



Structural Mediation Failure in Multipolar Conflicts: Power Divergence, Drone Warfare, and the Armenia–Azerbaijan Case, 1992–2026

Kingsley Chibueze Osuji¹, Nancy E. Osuji²

¹ Active researcher and scholar, National Research State University of Nizhny Novgorod named after N.I. Lobachevsky

² PhD Candidate, Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

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Corresponding Author:

Kingsley Chibueze Osuji

Abstract:

This article elucidates the persistent ineffectiveness of mediation in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict by presenting a conditional theory that synthesises structural realism, liberal institutionalism, and offense–defense theory. It enquires why consecutive mediation frameworks—the OSCE Minsk Process, Russia's orchestrated instability, the 2020 conflict and truce, and Western mediation—failed to yield lasting peace. The research contends that mediation results are influenced by the interplay of three structural variables: external power convergence, institutional enforcement capacity, and the offense-defense equilibrium established by military technology. The article employs theory-testing process tracing, structured focused comparison, and a meticulous counterfactual analysis of the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) scenario to illustrate that mediation was successful only when great powers were adequately aligned to constrain spoilers, institutions had credible enforcement capabilities, and the military equilibrium did not disproportionately favour unilateral aggression. The 2020 conflict, propelled by Azerbaijan's drone-enhanced offensive dominance, and Russia's strategic overextension post-2022 are examined as pivotal moments where these circumstances deteriorated. The counterfactual indicates that other foreign power combinations during the 2020 ceasefire could have changed the trend. The data further demonstrates that connectivity projects like as TRIPP have evolved into battlegrounds of great-power rivalry, with Russian and Iranian opposition limiting their execution. The results promote a verifiable conditional theory about mediation efficacy in multipolar conflicts, emphasising the importance of enforcement capability and power congruence for enduring peace.

Keywords: Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict; mediation; structural realism; offence–defence theory; drone warfare

1. Introduction

Armenia and Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is more than an ethnic dispute; it reflects the post-Cold War world order. After the USSR's breakup, the conflict quickly became a multilayered geopolitical contest driven by competing nationalisms and foreign strategic interests (De Waal, 2013, p. 160). For nearly thirty years, mediators travelled between Baku and Yerevan offering proposals, roadmaps, and hope for a negotiated conclusion. Diplomacy failed repeatedly. The 2020 conflict and 2023 dissolution of the post-war order revealed mediator shortcomings and structural pressures that affect peace negotiations in disputed regional areas (Hedenskog, 2023, p. 1–12).

The South Caucasus was Russia's strategic perimeter for much of its post-Soviet period, with Moscow overseeing security. The image has changed dramatically. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Azerbaijan's decisive military

assault in 2023, and the 2020 Second Karabakh War destroyed any remaining Russian control. Russia's status as the South Caucasus' main security guarantee has been considerably undermined in recent years, according to Olimjonov (2025, p. 86). Turkey, the EU, the US, and increasingly China and the Gulf nations filled the vacuum, cluttered the geopolitical arena.

The 2025–2026 launch of the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) marks a turning point. TRIPP was inspired by the US-mediated Joint Declaration of August 2025 and represents a bold effort to reconstruct South Caucasus connectivity, according to De Waal and Shiriyevev (2026). Armenia's Zangezur Corridor connects mainland Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan. A 'new corridor for transit traffic along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border, totally under Armenian jurisdiction and managed by Armenian border and customs agencies, employing advanced technological solutions' is proposed (de Waal and Shiriyevev, 2026, p. 2). This differs from prior Russian models that assumed Russian route oversight. TRIPP faces geopolitical opposition from Russia and Iran, who view it as a Western-backed intrusion into their territories (İşçi, 2026, p. 58). The data below shows that TRIPP has become a connectivity project and a great-power battleground, supporting this study's conditional theory of mediation's structural dynamics. This study argues that mediation's failure is not just due to institutional incompetence, diplomatic ignorance, or local group obstinacy. Three structural variables—external power convergence, mediating institution or hegemon enforcement capability, and offense-defense equilibrium influenced by military technology—determined mediation outcomes. Mediation was only effective when major powers were aligned to restrain spoilers, institutions had credible enforcement mechanisms, and dominant military technology did not favour unilateral aggression. This conditional theory is tested through thorough empirical examination of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict from 1992 to 2025, including the OSCE Minsk Process, Russia's managed instability model, the 2020 war, the post-2022 truce deterioration, and current Western mediation efforts. The methodologically rigorous TRIPP scenario examines whether a different external involvement at the 2020 critical ceasefire juncture could have changed the conflict's trajectory.

Research is driven by two questions. How have great power strategies affected this conflict's mediation frameworks' development, flaws, and evolution? Second, how can these dynamics explain power distribution, institutional limits, and military technology in mediation processes? The research shows that mediation in multipolar environments depends on systemic power dynamics, enforcement legitimacy, and battlefield technology, not peace offers' moral appeal.

The conflict between mediation frameworks and regional power dynamics motivates the research. After thirty years of diplomatic efforts, the conflict remains unresolved. The forced departure of all Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 was not a resolution; it was the conclusion of systemic decay that began after the 1994 ceasefire. Since Russia, Turkey, the US, and the EU had competing interests, successive mediation efforts failed to resolve the security challenges. In 2020 and 2023, this mismatch promoted unilateral military escalation, hampered institutional efforts, and prevented credible enforcement mechanisms. Ongoing relocation, militarisation, economic instability for both communities, and the collapse of a de facto political community have cost many lives. In this context, great nations often use mediation for geopolitical rivalry rather than conflict resolution. This scenario requires an

explanatory model that integrates power distribution, technical differences, and systemic rivalry—a gap in current research that this study addresses.

2. Review of Existing Literature

Early academic research on the Karabakh conflict focused on the OSCE Minsk Group's potential involvement in negotiating a resolution (Hopmann, 2015, p. 163). The 1990s saw a true liberal moment, propelled by optimism that post-Cold War institutions could address even the most intractable frozen issues. That optimism has faded. Later research has shown that institutional mediation is limited in environments with severe power disparities and external players unwilling to prioritise collective security over their own strategic interests (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 15). The Minsk Group's co-chairmanship by France, Russia, and the US was supposed to reflect great-power interests, but it instead expressed their different agendas. Russia's security promises to Armenia and Turkey's growing military assistance for Azerbaijan complicated the mediation process. This circle of dependency and obstruction reinforced itself (Jovic-Lazic, 2022, p. 33).

Technological advances that helped Baku succeed have been studied recently. Beyond conventional warfare, the 2020 battle showed how drone warfare might precisely weaken a state's defensive framework. Shrivastava (2025) succinctly describes this transformation: 'Drones did not change how wars are fought; they transformed who can win them.' Azerbaijan used drones to degrade Armenia's defence capabilities in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, exhibiting remarkable operational effectiveness. Instead of elite pilots, remote-controlled platforms neutralised tanks, artillery, and stationary air-defense systems. This alteration in the offence–defence balance hindered diplomatic engagement because Azerbaijan saw a military opportunity (Khalilzada, 2024, p. 201). In accordance with offence–defence theory, states with offensive capabilities are more likely to engage in military fait accompli rather than negotiate sincerely. The 2020 ceasefire and its aftermath have revived attention to Russia's mediation decline. After Ukraine's invasion, Russia's peacekeepers along the Lachin corridor have been less effective at maintaining order. Russia is involved in a protracted struggle that requires its full economic resources, preventing it from maintaining its historically strong influence in the South Caucasus before 2022, according to Avdaliani (2025). This strategic overstretch allowed Turkey to exert influence over Baku and allowed the EU to be more assertive.

Recent study has critically examined new connectivity projects and their geopolitical effects. De Waa and Shiriyev (2026) analysed TRIPP and called it a revolutionary development in the South Caucasus. The US-brokered Joint Declaration in August 2025 was signed by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who declared that the trilateral ceasefire agreement of November 2020 had expired and that a "new chapter in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations commenced on August 8, 2025, with the formal establishment of peace."TRIPP creates a new transit route along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border under Armenian law and border and customs agencies. This effort uses cutting-edge technology (de Waal and Shiriyev, 2026, p. 1). Geopolitical opposition has plagued the endeavour. According to İşçi (2026, p. 56-59), Russia and Iran view the idea as a Western-backed intrusion into their historical region of influence. Neither party can block the passage, but both can slow it down.

Liberals believe economic integration and connecting corridors are the best way to achieve enduring peace (Hover,

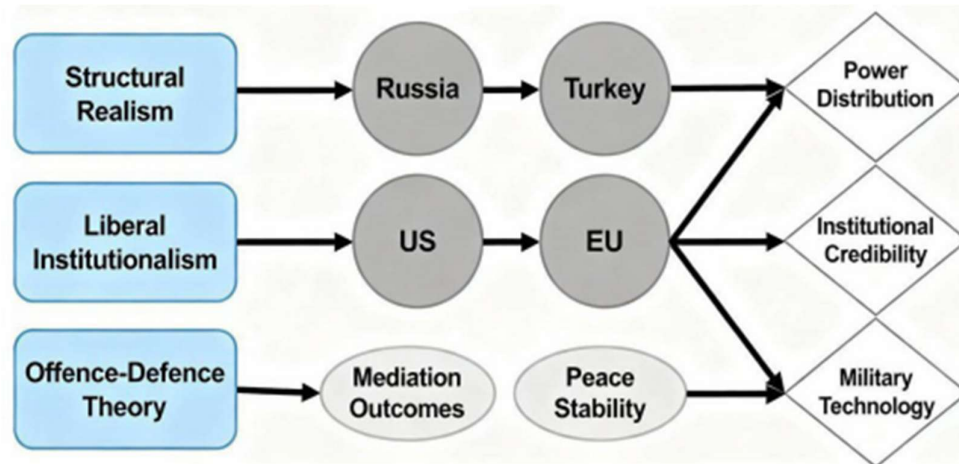
Buchenrieder and Sokolsky, 2025, p. 8). The EU's Brussels-format mediation efforts after 2022 emphasise border delimitation and regional economic integration. Charles Michel, President of the European Council, called the April 6 summit a significant occasion, highlighting the EU's expanding mediation role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process (The Center for Analysis, 2022, p. 2). These projects face systemic resistance. Russia and Iran, concerned about an East–West communication corridor that bypasses their influence, have aggressively slowed this endeavour (Koolae et al., 2024, p. 4). The South Caucasus is a hub for studying multipolar dynamics, which involve Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Western countries competing for influence in a fragmented Russian-centric framework (Olimjonov, 2025, p. 84).

The current literature shows that institutional design, technical evolution, and hegemonic decline are key to the issue. It seldom combines power distribution, institutional capacity, and military technology in an analytical framework. This study proposes and tests a conditional theory that incorporates these components to fill the gap.

3. A Conditional Theory of Mediation Effectiveness

This study uses a conditional framework to combine structural realism, liberal institutionalism, and offence–defence theory to understand mediation's success or failure. No single variable determines results; rather, external power convergence, institutional enforcement, and offensive and defensive measures do.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



[Source: Author's conceptual synthesis]

Structural realism helps analyse how great-power competition affects mediation outcomes (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 45; Waltz, 1979, p. 102). According to Allison (2013, p. 13), Russia's pursuit of a privileged sphere of influence, Turkey's regional assertiveness, and the US and EU's inconsistent involvement have created a fragmented external environment in the South Caucasus. Due to strategic conflicts, this intricacy has hampered mediation. Russia's 'managed instability' policy has helped it maintain influence over Armenia and Azerbaijan, while limiting Western participation (İşçi, 2026, p. 50). From this perspective, mediation results reflect the interests and capacities of the prevailing parties, not the neutrality of the process.

Liberal institutionalism illuminates platforms like the OSCE Minsk Group's structure and restrictions. Institutions can improve cooperation by reducing uncertainty, improving communication, and integrating states into normative frameworks (Keohane, 1984, p. 9). The Minsk Group and EU governance initiatives represented these goals. The lack of coercive enforcement measures greatly reduced their effectiveness; liberal peacebuilding is greatly weakened without hard power (Paris, 2004a, p. 42). Despite its procedural complexity, the Minsk Process was unable to force a resolution with a revisionist state sponsored by a large power.

Offence–defence theory explains how technical improvement has changed geopolitical calculations, compressing negotiating windows and making diplomacy secondary. The simplicity of offensive techniques compared to defensive ones affects whether governments seek security through collaboration or territorial expansion, according to Jervis (1978, p. 187). Azerbaijan's purchase of advanced drones and precision-strike weapons from Turkey and Israel has changed the offense-defense balance, diminishing Armenia's negotiating power. Baku now believes its military advancement is limited only by its operations speed.

These three perspectives yield three testable hypotheses:

- H1 (Power Convergence): Mediation succeeds only when the preferences of external great powers converge on a common outcome. Where preferences diverge, mediation is instrumentalised as a tool of geopolitical competition, undermining the peace process (Lake, 2017, p. 78; Allison, 2013, p. 13).
- H2 (Institutional Enforcement): Institutional mediation fails under an offense-dominant military balance unless the institution possesses credible enforcement capacity (peacekeepers, coercive sanctions). In the absence of such capacity, the state with the offensive advantage will pursue unilateral military action (Walter, 2002, p. 89).
- H3 (Technological Asymmetry): Significant technological asymmetry—particularly in offensive weaponry such as drones and precision-strike systems—compresses negotiation windows, as the advantaged state perceives its opportunity for military gain as temporary (Ščavničar and Oblak, 2023, p. 9308).

A causal mechanism links these ideas by turning structural difficulties into mediation failure. Power asymmetry and a powerful patron limit negotiation space since the weaker side has few concessions and the stronger party has little incentive to yield. This increases unilateral incentives since the stronger state believes armed action will be more beneficial than diplomacy. International mediation fails, and military action resolves the situation (Fearon, 1995, p. 383; Schelling, 2020, p. 98). The mechanism appears in all four cases. The Minsk Process languished in the 1990s and 2000s due to external power divergence and OSCE enforcement weaknesses. Azerbaijan's military modernisation in the 2010s changed the offense-defense balance, reducing Armenia's influence (SIPRI, 2024). Russia's managed instability approach provided temporary stability but collapsed owing to technology and strategic overextension after 2022. Western mediation was morally appealing but restricted by enforcement and tremendous power alignment.

4. Methodology

Understanding mediation's repeated failures and the collapse of seemingly stable moments requires a methodological framework that accounts for causal mechanisms, temporal sequences, and structural restrictions. This thesis views the

Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict as a structurally embedded battle impacted by regional power dynamics, military technology, and overseas geopolitical engagement. Process tracing, organised focused comparison, and methodologically rigorous counterfactual analysis are used in the qualitative, theory-testing investigation.

The report examines the OSCE Minsk Process (1992–2020), Russia's managed instability model (2008–2020), the 2020 conflict and truce, and Western mediation measures (2022–2025). Using a vital juncture framework, situations are picked most-likely/least-likely. Institutional mediation like the Minsk Process has normative foundations, co-chairing by major countries, and institutionalisation. The failure shows the limits of institutional mediation in circumstances of foreign power divergence and a military balance favouring aggression. Russia's controlled instability model suggests hegemonic mediation due to its coercive power and historical impact (Allison, 2013, p. 13; Toal, 2017, p. 78). The partial success and eventual failure show the limits of hegemonic mediation throughout technical and political transformation. Drone warfare disrupts the offense-defense equilibrium in the 2020 conflict, making it an ideal test of the theory that technology disparity limits negotiation opportunities (Freedman, 2017, p. 115). TRIPP counterfactual is a methodical scenario to determine if other external power alignments affected mediation outcomes. Theory-testing process tracing is used to determine if the causal mechanisms worked in each case. Process tracing requires deep engagement with the case to chronicle a continuous sequence of events, motivations, and responses to identify causal-process observations that support or refute causal chain stages. Primary documents (peace proposals, ceasefire agreements, and joint declarations, including the 1994 Bishkek Protocol, the Madrid Principles, and the 2020 Trilateral Statement); official speeches and statements by Presidents Putin, Aliyev, and Michel, Prime Ministers Pashinyan and Sargsyan, and State Department officials; and military balance data from the SIPRI and IISS. The evidence is evaluated using hoop, smoking-gun, and straw-in-the-wind tests. Azerbaijan's 2020 drone destruction of Armenian air defences proves that technical mismatch limited negotiation power (SIPRI, 2024). The Minsk Group's persistent conflict between Russia, the US, and France challenges the idea that foreign powers must align for mediation to succeed (Hopmann, 2015, p. 4).

External power convergence is estimated by aligning public comments, joint communiqués, diplomatic cooperation, and military deployments. Peacekeepers, monitoring systems, sanctioning procedures, and coercive instruments determine institutional enforcement power. The offense-defense balance is determined by drone strike frequency, air defence suppression, territory changes, ISR supremacy, and cost-exchange ratios. The TRIPP counterfactual follows Fearon (1991, p. 170) and Tetlock and Belkin (1996, p. 7) methods: It claims that the US, EU, and Turkey formed a multilateral enforcement coalition instead of relying solely on Russian guarantorship after the November 2020 ceasefire, and it follows a minimal rewrite rule, modifying only the mediator and enforcement mechanism while maintaining battlefield outcomes and core interests. The historical lack of sustained U.S. involvement, the EU's limited hard-power capabilities, and Turkey's alignment with Baku are plausible constraints, but the scenario remains feasible because no actor must violate its fundamental interests to improve coordination and resource allocation.

Current geopolitical research is examined in the TRIPP scenario. Russia and Iran oppose the TRIPP, according to De Waal, Kochinyan, and Shiriyevev (2026). The research evaluates the practicality and geopolitical implications of the TRIPP plan using interviews with EU diplomats and Moscow-based foreign policy experts, official comments, and

policy documents. The counterfactual analysis uses this evidence to reinforce its empirical base and policy significance. The four scenarios are compared using identical standardised questions to examine power convergence, institutional enforcement, and the offense-defense equilibrium (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 67). The TRIPP scenario is counterfactual and speculative, core negotiating records are scarce, and drone incident data may be biased. However, triangulation of varied data types and strict analysis approaches support theoretical results. According to qualitative research, explanatory coherence and causal pathways are prioritised over prediction accuracy.

5. Empirical Analysis: Mediation Frameworks in the South Caucasus, 1992–2025

To situate the case studies, it is helpful to establish the temporal architecture of the conflict’s mediation history. The timeline below captures the major initiatives, turning points, and escalations that structure the analysis.

Table 1. Mediation Frameworks in the South Caucasus, 1992–2025

Year	Event	Significance
1992	OSCE Minsk Group established	Multilateral mediation framework created with Russia, US, France as co-chairs
1994	Bishkek Protocol ceasefire	First ceasefire ends active hostilities of First Karabakh War
2007	Madrid Principles proposed	Co-chairs present basic principles for settlement
2008	Moscow Declaration signed	Russia brokers declaration reaffirming Madrid Principles
2011	Kazan meeting	Closest attempt to agree on Madrid Principles fails
2016	April Four-Day War	First major ceasefire violation; drone warfare begins to appear
2020 (Sep-Nov)	Second Karabakh War	44-day war; Azerbaijan's drone-enabled offensive recaptures territories
2020 (Nov 9-10)	Trilateral Ceasefire Statement	Russia brokers ceasefire; Russian peacekeepers deployed
2021 (Jan 11)	Putin-Aliyev-Pashinyan summit	Agreement on unblocking economic and transport links
2021 (Nov 26)	Sochi summit	Leaders agree to establish border delimitation commission
2022 (Apr 6)	Brussels summit (Michel)	First EU-mediated summit; agreement to start peace treaty negotiations
2022 (Feb)	Russia invades Ukraine	Russian resources diverted; regional influence begins to decline
2023 (Sep)	Azerbaijan's offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh	Russian peacekeepers do not intervene; Armenian authorities surrender
2023 (Oct)	Nagorno-Karabakh Republic dissolved	De facto end of separatist entity
2025 (Aug)	Washington summit	Joint Declaration signed; TRIPP framework announced

2025-2026	TRIPP implementation phase	New connectivity architecture emerges; Russian and Iranian resistance intensifies
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Source: compiled by author from case materials

The transition from multilateral institutional mediation via the OSCE to unilateral hegemonic control by Russia, culminating in a fractured multipolar landscape, is readily evident. The advent of TRIPP in 2025–2026 signifies an advancement: the launch of a US-led connectivity program that has transformed into a domain of intensified great-power rivalry. The subsequent subsections evaluate the conditional theory in relation to each principal mediation framework, with a specific focus on the geopolitical aspects of the TRIPP effort.

5.1 The OSCE Minsk Process (1992–2020): Institutional Mediation Lacking Enforcement

The OSCE Minsk Process originated in 1992 as one of the initial and most ambitious efforts to formalise mediation in the post-Soviet region. Established in the wake of the liberal optimism post-Cold War, the Minsk Group—co-chaired by Russia, the United States, and France—was anticipated to resolve the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict via continuous conversation and confidence-building initiatives (De Waal, 2013, p. 229). After nearly three decades, it failed to avoid recurring violence, establish a mutually acceptable settlement, or avert the 2020 conflict. The trajectory illustrates the structural constraints of institutional mediation in a context characterised by external power disparities, lack of enforcement, and a fluctuating offense-defense equilibrium.

The Minsk Process was predicated on two assumptions: that the co-chairs would synchronise diplomatic activities and deliver cohesive proposals, and that the OSCE’s normative framework—highlighting territorial integrity and self-determination—could underpin negotiations (Hopmann, 2015, p. 169–170). In practice, neither criterion was satisfied. The OSCE possessed insufficient peacekeeping powers and lacked sanctions authority; its actions necessitated consensus, hence granting each co-chair veto power. The co-chairs represented states with conflicting geopolitical interests. Russia perceives the South Caucasus as inside its exclusive sphere of influence (Melvin, 2024, p. 5); the United States assesses the region primarily in terms of energy security (Cohen, 2018, p. 26); and France's engagement is influenced, in part, by domestic political factors. The discrepancies compromised the integrity of the mediation initiative and enabled local entities to capitalise on foreign differences (Huseynov, 2025, p. 7–8).

The 1994 Bishkek Protocol, which concluded the first Nagorno-Karabakh war, represented the inaugural significant accomplishment of the Process; yet, it was devoid of enforcement mechanisms. No peacekeeping operation was initiated, and no oversight system was implemented. The ceasefire just suspended the conflict without resolving it, so validating the second hypothesis: institutional mediation is ineffective in an offense-dominant balance when enforcement power is lacking (Turan and Michael, 2021, p. 8). The subsequent Madrid Principles (2007, updated 2009 and 2011) proposed a gradual resolution encompassing territorial withdrawals, the repatriation of displaced individuals, provisional status for Nagorno-Karabakh, and a future referendum. However, the co-chairs lacked a cohesive plan. Russia favoured a resolution that maintained its power; the United States regarded the conflict as subordinate to overarching goals; France's involvement was predominantly symbolic. The disparity between the co-chairs provides compelling support for the first hypothesis: mediation is effective solely when the inclinations of great powers align

(Muhittin and Piriñçi, 2021, p. 22–24).

By the 2010s, ceasefire violations had proliferated, and the OSCE's limited monitoring mission shown ineffectiveness (International Crisis Group, 2021, p. 28). The April War of 2016 illustrated that the existing situation was unsustainable. Azerbaijan's military modernisation, driven by hydrocarbon income and the procurement of Turkish and Israeli drones, has significantly shifted the offense-defense equilibrium (Turan and Michael, 2021, p. 31). Armenia, dependent on antiquated Soviet-era air defences, with inadequate counter-drone capabilities. This technology disparity constricted the negotiation area, hence validating the third theory. Azerbaijani declarations progressively indicated confidence in a military resolution, whilst Armenia's political rhetoric became more rigid, especially following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which threw fresh difficulties into its relations with Moscow (Markarov et al., 2018, p. 5). The OSCE's failure to respond effectively to the April War and the July 2020 Tovuz events exposed its institutional ineffectiveness.

Upon the outbreak of conflict on 27 September 2020, the Minsk Group was marginalised. The co-chairs released remarks advocating for caution but did not engage much in negotiations. The ceasefire negotiated solely by Russia on 10 November 2020 signified the conclusive failure of the Minsk Process. The failure was structural rather than diplomatic: divergent external powers hindered united mediation, institutional frailty compromised enforcement, and technology asymmetry altered incentives towards unilateral action.

5.2 Russia's 'Managed Instability' (2008–2020): Hegemonic Domination and Its Constraints

Russia's strategy toward the conflict was both essential and destabilising. In contrast to the OSCE, Moscow had both the ability to coerce and the geopolitical intent to directly influence results (Allison, 2013, p. 19). Its strategy was focused not on liberal conflict resolution but on managed instability: a calculated maintenance of controlled tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan to sustain Moscow's influence, limit Western engagement, and prevent either state from extricating itself from its sphere of influence (Nigâr and Zaur, 2013, p. 139).

Russia employed leverage via a dual-track strategy: providing extensive security support to Armenia, including a military installation in Gyumri and subsidised armaments, while simultaneously enhancing economic and military relations with Azerbaijan, to which it delivered advanced equipment valued in the billions (SIPRI, 2024). This dualism enabled Moscow to exert influence over both factions while obstructing any from attaining definitive dominance—at least until drone warfare unsettled the balance. The 2008 Moscow Declaration, executed under President Medvedev's tenure, represented Russia's initial significant effort to formalise its dominance (Remler, 2016, p. 99). It reiterated the Madrid Principles but lacked enforcement measures or timetables, primarily aimed to illustrate Moscow's convening authority and to diminish Western influence.

Russia's mediation depended on three mechanisms: providing security guarantees to Armenia, facilitating military deliveries to both parties, and exercising diplomatic gatekeeping. By conducting negotiations in Sochi, Kazan, and Moscow, Russia established itself as the principal mediator. The 2011 Kazan meeting, regarded as the nearest the parties approached consensus, disintegrated at the final juncture due to disputes regarding sequencing and security assurances, with Russia's hesitance to deploy peacekeepers without more extensive concessions (Remler, 2016, p.

109–110). Azerbaijan, fortified by increasing military expenditure, came to perceive discussions as less beneficial than victories on the battlefield. The April War of 2016 signified a pivotal moment, as Azerbaijan's deployment of Israeli drones indicated the deterioration of the controlled equilibrium that Russia aimed to uphold (Kınık and Çelik, 2021, p. 175). The swift imposition of a ceasefire by Russia solidified its position as a crucial mediator, while also serving as compelling evidence for the third hypothesis: technological imbalance was emerging as a critical factor.

The Velvet Revolution in Armenia in 2018 brought an additional challenge. Despite Prime Minister Pashinyan's initial endorsement of the strategic relationship with Russia, his government's reforms and diminished predictability undermined Moscow's trust in Yerevan as a dependable customer, thus diminishing its motivation to restrict Azerbaijan. By 2020, Azerbaijan had acquired a substantial drone arsenal, including Turkish Bayraktar TB2s and Israeli Harop loitering missiles, which significantly transformed the offense-defense equilibrium. Upon the outbreak of war, Russia rejected Armenia's requests for CSTO intervention, permitting Azerbaijan to undermine a partner that had become increasingly unpredictable. This response indicated that Russian and CSTO defence responsibilities to Armenia pertain solely to the territory of the Republic of Armenia and do not encompass the areas of Azerbaijan that Armenia had occupied. Consequently, conflict in the occupied regions would not legally activate Russia's CSTO responsibilities, although hostilities within Armenian territory could.

The ceasefire of 10 November 2020 was enforced rather than negotiated. Russia stationed peacekeepers, reaffirmed its essential role, and diminished the influence of the Minsk Group. The peacekeeping mission was devoid of a definite mandate and enduring assurances; it relied solely on Russia's capacity to exert influence. This capability was rigorously challenged during the comprehensive invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which redirected military assets, undermined international legitimacy, and stretched economic resources. Russia was unable to impede Azerbaijan's ensuing military operations. Armenia openly challenged Russia's dependability, the CSTO declined to engage during Azerbaijani intrusions, and the EU initiated a monitoring mission to address the void. The managed instability model of Russia disintegrated due to its reliance on a capacity that had dissipated.

The model demonstrates the interaction of three structural variables: the absence of external power convergence, selective and self-interested institutional enforcement, and technological asymmetry that disrupted the regulated equilibrium. The causal sequence—power imbalance diminishing negotiation space and amplifying unilateral motivations—inevitably resulted in the collapse of hegemonic mediation (Fearon, 1995, p. 402).

5.3 The 2020 Conflict and Armistice: Unmanned Aerial Combat and the Deterioration of Diplomatic Efforts

The 2020 war represented the most significant disruption in the conflict since 1994, exposing the vulnerability of the post-ceasefire arrangement and the transformative influence of unmanned systems on the offense-defense equilibrium. The situation resulted from structural forces that had accumulated over more than a decade: Azerbaijan's prolonged military modernisation, Armenia's political fragility, and Russia's strategic indifference (Muhittin and Piriñçi, 2021, p. 217; Kofman, 2020).

During a significant portion of the post-1994 era, deterrence was based on a tenuous military equilibrium. By the early 2010s, Azerbaijan's defence expenditure has escalated to amounts surpassing Armenia's whole state budget (SIPRI, 2024).

Bolstered by petroleum funds, Baku made substantial investments in precision-guided missiles, advanced artillery, and, importantly, an advanced drone arsenal. Armenia, fiscally limited and strategically reliant on Russia, maintained a focus on static defence, possessing obsolete air defences and without effective counter-UAV capabilities. This expanding capability disparity significantly transformed strategic assessments. President Aliyev's discourse in the pre-war years exhibited a burgeoning confidence in a military resolution, and the Tovuz confrontations of July 2020 illustrated Azerbaijan's readiness to escalate (Kucera, 2019). Turkey's overt political and military support has strengthened Baku, situating the conflict within a wider regional context. Azerbaijan recognised a diminishing timeframe for military operations to yield conclusive outcomes prior to external intervention (Muhittin and Pirinççi, 2021, p. 227).

Armenia, in contrast, commenced the conflict encumbered by strategic errors. It presumed that Russia would engage militarily should the crisis intensify, although Moscow's consistent indications that CSTO duties were solely to Armenia's internationally recognised territory. It also misjudged the lethality of drone warfare, adhering to antiquated principles of positional warfare. The political upheaval following the revolution diminished its diplomatic standing and lessened Russia's motivation to constrain Baku.

The conflict progressed rapidly, demonstrating the drone-centric operational strategy that Azerbaijan had refined. Bayraktar TB2s accurately targeted Armenian armoured units and air defences, while Harop loitering munitions engaged radar systems, and continuous ISR platforms allowed Azerbaijani troops to detect and exploit vulnerabilities in real time (Kınık and Çelik, 2021, p. 182). Armenia's Soviet-era air defence system, centred on the S-300 and Osa-AK, demonstrated significant susceptibility. In the initial fortnight, numerous air defence systems were obliterated, establishing a conducive atmosphere for subsequent UAV operations—an unequivocal validation of the third premise. The seizure of Shusha on 8 November, utilising drone-assisted neutralisation of Armenian artillery and special troops penetrating wooded areas, constituted the pivotal strike. Armenia was unable to establish a robust defence, and Azerbaijan, currently in control of the crucial elevations overlooking Stepanakert, had no motivation to engage in negotiations.

The ceasefire on 10 November 2020, exclusively mediated by Russia, formalised Azerbaijan's territorial acquisitions, deployed Russian peacekeepers, and altered the geopolitical landscape of the region (UN-Peacemaker, 2020). Aliyev's triumphant speech characterised the remark as equivalent to Armenia's military surrender (Aliyev, 2020). The pact had significant structural ambiguities: the peacekeeping mandate lacked clarity, enforcement measures were nonexistent, and its sustainability relied solely on Russia's potential for power projection—an ability that would be considerably diminished post-2022. The 2020 conflict epitomises the point at which the three structural variables converged most significantly: external power divergence, inadequate institutional enforcement, and a pronounced offensive advantage, resulting not in a negotiated settlement but in a military fait accompli.

5.4 The Diminution of Russia's Mediation Capacity Post-2022

The military campaign conducted by Russia in Ukraine in February 2022 dramatically transformed the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. The Kremlin's military overextension limited its ability to address peripheral issues, significantly damaging its reputation as the primary security guarantor (Olimjonov, 2025, p. 86). Armenian Prime

Minister Pashinyan condemned Russia's inaction and initiated a shift towards Western institutions, stating before parliament in March 2023 that 'the security system of which we were a part has failed.' We must vary our security arrangements (Barseghyan, 2024). Subsequent joint military exercises with the United States and enhanced dialogue with the European Union ensued. Significantly, Russia's peacekeeping mission remained passive throughout Azerbaijan's invasion in September 2023, resulting in the breakup of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and the evacuation of its Armenian populace (Barseghyan, 2024; Chechelashvili, Kekelidze, and Kharshiladze, 2025, p. 20). The diminishment of Russian capability created opportunities for alternative mediators. The European Union, under the Brussels format spearheaded by Charles Michel, has become a prominent diplomatic entity, establishing a dual mediation framework in conjunction with the Moscow track (Huseynov, 2022, p. 36). The area transformed into, as Avdaliani described, a 'highly congested geopolitical arena' characterised by the competition of many countries for influence (Avdaliani, 2025).

5.5 Western Mediation (2022–2025): Liberal Peacebuilding in a Structurally Constrained Context

The interval from 2022 to 2025 saw the remarkable emergence of Western entities—the European Union and the United States—as important diplomatic participants. This transition was more a result of Russia's geopolitical overreach than a calculated strategy, resulting in a vacuum that allowed the EU and the U.S. to participate in previously unattainable ways (Chechelashvili, Kekelidze and Kharshiladze, 2025, p. 15; Bilban and Labarre, 2024, p. 28). However, Western mediation occurred within structural limitations that curtailed its efficacy.

The Brussels Process, launched by European Council President Charles Michel in late 2021, marked the European Union's longest prolonged diplomatic involvement in the South Caucasus since the early 2000s. Articulated within the framework of liberal peacebuilding—advocating for dialogue, border demarcation, economic interconnectivity, and a 'stable, secure, and prosperous South Caucasus'—it significantly appealed to Armenia, which aimed to diversify its security alliances following Russia's lack of intervention in 2020 and 2022 (Panahova, 2024, p. 192).

Nevertheless, the EU was deficient in enforcement measures and military leverage; its influence relied solely on the countries' readiness to participate. Azerbaijan perceived the Brussels Process as a means to reinforce its post-2020 achievements and obtain international acknowledgement of its territorial integrity, whilst Armenia regarded it as a strategy to diminish reliance on Russia. Both parties did not perceive the EU as a provider of security assurances. The establishment of the European Union Monitoring Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in 2023, although symbolically important as the inaugural Western security presence along Armenia's borders, lacked the mission to function within Azerbaijan, possessed no enforcement authority, and had no ability to prevent military escalation. Azerbaijan's effort in September 2023 demonstrated that EUMA was powerless to intervene, providing compelling empirical evidence that organisations lacking enforcement capabilities cannot constrain players with significant unilateral incentives (Bilban and Labarre, 2024, p. 18).

From 2022, the United States resumed diplomatic engagement, motivated by a combination of factors: combating Russian influence, promoting democratic reforms in Armenia, and stabilising energy corridors. Washington conducted many rounds of negotiations, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscoring the necessity for a 'sustainable and

respectful peace' (Embassy of Armenia to the USA, 2026). However, the Washington discussions encountered identical structural limitations as the Brussels Process. The military superiority of Azerbaijan and the susceptibility of Armenia constrained the potential for compromise, while the U.S. possessed insufficient enforcement capabilities to dissuade Azerbaijani coercion. The 2025 Joint Declaration, which delineates principles for normalization—mutual recognition of territorial integrity, border demarcation in accordance with the Alma-Ata Declaration, and the unblocking of regional transport routes—constituted a notable diplomatic accomplishment, yet it did not serve as a peace treaty (Xuclà, 2025, p. 237; Алма-Атинская Декларация, 1991). The execution relied on the parties' desire and the capacity of other players to enforce it. Azerbaijan employed military leverage—incursions, the blockade of the Lachin corridor, and continuous pressure—during the negotiations to influence results, while Western mediators could merely denounce these acts without the capacity to avert them. The September 2023 offensive, which eradicated Nagorno-Karabakh, solidified Azerbaijan's complete triumph and exacerbated the asymmetry (Caprile and Przetacznik, 2023, p. 3).

Western mediation brought novel frameworks and enhanced communication; nonetheless, it could not surmount the structural determinants that influenced the dispute. The convergence of external powers remained unfinished, as Turkey and Russia advanced their individual objectives; institutional enforcement capabilities were inadequate; and the offense-defense equilibrium continued to favour Azerbaijan. The result was normatively ambitious yet strategically limited diplomacy—an explicit demonstration of the fundamental assertions of the conditional theory.

5.6 The TRIPP Initiative: Connectivity as a Sphere of Great-Power Rivalry

The introduction of the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) in 2025–2026 signifies a notable advancement in the mediation and connectivity framework of the South Caucasus. Following the Joint Declaration of August 2025, TRIPP presents an extensive framework for regional connectivity focused on the Zangezur Corridor—a transit route through Armenia linking mainland Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave. As documented in the publications released by the U.S. The idea presented by Embassy Baku (2025) suggests a 'new transit route along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border, entirely under Armenian authority and managed by Armenian border and customs agencies, using modern technical technologies.'

The TRIPP framework, as outlined in the TRIPP Implementation Framework (TIF) released by the U.S. The State Department (United States, 2026) anticipates substantial U.S. investment in infrastructure, technology, and the enhancement of institutional capacity. The framework aims to convert the South Caucasus from a conflict zone into a connectivity hub, facilitating links between Europe and Asia via an upgraded transport network. Nonetheless, the proposal has elicited significant geopolitical opposition. According to de Waal, Kochinyan, and Shiriyev (2026), Russia and Iran saw the project as a Western-supported incursion into their established sphere of influence. Neither can completely obstruct the road; nonetheless, both possess the capability to impede or complicate it.

This opposition is grounded on the strategic interests of both entities. The South Caucasus has always been a vital element of Russia's strength and influence projection. The analysis indicates that Russia's apprehensions are especially pronounced concerning the Zangezur Corridor. Russia lacks a direct railway connection to Iran. A Russian-managed line through Meghri would have afforded Moscow oversight over an economical and secure link to the Julfa railway

junction and the Iranian rail system. This would have created the essential connection in a north-south corridor linking Russia to the Persian Gulf, a longstanding objective of Putin's. Russian critics have referenced the historical Persian Corridor, a transportation route comprising road and rail that extends north from Iran through Armenia and Azerbaijan to Russia, which facilitated the transit of about fifty percent of U.S. Lend-Lease assistance to the Soviet Union during World War II. The Kremlin's reaction to TRIPP has been measured although progressively apprehensive. De Waal, Kochinyan, and Shiryev (2026) assert that the Kremlin has responded to TRIPP with measured scepticism rather than outright resistance. In an interview, a Moscow-based analyst affiliated with official circles stated that the initiative was "politically premature" and would fail without Russian assistance.

Significant advancements in 2026 have rendered this position more challenging to maintain. Consequently, several individuals in Moscow seem to be adjusting their strategy, as shown by interviews with EU diplomats and foreign policy professionals located in Moscow. Russia appears to acknowledge that blatant blocking may be unproductive and that, for the moment, it maintains influence through its concessions on Armenia's rail infrastructure.

Iran's position on TRIPP is similarly intricate and internally fragmented. Prior to the 12-day conflict with Israel, which ultimately involved the U.S., Iran maintained a purposely unclear stance about connectivity between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Tehran aimed to maintain the status quo and prevent the erosion of its significance as a principal transit corridor for international trade and for Azerbaijanis journeying between Nakhchivan and the remainder of Azerbaijan—a role that afforded Tehran both financial and strategic advantage. Subsequent to the TRIPP announcement, Iran's political elite exhibited heightened divisions. The security establishment vehemently opposed the project, with certain authorities labelling it as a 'Turkic' route or a 'NATO' line—indicative of apprehension regarding Ankara's expanding influence in the South Caucasus and perceived Western intrusion (de Waal, Kochinyan and Shiryev, 2026).

On December 15, Ali Akbar Velayati, Senior Advisor to the Supreme Leader of Iran, declared Iran's opposition to the 'Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity' (TRIPP) initiative, characterising it as a significant threat to regional security (Caucasus Watch, 2025). Nonetheless, other elements, especially within the economic affairs and transportation ministries under President Pezeshkian, perceived an opportunity for talks with Washington regarding TRIPP. They proposed that Iran might accept proposals for a railway under Armenian control, particularly if it reinstated the connection between Iran's rail network and the South Caucasus through Julfa. They expressed their opposition to a highway traversing Armenia, which could jeopardise a proposed joint Azerbaijani-Iranian highway over the Arax Valley in northern Iran (de Waal, Kochinyan and Shiryev, 2026).

The internal Armenian political landscape further hinders TRIPP execution. The forthcoming parliamentary election in Armenia, scheduled for June 2026, will represent a significant milestone. The referendum will afford Moscow the chance to contest and possibly impede Pashinyan's pro-Western orientation and engagement with Ankara and Baku. Consequently, the Armenian government will exercise caution in provoking Moscow with threats to seize any Russian-managed assets within the nation.

The TRIPP project exemplifies the fundamental dynamics delineated in the conditional theory of mediation presented in this paper. The convergence of external power remains unfinished: the U.S. and EU endorse TRIPP, while Russia

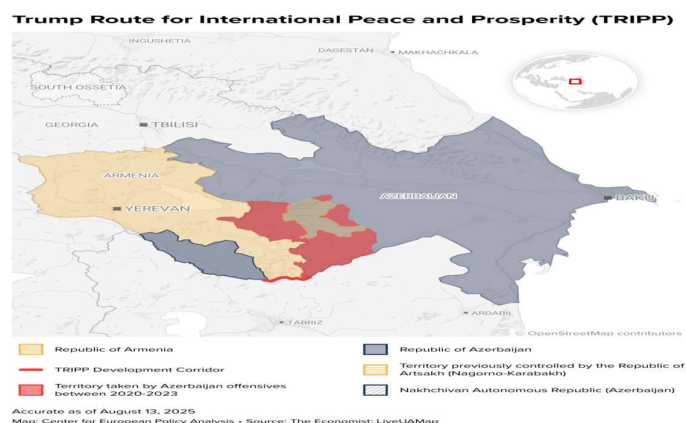
and Iran oppose it. The potential for institutional enforcement is constrained: U.S. investment and diplomatic influence are substantial, although hard-power assurances are lacking. The offence–defence balance, although not the primary catalyst of conflict, still influences the strategic landscape. Azerbaijan's military dominance strengthens its negotiation stance, but Armenia's susceptibility constrains its options. The TRIPP example illustrates that even well crafted connectivity programs cannot surmount structural limitations without genuine enforcement and collaboration among great powers.

6. Counterfactual Analysis: The TRIPP Scenario and the Potential for an Alternative Trajectory.

Counterfactual analysis, when executed with methodological precision, serves as a robust instrument for assessing causal assertions within the realm of international relations (Tetlock and Belkin, 1996, p. 7; Fearon, 1991, p. 170). In examining the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, one is prompted to consider whether the disastrous developments observed between 2020 and 2023 were an unavoidable consequence of existing structural dynamics, or if different arrangements of external power engagement might have influenced the course of events. The TRIPP scenario—an envisioned U.S.-led, enforcement-capable mediation framework introduced at the pivotal moment of the November 2020 ceasefire—serves as the foundation for this analysis (United States, 2026; Russian Federation, 2020). It conforms to the principles of minimal alteration, historical credibility, and theoretical coherence.

The critical juncture occurs during the night of 9–10 November 2020, a pivotal moment marked by the negotiation of the ceasefire. The military equilibrium had undergone a significant transformation, favouring Azerbaijan; however, the Armenian forces had not reached a point of complete disintegration. Additionally, the deployment of Russian peacekeepers had not yet occurred, and the institutional framework of the post-conflict order remained in a nascent state (Muhittin and Pirinççi, 2021, p. 229). The absence of the United States and the European Union from the negotiations can be attributed to their focus on domestic transitions and the ongoing pandemic. However, this preoccupation does not render their involvement unfeasible; historical precedents, particularly those from Bosnia and Kosovo, illustrate that the United States has previously engaged in intervention during comparable circumstances. The United States opts to engage in both diplomatic and military intervention, advocating for a multinational enforcement mission, with the backing of the European Union, aimed at stabilising the ceasefire and averting further escalation.

Figure 2. Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP)



Source: The Economist; [Live UA Map](#)

The credibility of the TRIPP scenario depends on various factors. U.S. strategic objectives in the South Caucasus—energy corridors, democratic change in Armenia, and the containment of Russian influence—were significant, albeit underemphasised. Regional dynamics did not inhibit U.S. involvement: Turkey had collaborated with the U.S. in prior peace enforcement operations, Azerbaijan pursued international legitimacy, and Armenia, confronting military disintegration, would likely have welcomed American participation. Russia, however hesitant, may have permitted a constrained U.S. involvement to avert direct conflict. The U.S. military had the logistical capability for swift deployment, while the EU proved the political resolve to endorse such a mission, as evidenced by EUMA.

In the TRIPP scenario, external power convergence significantly escalates. The United States and European Union support Armenia's requirement for security assurances and Azerbaijan's aspiration for global recognition. Turkey consents to a restricted U.S. involvement in return for acknowledgement of Azerbaijan's territorial acquisitions. Russia, albeit cautious, acquiesces to the arrangement to prevent escalation. The institutional enforcement capacity significantly increases: a U.S.-led coalition supported by the EU would have the necessary resources to enforce the ceasefire, monitor activities, and deter violations, thereby diminishing Azerbaijan's motivations for unilateral actions and enhancing Armenia's confidence in the security landscape. The offense-defense equilibrium stays constant—Azerbaijan continues to possess drone superiority—yet its strategic ramifications are diminished by credible deterrence. The repercussions of breaching a U.S.-mandated ceasefire would be far greater, and Armenia would possess external security assurances that alleviate the compulsion to acquiesce to disadvantageous conditions.

Could TRIPP have averted the disintegration of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023? The counterfactual indicates it probably would have. An effective enforcement mission would have dissuaded Azerbaijan's September 2023 onslaught, safeguarded the Armenian populace of Nagorno-Karabakh, and fostered a diplomatic atmosphere more favourable to compromise. While it would not have addressed the fundamental political conflict, it would have prevented the humanitarian disaster. The disintegration of the post-2020 system was not intrinsically predetermined; it resulted from certain external configurations, institutional frailties, and technical disparities that could have been modified.

The TRIPP project of 2025–2026, however, exposes the persistent structural limitations that the counterfactual scenario aimed to address. The Carnegie analysis indicates that Russian and Iranian opposition has considerably hindered implementation. The endeavour has become into a battleground for great-power rivalry, with Moscow and Tehran attempting to impede or obstruct the project via diplomatic coercion, economic influence, and political subterfuge. The Armenian election of June 2026 signifies a pivotal juncture, as Moscow may attempt to exploit it to contest Pashinyan's pro-Western orientation. The U.S.-Israeli military operations against Iran further complicate the situation, rendering substantial U.S. investment and development along Iran's border improbable. The Carnegie research indicates that for TRIPP's implementation to be viable, the escalation must diminish promptly (de Waal, Kochinyan, and Shiriyeu, 2026).

The TRIPP counterfactual enhances the article's theoretical assertions while also exposing the practical impediments

to their implementation. The efficacy of mediation in multipolar disputes hinges on the interplay of power convergence, institutional enforcement, and the offense-defense equilibrium. Prompt involvement at pivotal moments can alter results; but, even the most meticulously crafted initiatives encounter significant structural limitations during periods of acute great-power rivalry.

7. Discussion of Findings

The systematic and concentrated comparison of the four mediation frameworks provides strong evidence for the conditional hypothesis. The sole instance in which the three theoretical prerequisites were concurrently satisfied—the TRIPP counterfactual—yielded a hypothetical lasting peace, indicating that these conditions are collectively essential for effective mediation in multipolar conflicts.

7.1 Power Convergence

The evidence substantiates that mediation is effective solely when the preferences of external great powers align (H1). The OSCE Minsk Process was unsuccessful due to the co-chairs' divergent objectives. Russia's orchestrated instability averted full-scale war for more than a decade solely due to Moscow's unopposed inclination for a frozen conflict; but, once Turkey's backing of Azerbaijan and the altered offense-defense equilibrium undermined that supremacy, the structure disintegrated. The 2020 ceasefire resulted not from convergence but from Russia's unilateral involvement to preserve its control. Western mediation from 2022 to 2025 was limited by insufficient convergence, while Turkey and Russia followed distinct agendas. The TRIPP scenario illustrates the imperative of alignment: a multilateral alliance would have diminished the capacity of countries to engage in unilateral armed actions.

Nonetheless, the TRIPP plan of 2025–2026 exemplifies the challenges associated with attaining such convergence. The Carnegie research indicates that Russian and Iranian opposition has considerably limited the initiative's execution. The Kremlin has thus far responded to TRIPP with measured scepticism rather than outright resistance, however it has progressively endeavoured to adjust its strategy as tangible advancements have occurred. Iran's stance is internally fragmented, characterised by a conflict between the security establishment's resistance and the economic ministry's pragmatism (de Waal, Kochinyan, and Shiriyeu, 2026). The disunity of external preferences indicates that the convergence of power continues to be unattainable, despite the apparent increase in diplomatic momentum.

7.2 Institutional Enforcement

The analysis verifies that institutional mediation is ineffective in an offense-dominant equilibrium unless the institution has credible enforcement capabilities (H2). The Minsk Group possessed no authority; it served solely as a platform for conversation, rather than for action. Russia's orchestrated instability had enforcement powers through military leverage; nonetheless, it was employed to manage rather than settle the conflict and ultimately failed to dissuade Azerbaijan once its offensive capabilities enhanced. The 2020 ceasefire featured a distinct enforcement mechanism—Russian peacekeepers—yet it was unilateral, constrained, and lacked legitimacy; as Russia's capabilities diminished, the mechanism disintegrated. Western mediation implemented oversight without enforcement mechanisms. The TRIPP scenario proposes a multilateral enforcement coalition with enhanced legitimacy and capability, indicating that the lack of such a coalition is a significant factor in the ongoing conflict.

The TRIPP project of 2025–2026, although not a military enforcement mechanism, signifies an alternative form of institutional capacity: economic and diplomatic influence via connective infrastructure. The TRIPP Implementation Framework delineates that TRIPP advocates for a route entirely governed by Armenian jurisdiction and overseen by Armenian border and customs agencies (United States, 2026). This signifies an effort to enhance institutional capability by sovereign authority instead of foreign imposition. The efficacy of this strategy hinges on the readiness of foreign countries to honour Armenian sovereignty—a readiness that is not certain due to Russian and Iranian opposition.

7.3 Offense-Defense Equilibrium

The 2020 conflict offers compelling evidence that substantial technical disparity constricts bargaining opportunities (H3). Azerbaijan's drone-enhanced dominance rendered Armenia's defensive strategy ineffective, diminished its negotiating leverage, and precluded a negotiated resolution. This discovery has profound consequences for conflict resolution theory: the offense-defense balance is not a static background condition but a dynamic variable that influences the feasibility of negotiation. When aggression prevails, the opportunity for diplomacy swiftly diminishes, and violence emerges as the favoured method. Shrivastava (2025) concludes that drones have diminished the bar for participation. Deterrence, once based on formidable reprisal, now confronts a novel reality characterised by speed, precision, and deniability.

The TRIPP plan of 2025–2026 implicitly acknowledges that the offence–defence balance is a crucial variable. TRIPP aims to build economic linkages and institutional frameworks to render armed alternatives less appealing. Nonetheless, as De Waal, Kochinyan, and Shiryev (2026) illustrate, geopolitical pushback can compromise even meticulously crafted connectivity attempts. The resistance from Russia and Iran indicates their belief that TRIPP jeopardises their strategic interests, bolstering the notion that structural determinants, like as great-power competition, persist in influencing outcomes.

7.4 Causal Mechanism Chain

The causal chain—power asymmetry diminishing negotiating space, amplifying unilateral incentives, and undermining multilateral mediation—offers a cohesive explanation across several scenarios. The Minsk Process experienced impasse due to asymmetry; in Russia's managed instability, a hegemonic power temporarily contained it; in 2020, significant asymmetry resulted in conflict; and in Western mediation, inadequate convergence and insufficient enforcement perpetuated unilateral incentives. The counterfactual indicates that reversing this sequence—establishing power symmetry via multilateral enforcement—might yield an alternative result. The TRIPP project of 2025–2026 aims to progress along this continuum, although its efficacy hinges on surmounting the structural limitations identified by the theory.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Mediation Frameworks

Variable	OSCE Minsk Process (1992-	Russia's Managed Instability (2008-	2020 Ceasefire	Western Mediation (2022-2025)	TRIPP Counterfact ual	TRIPP Initiative (2025-2026)
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	2020)	2020)				
Power Convergence	Low (divergent Russia-US- France interests)	High (Russian unilateral dominance)	Low (fleeting Russian intervention)	Medium (EU-US alignment but Turkey/Russia a divergence)	High (multilateral coalition)	Medium (US- EU alignment; Russia/Iran resistance)
Institutional Enforcement	None (OSCE no coercive capacity)	High (Russian military leverage)	Medium (Russian peacekeeper s only)	Low (EUMA monitoring only, no enforcement)	High (multilateral peacekeeper + sanctions)	Low-Medium (economic leverage, limited enforcement)
Offence- Defence Balance	Stable until late 2010s	Managed by Russia until 2020	Offensive- dominant (drone warfare)	Offensive- dominant persists	Stabilised by enforcement	Persistent asymmetry, mitigated by economic incentives
Mediation Outcome	Stalemate/f ailure	Temporary stability, asymmetric dependence	Temporary ceasefire, unresolved grievances	Normative frameworks without enforcement	Hypothetical sustainable peace	Partially implemented; facing geopolitical resistance

Source: Author's synthesis from case materials.

The systematic variation in independent variables predicts change in the dependent variable, so validating the explanatory capacity of the conditional theory. The TRIPP endeavour of 2025–2026, characterised by medium convergence and low to medium enforcement, results in a partially executed framework encountering substantial geopolitical opposition—an outcome situated between the Western mediation impasse and the hypothetical durable peace of the counterfactual.

Conclusion

The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, spanning from the early 1990s to the dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 and the advent of the TRIPP initiative in 2025–2026, exemplifies how mediation in multipolar regional contexts is influenced by structural forces beyond the purview of any individual diplomatic entity. The ineffectiveness of consecutive mediation frameworks cannot be ascribed to insufficient diplomatic acumen or innovation; rather, it signifies the interplay of three structural variables—external power convergence, institutional enforcement capacity, and the offense-defense balance—that collectively dictated the conditions under which mediation could be successful (Lake, 2017, p. 78; Walter, 2002, p. 89; Freedman, 2017, p. 115). Mediation yielded a lasting result solely in the counterfactual situation where these conditions coincided.

The TRIPP initiative of 2025–2026 signifies an effort to overcome these structural limitations while simultaneously affirming their ongoing existence. The strong geopolitical resistance from Russia and Iran illustrates that connection programs have evolved into battlegrounds of great-power competition. The initiative's success hinges on surmounting

this resistance—a challenge that necessitates the power convergence and enforcement capability that have traditionally been lacking in the South Caucasus. The Armenian election of June 2026 is a pivotal moment, as Moscow may attempt to leverage it to contest Pashinyan's pro-Western orientation. The internal conflicts within Iran and the extensive U.S.-Israeli military campaign exacerbate the situation, rendering substantial U.S. investment implausible in the present context.

The research offers multiple contributions to the current body of literature. Initially, it presents a conditional theory that integrates previously unrelated scholarly elements into a cohesive, testable framework. The theory delineates explicit conditions that influence the likelihood of mediation success or failure, producing testable propositions applicable to many conflict scenarios. Secondly, it enhances offence–defence theory by illustrating its significance in relation to mediation timing, indicating that technology advancements can radically transform the feasibility of diplomacy.

The examination of drone warfare in 2020 presents persuasive evidence of this phenomenon. Third, it illustrates how methodologically rigorous counterfactual analysis can augment process tracing by evaluating the necessity of theoretical conditions. In accordance with Tetlock and Belkin (1996, p. 7) and Fearon (1991, p. 170), the counterfactual analysis delineated distinct areas of divergence, complied with minimal revision guidelines, and recognised plausibility limitations. Fourth, it offers a comprehensive empirical analysis of the South Caucasus mediation experience, utilising primary documents, military data, and recent developments post-2022. The examination of TRIPP illustrates that connectivity projects have evolved into platforms for great-power rivalry, introducing a novel aspect to the discourse on mediation and conflict resolution.

The policy ramifications are substantial. Sustainable peace necessitates more than diplomatic efforts; it demands effective enforcement systems capable of modifying the incentives of conflicting parties. Multilateral cooperation among major powers is crucial to ensure that mediation does not transform into an instrument of geopolitical rivalry. The decline of Russia's mediation capability has resulted in a power vacuum that necessitates a concerted response from Turkey, the EU, and the U.S. The success of the TRIPP program hinges on effectively handling resistance from Russia and Iran while preserving momentum—a precarious equilibrium that necessitates ongoing diplomatic engagement. The analysis highlights the perils for regional governments of depending on a singular external benefactor; diversifying security alliances and creating direct communication channels might mitigate the risk of being manipulated in great-power conflicts. Confidence-building measures and the depoliticisation of connectivity initiatives under multilateral oversight are essential.

Scholars should examine the conditional theory in more multipolar conflict zones—specifically Ukraine, Syria, and the Taiwan Strait—and further explore the influence of emerging technologies, including cyber weapons and artificial intelligence, on the offense-defense equilibrium. The counterfactual technique, when employed with stringent criteria, can serve as an effective instrument for theory advancement. The paper advocates for a more profound convergence of security studies and conflict resolution scholarship. Mediation is not a neutral or technical procedure; it is intertwined with the geopolitics of power, technology, and institutions.

The South Caucasus currently finds itself at a pivotal crossroads. The erstwhile Russian-centric order has disintegrated

into a dynamic, multipolar environment characterised by competing nations vying for influence. The TRIPP initiative's potential as a conduit for sustained peace or merely another instance of the region's enduring great-power rivalry is yet to be determined. The conditional theory articulated in this article posits that the resolution hinges on the ability of external powers to align on shared goals, the capability of institutions to establish credible enforcement mechanisms, and the stabilisation of the military balance to avert opportunistic escalation. These conditions are challenging, however not insurmountable. The TRIPP counterfactual, however conjectural, illustrates that an alternative arrangement of power and institutions might have yielded a different result. Realising this configuration in practice continues to be the primary issue for peacemaking in the South Caucasus and beyond.

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