

## Is Diplomacy Doomed?

by [Eric Alter \(/experts/eric-alter\)](#), [Nickolay Mladenov \(/experts/nickolay-mladenov\)](#)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Eric Alter \(/experts/eric-alter\)](#)

*Eric Alter is the dean of the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy in Abu Dhabi and a professor of international law and diplomacy.*



[Nickolay Mladenov \(/experts/nickolay-mladenov\)](#)

Nickolay Mladenov is the Segal Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. An accomplished Bulgarian politician and diplomat, he served most recently as UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process.



Articles & Testimony

### Once the election year subsides, newly elected governments will need to show political courage and creativity to revive diplomacy's role in global governance.

Conflicts across the globe continue to fester, undermining stability in critical regions. The window for diplomacy appears to be narrowing, and the U.S., despite earnest efforts, is running out of time.

Repeated appeals for peace, however persistent, have not been sufficient to break through the entrenched complexities of current crises. What was once touted as a “90 percent done” deal in Gaza now seems a distant reality. Just two weeks ago, a U.S.-backed proposal for a 21-day cease-fire (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/us-allies-propose-21-day-cease-fire-israel-hezbollah-rcna172786>), designed to facilitate diplomatic engagement between Israel and Hezbollah along the Blue Line, failed to gain traction and was followed by significant escalation. Mediation efforts in Sudan aiming to broker a cease-fire are under siege (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/09/war-sudan-intensifying-coordinated-pressure-needed-prevent-countrys-fragmentation>), as the Sudanese Armed Forces, one of the belligerent parties in the brutal civil war, launches a new offensive.

Successful diplomacy requires a balance of incentives and consequences. Offering rewards without accountability—the proverbial carrot without the stick—rarely shifts the dial. It’s not that the world lacks an appetite for diplomacy or mediation. China’s successful brokering of a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/what-you-need-know-about-chinas-saudi-iran-deal>) is a case in point. Meaningful negotiations were possible at COP28, where difficult concessions ultimately led to consensus. A groundbreaking new treaty on intellectual property, genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge was also adopted ([https://www3.wipo.int/wipogreen/en/news/2023/news\\_0027.html#:~:text=Through%20this%20publication%20and%20its,environmental%20sustainability%20and%20global%20](https://www3.wipo.int/wipogreen/en/news/2023/news_0027.html#:~:text=Through%20this%20publication%20and%20its,environmental%20sustainability%20and%20global%20)) by consensus by the World Intellectual Property Organization membership. Even more recently, Iranian officials have indicated a willingness to engage in talks (<https://apnews.com/article/iran-nuclear-deal-khamenei-us-tensions-bc11763f45041ac84171ebc3866f1273>) with the U.S.

Yet, despite these efforts, Western diplomacy has too often missed critical opportunities. Diplomatic breakthroughs have become increasingly rare, with few exceptions. The United Arab Emirates’ facilitation of prisoner exchanges (<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-ukraine-exchange-206-prisoners-second-swap-two-days-2024-09-14/>) between Russia and Ukraine stands out as a success. Turkey and Armenia have made good progress (<https://www.voanews.com/a/turkish-armenian-envoys-resume-talks-aimed-at-reconciliation/7718495.html>) at normalizing ties after a two-year lull.

Success, however, cannot be measured by new agreements and treaties alone. This year’s main diplomatic achievement—the Pact for the Future (<https://www.un.org/en/unis-nairobi/press-release-united-nations-adopts-ground-breaking-pact-future-transform-global>), endorsed at the United Nations General Assembly—faces serious doubts about its ability to deliver on its promises. Beyond the question of new treaties, the pact raises larger concerns about whether international organizations like the UN are still equipped to handle the complexity of modern conflicts. Diplomacy must remain central, whether in the context of full-scale war, escalating tensions, or protracted stalemates. So, how do we begin to account for the stagnation in global diplomacy?

The growing polarization of the international landscape, coupled with the rise of populism, has created an environment where securing discreet, productive negotiation spaces is becoming increasingly difficult. Domestic political cycles also pose a challenge. In 2024, more than 64 countries (<https://time.com/6550920/world-elections-2024/>)—accounting for nearly half of the global population—are scheduled to hold elections, many poised for significant political transitions. This undermines the long-term focus and sustained effort that diplomacy demands. For example, the upcoming U.S. and potential Israeli elections could drastically shift the tone and content of diplomatic efforts in the Middle East. After the presidential election in Taiwan (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/taiwans-2024-elections-results-and-implications>), the risks of escalatory dynamics set in motion by Taiwanese internal politics are still to be ascertained.

Leaders entangled in conflicts from Russia and Sudan to Central Africa are either consolidating power or battling for survival. Without their direct engagement, diplomatic agreements are increasingly hard to secure. In many cases, foreign policy mirrors internal political agendas, leaving senior diplomats as mere extensions of their leaders’ views, rather than professional actors capable of articulating broader international perspectives. Even foreign ministers often find themselves constrained, unable to present positions that diverge from those of their heads of state. Still, despite these limitations, diplomats involved in conflict mediation remain committed—whether officially or unofficially—to returning to the negotiating table.

On the ground, the pursuit of victory at any cost has overshadowed the willingness to compromise, with ultimatums taking the place of dialogue. Beyond the battlefield, discussions are dominated by economic interests, connectivity and geopolitical competition, pushing diplomacy into the background. The focus has shifted from the art of diplomacy to the race for influence and power. All states, however small or great, have every reason to remain invested in diplomacy. Those facing economic or military decline can use it to rehabilitate their standing while rising middle powers can leverage it to carve out a more prominent role on the world stage.

Diplomacy remains indispensable for all. Countries like Turkey, India, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have already positioned themselves as key diplomatic players, leveraging their economic and military clout to assert influence. These middle powers could serve as much-needed brokers in future negotiations.

Once the election year subsides, newly elected governments will need to show political courage and creativity to revive diplomacy’s role in global governance. As fatigue from unrelenting

regional conflicts sets in, opportunities will emerge to reenergize diplomatic efforts—if those efforts are truly inclusive. Middle powers, regional organizations and civil society groups should be incorporated into future diplomatic frameworks to create more sustainable solutions.

Perhaps it is also time to revisit some of the innovative diplomatic formats of the past that have helped bridge differences: the diamond-shaped table of the [Good Friday Agreement](https://www.ireland.ie/en/dfa/role-policies/northern-ireland/about-the-good-friday-agreement/) (https://www.ireland.ie/en/dfa/role-policies/northern-ireland/about-the-good-friday-agreement/), where even fierce adversaries like Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams could sit beside and across from one another; or the [Majlis-style diplomacy](https://ich.unesco.org/en/RI/majlis-a-cultural-and-social-space-01076) (https://ich.unesco.org/en/RI/majlis-a-cultural-and-social-space-01076), often practiced in the Gulf, which promotes respectful dialogue and consensus-building.

These and many other formats could provide a valuable framework for addressing regional conflicts, fostering trust and long-term stability in an increasingly polarized world; proving their value in the diplomatic arena.

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