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## **Friends Indeed?**

**The United Nations, Groups of Friends,  
and the Resolution of Conflict**



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# Friends Indeed?

## The United Nations, Groups of Friends, and the Resolution of Conflict

Teresa Whitfield



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*For Jason,  
Isabel, and Harry*

*True happiness  
Consists not in the multitude of friends,  
But in the worth and choice.*

—Ben Jonson, *Cynthia's Revels* (1600)

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The subject of *Friends Indeed?* is a little-noted but newly emerging phenomenon in modern diplomacy—groups of states that attempt to manage or resolve violent conflicts. Specifically, these groups—or Friends—represent a particular manifestation of multiparty mediation in which diverse actors collaborate, compete, and coexist while conducting parallel or sequenced interventions in a given conflict arena. With this important study, Teresa Whitfield places these diplomatic coalitions of the willing in the widest analytic context, deriving significant conclusions for the UN secretary-general, his secretariat colleagues, national decision makers who participate in or may consider participating in such groups, and other relevant policy audiences. The book blends together six original, in-depth case studies, an overview of eight additional cases, and a masterful familiarity with post–Cold War conflict management and mediation efforts, particularly as relates to the United Nations. The result is an authoritative assessment of the accomplishments, the potential, and the limits of Friends as a mechanism for allowing third-party participation in peacemaking and peacebuilding.

In publishing this study, the United States Institute of Peace deepens its already strong reputation for publishing and promoting the latest research and scholarship on best practices in the mediation of violent international conflicts. In particular, *Friends Indeed?* reflects the Institute’s continuing commitment to exploring, defining, and articulating practical lessons from hard-won experience in the field of peacemaking. Past Institute volumes include *Herding Cats: Multiparty Mediation in a Complex World* (1999), which contains analytic essays and a series of first-person practitioner case studies that explore complexity in mediation, *Taming Intractable Conflicts: Mediation in the Hardest Cases* (2004), which examines best practices in tackling the most stubborn of conflicts, and *Grasping the Nettle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict* (2005), which analyzes the defining characteristics and underlying dynamics of intractable conflicts. In fact, Whitfield was a contributor to *Grasping the Nettle*, joining forces with Cynthia Arnson to write a chapter on peacemaking in the Colombia conflict.

Drilling down into some fourteen case histories—six of which represent unique, detailed accounts based largely on primary sources—Whitfield is here able to portray the full dimensions of the Friends phenomenon. We come to see how Friends groups began in the immediate post–Cold War

period, how they have evolved from a mere handful of groups to more than thirty, why they have emerged more often in certain regions (Latin America, Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Africa) than in others, and when they are most likely—and least likely—to make a constructive addition to the modern diplomatic arsenal. Additionally, we learn what roles they have played and are continuing to play, and what types of conflicts are most propitious for this form of multiparty activity.

Groups of Friends, we learn here, are a unique diplomatic innovation sometimes built around a particular constellation of UN Security Council members that served together at a particular moment in time and “adopted” a conflict in order to sustain their own direct mediation role. This was the original basis of one variant, the Namibian Contact Group, which arose in 1978 and continued on into the mid-1980s. More recent Friends groups tend to be ad hoc and informal in origin, and may escape any form of official recognition in the resolutions of international or regional organizations. The groups typically have no address or headquarters, no letterhead, no written records (apart from member state archives), no formal charter, and few bylaws or agreed-upon operating principles. Some groups focus on supporting the UN secretary-general’s peacemaking role (and especially that of his envoys), some adopt a country or conflict in order to lead or backstop a peacemaking or mediation process (whether or not there is a major UN role), and some take on the critically important role of coordinating international monitoring and implementation efforts during the post-settlement phase.

The groups operate in diverse ways depending on the specifics of each case, the nature of the surrounding regional environment, the internal composition and leadership chemistry of the members and their motives for participation, and the timing of the group’s activity in relation to the conflict’s life cycle. Whitfield singles out a number of significant contributions that Friends groups have the *potential* to make. They can (1) bring additional leverage to the lead mediator in relation to the parties, (2) create a more level playing field among the parties and surround them with a reassuring political context, (3) serve as a potential venue for post-settlement planning and rally interest and financial support for implementation, (4) provide a clearing house or gateway in order to coordinate external engagement and discourage rival, contradictory mediation initiatives, and (5) buffer a UN-led peace process from direct intervention by powerful individual states. Whitfield sharply distinguishes the operation of Friends groups during a peace process from their role during peace implementation.

A central argument in this volume is that the potential contribution of such groups can be maximized by learning the lessons of past groups and conflict case studies. A powerful core of the author's message is signaled by her title, *Friends Indeed?* This is nuanced wording indicating that the jury is still out on this new diplomatic mechanism, that much depends on the way the Friends operate in any given case, and that Friends can become part of the solution as well as part of the problem in conflict management and mediation. When Friends allow themselves to be used or deployed as tools of the government in an internal conflict, there is little likelihood of real progress on peacemaking. A similar outcome appears likely when Friends exercise their role primarily to protect or support one side or to advance solely their own national interest. Little can be expected from a group that is internally divided along the lines of the conflict itself, that cuts across the efforts and authority of the lead mediator, or that effectively shields the conflict parties from the necessity of taking tough decisions. A number of the cases that Whitfield presents—Haiti, Georgia-Abkhazia, and Western Sahara—illustrate these concerns, and the operation of Friends groups in these cases contrasts starkly with the more successful of the six cases on which she develops individual case histories (El Salvador, Guatemala, and East Timor). Whitfield also cautions that less can be expected when Friends groups succumb to the status anxiety and sensitivities of would-be participants and grow too large to be effective institutional adjuncts of the primary mediator.

The volume concludes with lessons about the conditions for success of Friends groups, lessons that will produce a smile of recognition from close students and practitioners familiar with these and similar cases of low-to-middle-profile conflicts typically mediated outside the klieg lights of big power politics. Regional context makes a decisive difference: this sort of peacemaking stands little hope when neighbors and regional hegemony are actively intervening to pursue their own interests in the conflict or to dominate possible outcomes. Whitfield argues that the composition of Friends groups is perhaps the most important single ingredient in their success or failure and offers readers a detailed typology of the kinds of states that *ought* to be included if one wishes to build an effective group. At the same time, she recognizes that no one is really in charge of the process of selecting or recruiting members: Friends select themselves and are attracted to cases for a wide range of motives.

*Friends Indeed?* offers many rewards to the reader interested in comparative diplomatic practice, in the role of the United Nations in conflict management and peacbuilding, and in mediation tradecraft more generally.

The six cases developed in the volume represent the fruits of important and original fieldwork cultivated by the judgment of a talented conflict researcher. Whitfield's depth and breadth of familiarity with the natural history of conflict since 1990—as well as with the proliferation of informal Friends mechanisms—makes this an especially worthy addition to the Institute's growing library of materials on best practices in mediation.

Chester A. Crocker  
Washington, D.C.

# Acknowledgments

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In the five years since I first embarked on *Friends Indeed?* I have incurred many debts of gratitude.

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The subject of *Friends Indeed?*—diplomatic mechanisms characterized by their informality and discretion as much as by their engagement in political situations of extreme complexity—is one that has placed a particular emphasis on interviews as a primary resource. Since 2002 I have conducted more than two hundred interviews with UN officials, diplomats representing individual states or regional organizations, representatives of state and nonstate conflict parties, academics, and other analysts of conflict. To these individuals, some of whom I returned to time and time again, and many of whom preferred, for obvious reasons, to remain anonymous, I express my deepest gratitude.

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