

Peace secretariats and dialogue promotion

Potential and limitations

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In an era when peace processes are increasingly stalled or have collapsed, and where links between formal and informal dialogue are more vital to foster, peace secretariats can help build confidence, establish communication channels, and build skills and capabilities among conflict parties to prepare common ground for formal discussion. Peace secretariats are typically locally owned, in line with the priorities of the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States and the UN Sustaining Peace agenda. This article explores how they can be responsive to the increasing prevalence of fragmented conflicts and promote peace initiatives in contexts that are less amenable to international mediation.

Peace secretariats are part of the wider 'infrastructure for peace' – the landscape of actors, networks and institutions that support a peace process. They are always established by and closely affiliated with at least one of the conflict parties, distinguishing them from more inclusive infrastructure such as local peace councils or committees that include civil society. Conflict parties typically decide to establish peace secretariats when formal peace talks are possible or are being prepared, but there are instructive examples of equivalent structures that have been established much earlier. This article illustrates challenges and opportunities with examples from Afghanistan, Colombia, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and South Africa, while acknowledging the limitations of generalisation.

Peace secretariats – role, status and mandate

Peace secretariats implement tasks assigned to them by leaders of conflict parties or their negotiators, primarily to support negotiation or dialogue processes. These include secretarial duties such as notetaking, archiving and logistical support, as well as communications and media relations, strengthening skills and capabilities and providing advice. Secretariats can also liaise with mediators and other third parties, civil society and representatives of other conflict parties. They can be mandated to facilitate intra-party consensus building, inter-party relationship building and conflict management.

Prior to reaching an agreement, peace secretariats are necessarily unilateral, supporting their respective negotiating parties. Peace secretariats sometimes play roles after an agreement has been reached to facilitate and monitor implementation. Post-settlement peace secretariats can be multilateral, building on increased trust among the parties, such as South Africa's National Peace Secretariat. They may also undergo an organisational transformation and consolidation, for instance from a secretariat into a ministry as occurred in Nepal.

In 2004, Nepalese Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba established a High-Level Peace Committee supported by a secretariat to assist the government negotiation team. There had been no formal governmental structures

to support the talks between the state and the Maoists in 2001 or 2003, and the secretariat signalled a new approach. The secretariat gradually developed the capacities of a resource centre, eventually hosting consultative talks with civil society and serving as communication channel for the government to engage with donors. A peace deal between the Nepalese government and the Maoist insurgents was signed in 2006.

For non-state armed groups, peace secretariats can provide an organisational structure and often a first official 'address' to help them engage in dialogue. Establishing a secretariat early in a nascent peace process can help an armed group build a foundation of required skills and expertise, as well as trusted contact points and communication channels. Secretariats can provide the logistical support needed to overcome the restrictions on freedom of movement or safe passage faced by non-state armed groups.

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Secretariats are usually established close to powerholders, for example in a prime minister's office in the case of a state conflict party, which can leave them open to criticism of being opaque and exclusive. The South African secretariat, for example, was accused of undue government influence over its supposedly common, all-party structure. The peace secretariats of non-state armed groups also usually cater to a narrowly defined and relatively constant set of powerful actors within the group, raising concerns over representation and legitimacy.

Secretariats' roles are often poorly documented due to the confidentiality of ongoing peace talks or conflict parties not being predisposed to keeping written records. As part of the parties' 'internal affairs', the staffing and mandates of secretariats are also often politicised.

In most cases, peace secretariats are set up as temporary support structures that will expire once peace talks are finished, with a limited mandate, clear instructions and a defined role within the hierarchies of the conflict party that limits their influence and clarifies their relationship with the party leadership in order to avoid internal rivalry. While this can help secretariats to fulfil their role, it can also limit their potential to innovate and adapt, for example to take on new tasks, expand into other areas of responsibility, or develop alternative approaches to conflict resolution.

Changes of leadership affect a party's peace discourse and strategy. Although this can affect all conflict parties, state-affiliated peace secretariats are especially prone to changes of political direction – and often of key staff – sometimes with detrimental repercussions for peace. For example, when a new round of fighting broke out in Sri Lanka in 2007–08, the secretariats of the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) effectively transformed into propaganda machines for the war.

Peace secretariats and early phases of peace processes

Peace secretariats have traditionally been established when conflict parties are actively preparing for peace talks – often when a peace process is well under way and secretarial support is required. But there are examples of equivalent peace support architecture established much earlier on. The Afghan High Peace Council's secretariat, for example, was established as a cornerstone of President Hamid Karzai's approach to peace and national reconciliation in 2010, when there was little movement towards organised peace talks. Its activities were focused on creating consensus among Afghan political factions about a peace process with the Taliban, but also included confidence-building measures like prisoner exchanges. (For more on Afghanistan, see the article 'Navigating local and central dynamics – Peacemaking with the Taliban' in this edition.)

Moreover, peace processes are not linear and are prone to stalling, collapse and starting over. Peace secretariats may, therefore, repeatedly experience *de facto* 'new' and pre-formal phases. The Colombian Office of the High Commission for Peace, for instance, was created to support peace dialogue 20 years ago and has remained active as the main governmental body to explore, design and lead peace and humanitarian negotiations with several armed groups. (For more discussion on conflict parties with a focus on Colombia, see the articles 'Building political will for dialogue – Pathways to peace talks in Colombia' and 'Deciding on dialogue – Pathways out of violence for armed opposition movements in Myanmar and the Basque Country'.)

Four functions of peace secretariats are relevant to informal or early phases of peace processes. These are discussed in more detail below.

Theme 1. Commitment and political will

Establishing a peace secretariat can demonstrate parties' resolve to adopt a new approach or change of political direction. For example, Sri Lanka's Secretariat for the Coordination of the Peace Process was established in early February 2002 before a ceasefire agreement had officially been signed. Given the government's experience of earlier

talks, for which it had not been well prepared, the secretariat was intended to professionalise the management of talks, coordinate government activities and assist its interaction with the LTTE and the Norwegian facilitator.

Within a very short time, the LTTE also established its own secretariat as a counterpart to the government structure and as a (much-contested) attempt to signal parity of status.

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Later, the political parties representing Muslim communities founded their own secretariat with the aim to position themselves as another – albeit unarmed – party of the conflict and to promote their inclusion in the peace process.

Conversely, a weak secretariat can also show a lack of resolve. In Myanmar in 2016, the new government replaced the Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC) with the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC). The MPC was established in 2012 to support the peace process and negotiation of bilateral ceasefires. The NRPC is widely regarded as poorly led and staffed, limited to logistical functions and as such a reflection of the current government’s political priorities. (See the article ‘Unsticking stalled peace processes – Insider mediator perspectives from Myanmar’ in this edition for more background.)

Theme 2. Accessibility and preparations

Armed groups can be hard to contact. Many operate without obvious official organisational structures and often in hiding, particularly when they are listed as terrorist organisations. A secretariat can improve access to the armed group, including in some cases with a first official ‘address’ – like the Afghan Taliban’s political office in Doha. Such offices can provide a reliable contact point for an armed group. This is useful in the early phases of peace processes, for preparatory meetings, direct contact with officials before the formal talks begin, or as an entry-point to building negotiation skills – helping groups to prepare arguments, clarify positions or simply know what to expect during different rounds of talks and how to organise their representation. Armed groups that have been isolated for long periods of time may be especially in need of such support.

State conflict parties may be wary that formalising organisational structures for non-state conflict parties implies parity of status. In Sri Lanka, for example, the

LTTE developed increasingly elaborate political and administrative structures to complement its military outfit as part of its own statebuilding efforts. The Taliban established a political office in Qatar in 2013 with the support of United States and Qatari governments. This met strong resistance from the Afghan government, provoked by the Taliban raising their flag and identifying their office as belonging to the ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’, both of which symbolised the Taliban’s 1996–2001 period of rule in Afghanistan. The Taliban temporarily closed the office. It became operational again after guarantees it would be used exclusively to support peace talks.

Theme 3. Connection and coordination

Peace secretariats can play an important role in developing good working relations among conflict parties in the early phases of peace processes, which can also help in later stages to navigate impasses. This might include confidence-building measures like exchanges of prisoners, coordinating transport and treatment of injured fighters, facilitating socio-economic support measures, and even helping to reintegrate demobilised combatants.

At the beginning of the peace talks in 2003, the Sri Lankan government and LTTE secretariats developed relatively informal, cordial relations between their respective staff – partly credited to the personal attitude of the respective directors at the time, but also encouraged as part of confidence building. The secretariats facilitated the initial work of various sub-committees dealing with specific issues and the delegations’ travel to several rounds of talks outside the country. Initially they managed to maintain functional working contacts even when the talks stalled, and formal relations soured. The secretariats participated in informal and ‘track two’ dialogue as well as in official talks, which helped to bridge deep divides between the two sides.

In Myanmar in 2017, representatives of ethnic armed groups that had signed the so-called nationwide ceasefire with the government in 2015 wished to enhance their ability to engage in the peace process. Despite anxieties from some donors that such a secretariat represented inappropriate institutionalisation, the (then) eight ceasefire-signatory groups established an office to improve their preparations for peace negotiations, and to support internal coordination and with other elements of the peace architecture, like the NRPC and the ceasefire-related Joint Monitoring Committee. The secretariat office is located near to these institutions, ostensibly to promote better communication. It builds on pre-existing informal efforts by NGOs to provide secretariat-style support during earlier informal periods, and mirrors to some extent the work of the NRPC, which is also tasked with supporting and coordinating the activities of different peace bodies at national, regional and local levels.

Theme 4. Revitalising stalled peace processes

When peace talks stall, negotiators stop talking. But this does not mean that all contacts need to cease. Peace secretariats can continue to be active, offering an entry point for communication in addition to other less formal contacts or backchannels. During later stages of the last Sri Lankan peace process, for example, when official meetings were difficult, the constructive relationship and continued contact between the parties' secretariats

included a dedicated phone line between their two offices. But as tensions escalated and a return to war loomed, even the phone line was eventually cut.

Peace secretariats can be officially mandated to keep working for peace when a process is interrupted. Even during the most violent years in Colombia, the peace secretariat kept various informal and formal, direct and indirect channels open with armed actors, facilitators

ROLES OF PEACE SECRETARIATS IN PROMOTING PATHWAYS TO PEACE

Identifying and supporting measures and gestures to build confidence and trust.

Supporting internal coordination and with other elements of peace architecture.

Providing learning opportunities and briefings on policy issues and process concerns for negotiating parties and teams.

Trusted contact point and communication channel – informal and formal, direct and indirect channels.

Engagement with civil society, the public and international actors, and effective documentation of meetings.

Building a foundation of skills and expertise within negotiating parties and advisers.

Logistical support such as travel, visas, free passage, and events.



and mediators, to explore pathways to facilitating humanitarian access or to revitalising peace efforts. The presidencies of Álvaro Uribe (2002–10) and Iván Duque Márquez (2018– today) maintained a public stance against any peace negotiations with insurgencies in Colombia, but in practice both kept regular, secret contact with armed actors to explore opportunities for dialogue.

Secretariats can also be revived after a period of silence. The Taliban political office in Qatar maintained a low profile for some years after 2013. In that period, some Taliban were able to meet with government officials or civil society at track two events in Qatar and elsewhere. The office became more visibly active when informal talks were facilitated by the 'Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs' in 2015 and 2016. The office has more recently played important roles during direct talks with the US government from 2018–20. The presence in the office of long-time representatives such as the spokesperson of the Taliban in Doha and former Taliban ministers and diplomats has helped the movement to remain accessible.

Conversely, when secretariats or similar organisations are deliberately shut down, their institutional memory is often lost. The Sri Lankan government's peace secretariat remained active until the very end of the civil war in 2009, but was closed down at short notice – to the surprise of its staff, who had already started to prepare for post-war tasks related to rehabilitation and reconstruction of the war-affected areas. No preparations were made to store archives or sustain the expertise of past experiences. The sudden end of the secretariat left a knowledge vacuum within the government administration of how to address post-war needs in a systematic and coordinated manner. After a phase of transition, different government bodies resumed responsibility for various aspects of social cohesion.

Creating space for secretariats to support early dialogue

Secretariats can play an essential role to support informal, early or stalled peace processes – helping to build or maintain bridges between informal and formal channels, making non-state armed groups' accessible and building their confidence to engage in dialogue, and demonstrating states' commitment to find a negotiated solution to armed conflict. The four functions highlighted above show where peace secretariats can most usefully play a preparatory and facilitative role.

Peace secretariats require recognition and support to realise their potential. But they also need leeway and authority to solve problems, guide peacebuilding strategy and think 'outside the box' of political priorities of the day. Such functions need to be mandated by the leaders of conflict parties. Often created in a rush, using

loyal staff members and close confidantes not necessarily equipped with the required expertise on conflict resolution, the modalities of peace secretariats do not always receive enough attention.

Whereas the conflict parties 'own' the secretariats and define their mandates, external support during the preparation for peace talks should also extend to peace secretariats. Mediators and other third-party peace supporters should pay more attention to advising conflict parties on the creation and functioning of effective support structures, for example by offering lessons learned and advice on the mandate, functions and scope of peace secretariats. Useful options for consideration might include an explicitly mandated task of providing access to alternative thinking and constructive feedback on negotiation efforts, which also allows for the expression of critical views without being perceived as treacherous. Third parties can also help ensure that secretariats communicate with all stakeholders and consult with civil society in a more inclusive manner, which helps avoid marginalisation of some positions.

Another precondition for effective support structures are qualified staff and resources to perform the required tasks. Again, third-party actors and donors can be helpful. Encouraging and assisting conflict parties to establish or sustain peace secretariats to support their peace process might prove to be a cost-effective investment – given how many processes fail to get off the ground, fall at the first hurdle, stall, fragment or collapse. If sensitive to the political context and carefully monitored and adjusted to changing conditions, secretariats can even support implementation of a peace agreement once it is reached.

Peace secretariats should be part of a wider landscape of peace support actors, networks, organisations and structures – not all of them formal institutions. Their effectiveness is enhanced by understanding their positioning within the broader peace infrastructure and by creating and transforming relationships among various conflict and peace constituencies. This requires consideration of intra – and inter-party peace structures and efforts at different tracks, how they interlink vertically and horizontally, and how complementary they are.

Secretariats – as one element of a wider infrastructure for peace – are defined by their proximity to formal government administration or the hierarchy of armed groups. But such bodies – and the decision-makers who establish them – should also be encouraged to reach out to informal actors and networks, which play an essential role in exploring different pathways to peace, especially in the context of informal and pre-formal efforts to begin a peace process.