It is a truism in mainstream academic debates and practical trainings that mediators’ impartiality is an essential element of successful peace mediation. In order to gain trust from negotiating parties who are carrying out adversarial bargaining, the traditional assumption suggests that mediating bodies must remain “impartial and unbiased, ideally unconnected” to any of the direct participants.[1] Moreover, mediators are believed to have more opportunities to promote creative suggestions, and to organize external interventions more effectively, when they constantly maintain unbiased positions throughout the negotiation period.[2]

These mainstream assumptions, however, have faced criticism from a variety of viewpoints. While many studies highlight the limited utilities of impartiality from practical viewpoints, others question whether it is possible for a third party to be purely impartial and unbiased from more fundamental perspectives. Moreover, some commentators attempt to develop more theoretical arguments on the positive contributions of biased mediators.[3] Nevertheless, compared to the amount of research outputs and practical trainings based on the widely accepted faith in the neutrality of mediators, the roles of biased mediation have gained much less attention in contemporary scholarship; moreover, previous studies on this topic generally relied on theoretical consideration or a small number of case studies.

In this regard, Isak Svensson’s *International Mediation Bias and Peacemaking* is a significant step towards a more comprehensive understanding of “why biased mediators are effective in bringing about settlements” of armed conflicts (p. 4). This research proves the effectiveness of four causal mechanisms that increase the possibility of successful mediation of biased interveners: (1) their motivation to offer incentives to the sides close to them, (2) their ability to gain accurate information from the national actors that they advocate, (3) their better positions to get the negotiating parties to make concessions, and (4) the ability of their leverage to counterbalance negotiators’ less genuine commitments. In order to prove
these hypotheses, this volume presents quantitative analysis of 124 peace agreements signed in the post-Cold War period as well as five case studies.

The contents of this volume are carefully organized to develop these key arguments. Specifically, part 1 presents key concepts and an analytic framework that are utilized in Svensson’s empirical data analysis. He focuses on three questions: How should the success of mediation be evaluated (chapter 1)? What are the limitations of unbiased mediators (chapter 2)? Why can biased mediators do better jobs than impartial mediators in bringing about successful peace negotiation (chapter 3)? At the risk of oversimplifying his arguments, the extensive discussions can be summarized as “biased mediators have some relative strengths that are important in order to bring about peace institutions in civil wars” (p. 42).

Based on conceptual and hypothetical clarification, part 2 demonstrates empirical evidence of the previously stated hypotheses. By drawing on data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, chapter 4 demonstrates the statistical correlation between biased mediation and the success of three types of peace institutions, namely, “political, military, and territorial power-sharing; third-party security guarantees; and justice arrangements” (p. 45). Although their statistical significance varies, the findings present clearly positive correlations: mediators biased in favor of rebel groups are more likely to bring about solid power-sharing arrangements and external security guarantees while those advocating the government’s interests are generally more contributive in producing territorial power-sharing agreements, amnesties for governmental leaders, and the rehabilitation of civilian lives.

In chapters 5 to 9, the case studies are conducted to present more nuanced explanations of the roles played by biased mediation, primarily dealing with the four hypotheses stated above. The specific analytical emphasis varies chapter by chapter. For example, chapter 5 examines how (rebel-biased) India encouraged the Sri Lankan government to make concessions whereas chapter 7 highlights the (pro-government) US mediation that brought about agreements on territorial power-sharing structure. Moreover, Malaysia demonstrated successful mediation in the peace process of the Philippines, based on moderate low-key facilitation (chapter 6). The case study of India reveals the strengths and problems of direct and strong involvement (chapter 5). The case study of Cambodia in chapter 8 is interesting in that it shows the diplomacy between biased mediators to develop more unified diplomatic manners.

Finally, the two chapters in part 3 propose varied theoretical and practical implications of the empirical findings. In particular, chapter 10 proposes four models whereby future mediation practice can utilize or benchmark the strengths of biased mediation. Thus, as far as the peace processes examined in this study go, the empirical data proves the relative strengths of biased mediators in brokering successful peace processes.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the conclusion of this research should not be interpreted as a simple advocacy of biased mediation. Instead, the author acknowledges that many biased mediators have demonstrated various problems, ranging from hastened and untimely engagement in pursuit of selfish interests to imprudent application of coercive pressure. Hence, this publication warns of the negative impact of mediators having too much bias and highlights the need to control the influence of biased mediators to “bring their side to the table and make the concessions necessary for a settlement to be reached” (p. 122), although the details of how to do so are beyond the scope of the study.

These core arguments, including the four hypotheses, may not necessarily be groundbreaking since similar views have been proposed by previous studies, such as the works of Andrew Kydd, I.
William Zartman and James Smith. Nevertheless, two significant contributions this study makes should be properly recognized. First, Svensson’s publication attempts to synthesize many of these previously proposed ideas into an integrated study. Although it could not cover all the relevant ideas, the four hypotheses provide a concise analytic framework through which to comprehend many separate arguments on biased mediation. Secondly, this study is one of the first (if not the first) quantitative empirical studies of the roles of biased mediation. By examining all peace agreements produced in the post-Cold War period, it demonstrates many statistically significant findings, which will be useful to future studies as rarely available empirical evidence.

This publication also presents a number of interesting discussion points in terms of conceptualization and theory development. For example, in evaluating the success of mediation, Svensson attempts to move beyond simplistic judgments focusing on the production of peace accords or termination of armed conflicts. Instead, he proposes to examine the institutional arrangements for peace building produced by the concerned mediation process. For this particular research project, he pays attention to systems for power-sharing, security, and justice.

Another impressive aspect of this book is its economical presentation. While dealing with varied theoretical issues, as well as a large amount of empirical data as mentioned above, the discussions in this book are concisely but effectively organized to support the key arguments. It seems as if there is not a single word written without purpose. Hence, as a research output, this volume presents highly coherent and cautiously organized modes of delivery. Consequently, as a researcher who has been following the academic discussions on third-party mediation, I found Svensson’s book an enjoyable read.

On the down side, I am a bit concerned that such a research-oriented and concise presentation may narrow down the readership. Considering this book is not very generous in providing introductory explanations of key concepts, theories, or relevant case studies, undergraduate students or members of the public with a general interest in this topic may find it difficult to follow the discussions.

Moreover, one missed opportunity of this book is that the qualitative case studies pay most attention to the negotiation between two national parties (mostly, a government versus a rebel group) and so lack consideration of the different dynamics of peace negotiation caused by the involvement of multiple negotiating parties. The author does consider that many peace processes are in fact multilateral (i.e., the discussion on p. 112); however, according to the binary conceptualization of biased mediation presented in part 1, the case studies do not elaborate much about multi-party negotiation. In this sense, the Cambodian peace process (chapter 8) could have provided a good opportunity to unpack such dynamics since the resistance movement (Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea) consisted of three internal factions with different ideological backgrounds, leadership styles, and external supporters.

Overall, the key arguments are effectively and convincingly developed and the proposed hypotheses were proved valid by both the quantitative and qualitative examinations. I hope this interesting research encourages further studies on the nature of biased mediation and more creative and integrative approaches towards peace mediation, through which the (potentially) positive roles of biased mediators can be fostered.

Notes


[2]. Out of numerous relevant references, some examples include Avruch, Culture and Conflict Resolution; Jacob Bercovitch and Karl DeR-


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