplomacy, which involves informal initiatives led by intellectual elites and nongovernmental mediators. The multi-track model integrates these channels within a unified operational structure based on functional complementarity among diverse actors and roles (Jones 2015, 19-23).

Operational Structure: The classical operational structure of MTD consists of nine interconnected tracks, each serving a distinct function in conflict management:

Track I: Governments and official diplomacy.

Track II: Informal mediation and specialized dialogues.

Track III: The business sector as a stabilizing economic actor.

Track IV: Citizens and community-based organizations.

Track V: Educational and research institutions.

Track VI: Peace initiatives and civil movements.

Track VII: Religious institutions.

Track VIII: Funding and support sources.

Track IX: Media and communication channels.

The operational premise is that the simultaneous interaction of these tracks generates a more resilient peace environment than any single track could achieve alone (Lederach 1997, 23-24).

Figure 1. Hierarchical System Model of MTD



Adapted by the author from Diamond and McDonald (1996, 6-11, 29-32) and Lederach (2005, 35-42).

MTD is closely aligned with peacebuilding approaches, which emphasize that sustainable peace cannot be achieved solely through political agreements but requires the reconstruction of social and institutional relationships. Peacebuilding literature further highlights that engaging local and community actors in dialogue and settlement processes enhances legitimacy and strengthens local ownership—an approach that constitutes the core operational logic of MTD (Lederach 2005, 35-42).

MTD relies on a set of informal mechanisms, including organized community dialogues, nongovernmental mediations, problem-solving workshops, specialized dialogue platforms, and expert networks or think tanks that provide technical knowledge and policy options to support formal negotiations. These tools are characterized by flexibility, the ability to operate in politically closed or tense environments, and the potential to pilot negotiation approaches before transferring them to official channels (Saunders 1999, 45-47).

Theoretically, MTD aligns with contemporary conflict management approaches that adopt multilevel frameworks influenced by network theory and complex governance. It intersects with constructivist perspectives which emphasize the role of ideas, identities and social networks and is consistent with global governance approaches that recognize multiplicity of actors and diffusion of influence beyond the state, thus, in this sense, MTD represents a transition from state-centric diplomacy to a more systemic and socially embedded form of diplomacy that integrates a wide array of actors and networks in managing complex conflicts (Richmond 2016a, 57-59).

2- Patterns of MTD Employment in International Conflicts

The emergence of international conflicts after 2011 has generated a more complex and interconnected conflict environment in terms of actors, instruments, and levels of influence. Military, political, economic, and informational dimensions have increasingly overlapped, while the role of non-state actors in both conflict dynamics and settlement processes has become more prominent. Consequently, this environment has exposed the limitations of relying exclusively on formal diplomacy for crisis management and highlighted the need for more flexible operational models that integrate formal and informal channels within the framework of MTD (Richmond 2016a, 57-59).

In practice, MTD is implemented through interconnected interactions among formal negotiation tracks (Track I), informal dialogue channels (Track II), and hybrid track 1.5 mechanisms,

which involve former officials, independent experts, and mediators operating in semi-formal negotiation spaces. Empirical experiences in contemporary conflicts demonstrated that the effectiveness of conflict management is closely linked to the functional integration of these tracks, as well as their capacity to distribute roles across formal negotiation, trust-building, and knowledge production that support political foundations of sustainable settlements (Jones 2015, 19-23).

Within this context, this section aims to analyze the practical patterns of MTD applications in post-2011 international conflicts by focusing on two interrelated dimensions (Lederach 2005, 57-59; Richmond 2016a, 57-59).

a. Mechanisms of integration between formal and informal tracks through applied models, which include the role of backchannel communications, nongovernmental mediation, and think tanks in supporting negotiation processes.

b. The operational role of non-state actors —humanitarian, economic, media, and community-based—in shaping conflict management dynamics with reducing escalation and facilitating settlement environments.

2-1 Integration of Formal and Informal Tracks in Conflict Management

Practical experience in managing contemporary international conflicts demonstrates that the rigid separation between formal and informal diplomatic tracks no longer reflects the operational reality of modern negotiation processes. Conflict management has increasingly shifted toward integrative models combining Track I (official diplomacy), Track II (informal dialogue), and Track 1.5 mechanisms operating in semi-formal settings. This integration is based on a functional division of labor: Track I produces legally and politically binding commitments, while informal tracks prepare the negotiation environment by building trust, testing alternative proposals, and opening communication channels free from formal protocol constraints. Multiparty mediation literature

further confirms that such integrative patterns enhance negotiation flexibility and reduce political costs for disputing parties (Crocker et al. 1999, 41-45).

Integration Models often manifest through formal negotiations that rely on prior or parallel informal dialogues managed by experts or independent institutions. In protracted conflicts and informal meetings frequently function as safe spaces for exchanging perceptions, reframing interests, and gradually shaping consensus formulas that can later be transferred to official negotiation tables. Thus, scholars of Track II diplomacy emphasize that such dialogues do not replace formal negotiations but act as cognitive and analytical accelerators by reducing stereotypes and fostering a shared language among adversaries (Jones 2015, 29-32).

Nongovernmental mediators play a pivotal role, especially characterized by political stalemate or the absence of mutual recognition, where academics, former diplomats, and representatives of international NGOs can engage conflicting parties without such engagement being interpreted as formal political concession, thus mediation studies indicates that these parallel channels are often used to test intentions and develop bridging proposals that facilitate negotiation breakthroughs (Montville 1993, 165-168).

Think tanks and academic institutions have also emerged as key providers of technical and analytical support in negotiation processes through policy papers, settlement models, scenario analyses, and closed dialogue platforms, as well as by fostering effective cooperation that reduces redundancy among initiatives. All these institutions contribute to the intellectual framework of peace processes. Consequently, Track 1.5 diplomacy—which brings together former or informal officials with independent experts—has seen increased use in complex conflicts due to its ability to combine political access with informal flexibility (Diamond and McDonald 1996, 23-26).

The Iranian nuclear negotiations culminating in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) provide a prominent example of track integration, as backchannel contacts and informal expert-level meetings preceded the formal multilateral negotiations, particularly the secret talks hosted in Muscat, Oman. These informal exchanges contributed to narrowing technical gaps and building mutual understanding before the launch of the official negotiation framework. Analytical studies of this case indicate that informal channels played a decisive preparatory role in mitigating accumulated mistrust (Parsi 2017, 93-96).

The Colombian peace agreement with the FARC illustrates another model of track integration. While formal negotiations were conducted in Havana, Cuba, parallel community dialogues and contributions from civil society organizations and conflict-resolution experts expanded the negotiation knowledge base and addressed the social dimensions of the conflict. Analyses of the Colombian peace process further demonstrate that incorporating informal tracks facilitated inclusion of victims' rights and local development issues within the formal negotiation agenda (Lederach 1997, 123-126).

Multitrack mediation patterns in complex regional conflicts often involve parallel roles performed by international organizations, research institutions, independent mediators, and governmental actors. These multiple channels increase the likelihood of flexible solutions, requiring high levels of coordination to prevent initiative fragmentation or competition among agendas (Richmond 2016a, 72-77).

Backchannel diplomacy represents one of the most significant instruments of track integration. These confidential communication channels enable politically low-cost interaction by allowing parties to propose preliminary concessions or exploratory ideas without public commitment, thus diplomatic studies indicate that backchannels have played decisive roles in numerous negotiation breakthroughs by serving as testing grounds for

potential solutions before their transfer to formal negotiation processes (Zartman 2007, 71-75).

Informal tracks also contribute to trust-building through repeated low-sensitivity interactions such as problem-solving workshops, thematic dialogues, and community-level engagements, rather than focusing solely on resolving disputed issues. These interactions seek to redefine relationships between adversaries. Therefore, conflict transformation theorists argue that such cumulative engagement constitutes a necessary condition for the success and sustainability of formal agreements (Lederach 2014, 46-53).

2-2 The Role of Non-State Actors in Conflict Management Tracks

The multiplication of operational levels in international conflicts since 2011 has led to a relative decline in the state's monopoly over conflict management instruments. Consequently, non-state actors have emerged as essential operational components within the MTD framework, which functions as an interactive network involving non-governmental organizations, humanitarian agencies, economic entities, community networks, and digital media platforms. Contemporary peacebuilding literature emphasizes that the inclusion of these actors broadens the sphere of influence, enhances information flows, and strengthens societal acceptance of settlement pathways (Richmond 2016a, 63-71).

International NGOs increasingly play a prominent role in mediation and peacebuilding, as they facilitate informal dialogues, organize encounters between disputing parties, and provide technical expertise in designing reconciliation processes. Thus, their institutional flexibility and ability to operate in politically sensitive environments enable them to build long-term trust relationships with local communities. Multi-party mediation studies frequently indicate that NGOs function as facilitators that prepare the ground for formal negotiations without substituting for them (Crocker et al. 2015, 9-12; Diamond and McDonald 1996, 23-31).

Humanitarian organizations perform a dual function within conflict management tracks. On the one hand, they mitigate the

humanitarian consequences of violence; on the other hand, they contribute to de-escalation by opening field-level communication channels between adversaries. Humanitarian coordination mechanisms, temporary ceasefire arrangements for aid delivery, and humanitarian corridors often evolve into practical instruments of confidence-building, thus scholarship on humanitarian action in conflict zones suggests that humanitarian diplomacy has become an influential sub-track within the broader MTD architecture (Slim 2015, 118-126).

The private sector and transnational corporations have likewise become significant actors in conflict environments through corporate social responsibility initiatives, economic leverage, and the protection of critical supply chains. Major corporations may indirectly contribute to stabilization efforts, and governance studies indicate that they can exert informal mediating influence or help consolidate local stability when their economic interests depend on secure environments; however, this role remains inherently dual as corporate involvement may either promote stability or generate additional pressure depending on the structure of their economic interests (Haufler 2001, 28-30).

International media and digital platforms have emerged as influential elements in shaping negotiation environments and framing conflict perceptions. Media outlets construct interpretive narratives, influence public opinion, and generate normative pressure on conflict parties. The digital platforms have created transnational spaces for dialogue, societal diplomacy, and advocacy campaigns. The communication and conflict studies underline that the information environment has become an integral structural component of conflict management rather than a peripheral factor (Seib 2012, 65-70).

Religious and community-based networks play a critical role in local conflict settlements due to their social legitimacy and symbolic authority, as well as their capacity to influence collective behavior. Local peacebuilding experiences demonstrate that

religious and community leaders can facilitate grassroots mediation or contain violence and rebuild social ties. Peacebuilding theorists argue that such actors are indispensable for translating political agreements into sustainable social peace (Lederach 1997, 145).

The Russian-Ukrainian war offers a current example of the role that nongovernmental civil and economic networks play in conflict dynamics. Civil society organizations or humanitarian relief networks and private technology actors have contributed to humanitarian assistance, documentation of violations, and shaping of international public opinion. Technology companies have also played a role in protecting communication infrastructure, thus contemporary analyses indicate that such actors are increasingly embedded within both the structure and management of conflict environments (Buchanan and Imbrie 2022, 133-142).

Efforts to counter ISIS provide another illustration of multitrack coalitions where governmental measures intersect with community-based, religious, media, and technological initiatives aimed at combating extremism, countering radical narratives, and promoting reintegration programs. Thus, studies on countering violent extremism emphasize that nongovernmental approaches constitute a decisive complementary element to military and security instruments (Gerges 2017, 221-230).

In Middle Eastern conflicts, civil society mediations and local organizational initiatives have supported informal dialogue tracks aimed at containing localized violence and preparing negotiation environments. Although such initiatives may lack decisive political authority, they have contributed to maintaining communication channels and preventing broader escalation in certain contexts (Al-Sabbagh 2019, 55-63).

3- Evaluating the Effectiveness of MTD and Its Future Prospects

3-1 Selected Case Studies: A Comparative Analytical Design

This study adopts a comparative case study approach as an appropriate analytical instrument for examining complex, multi-

variable phenomena, particularly within international conflict settings characterized by the interaction of formal and informal diplomatic levels. A comparative case study methodology enables hypothesis testing in real-world political environments while preserving sensitivity to historical, institutional, and geopolitical contexts (Yin 2017, 15-18; George and Bennett 2005, 17-21).

The study employs the logic of the Most Different Systems Design (MDS), given the structural, political, and geopolitical divergence between the two selected cases. This design allows for the isolation of the independent variable—namely, the integration of diplomatic tracks—and the assessment of its impact on conflict management outcomes across distinct systemic environments (Landman 2008, 62-66).

3-1-1 The Iranian Case – Track Integration in an Internationalized Strategic Crisis

3-1-1-1 Strategic Structure of the Conflict

The Iranian nuclear crisis, which emerged in the early 2000s, evolved into one of the most complex proliferation disputes, particularly following its referral to the UN Security Council in 2006 and the subsequent imposition of multilateral sanctions. Economic coercion subsequently became a key instrument of strategic pressure, creating a dual negotiation dynamic that combined pressure with diplomatic engagement (Parsi 2012, 87-92). Crisis management literature further notes that conflicts characterized by deterrence dynamics involve heightened sensitivity in negotiation processes as concessions may be interpreted as signs of strategic weakness, thereby increasing the political costs of compromise. Under such conditions, parallel diplomatic tracks emerged as a functional necessity rather than a complementary option (George and Bennett 2005, 123-127).

3-1-1-2 Architecture of Interacting Diplomatic Tracks

3-1-1-2-1 Track I (Official Negotiations)

The P5+1 framework led the official track, which operated within a legal-technical structure grounded in IAEA standards and non-

proliferation norms. However, it experienced prolonged stagnation due to deep mistrust with domestic political pressures in both the U.S. and Iran and diverging priorities among major powers.

3-1-1-2-2 Track 1.5 (Semi-Official Engagements)

Semi-official engagements involved former officials, policy advisors, and experts close to decision-making circles. These unofficial meetings allowed preliminary testing of ideas without formal commitment and contributed to the formulation of early settlement frameworks (Crocker et al. 2015, 112-118).

3-1-1-2-3 Backchannel Diplomacy

Oman's secret negotiations between 2012 and 2013 marked a decisive turning point. These confidential exchanges reduced political exposure costs and enabled direct communication away from media and public pressure (Parsi 2012, 3-7). Mediation literature emphasizes that backchannels are particularly critical in highly polarized settings because they facilitate the gradual redefinition of interests without incurring public or political risks (Crocker et al. 2015, 28-34).

3-1-1-3 Effectiveness Assessment in the Iranian Case

3-1-1-3-1 Breaking Negotiation Deadlock

Backchannel diplomacy succeeded in overcoming years of negotiation stagnation by reframing the core issue from a zero-sum right to enrich debate toward a focus on regulatory and verification mechanisms.

3-1-1-3-2 Reengineering the Negotiation Environment

Semiofficial tracks facilitated technical dialogue on sensitive issues such as enrichment levels, centrifuge numbers, and inspection regimes, contributing to the reduction of zero-sum dynamics (Parsi 2017, 60-65). More broadly, the preparatory functions of informal tracks are usually widely recognized as core indicators of mediation effectiveness for reducing the dispute (Lederach 2005, 48-52; Diamond and MacDonald 1996, 147-150).

3-1-1-3-3 Translating Informal Understandings into Institutional Commitments

The transition from Muscat understandings to the formal framework of JCPOA illustrates the functional integration of diplomatic tracks and institutional consolidation of gains achieved through informal engagement (Crocker et al. 2015, 15-19).

3-1-1-3-4 Managing Domestic Political Costs

Backchannels enabled both parties to test internal reactions before making public commitments; however, the subsequent U.S. withdrawal in 2018 exposed the fragility of domestic consensus, demonstrating that multi-track engagement cannot substitute for structural internal alignment.

3-1-1-4 Analytical Implications

MTD can generate breakthroughs in high-sensitivity international crises as backchannels strategically reduce the political costs of concessions, while track integration constitutes a necessary condition for negotiation progress. However, it remains insufficient for ensuring long-term sustainability.

3-1-2 The Colombian Case – Multi-Track Engagement in a Protracted Internal Conflict

The Colombian peace process provides a compelling model for assessing MTD within a protracted internal armed conflict encompassing political, social, and economic dimensions over more than five decades.

3-1-2-1 Strategic Structure of the Conflict

The conflict is characterized by the presence of multiple domestic actors—including state forces, armed groups, and civil society—alongside international facilitation by actors such as Norway and Cuba. It also involves deep societal challenges related to justice and reintegration, which require broad social legitimacy (Ginty 2011, 78-82).

Contemporary mediation literature emphasizes that conflict resolution efforts are unlikely to succeed if confined solely to Track I diplomacy, thereby highlighting the necessity of multilevel engagement (Lederach 2005, 36-38; Diamond and MacDonald 1996, 3-5).

3-1-2-2 Architecture of Interacting Tracks

3-1-2-2-1 Track I:

Official negotiations in Havana were conducted with full political authority to formalize agreements.

3-1-2-2-2 Track II and Track III

Church actors and civil society organizations contributed to building grassroots trust while international NGOs provided technical mediation expertise. Facilitating states offered quasi-official platforms that supported dialogue processes (Lederach 1997, 123-125).

3-1-2-3 Effectiveness Assessment

3-1-2-3-1 Social Legitimacy Enhancement

Public acceptance was strengthened through broad societal inclusion embedded in the peace agreement (Ginty 2011, 78-80).

3-1-2-3-2 Integration of Transitional Justice

informal tracks ensured the incorporation of victims' rights and transitional justice mechanisms into the formal agreement (Lederach 1997, 130-132).

3-1-2-3-3 Broad-Based Domestic Support

A balanced political-social consensus was achieved through distributed engagement across multiple actors (Lederach 1997, 123-126; Mac Ginty 2011, 78-80).

3-1-2-4 Structural Constraints

The process faced structural constraints, including dependence on international facilitators, funding limitations with institutional sustainability challenges, and ethno-regional complexity, all of which required adaptive strategies (Ginty 2011, 82-84).

3-1-2-5 Comparative Analytical Insights

A comparison between the Iranian and Colombian cases reveals that context — whether an internationalized strategic crisis or a protracted internal conflict — shapes track configuration and functional priorities.

Backchannels and elite-level semi-official engagement are decisive in overcoming strategic mistrust, whereas in international conflicts, grassroots and societal tracks are central to legitimacy and sustainability in internal conflicts.

Accordingly, the effectiveness of MTD is context-contingent. While track integration constitutes a necessary structural condition for

negotiation progress, long-term sustainability depends on institutional resilience and domestic political alignment.

3-1-3 Comparative Strategic Analysis between the Iranian and Colombian Models

3-1-3-1 Contextual Variation and Its Impact on the Structure of Tracks

The practical application of the Most Different Systems Design (MDS) logic is reflected in the two cases. Although the contexts are structurally divergent—one representing a highly sensitive international crisis and the other a protracted internal conflict—both demonstrate a convergent pattern underscoring the strategic importance of integrating official and unofficial diplomatic tracks.

In the Iranian case, the overarching strategic objective was to manage a high-cost nuclear crisis without escalation into military confrontation within a deterrence-sensitive environment. Backchannel diplomacy functioned as a mechanism for reducing political costs of compromise and testing mutually acceptable concessions under controlled conditions (Crocker et al. 2015, 28-30). Oman's confidential negotiations provided a low-visibility space for recalibrating and gradually constructing a viable bargaining framework.

By contrast, the Colombian Case revolved around rebuilding the domestic social contract after decades of armed conflicts. The central strategic challenge was reaching a negotiated settlement and ensuring its societal legitimacy and long-term sustainability. This required the structured inclusion of civil society actors, religious institutions, and non-governmental organizations to anchor the peace process within broader social consent (Lederach 1997, 123-126). MTD functioned less as a secrecy-based breakthrough mechanism and more as an architecture for building legitimacy.

3-1-3-2 Indicators for Measuring Effectiveness

Five analytical indicators were adopted by this study for comparative effectiveness evaluation:

- a.** Deadlock-Breaking Capacity
- b.** Confidence-Building Between Parties
- c.** Domestic Legitimacy

d. Conversion of Informal Understandings into Formal Agreements
e. Sustainability Under Changing Strategic Environments.

These indicators reveal differentiated patterns of effectiveness across the two cases.

In the Iranian case, high effectiveness was demonstrated through the breaking of negotiation deadlocks and the achievement of the JCPOA under indicators (a) and (d). However, structural fragility became evident under indicators (c) and (e), particularly following the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement in 2018.

By contrast, Colombia demonstrated stronger outcomes under indicators (c) and (e), as transitional justice mechanisms and societal engagement contributed to legitimacy and sustainability. Nevertheless, achieving breakthroughs under indicator (a) required a longer timeframe.

3-1-3-3 Theoretical Implications

- MTD is inherently adaptive and context-sensitive as it is shaped by the nature of the conflict and the relevant level of analysis.
- Confidential backchannels play a crucial role in enabling strategic breakthroughs, especially in highly sensitive international disputes characterized by deterrence dynamics and mutual suspicion.
- Generating domestic legitimacy and embedding peace agreements within broader political communities are indispensable functions of societal tracks, especially in protracted internal conflicts.

Accordingly, the concept of hybrid peace intersects with sustainable peace outcomes, requiring the integration of formal institutional frameworks with localized societal processes (Ginty 2011, 78-82).

3-1-3-4 Strategic Synthesis

As a result, three structural variables govern the effectiveness of MTD: the nature of the conflict, the degree of political polarization, and the level of institutional integration among diplomatic tracks. While the Iranian model demonstrates the capacity of backchannel diplomacy to generate rapid negotiation breakthroughs, the Colombian model illustrates that long-term sustainability depends on broad-based societal legitimacy (see Table 1).

Thus, the effectiveness of MTD is not uniform across cases; rather, it is contingent upon the alignment between track configurations and the underlying structure of the conflict.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of the Iranian and Colombian Models

Criterion	Iranian Model	Colombian Model
Nature of Conflict	High-stakes international conflict tied to nuclear security, non-proliferation, and great-power balancing	Protracted internal conflict with political, social, and socio-economic dimensions
Level of Analysis	Systemic–Regional	Domestic–Societal
Principal Actors	P5+1, Iran, and Oman as a regional mediator	Colombian government, FARC, civil society, Church, Norway/Cuba as facilitators
Track I (Official Diplomacy)	Multilateral negotiations culminating in the 2015 JCPOA	Havana negotiations (2012–2016) between the government and FARC
Track II/Backchannels	Secret Oman talks for proposal testing and political cost reduction	Community mediation, NGO/Church involvement, and informal dialogues
Logic of Track Integration	Break deadlocks and build strategic trust in a high-risk environment	Build social legitimacy and broadening domestic support for sustainable peace
Deadlock-Breaking Capacity	High – decisive backchannel diplomacy	High – decisive backchannel diplomacy
Domestic Legitimacy	Limited due to political polarization	Highly-structured civil society participation and transitional justice mechanisms
Sustainability	Low and volatile, sensitive to external changes	Moderate to high despite residual violence and implementation challenges
Risk Structure	Strategic shifts in the international environment and leadership changes	Societal fragmentation, reintegration challenges, and transitional justice complexities
Strategic Impact	Regional power balance and international system stability	Domestic stabilization, societal reconciliation, and state reconstruction

Prepared by the author from: (Bercovitch and Jackson 2009, 15-20, 129-132) ;(Crocker et al. 2015, 3-18, 67-90, 511-563); Ginty (2011, 41-60, 125-130); (UNEG 2023).

3-2 Measuring the Effectiveness of MTD in Conflict Management

Measuring the effectiveness of MTD remains methodologically challenging due to its networked, multi-actor nature and decentralized channels. Unlike Track I diplomacy, whose outcomes are often reflected in formal agreements, MTD's impact extends across cognitive, behavioral, and institutional levels. This complexity necessitates the use of composite qualitative and quantitative indicators -such as de-escalation, trust building, continuity of communication, and improvements in the negotiation environment- while emphasizing cumulative relational transformations rather than the final settlement alone (Diamond and MacDonald 1996, 147-150).

Effectiveness indicators in MTD focus on operational outcomes, including the creation of alternative communication channels, the sustainability of dialogue, the reduction of hostile rhetoric, and the advancement of confidence-building measures. They also encompass the generation of proposals within unofficial tracks and their subsequent integration into formal negotiations alongside measurable outcomes such as reduced violence, increased cooperation, and the evolution of shared perceptions. Thus, scholars highlight relational transformation and perception change as key indicators of success when formal agreements remain incomplete (Diamond and MacDonald 1996, 29-32).

At the empirical level, multitrack mediation has demonstrated tangible successes in de-escalation and trust-building, particularly in protracted and complex conflicts (Crocker et al. 2015, 9-12). Informal mechanisms -such as backchannels, problem-solving workshops, and closed expert dialogues- create less politicized environments that reduce stereotypes and enhance negotiation flexibility, thereby facilitating subsequent formal engagement.

Both the Colombian and Iranian cases illustrate these dynamics. The Colombian peace process (2012-2016), which culminated in the Final Peace Agreement, demonstrated how sustained multitrack engagement contributed to ending decades of armed

conflict between the state and the FARC-EP (Atlantic Council 2024). Similarly, the Iranian nuclear negotiations combined formal multilateral diplomacy (P5+1) with backchannel communication and expert-level engagements, paving the way for the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (Parsi 2017, 94-95, 105-108).

These cases highlight the role of experts and unofficial intermediaries in narrowing gaps and formulating technical proposals that later crystallized into formal agreements. Informal tracks often function as negotiation laboratories where potential solutions are tested prior to official adoption. Moreover, the cumulative effects of trust-building within Track II and Track 1.5 processes represent one of their most important contributions to conflict management (Jones 2015, 20-23).

The sustainability of settlement is closely linked to the diversity of tracks involved. Agreements supported by societal, civic, and economic actors tend to be more durable than elite-driven arrangements. The involvement of local communities, civil society, and knowledge institutions broadens social acceptance, fosters local ownership, and transforms political agreements into enduring societal peace processes. Thus, peacebuilding literature emphasizes that sustainable peace depends on the depth of supportive networks, an outcome more effectively achieved through multitrack engagement than through formal agreements alone (Lederach 2005, 48-55).

However, MTD faces structural coordination challenges arising from the multiplicity of initiatives with varying institutional mandates and divergent actor priorities. The absence of effective coordination mechanisms can lead to role duplication, reduced credibility, conflicting messages, and competition among initiatives. Research on multiparty mediation indicates that an excess of actors and tracks may become a source of fragmentation rather than strength if not managed within a clear coordination framework (Richmond 2016b, 102-110).

These challenges are compounded by conflicting agendas among non-governmental actors themselves. Not all non-state actors operate from neutral positions; some are influenced by funding structures, ideological orientations, or geopolitical considerations. Critical peacebuilding scholarship shows that external interventions may reproduce power asymmetries or promote models insufficiently grounded in local contexts, thereby undermining legitimacy and limiting effectiveness (Ginty 2011, 83-91).

The influence of nongovernmental actors remains limited during decisive political phases as the authority to conclude agreements, provide guarantees, and enforce outcomes rests with sovereign states, while informal tracks are effective in preparation, bridge-building, and option generation, they rarely resolve core issues related to sovereignty, security arrangements, and power sharing. As a result, track II cannot replace Track I but operates as a complement to it (Zartman 2007, 39-47).

Finally, the degree of major-power competition significantly shapes the effectiveness of MTD. In highly polarized geopolitical environments, mediation efforts may become politicized, thereby constraining informal channels and reducing their autonomy. Under such conditions, multi-track initiatives risk becoming instrumentalized, while their capacity to function as neutral facilitators diminishes. Studies indicate that the effectiveness of unofficial mediation declines as conflicts become arenas of great-power competition rather than issues amenable to technical resolution (Richmond 2016b, 88-96).

Accordingly, MTD effectiveness is cumulative and facilitative - enhancing trust, enabling negotiations, and shaping conducive environments- while ultimate outcomes remain contingent upon coordination with formal diplomacy and broader power structures (see Table 2).

Table (2): Indicators for Measuring MTD Effectiveness in Conflict Management

Dimension	Core Indicator	Sub-Indicators	Measurement Tools	Level of measurement
De-escalation	Tension/violence reduction	Fewer armed incidents, reduced hostile rhetoric	ACLED/UCDP datasets, UN reports, discourse analysis	Quantitative- Qualitative
Confidence-Building	mutual trust	Continuity of informal meetings, goodwill measures, and humanitarian agreements	Process tracing, elite interviews, communiqués	Qualitative- Cumulative
Communication Channels	Durability of dialogue	Track II meeting frequency, institutionalized platforms, liaison mechanisms	Mediation archives Negotiation records	Quantitative- Institutional
Negotiation Environment	Enhanced political climate	Agenda expansion, flexible bargaining positions, and reduced preconditions	Draft agreements, longitudinal tracking	Qualitative
Track Integration	Formal-informal coordination	Adoption of informal proposals, Track II experts in delegations	Textual analysis, participant interviews	Qualitative- Analytical
Domestic Legitimacy	societal acceptance	Public support, civil society participation, and a decline in opposition	Polls, civil society reports, and event datasets	Quantitative- Qualitative
Relational Transformation	Interaction patterns	Cooperative framing, cross-conflict networks, joint initiatives	Social network and discourse analysis, monitoring initiatives	Qualitative- Network
Strategic Sustainability	outcomes resilience	Compliance post-agreement, reduced relapse, sustained communication	Longitudinal tracking, peace indicators, and implementation reports	Quantitative- Strategic

Prepared by the author based on Diamond and MacDonald (1996, 29-32, 147-150); Lederach (2005, 48-55); Crocker et al. (2015, 9-12); Jones (2015, 20-25); Richmond (2016, 88-94); and Zartman (2007, 39-45).

MTD effectiveness should be evaluated using mixed methods that capture relational change, cumulative trust-building, and the strength of social networks, extending beyond formal agreements to broader perceptual, behavioral, and strategic impacts (Diamond and McDonald 1996, 147-150; Lederach 2005, 48-55).

3-3 The Future of MTD in a Transforming International Conflict Environment

The future of MTD will be shaped by ongoing processes of digitalization, the expanding role of non-state actors, and the convergence of cyber, informational, and traditional conflict instruments across hybrid physical-digital spaces. Consequently, MTD must adapt to more flexible, decentralized, and multi-layered operational patterns in order to remain effective (Richmond 2016b, 88).

Digital diplomacy platforms and transnational networks are expanding the scope of informal Track II and Track 1.5 engagement across borders while introducing new risks like misinformation, digital manipulation, and narrative manipulation (Bjola and Holmes 2015, 7-15).

AI is also expected to play an increasingly prominent role in conflict analysis and mediation support through big data analytics, escalation pattern monitoring, scenario modeling, and decision-support systems. AI-based tools are already being applied in early warning mechanisms, hostile discourse analysis, and the identification of potential negotiation openings. However, existing research indicates that such technologies are unlikely to replace human mediators; rather, they enhance the analytical capacity of both official and unofficial diplomatic tracks (Buchanan and Imbrie 2022, 133-138).

In parallel, the rise of networked multi-actor diplomacy is shifting from hierarchical state control to flexible multilevel coalitions integrating governments, international organizations, and civil society actors (Slaughter 2004, 12-14).

Moreover, the integration of soft power into informal diplomatic tracks -through education, cultural exchange, and knowledge

partnerships- contributes to trust-building, perceptual change, and the long-term reduction of conflict risks (Nye 2004, 55- 63).

Several future scenarios for multi-level conflict management can be anticipated:

•**The first scenario: High Integration**

1. In this scenario, states and international institutions succeed in effective coordination frameworks linking official, unofficial, and digital diplomatic tracks.

•**The second scenario: Uncoordinated Parallelism**

2. This scenario is characterized by the proliferation of multi-track initiatives without structured coordination, thereby diminishing overall effectiveness.

•**The third scenario: Geopolitical Containment**

3. In this scenario, intensified great-power competition politicizes and weakens unofficial tracks. Such scenario-building approaches are widely used in conflict foresight literature to estimate potential trajectories of international disputes (Ramirez and Wilkinson 2016, 85-95).

Discussion:

The findings of this study indicate that the shift from classical state-centric diplomacy to MTD reflects not only an expansion in the procedural tools of conflict management but also a broader structural transformation in the governance of contemporary international conflicts.

The international system has become increasingly complex, particularly after 2011, due to the proliferation of state and non-state actors and the growing interconnection between domestic, regional, and global dimensions of conflict. Consequently, conflict management has progressively moved beyond formal interstate negotiations toward multi-layered and networked forms of diplomatic engagement that accommodate multiple actors and channels.

The analysis of the Iranian nuclear negotiations and the Colombian peace process demonstrates that informal and semi-official

channels have evolved from peripheral mechanisms into integrated components of broader negotiation frameworks. MTD appears to be particularly effective during pre-agreement phases, where Track II and Track 1.5 mechanisms operate as experimental arenas for testing negotiation strategies, exploring policy alternatives, building incremental trust, and reducing political risks.

These tracks reduce perceptual uncertainty, expand communication networks, and sustain dialogue during periods of formal deadlock, thereby demonstrating that MTD extends beyond the conclusion of formal agreements to shape the relational and cognitive conditions necessary for successful settlements.

This study further demonstrates that the effectiveness of MTD is contingent upon its integration with officially mediated governmental channels. Informal mechanisms tend to produce limited influence when operating in isolation; however, when linked—directly or indirectly—to formal diplomatic tracks, they function as genuine instruments for narrowing negotiation gaps, generating technically viable compromises, and preparing the political environment for formal agreements.

This reflects broader principles of network governance, whereby complex challenges require coordinated multilevel engagement among diverse actors in order to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Non-state actors—including civil society organizations, independent mediators, expert networks, and private-sector participants—are increasingly playing significant roles in dialogue facilitation, agenda formation, and trust-building initiatives without fundamentally challenging the central authority of states. Legal authority and legitimacy over final agreements remain primarily in the hands of governments, while preparatory, facilitative, and confidence-building functions are largely performed by non-state actors.

The concepts of Networked Diplomacy and Complex Interdependence are aligned with theoretical perspectives

emphasizing the distribution of influence across societal and institutional levels.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of MTD remains constrained by structural coordination challenges across multiple tracks. Competing agendas, institutional friction, and the instrumentalization of informal channels by external powers may undermine coherence and reduce overall effectiveness.

Outcomes achieved through unofficial tracks are further restricted by geopolitical rivalries and strategic competition. Consequently, coherent coordination mechanisms, alignment of actor interests, and resilient trust-building processes capable of withstanding political and contextual pressures remain essential for the sustainability and strategic effectiveness of MTD.

Finally, evaluating the effectiveness of MTD requires moving beyond a narrow focus on formal settlements toward broader processes of conflict transformation. Indicators such as communication continuity, de-escalation, shifts in mutual perceptions, the expansion of cross-conflict networks, and the integration of informal proposals into negotiation agendas provide more comprehensive measures of strategic effectiveness.

Employing mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative process tracing with relational monitoring is essential for capturing the multidimensional impact of MTD.

Overall, MTD represents a significant structural evolution in contemporary conflict management. Through enhancing negotiation resilience, integrating diverse actors, and shaping relational and procedural conditions, MTD strengthens adaptive capacity, promotes strategic collaboration, and facilitates durable agreements in complex, hybrid, and multi-actor conflicts. In this sense, MTD reflects a necessary transformation in modern diplomatic practice.

Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that MTD has emerged as a structurally significant paradigm for managing complex international conflicts

in the post-2011 era. Contemporary conflicts are increasingly characterized by the overlap of political, security, economic, technological, and informational dimensions, thereby exposing the limitations of traditional state-centric diplomacy. The comparative analysis of the Iranian nuclear negotiations and the Colombian peace process illustrates that the integration of official, semi-official, and unofficial tracks enhances negotiation resilience, reduces escalation risks, and strengthens the legitimacy and sustainability of agreements.

Non-state actors—including NGOs, think tanks, and technical mediators—play a critical role in trust-building, policy incubation, and the generation of transferable negotiation options. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of MTD depends on structured coordination among actors, institutionalized mechanisms for integrating informal outputs into formal decision-making processes, and the mitigation of geopolitical constraints. At the same time, digitalization and networked governance continue to expand participation while requiring careful management of information integrity and strategic influence. Overall, MTD represents a flexible and adaptive approach capable of enhancing contemporary conflict resolution.

Key Findings:

1. MTD integrates multiple diplomatic tracks to manage multidimensional conflicts effectively.
2. The integration of Tracks I, 1.5, and II enhances adaptive negotiation capacity and pre-agreement trust-building.
3. Non-state actors serve as important platforms for idea generation, mediation support, and legitimacy-building.
4. Informal tracks are most effective during early negotiation phases, whereas the formalization of agreements ultimately depends on official diplomatic channels.
5. Structural coordination, agenda alignment, and institutional mechanisms are essential for sustaining the effectiveness of MTD.

6. Geopolitical competition and digital transformation significantly influence conflict-management outcomes and therefore require strategic mitigation mechanisms.

Acknowledgments

Funding statement: No funding available.

Conflict of interest statement: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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