

Conference track «21.4 Theory of international relations and global political processes»

**The Self-Enforcement Dilemma of Procedural Mediation under Power
Asymmetry: Theoretical and Empirical Analysis**

Academic supervisor – Лебедева Марина Михайловна

Жэнь Ваньюй

Postgraduate

Московский государственный институт международных отношений, Факультет
управления и политики, Moscow, Россия

E-mail: renwy666@gmail.com

In the study of international conflict management, third-party mediation is widely regarded as an important mechanism for guiding conflict parties into negotiations and reducing the intensity of conflict [1, 2, 3]. By introducing an external actor into the conflict process, mediation can help lower the costs of communication, clarify the bargaining positions of the parties, and create institutionalized channels through which the disputing parties may explore potential compromises. Procedural mediation, in particular, seeks to facilitate negotiations on a voluntary basis by establishing rules, setting agendas, and regulating interaction procedures. Rather than imposing binding outcomes, this strategy aims to structure the negotiation environment so that conflict parties themselves can gradually move toward mutually acceptable arrangements. Its effectiveness therefore depends on the sustained compliance of conflict parties with existing procedural arrangements in the context of repeated interactions. It is therefore commonly understood as a cooperative arrangement grounded in self-enforcement [5]. However, both previous research and practical experience indicate [6] that under conditions of pronounced power asymmetry, such forms of mediation are often difficult to sustain over the long term, and even after initiation, mediation processes frequently fall into stalemate.

To explain the internal mechanisms that hinder the sustainable functioning of procedural mediation under power asymmetry, this article develops a two-player repeated-game model that explicitly incorporates power asymmetries. Procedural mediation is conceptualized as a cooperative arrangement that shapes behavioral expectations through rules and interaction procedures and is sustained by endogenous incentives [7, 8]. Within this framework, the strategic interaction between the stronger and weaker parties is modeled as a repeated decision process in which cooperation corresponds to continued participation in mediated negotiations, while defection represents the resumption or continuation of confrontational strategies. The results of the model analysis demonstrate that even when severe and credible punishment mechanisms—such as grim-trigger strategies—are introduced, procedural mediation fails to constitute a subgame-perfect equilibrium once the stronger party's structural advantage in the conflict exceeds a certain threshold [4]. This outcome is not driven by insufficient patience on the part of the actors but rather by the long-term cumulative effects of power asymmetry in repeated interactions. When the stronger party consistently obtains higher payoffs from confrontation, the incentive structure necessary to sustain cooperation becomes increasingly fragile. On this basis, the article further discusses the conditions under which external constraints may intervene as a supplementary mechanism in procedural mediation, emphasizing that their effectiveness depends on extremely stringent incentive conditions.

At the empirical level, the article combines descriptive analysis and regression analysis to assess the short-term effects of procedural mediation and to systematically examine the conditions under which external constraints are introduced and the mechanisms through which they operate under power asymmetry. Using mediation event data, the study evaluates how mediation outcomes vary across conflicts characterized by different power configurations and

strategic environments. The findings indicate that the emergence of external constraints is clearly non-random and is more likely to occur in highly confrontational conflicts with limited space for mediation. In other words, external intervention tends to arise precisely in situations where procedural mediation faces the greatest structural difficulties. Ignoring this selectivity may lead to an overestimation of the independent effect of external intervention on mediation outcomes and, consequently, to an underestimation of the incentive constraints faced by procedural mediation at different stages of conflict. From the perspective of incentive analysis, this study offers a theoretical explanation for variations in the effectiveness of procedural mediation under conditions of power asymmetry.

Keywords: procedural mediation; power asymmetry; self-enforcement; external constraints; repeated games

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