

Environmental Entry Points for Mediation

Collaborating over environmental issues can be an entry point for security and peace talks. A global increase in environmental degradation and armed conflicts calls for clarity on the feasibility and limitations of this approach.

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With the increase in number and intensity of armed conflicts, mediators are continually exploring what can be an entry point to start talks with or between conflict parties to move towards agreements that enhance security and peace. Entry points may be humanitarian, economic, environmental, security, or even political issues parties are ready to start talking about. Rising environmental degradation and resource competition are increasing attention to environmental issues as entry points.

Environmental issues can include the impacts of climate change (e.g. floods, droughts), environmental degradation (e.g. oil spills), and the use and management of renewable (e.g. water, forests), and non-renewable (e.g. minerals, oil, gas) resources. While some of these resources have been explored under an economic angle, an environmental perspective takes a broader focus, such as shedding light on ecosystem disruption resulting from the economic use of natural resources. The peacemaking efforts linked to rare earth mineral deals, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) or Ukraine, illustrate this broader dynamic.

Two reasons closely link the environment and security: One, because dealing with environmental degradation or natural re-



Philippine Coast Guard surveys several presumably Chinese ships in Sabina Shoal in the South China Sea. *Philippine Coast Guard / Handout via Reuters*

sources is very challenging under ongoing armed hostilities. A minimal security arrangement, e.g. a truce, cessation of hostilities or ceasefire, is often needed to address the environmental issue. In cases of large-scale environmental events during an armed conflict, such as natural disasters (e.g. tsunami in Aceh), the damage cannot be addressed without also engaging on security issues. Second, a minimal degree of security is often needed for parties to start

talking about longer term topics such as political agreements, security agreements are therefore often addressed early on in a peace process. Security is therefore often a natural lynch pin between early talks on humanitarian or environmental issues, and longer-term peace talks (Fig. 1).

This analysis outlines when, how and under what conditions environmental issues can function as an entry point. It focuses on the

environment-to-security-to-peace linkage, and recognizes that security and peace agreements can provide space to address environmental protection and resource use management questions. Lessons from the humanitarian field are also useful for the environment-to-security-to-peace linkage, but with important differences.

Entry Points for Mediation

Entry points are the *means or first steps* mediators use to start working on a conflict, with the aim of initiating dialogue with or between conflict parties, launching a negotiation process, or unblocking a stalled process. They are those issues for which con-

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flikt parties have a common interest to engage on, and which mediators hope will enable dialogue on other, more sensitive issues. The use of entry points requires careful conflict analysis (e.g. using the [ACCP framework](#)) to assess which actors, content or processes in a given context are amenable to dialogue. Crucially, entry points need to lead to a process or continued engagement between parties. For this reason, the potential objective of a future negotiation needs to be clarified at an early stage. This process objective encapsulates the minimal overlapping aspirations of the conflict parties and provides a benchmark against which the usefulness of a proposed entry point can be assessed. Entry points are more likely to be effective when they adhere to certain criteria (see textbox).

Environmental Entry Points

Under certain conditions, efforts by mediators to promote short-term environmental cooperation between parties can function as a mediation entry point. Yet if conditions are not favorable or processes poorly designed, third-party efforts to make this link can discourage parties from collaborating, cause additional environmental damage, or undermine peacemaking. This raises three questions: What are the conditions for effective entry points? How should these be designed? When should third parties seize or avoid them?

The following criteria indicate when environmental entry points can lead to security and peace talks: 1) Parties have a *shared political objective* or vision beyond the environment, 2) Conflict parties or their constituencies are negatively *impacted by environmental*

issues, or the lack of action on them, 3) The issue can be addressed by *technical and cooperative actions*, 4) Working on the environment leads to tangible outcomes, which both sides can sell as wins to their constituencies, 5) The entry point leads to further *stepping stones* enabling a move from environment to security issues, 6) *data-sharing* is possible, creating shared knowledge base, 6) *benefits* outweigh the risks (see figure).

In certain situations, however, even when environmental topics are addressed, they are treated as an isolated topic and do not translate into progress towards security agreements. This can be the case when the issue is either *too important* (i.e. already highly securitized and politicized) or seen as *not important enough* by parties to warrant engagement at all, and *risks* outweigh the benefits. An insufficient link between parties' technical staff and political levels also hinders the entry point logic.

The below cases show the conditions under which environmental entry points laid the foundation for security-related and political dialogues, and when they did not.

DRC: Minerals-for-Peace

In June 2025, the DRC and Rwanda reached an agreement in Washington aimed at de-escalating the conflict in eastern Congo, amid intensified fighting linked to the resurgence of the Rwanda-backed armed non-state actor M23. This triple-layered arrangement combined political and security commitments with parallel negotiations on a Regional Economic Integration Framework (REIF). Within this [framework](#), cooperation over mineral resources was deliberately positioned as an economic and natural resource entry point. The REIF sought to leverage the strategic and commercial value of minerals as a hook to incentivize military restraint, attract investments, and formalize mineral supply chains long associated with conflict financing. The [objective](#) was to embed peace within a broader agenda of regional economic integration and align the peace process with global demand for critical minerals. Although the June agreement established a ceasefire, it failed to stabilize the [security environment](#). This approach was also clearly driven by the strategic interests of the third-party peacemaker (i.e. the US) in the DRC's mineral wealth, raising im-

Mediation Entry Points Criteria

Interests: The topic is relevant to the actors concerns and aspirations

Low threshold: Parties see a short-term “no big risk, no big effort” but still some concrete benefit in engaging on the issue

Geared towards objective: The entry point has the potential to move things towards the medium- to long-term negotiation process objectives

Process design: The next steps from the entry point towards a process have been designed

Link to other topics: The entry point has the potential to link up to other content, actors, processes

Reciprocity: The entry point has more or less symmetrical risks and benefits for all conflict parties

Discretion and consent: To minimize hesitation around engaging, the entry point is explored in a discreet manner, always working with the consent of the main parties

Transparency: A mediator's intentions are made transparent to the conflict parties

Based on criteria from [Confidence Building Measures \(CBMs\) in Peace Processes](#) and [Creative Entry Points in Mediation](#)

portant considerations about the positioning, behavior, and perception of third parties and how this might affect environment-to-security approaches.

Several factors made minerals a plausible entry point. The DRC's centrality to global critical-mineral supply chains provided incentives for engagement, while there was widespread recognition that resource extraction has long fueled conflict. Natural resources and economic incentives were

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seen as means to reshape conflict dynamics where political and military approaches had [repeatedly stalled](#).

Yet significant constraints worked against this strategy. Continued insecurity deterred investors, key armed groups were not party to the accords, and DRC authorities insist-

ed that security progress must precede economic cooperation. Ultimately, the minerals entry point delivered limited steps towards peace, as the parties did not implement the political and security-related commitments made on paper.

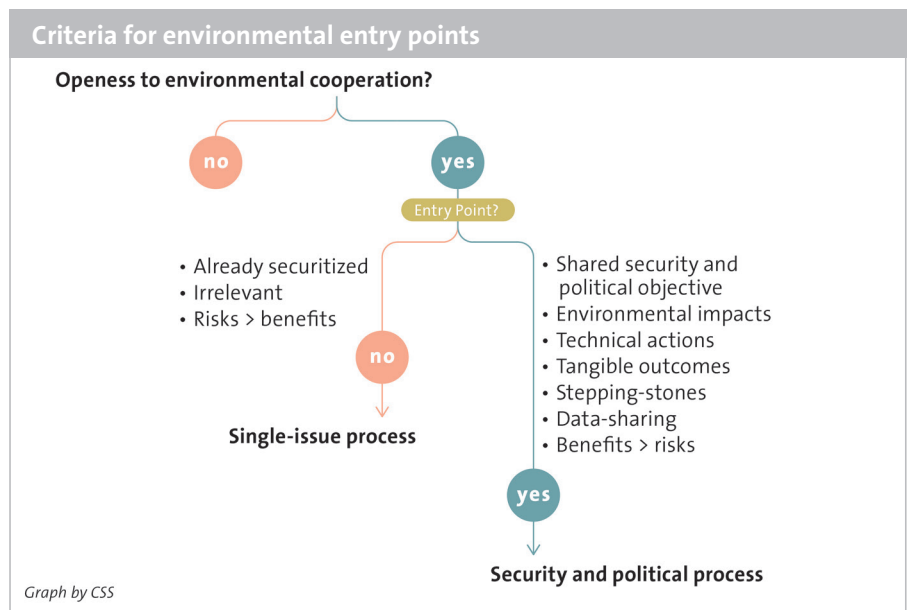
Mediation insight: ‘Minerals-for-Peace’ incentives can open diplomatic space, but without robust implementation of the ceasefire security measures, and inclusive political settlements, they risk reinforcing conflict dynamics rather than resolving them, and cause further environmental and social harm in the absence of adequate safeguards.

South China Sea: Science Diplomacy

In the highly politicized South China Sea dispute, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) sought to use shared environmental concerns as a non-political entry point for cooperation and dialogue among littoral states. Rather than only engaging in political negotiations, the focus was on convening scientists and policymakers around a concrete issue: joint fisheries management. Overfishing threatens not only marine ecosystems, but also the food security and livelihoods of millions of people — making it a compelling, non-ideological starting point for cooperation with symmetric benefits for all parties.

This led to the creation of a joint working group through which scientists from littoral states produced two Common Fisheries Resource Analyses — landmark technical collaborations that demonstrated how shared science can build trust across political divides. The ‘entry point’-logic behind this was that if parties could agree on managing a shared critical resource, they might be more open to engage in political and security-related tracks. Fisheries became a neutral space to build confidence and yield ‘win-wins’ that didn’t require difficult political compromise. This bolstered the security-related talks on managing coast guard interactions and preventing conflict escalation.

Mediation insight: Environmental issues — when urgent and evidence-based — can open doors where traditional diplomacy stalls. The potential of environmental cooperation is rooted in the common interests of states on issues with relatively low costs for them, unlike many security-related agreements. By staying practical and linking environmental action to broader security concerns, nature can become a quiet but powerful catalyst for dialogue. However, even ‘technical’ issues can be deeply



embedded in national security concerns — limiting how far science diplomacy and cooperation alone can advance political engagement.

Jordan – Israel: Water-for-Peace

The 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty institutionalized water cooperation on the Jordan River basin through a Joint Water Committee (JWC). This built on earlier U.S.-mediated efforts, notably the 1953–1955 Johnston Mission, which framed water as a technical — not political — issue.

The water as an entry point-logic in the 1950s was to establish a process of technical cooperation among states who otherwise lacked diplomatic relations. These negotiations sought agreement on allocations and development while avoiding questions of sovereignty and recognition. Though never ratified, Israel and Jordan largely followed its allocations, creating a de facto cooperative regime that eased the path to the 1994 treaty.

No direct security track emerged from this environmental entry point. But sustained technical cooperation contributed indirectly to the process leading to the peace treaty. By constraining unilateral water development and establishing norms of restraint, it reduced the likelihood that water disputes would escalate. Over time, it normalized data sharing, contacts, and joint problem-solving, mak-

ing water one of the few domains in which confidence existed prior to formal peace.

Several factors made water a viable entry point. Scarcity was acute, technocratic framing lowered political costs, US mediation provided legitimacy and continuity, and the basin’s hydrology created mutual dependencies. Yet significant obstacles worked against the process. Water was highly securitized and power asymmetries undermined trust. Arab League opposition blocked political ratification, highlighting the limits of technocratic cooperation when disconnected from political ownership. In the end, the environmental

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entry point was *partially successful*. It did not lead to early political agreement but created practices and norms later embedded in the 1994 treaty. Efforts to use collaboration over water resources to foster broader regional cooperation have continued since then, including in the Blue Peace initiative.

Mediation insight: Environmental issues can sustain long-term confidence-building, even under non-recognition and the absence of political tracks, but their impact

depends on eventual linkage to broader political processes.

Red Sea: Avoiding an Oil Spill

A potential entry point that was deliberately not used as such is the UN-led effort to secure a floating oil storage vessel, [the FSO Safer](#). The abandoned ship, moored off Yemen's coast near the Houthi-controlled port of Hudaydah, containing over one million barrels of crude oil, created a

Mediators must demonstrate a deep understanding of the parties' needs and interests.

significant risk of a large-scale oil spill with catastrophic environmental and economic consequences. In 2023, an UN-coordinated [operation](#) transferred the oil to a replacement vessel, thereby averting an environmental disaster.

Despite the apparent potential for cooperation over the Safer to serve as an entry point into political or security discussions, the operation was *explicitly de-linked* from the political track of the UN engagement in Yemen to resolve the ongoing armed conflict. The UN framed the effort as a strictly humanitarian and environmental intervention, intentionally avoiding any linkage to ceasefire negotiations or wider peace talks. This reflected the time-critical nature of the risk and concerns that embedding the issue within contested political negotiations could delay or jeopardize the technical op-

eration. The overriding priority was to prevent an imminent ecological catastrophe rather than to leverage the issue for progress on the political front. As a result, while the Safer operation succeeded in preventing a major environmental crisis, it did not lead to further security or peace negotiations.

Mediation insight: Facilitating environmental collaboration between conflict parties can mitigate the environmental or humanitarian impacts of conflicts, even if it does not lead to further dialogue. Third parties need to assess whether linking the environmental issue to dialogue risks delaying urgent action in ways that outweigh potential trust-building gains.

Assessing Risks and Benefits

The cases indicate the need for a nuanced assessment of environmental entry points. The approach comes with certain risks. This is similar in the humanitarian field, [where humanitarian issues can serve as entry points](#), but doing so risks undermining the space for principled humanitarian action if not handled carefully. Environmental actors appear more open to exploring the environment-to-security link, possibly due to the diversity of environmental issues and actors involved, the absence of established principles governing interaction between environmental and security actors, and the hope that security enables long-term environmental protection and sustainable natural resource use.

Environmental issues can serve as entry points for security and peace talks, but it is not as straight-forward as often portrayed. Mediators must demonstrate a deep understanding of the parties' needs and interests, the environmental dimension of the potential entry point, and the potential for linking it to a follow-on security and peace process. Only then will they be able to assess risks and benefits in ways that both protect the environment and promote peace.

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For more on perspectives on mediation and peace promotion, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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