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From Secret Diplomacy to Institutional Interaction: Intelligence Services and Intelligence Diplomacy in Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

Increasing expectations of transparency in formal diplomacy often limit the effectiveness of official channels, particularly in sensitive strategic matters, leading states to rely on the less visible, yet highly flexible, mechanism of intelligence diplomacy. Moreover, traditional diplomatic tools have struggled to resolve post-9/11 conflicts, which are characterized by hybrid warfare, gray zones, and the prominence of non-state actors. To address these challenges, governments increasingly utilize intelligence services not merely for information gathering but as primary actors in conflict resolution. This study investigates the effectiveness of intelligence diplomacy in conflict resolution processes by employing a qualitative multiple case study design based on open sources. The cases were selected to determine whether the outcomes of such initiatives are driven by idiosyncratic conditions or systematic structural factors. The analysis focuses on three core activities: covert negotiations, mediation, and information sharing. The findings suggest that intelligence diplomacy has evolved from a supportive auxiliary function into a structural necessity, providing a critical alternative where formal diplomacy fails. The study concludes that intelligence services effectively navigate the complexities of modern conflicts by establishing initial contact and sustaining dialogue in environments where official diplomatic presence is limited or impossible.

Keywords:
Conflict Resolution; Diplomacy; Intelligence Services; Intelligence Diplomacy; Secret Diplomacy; Gray Zone.

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In the dynamic and unpredictable world of international relations, uncertainty is an ever-present reality. Governments must constantly assess the potential benefits and risks of their decisions, taking into account the possibility of unanticipated events that could derail their plans and have far-reaching consequences. Risk assessment and the capacity to strategize according to the current situation are among the main tools for minimizing the potential negative consequences of foreign policy (Debo 2023, 74).

In this framework, diplomacy and intelligence activities have historically functioned in a complementary manner to prevent or mitigate these risks. According to the traditional approach, the information provided by intelligence services has been supportive of diplomatic processes. Traditionally, these organizations are not directly decisive in the foreign policy-making process and are not considered institutions with decision-making or implementation authority. After the Cold War, increasing spheres of influence and technological developments have transformed diplomacy into a more complex structure concentrated on data analysis and reinforced by intelligence services. In other words, in today's world, where threats have become hybrid and traditional security understanding and diplomacy methods are insufficient, intelligence services have started to exceed their traditional roles and become institutionalized diplomatic actors. The role of intelligence services in this shifting approach to diplomacy has been conceptualized in the specialized literature as "intelligence diplomacy". Intelligence diplomacy is a type of diplomacy in which intelligence services, as foreign policy actors, conduct direct diplomatic activities, often in secret. These activities include, mainly, negotiation, mediation, and information sharing.

Although conflict resolution is a common problem of intelligence and diplomacy, the diplomatic efforts of intelligence services in the post 9/11 conflicts have been one of the important fields of study of intelligence diplomacy.
Governments employ intelligence services as part of conflict resolution, and these actors not only gather information on the parties but also work to strengthen the basis for reconciliation and directly determine strategy as a foreign policy actor. The role of intelligence services in conflict resolution is, in fact, the essence of intelligence diplomacy and can greatly contribute to conflict resolution when used effectively. Richard Gowan, the International Crisis Group's UN Director, explained this new process in conflict resolution by stating that "heads of intelligence services are increasingly replacing diplomats in peacemaking and mediation efforts and intelligence diplomacy is replacing the UN" (Athanasiadis 2024).

So, is intelligence diplomacy increasingly replacing formal diplomacy in conflict resolution? This study examines the hypothesis that intelligence diplomacy (the use of intelligence entities as primary actors in conflict resolution) is more suitable for resolving or mitigating conflicts in the post-9/11 era; it aims to demonstrate that this method is more effective compared to traditional methods. In this study, first of

all, the transformation of diplomacy in line with the dynamics of the international system and technological developments, and the position of intelligence services in this transformation process will be revealed. The final section will analyze the role of intelligence diplomacy in conflict resolution, focusing on multiple contemporary conflicts that have emerged in different contexts post 9/11.

This study investigates the effectiveness of intelligence diplomacy in conflict resolution processes by employing a qualitative multiple case study design. The methodological rationale for adopting this design is to discern whether the outcomes of such diplomatic initiatives are driven by idiosyncratic (case-specific) conditions or systematic structural factors. Given the inherent secrecy of intelligence operations and the classification of official archives, data collection is significantly constrained. To mitigate this methodological challenge, a systematic data collection strategy based on open-source techniques is employed.

Case selection was guided by the following criteria: (a) the conflicts that occurred in the post-9/11 era, (b) the intelligence service functioned as the "primary diplomatic actor" rather than a supportive element, and (c) the cases represent distinct geopolitical contexts (State-to-State and State-to-Non-State Actor). This diversity enables an analysis of the operational mechanisms of intelligence diplomacy across varying political contexts. Accordingly, the selected cases are analyzed within the framework of the primary activities of intelligence diplomacy: covert negotiations, mediation, and information sharing (cooperation).

The Transformation of Diplomacy: Alternative Methods

Diplomacy is only one of the tools a government uses to implement its foreign policy strategy. There are many different definitions of the concept. Diplomacy can be defined as "the system and art of communication between actors" (Wight 1978, 113). According to another definition, diplomacy involves "the formulation and implementation of a state's foreign policy" (Bull 2002, 158). Morgenthau's statement that "the method of establishing the preconditions for a lasting peace is called peace through compromise and its instrument is diplomacy" is also noteworthy (Morgenthau 1948, 419). These definitions generally consider diplomacy as the negotiated management of international relations.

More generally, diplomacy is the process of gathering and evaluating information about the international environment and formulating alternative policy strategies. According to the 1961 Vienna Convention, Article 3, diplomacy is the process of formulating and implementing alternative policy strategies through negotiations documented or endorsed by gathering and evaluating information about the international environment. Implementation involves the process of communicating the agreed foreign policy strategy to other governments and societies and, when appropriate, securing their cooperation towards the relevant policy, usually through

persuasion or other forms of coercion. Diplomacy is used not only in official relations between states, but also in the relations of other political actors with a certain position in world politics. Political groups that are not recognized as states sometimes communicate with states and/or other such groups through intelligence services. As Bull puts it, diplomacy is not limited to sovereign states, but it is one of the main means of communication of the "international community" (Bull 2002, 157-158)

There are many spaces and forms for diplomacy. It can take place bilaterally, multilaterally, in a formal or informal setting, and can be conducted publicly or, more often, in secret. At this point, especially secret diplomacy is an important way of achieving foreign policy objectives. Secret diplomacy is seen as the process of obtaining information from certain individuals and groups, concealing it from all or some, and/or sharing it with others. Depending on the situation, information obtained openly or secretly can be manipulated, distorted, or propagandized to suit national interests or foreign policy objectives. At this point, the fact that secret diplomacy can be covert blurs the boundaries between it and intelligence activities (Murray 2016, 15, 20-21).

Throughout history, diplomacy has been the main factor in international relations. The beginning of this system has two pillars: resident embassies and conferences. Abandoning the temporary method of dispatching special envoys during specific crises, states began to establish permanent embassies in each other's capitals - a practice that originated in 15th-century Italy and rapidly spread across Europe as a significant means of diplomatic communication (Wight 1978, 113). In the final decades of the 18th century, most European states had specialized departments and ministries for foreign policy management. The Congress of Vienna in 1815 provided an opportunity to review and adjust established diplomatic practices. As a result, there was a more than superficial order in the conduct of international politics, and the aftermath of World War I came to be known as the "new diplomacy." Indeed, it is possible to say that an important system of international relations developed in the 100 years following the Napoleonic Wars, particularly in Europe (Hamilton and Langhorne 2011, 93-94).

However, looking at the history of diplomacy, "old diplomacy" is actually not that old. It started in the Renaissance and lasted until World War I. Diplomacy's strengths lie in its ability to maintain order and peace, establish normative frameworks, and engage in self-regulation. However, its weaknesses often stemmed from its closed nature and lack of transparency. The 20th century's "new diplomacy" was born in reaction to the "old" (Weisbrode 2014, 13, 20). Diplomats were considered to be responsible for the war because they had failed to prevent World War I, and therefore, there was a strong reaction against "old diplomacy" and especially against secret diplomacy. It was argued that politics in the future would have to be shaped according to the needs of modern democracy and conducted under more "simple" rules than in the 18th and 19th centuries (Butterfield 1966, 181-182). Moreover,

historically, diplomacy had to adapt to technological developments and changes in economic, political, and social conditions. Railroads, steamships, and the electric telegraph created a communications revolution. This contributed to the definition of the trade and financial problems of industrializing societies' interns of policy objectives, and these problems were included in the field of diplomacy (Hamilton and Langhorne 2011, 93-94).

The new diplomacy was built on "public accountability" as a way to ensure that foreign policy depended on popular consent, on "self-determination" as a state-level extension of the liberal principle of individual rights, and on "collective security" as a mechanism to restrain the arbitrary use of force (Bjola and Kornprobst 2018, 53). The "new diplomacy" inspired by the Wilson Principles was, according to Weisbrode, in fact an interpretation of the views widely held in liberal circles in Britain, the United States, and Europe (Weisbrode 2024, 20).

The post-World War II fear of nuclear war did not put an end to states seeking changes to the status quo, but it did make states feel compelled to seek victories outside the use of force (Butterfield 1966, 190). An increasing number of industrial, social, and technological issues were considered to have an international and, therefore, diplomatic dimension. Moreover, the onset of the Cold War had the effect of reversing Carl von Clausewitz's famous maxim "war is the continuation of politics by other means." Diplomacy is often perceived as a form of warfare carried out by other means. Moreover, like the wars of the 20th century, diplomacy has become "total" both in its goals and in the issues it addresses (Hamilton and Langhorne 2011, 185). This transformation did not diminish the impact of the "new diplomacy" after 1945. It made itself and international politics more acceptable to popular and nominally democratic governments. By designing a communitarian, cooperative language, diplomacy preserved peace in Europe and reframed geopolitical problems as "functional" issues. This process reduced the tendency to use war as a foreign policy tool (Weisbrode 2014, 13, 20).

In the post-Cold War information age, technology-driven changes in the new diplomacy have occurred, and the need for diplomacy to adapt to the "digital world" has emerged. Improved capacity to collect and disseminate information has given policymakers and government institutions new opportunities to communicate their messages and set political agendas outside traditional channels in a world where everyone is increasingly connected. This transformation has been conceptualized as "digital diplomacy" or "DigiPlomacy". The development of e-mail, the use of websites by diplomatic missions and international organizations, and the proliferation of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), and blogs are considered to be key components of digital diplomacy. It has been argued that the adoption of digital diplomacy has changed the way diplomats manage information, engage in public diplomacy, prepare strategies, participate in international negotiations, or even manage crises (Sharma 2023).

New technologies have the potential to facilitate complex diplomatic negotiations and redefine interactions between states and non-state actors (Frey 2024, 107-108). At this juncture, it is possible to say that convenient access to information and the increasing power of information have brought more actors – such as non-state armed actors – into diplomacy (Theander 2021, 2). In addition, technology and globalization have created a new imperative for us to be informed about everything that is happening all over the world. Diplomacy is no longer just about war and peace; it is about keeping track of enemies, rivals, competitors, allies, in short, everything that is happening all over the world (Pathak 2006, 52).

The worldwide adoption of digital platforms has brought with it a wave of openness and transparency that has never been experienced before (Rashica 2019, 23). The digital environment is a leaky place, and it is easier than ever to expose hostile and even peaceful government activity in real time (Wichowski 2015, 52). Indeed, the principle of secrecy in diplomacy is increasingly challenged by the easy dissemination of digital information to global audiences. Recent diplomatic leaks by activists such as Edward Snowden and Julian Assange have led to the perception that "the end of secrecy is near" in the postmodern digital age, where transparency is the order of the day (Bjola 2016, 2).

As a result, the expanding spheres of influence in diplomacy – the diversity of actors, the wave of openness/transparency, and the need for information analysis as a result of technological developments- have created the need for intelligence diplomacy. In the next section, the position of intelligence services in the changing understanding of diplomacy will be analyzed.

The Role of Intelligence Services as Foreign Policy Actors: Intelligence Diplomacy

Diplomacy and intelligence are the two main tools that every modern state, regardless of its political, military, and economic capacity, uses to achieve its foreign policy objectives and protect its national interests and security. Although the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and foreign intelligence services are two different institutions, their operational interests – collecting and analyzing information for foreign policy planning and managing relations with other actors – create a link between them (Markovski 2020, 18).

In the age of globalization, all nations must improve their information-gathering capabilities for both economic prosperity and security. They also have to assess the possibilities of information sharing for international security. This has led to a much closer partnership between diplomacy and intelligence, in terms of operational objectives (Pathak 2006, 51). Diplomacy and intelligence have been intertwined throughout history, and their juxtaposition is not new. However, technological advance has transformed intelligence from a limited "secret information gathering"

tool into a foreign policy instrument that performs a more strategic and proactive role. Communication between policymakers of states and other actors in world politics can also take place without the mediation of diplomats. For example, there is communication through direct meetings of political leaders of states and meetings of officials and intelligence personnel other than diplomats. This transformation took place in the 1960s, when it was believed that fast, direct communication in times of crisis was better than communication between groups specialized in diplomacy, such as the proliferation of "The Hotline" between heads of state (Bull 2002, 172).

As stand-alone institutions, intelligence services began to be part of 20th-century governments, and this association evolved over time, especially in foreign policy affairs. According to Herman, the difference from diplomacy is that intelligence provides information through special methods, while diplomacy uses it (Herman 1998, 1-22). Basically, on the surface, intelligence services gather information and foreign ministries use it to shape policy. Yet, in the background, diplomats also collect classified information.

Diplomacy has many functions, such as negotiation, representation, and communication. However, another purpose is to gather and disseminate information. None of the other functions can be effective without fulfilling this purpose. In other words, obtaining, sharing, and utilizing information for strategic purposes is the basis of diplomacy. States keep information such as designs of weapons, military operations, and diplomatic negotiation tactics secret from other actors. Most countries have official secrecy laws and complex rules on access to sensitive intelligence and national security information. Secrecy is a competitive, built-in aspect of dialogue between states. Illegally collecting information and sharing it with allies or the public has been controversial in all historical periods of diplomacy (Murray 2016, 13-15).

In the first half of the 18th century, Britain had a network of agents covering French and Spanish naval bases. In the same century, the spread of diplomacy led all European countries to seek to intercept and decode foreign diplomatic correspondence. However, intelligence services hardly existed during these centuries in the modern sense of permanent, professional institutions separate from diplomacy and foreign offices. Diplomats were expected to manage their own secret agents as part of their normal information gathering and political action. With the industrial revolution, the reflection of advanced technology on the battlefield produced new forms of warfare that required pre-planning based on information about the capacities of rival armies. This led to the creation of permanent and independent military intelligence departments. Initially, this did not affect the position of diplomacy. Embassies provided information on foreign forces through their military attachés. However, intelligence services grew in the early 20th century. The rate of technical and operational change in military capabilities has increased, and planned mobilization and deployment have increased the value of obtaining adversaries' plans. This made states more secretive about military matters (Herman 1998, 2-3).

In the Cold War period, intelligence and foreign policy became more intertwined as the struggle between the US and the Soviet Union took place in the gray zone due to the nuclear balance. Under the direction of the hegemonic actors of the era, covert operations conducted through foreign intelligence services served as a decisive foreign policy tool to protect national security interests. Covert operations as a means of achieving foreign policy objectives included covert activities such as propaganda, political operations, economic operations, coups, and the use of paramilitary proxies and intelligence services to influence each other's political, economic, military, and social conditions (Gök 2022a, 159-160).

The main objective of these actions is not to inform foreign policy decision-making, but to weaken or overthrow other governments by masking the involvement of the main actor. These activities involve international action, therefore, they obviously become a dimension of foreign policy. Notable examples include the Cold War-era funding of Italian anti-communist parties, the overthrow of governments in Iran and Guatemala, and the support of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan against Soviet forces (Munton 2018, 5).

In the post-Cold War era, advances in information technology brought a wave of openness and transparency in foreign policy, and it became easier than ever to simultaneously disclose secret government activities such as covert operations. This has transformed the relationship between foreign policy, diplomacy, and intelligence services.
Traditionally, while information from intelligence services supports the policy-making process, these services do not generally formulate foreign policy themselves (Munton 2018, 3). Moreover, according to this understanding, intelligence, unlike diplomacy, is not a decision-making and executive institution. In practice, there is often a clear distinction between intelligence and diplomatic professions (Herman 1998, 6).

However, in today's world, intelligence services play an active role in foreign policy-making processes. This new role transforms intelligence services themselves into structures that play a more active role in foreign policy decision-making processes, as opposed to classical intelligence service activities whose scope has long been limited to specific tasks (Darıcılı 2022). According to Mark Lowenthal, intelligence services can make four major contributions to policymaking: avoiding strategic surprises, providing long-term expertise, supporting the policy process, and protecting the confidentiality of information, needs, and methods (Lowenthal 2009).

While covert action and special operations have always existed, traditional diplomacy is being challenged by the expectation that modern-day organizations are increasingly "hunters, not gatherers." The WikiLeaks and Snowden incidents show that leaks of classified diplomatic communications can undermine the trust diplomats need to operate, especially where allies are concerned (Lomas 2021). The value of clandestine diplomacy processes involving intelligence services is that

they are more easily deniable, which is particularly important when the adversary is involved in armed attacks and/or terrorist activities. The role of intelligence services can be to support both national and international dialogue. The intelligence services are, indeed, very useful assets of the political will to engage in dialogue (Scott 2004, 331). With the growth of international cooperation, intelligence services operatives have become regular members of diplomatic missions in friendly and neutral countries, and intelligence has become a form of international diplomacy in its own right (Herman 1999, 203).

Recently, the concept of intelligence diplomacy has attracted growing interest in both academic and policy circles. However, there is not yet a generally accepted definition of the term. Some scholars narrowly define the concept as intelligence sharing with allies. Others see intelligence diplomacy as a more effective and broader form of public diplomacy. In general, intelligence diplomacy refers to the process by which foreign intelligence services are used to inform, encourage cooperation, enable joint actions, and deprive adversaries of strategic advantages. From the US perspective, intelligence diplomacy is used to "support the policies of policymakers in government, strengthen strategic relationships with foreign governments, and promote collective international action based on common interests." According to this perspective, an intelligence diplomacy process must meet three criteria: first, it must involve the public or direct sharing of objective intelligence with a foreign government; second, it should have the purpose of exchanging perspectives with a foreign government on a particular threat or problem; third, it should be done in support of advancing a preferred policy objective that may lead to unilateral, joint or multilateral action (Holmgren 2023).

Despite the diversity of definitions in the literature, this study situates intelligence diplomacy within a more specific and operational framework that extends beyond mere intelligence sharing. In this context, intelligence diplomacy is defined as the process whereby intelligence services, acting on behalf of the state, conduct negotiations, mediate, and engage in information sharing aimed at building trust in conflict environments where traditional diplomatic channels are deadlocked, political costs are high, or official contact carries significant risk. Although conflict resolution is a shared objective of both intelligence and diplomacy, the specific role of intelligence services in this domain has emerged as a distinct and critical area of inquiry. Accordingly, the following section examines this intersection in detail.

Intelligence Diplomacy in Conflict Resolution

While international conflict resolution is a field of study within the discipline of international relations, in terms of actors, it includes state institutions such as foreign ministries and intelligence services, political parties, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, universities, multinational corporations, and media (Gök 2022b, 241).

The aim of conflict resolution is not to avoid conflict, but rather to deal with it in a way that minimizes its inherent negative impact and maximizes its positive potential within the framework of peace values (Sanson and Bretherton 2001, 3). At this point, many different methods can be used together with actors at different levels to establish peace by developing solutions for the parties to the conflict. Today, as a result of the increase and spread of conflicts, different techniques have been forced to be developed for the resolution of conflicts and the search for the development and implementation of peaceful strategies to resolve conflicts through alternative methods involving soft power rather than hard power methods involving the use of force (Gök 2022b, 241).

Conflict resolution methods can generally be handled in four ways: (1) the use of force and coercive measures, (2) judicial and legal processes, (3) formal and informal bilateral methods, and (4) various forms of non-coercive, third-party interventions (which can be undertaken by a range of actors). These four ways of managing conflicts roughly correspond to power-based approaches to conflict (deterrence, sanctions), law-based approaches (invoking legal norms), and interest-based approaches (seeking common interests through bilateral negotiation and third-party mediation). Each approach has different features, characteristics, objectives, and outcomes; each requires different costs and resources, and each may be appropriate for different conflicts (Bercovitch and Gartner 2009, 4-5).

The use of intelligence diplomacy in conflict resolution falls within "interest-based approaches."
States make use of intelligence services as part of conflict resolution, and these actors go beyond gathering information about the parties to strengthen the ground for reconciliation and directly determine strategy as a foreign policy actor. The role of intelligence services in conflict resolution is, in fact, the essence of intelligence diplomacy, which, when used effectively, can provide a state with diplomatic leverage or political advantage.
The main types of activities that intelligence diplomacy involves in conflict resolution can be summarized as "secret negotiations, mediation, and information sharing."

Favored for centuries in resolving international disputes through diplomacy, confidential negotiations are an extremely common and functional method of conflict resolution in which officials of two or more actors discuss their disputes face-to-face. Negotiation is a cost-effective mechanism aimed at creating peace, creating a safe environment for peace to flourish, and ensuring sustainability through the application of justice (Meerts 2015, 21).

Negotiating institutions are successful when they are able to change or sustain the actions of a foreign government in a way that aligns their interests with those of the government they represent. During the communication process, those formulating policies will often revise their objectives in light of changing circumstances and

feedback from the foreign government. The communication process continues until consensus is reached or one government abandons or withdraws its demands (Galanton 2011, 100).

When seeking a solution to an armed conflict or political crisis, the parties involved often resort to secret negotiations. The aim is to avoid public awareness of the existence of negotiations at the outset. In some cases, both the process and its outcomes are intended to remain secret, and in other cases, the parties make the final results, on the whole or in part, public once the process has ended (IFIT 2019).

The most critical actors in secret negotiations, especially in conflicts involving non-state armed actors, are often intelligence services. When determining a negotiating strategy with groups such as terrorist organizations or national liberation movements, the most difficult decision is to strike a balance between secrecy and transparency. One of the main public objections to entering into negotiations is the risk of terrorist organizations legitimizing their aims and means. In such cases, negotiations can destabilize the political structures of the governments involved, hamper international efforts, and set a failed precedent (Neumann 2007, 128).
In order to overcome the obstacles encountered in such conflicts and to create a basis for negotiations, states prefer less visible but more effective intelligence diplomacy. This is because the covert nature and plausible deniability of intelligence activities make it possible to achieve similar foreign policy objectives with less public backlash.

There are many recent examples of secret negotiations between intelligence services and armed non-state actors. The most notable example is the US Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) secret negotiations with the Taliban before the US military's complete withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.
William Burns, then CIA Director, a former diplomat, but who was considered the most experienced secret negotiator of the Joe Biden administration, held the highest-level face-to-face meeting to date on behalf of the US with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the Taliban leaders. It is stated that the negotiations sought a compromise on the US withdrawal process, the political and social situation in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, and the fight against ISIS. The Taliban sees the Afghan branch of ISIS as a threat, and they are in conflict. At this point, the possibility of cooperation between the Taliban and the US on ISIS has emerged (BBC 2021). As a matter of fact, when the statements made by the US are analyzed, official sources frequently state that the most urgent threat in Afghanistan is ISIS and underline that the Taliban also has this idea (The New York Times 2021).

During the same period, a similar secret negotiation process with the Taliban was also conducted by the British Intelligence Service MI6. According to Miller, "The secret talks between the Taliban and MI6 during the evacuation of Kabul represent the final chapter in the British Intelligence Service's longstanding engagement with radical Islamist groups in Afghanistan" (Miller 2021). The strategy of negotiation that

began during the Cold War to break the Soviet sphere of influence continued in 2007 when MI6 agents held talks with Taliban members in Afghanistan to persuade them to stop fighting against the Afghan government (Politics.co.uk 2007). In the recent past, however, senior British intelligence officials held secret talks with the Taliban in Kabul to obtain assurances that Afghanistan would not be used for terrorist attacks against the West (The Telegraph 2021).

There are noteworthy examples in the recent past of negotiation processes carried out within the framework of intelligence diplomacy between states, with important implications for conflict resolution.
In 2020, Yossi Cohen, then head of the Mossad, negotiated the normalization of relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel, which is an important example of intelligence diplomacy. As a result of Cohen's secret negotiations throughout 2020, the UAE officially declared its recognition of Israel on August 13, 2020, and this process was formalized with the "Abraham Accords" signed at the White House on September 15, 2020 (Reuters 2020).

It has a historical significance in that the Arabs, who have long been at odds with Israel over the Palestinian issue, wanted to shift the intra-regional balance of power in their favor due to the growing Iranian threat in the region and took steps of mutual cooperation with Israel in this direction (Yaman and Yiğittepe 2023). In this context, apart from normalizing relations between Israel and the UAE and Israel and Bahrain, geopolitically, the agreements were expected to strengthen the informal anti-Iran alliance in the region, increase pressure on Tehran, and strengthen US ties with key allies in the Middle East (Norlen and Sinai 2020).
A similar example of intelligence diplomacy was seen in the initiatives that paved the way for the normalization process between Türkiye and Egypt in 2023. Hakan Fidan, then the head of the National Intelligence Service of Türkiye (MIT), was involved in secret negotiations for the normalization of Türkiye's bilateral relations with Egypt (Hurriyetdailynews 2023).

Türkiye's improved relations with Egypt can be considered as one of the most important steps in the regional normalization process. The policies pursued by the two countries, which adopted different and even confrontational attitudes towards each other on the basis of discourse in regional crises such as Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, started to harm their regional interests (Ataman 2023). As a matter of fact, these negotiations were conducted with the aim of providing geopolitical and geostrategic benefits to the two countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as being the product of a common interest-based approach.

Another important activity of intelligence diplomacy in conflict resolution is mediation. International conflicts are becoming increasingly complex and pose a threat to global peace and security. In this context, mediation gains key importance as a mechanism to prevent violence and find a peaceful solution. Mediation is a process of intervention by a neutral third party that helps conflict parties to reach

a common understanding and agreement through dialogue and negotiation. This process aims to create an environment of trust where conflicting parties can express their interests and concerns and seek mutually satisfactory compromise options. One of the attractive functions of mediation in international relations is that it can be applied to different types of conflicts and actors. It can be applied to territorial disputes, economic disputes, national identities, and broader contexts such as religious or ethnic conflicts. It is important to emphasize that mediation not only contributes to ending hostilities but also helps to build the foundations for long-term peace and cooperation (Zhomartkyzy 2023, 169-170).

The mediation process is methodological as well as theoretical and needs to be addressed through expert knowledge, sophisticated analysis, and intelligence (Nathan 2014, 225). This is why intelligence services in particular are playing an increasingly important role in mediation processes.
This is because existing mediation approaches and their results have become inadequate over time due to changes in mediation motivations, actors' intentions, and the nature of conflicts. As a result, there have been changes in the nature of mediation with new approaches both in literature and in practice (Kiraz 2020, 230). Because interstate competition has taken on a hybrid character in the gray zone and the element of "plausible deniability" has increased in this process, the mediating ability and scope of traditional diplomacy have been limited.

Similar criticism was made in the summary report of the Fourth Istanbul Mediation Conference, which discussed the development of mediation within the UN. According to the report, although international organizations have played an increasing role in the early stages of conflict and post-conflict phases in the post-Cold War era, their involvement in post-conflict reconstruction is declining. In this respect, there are fewer diplomats but more military and intelligence personnel on the ground today. Therefore, in recent times, conflict resolution has been predominantly focused on intelligence diplomacy: a country can mediate to establish peace in another country through its intelligence services (Herman 1999, 156).

While there are many current examples of mediation involving intelligence services, Türkiye has become one of the actors contributing to the institutional development of mediation by giving importance to mediation activities in its foreign policy since 2010 (Kiraz 2020, 228). In this context, it is seen that MIT has carried out effective mediation activities in conflicts and crises through intelligence diplomacy. MIT has carried out important activities in intelligence diplomacy, such as the exchange of 200 prisoners of war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022, the intelligence contacts between the US and Russia, and the coordination of the prisoner exchange between the two countries (Şahin 2022). The most high-profile of these activities was the most comprehensive prisoner swap between Russia and the US since the Cold War, which took place in Ankara on August 1, 2024, with the mediation of MIT (Seren 2024).

With the organization of MIT, the parties were brought together in Türkiye in July 2024. The swap between citizens of Western countries and Russian citizens

imprisoned in the US, Germany, Poland, Norway, Slovenia, Russia, and Belarus was mediated (Hürriyet Gazetesi 2024). In the operation in which a total of 26 prisoners were exchanged, 10 people detained in the US and other Western countries were released, while Russia handed over 16 prisoners to the US (Seren 2024).

Another recent mediation activity of MIT was between Israel and Hamas after October 7. MIT played an important role in this process, conducting intensive diplomacy with Hamas senior leadership, Israel, Egypt, Qatar, and the US, and mediating between Israel and Palestine on issues such as ceasefire and prisoner exchange. In the context of requests for assistance from foreign countries, MIT mediated the release of some foreign hostages in Gaza and helped Hamas release 5 Thai hostages on January 30, 2025 (Şimşek 2025).

Consequently, when direct negotiations between the parties are not possible, intelligence services as intermediary actors can be involved in conflict resolution not only as information gatherers or analysts, but also as actors managing the technical and strategic components of mediation.
Although intelligence services have become the guiding and decision-making actors in conflict resolution processes, they continue to use the power of information as a tool in intelligence diplomacy. Indeed, information sharing for cooperation in intelligence diplomacy plays a critical role in building trust between the parties and sustaining communication channels.

International intelligence cooperation is the liaison between relevant actors responsible for the collection, analysis, and/or dissemination of intelligence for purposes such as defense, national security, and the prevention and detection of transnational crime, and information sharing is an important step in this process (Born, Leigh and Wills 2015, 15).

Intelligence services tend to protect information because they fear that sharing it could result in disclosure, which could reveal important sources and methods and threaten the organization's ability to collect intelligence in the future (Roach 2012, 131). Since the end of the Cold War, threats have become increasingly transnational in nature. The acceleration of globalization has contributed to the expansion of the scope and pervasiveness of networks engaged in activities such as organized crime, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism. The growth of these transnational threats has forced intelligence services to cooperate with their counterparts in other states to meet these challenges. Although cooperation in certain areas of intelligence operations (e.g., signals intelligence) has been longstanding, particularly among Western states, there has been an increase in both the scope and scale of intelligence cooperation since 9/11 (Leigh 2011, 3).

Intelligence cooperation is also an extension of foreign policy. In many states, intelligence services are very close to the executive, and their work is closely aligned with the priorities of the incumbent government. Generally speaking, intelligence

cooperation will be followed by a state's foreign relations (Born, Leigh and Wills 2015, 17-18).

Shared intelligence is valuable if it sheds light on important foreign policy issues. Recipient states wish to make sure that their partners provide accurate information and analysis-based intelligence that complements their own efforts. Such information, which cannot otherwise be obtained at a reasonable cost, can be useful even if it does not directly lead to changes in foreign policy. For example, shared intelligence can increase confidence in the information held by the receiving state by corroborating existing information. This, in turn, confirms the accuracy of current policy and can reduce the pressure to change strategy (Walsh 2007, 157).

Intelligence components are often difficult to implement, especially in multinational peacekeeping operations. Tactical and strategic cooperation for successful conflict resolution has therefore been limited. As the international community has demanded better and more effective use of peacekeeping forces, a sense of insecurity created by national interests has tightly controlled intelligence cooperation in multinational interventions (Larsson 2010). In such operations, intelligence gathering was mainly undertaken by the intelligence services of the cooperating states (Díaz 2007, 33). On the other hand, the sense of insecurity created by hybrid threats has forced international cooperation mechanisms to be more flexible, especially in terms of intelligence sharing. For example, NATO has reformed its intelligence institutions to facilitate support to member states' foreign policy decision-making and operations, including enhanced warning systems and intelligence sharing against hybrid threats. With the establishment of the Joint Intelligence and Security Division (JISD) in 2017, the Alliance began to unify intelligence sharing to counter hybrid threats and joint operations (Gök 2024). NATO's intelligence-sharing reform was put to the test during Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2022.

In the fall of 2021, US intelligence had strong indications that Russia was preparing to invade Ukraine, and President Biden sent then CIA Director Bill Burns to Russia to conduct intelligence diplomacy. The aim was to make Russia back down by making it feel that its plans were known. However, these contacts did not yield any concrete results. The US then decided to share information with its allies, which was subsequently leaked to the press. This put Russia's military preparations on the agenda of the international community. In January, the US discovered that Russia was planning a fake attack and made it public, thus frustrating the disinformation attempt (Calabresi 2024).

Ultimately, the essence of intelligence diplomacy rests on the growing awareness among relevant actors that information is a strategic asset that, when used wisely, can provide diplomatic leverage. Indeed, the US proactive sharing of intelligence regarding Russian intentions and mobilization with NATO allies prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine not only established a strategic narrative of aggression but also enabled the international community to recognize the true nature of the intervention as it unfolded. Moreover, thanks to this sharing, hybrid warfare strategies such

as "false flag operations", which the Russians successfully employed in the 2014 annexation of Crimea, were ineffective in the 2022 intervention (Shapiro 2024).

The incident clearly demonstrated the utility of intelligence diplomacy as a tool for influence, both in terms of negotiation and information sharing. By effectively using intelligence diplomacy to guide its allies, prepare the international community, and break the psychological superiority of its rival, Russia, the US has added a new dimension to its conflict resolution approaches, even though the conflict in Ukraine continues today.

In conflict resolution, intelligence diplomacy enables information sharing between actors, effective cooperation and swift adaptation to changing priorities and contexts, and efficient resource allocation. Information also enhances situational awareness. Conversely, conflicts may escalate in the absence of such information. The importance and challenges of intelligence sharing in multinational peacekeeping operations were particularly evident in the international community's intervention in Mali following the 2012 uprising by armed separatists against government forces in northern the country. The French-led military intervention that began in early 2013 prevented anti-government forces from advancing further south, and, in the same year, a peacekeeping force was deployed to Mali under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2100 to restore stability in the country. After a decade of operations, a deteriorating security situation, and other setbacks in 2020 and 2021, the French military force withdrew amid deepening distrust of the Malian government's actions and intentions. Subsequently, the UN mission suspended its activities and withdrew its personnel in 2023 after Malian authorities demanded its departure (Sims 2024; Fabra 2022).

The lack of a centralized, trust-based information-sharing system among the actors involved in the Mali mission hindered communication and coordination, ultimately undermining operational effectiveness and leading to mission failure (Sims 2024). Concurrently, a series of political miscalculations, such as the obstruction of negotiation initiatives and the prioritization of broader stability over accountable governance, played a significant role. France's engagement in the Sahel was predicated almost entirely on a military-centric strategy, failing to address the root causes of the conflict. This situation was further exacerbated by operational failures, particularly the collaboration with armed groups, which undermined local state authority and inflamed ethnic tensions (Powell 2022). The French General Directorate for External Security (DGSE) also faced scrutiny for its inability to anticipate these developments, largely attributed to a paucity of reliable human intelligence (HUMINT) assets on the ground. Given that coup preparations were conducted by tightly knit, compartmentalized groups, infiltrating such formations proved exceptionally challenging for foreign entities. This reality underscored the vital importance of intelligence diplomacy and deeper collaboration with local counterparts (Aksan 2023).

The Mali example demonstrates that the capacity to overcome information challenges stemming from uncertainty and complexity is essential for supporting the tactical

and operational levels of peacekeeping missions. Conversely, at the strategic level, it is crucial that information analysts mitigate uncertainty and ambiguity through effective information sharing to clarify the decision-making context (Duursma 2018, 465). In this context, intelligence diplomacy assumes a pivotal role. For peacekeeping missions to succeed, establishing a comprehensive and trust-based diplomatic framework among stakeholders is imperative.

Conclusion

The multiple case analysis conducted in this study reveals that the success of intelligence diplomacy is driven not only by case-specific (idiosyncratic) local dynamics, but also by structural transformations within the international system. The hybridization of the security environment and the proliferation of non-state actors in the post-9/11 era have elevated intelligence services from an auxiliary instrument of foreign policy to a primary diplomatic actor. The findings of the study demonstrate that, challenging the limited conceptualization in the existing literature, intelligence diplomacy plays a constitutive rather than a complementary role in gray zones where formal diplomacy has reached an impasse. The case analysis highlights the fact that the efficacy of intelligence diplomacy is most pronounced in three key activities: covert negotiations, mediation, and information sharing. In regions where state authority is weakened, such as the Middle East, the Sahel, and Eastern Europe (Ukraine), the adaptive nature of intelligence services provides states with significant operational latitude. From back-channel negotiations with the Taliban to prisoner exchanges in the Russia-Ukraine War, numerous examples demonstrate that intelligence diplomacy has evolved from a mere technical instrument of crisis management into a strategic imperative.

Consequently, intelligence diplomacy is no longer a transient expedient for crisis management but an integral element of modern statecraft. However, this expanded mandate inevitably introduces significant legal and normative challenges. Looking forward, intelligence services are expected to evolve into hybrid institutions that not only gather operational data but also monitor ceasefire regimes on the ground and provide solution-oriented analytical frameworks. To ensure the viability of this transformation, it is imperative to establish robust democratic oversight mechanisms, preserve the equilibrium between institutional autonomy and foreign policy objectives, and mitigate operational risks.

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