

The Use of Smart Pressure to Resolve Civil Wars

Smart pressure is a new concept that recasts how we should think about the use of pressure when mediating in civil wars.

By Dr. Allard Duursma

Mediated peace agreements often fail in bringing about lasting peace. This poor track record is largely a result of the use of pressure, which is often at the expense of the durability of a peace agreement.¹ Peace agreements are likely to break down if they have been imposed on the conflict parties. So does this mean mediators should always refrain from engaging in high-powered mediation?

There is disagreement about the answer to this question. Some favor a ‘sticks and carrots’ approach, proceeding as quickly as possible, and directing the conflict parties towards the substantive issues of the deal. Others prefer a peace process in which the mediator ensures that the conflict parties own the process, essentially offering them a problem-solving platform through which they can build win-win relationships. These approaches are less mutually exclusive than they appear at first sight. While the use of pressure and problem-solving can be distinguished analytically, in practice almost every mediation process involves problem-solving and the use of pressure. Hence, the focus should be on how these distinct processes interact. When should a mediator focus on problem-solving and when should the use of pressure be prioritized? Do problem-solving and the use of pressure supplement or supplant each other?

To answer these questions, this policy brief introduces the notion of *smart pressure*.² This concept holds that high-powered mediation is more likely to be effective if it has been preceded by a

process in which the mediator has encouraged the conflict parties to converge in terms of how they can resolve the underlying issues of the conflict.

The Use of Smart Pressure

Kenyan General Lazaro Sumbeiywo was the chief mediator of the Naivasha peace process, which sought to resolve the war between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). When asked about the role of third party pressure in moving these two conflict parties towards signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on January 9, 2005, Sumbeiywo, noted: “Pressure has to be applied at the right time. I approached the use of pressure during the peace process like a solder. A solder will not get out of his trench unless he knows he will hit a target. So you will have to wait long

Key Points

- Mediators should ensure that the conflict parties develop a sense of ownership in the peace process.
- A mediator should only apply pressure when the conflict parties can live with the endpoint of this pressure.
- The chief mediator should coordinate and manage pressure from impatient, external third parties, but they can also use the leverage of external third parties to break deadlocks.

enough until a target provides itself and only then you will be effective.”³ Sumbeiywo’s statement illustrates the central idea of smart pressure. Pressure can be used to combat heel-dragging or break specific deadlocks, but it will not be effective if the conflict parties cannot live with the endpoint of this pressure.

Several other influential mediators have also pointed to the importance of conflict parties owning the peace process. For instance, Lakhdar Brahimi and Salman Ahmed state that no matter how sound an international mediator’s proposals might be, “they risk being rejected if they have not emanated from a process that enjoys the confidence of all the parties to the conflict and is considered legitimate in the eyes of the population at large. The process matters and it takes time. A particular peace conference itself might conclude an agreement in days or weeks, but rarely without the months or years of consultations prior to convening it. [...] The best way to kill a potentially viable political solution is to float it prematurely”⁴

In short, pressure is rarely a substitute for problem-solving, but sometimes it can help break deadlocks and combat heel-dragging. The following cases highlight how the use of pressure can support or undermine a peace process.

Doing it Right: The Naivasha Peace Process

In early 1994, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) became involved in mediation in the conflict between the Sudanese government and the SPLM/A, which had been ongoing since 1983. Little progress was made before January 2002, when Lazaro Sumbeiywo was appointed as the new chief mediator. During sessions in June 2002, the IGAD mediation team tried to shift the attention of the conflict parties towards a possible solution to the civil war.

On July 17, 2002, after almost a month of negotiations and problem-solving workshops, Sumbeiywo instructed Sudanese government negotiator Sayed el-Tayeb and SPLM/A negotiator Deng Alor to inquire as to the two sides’ red lines, without any other representatives of the conflict parties or the mediators present. It became apparent that the SPLM/A leadership would never compromise on the option of secession in a referendum, whereas the Sudanese government would never sign an agreement that would turn Sudan into a secular state. Sayed el-Tayeb recalls how talks aimed at resolving the underlying issues, rather than third party pressure, eventually showed that a mutually acceptable solution was possible: “It wasn’t like someone was sitting there and was pushing some buttons. Actually, everybody initially thought the Machakos talks



Sudan’s First Vice President Ali Osman Mohamed Taha and Sudan People’s Liberation Movement leader John Garang at the signing of the CPA in Nairobi. *Antony Njuguna / Reuters*

were destined to fail like all previous rounds of talks. Then I sat down with Deng Alor and we talked at length for the entire day. It became clear that the SPLM/A was absolutely insisting on the right of self-determination, but they started to show a lot of understanding regarding the issue of the relationship between state and religion. The next day, we and the SPLM/A agreed to sign the Machakos Protocol. It was a huge breakthrough.”⁵

The Machakos Protocol stipulated that following a six-year interim period, southern Sudan would be allowed to hold a referendum on whether to secede from northern Sudan. The signing of the Machakos Protocol reflected that the conflict parties had found an appropriate formula to resolve the two fundamental conflict issues: religion and self-determination.

Though the conclusion of the Machakos Protocol was a watershed in the peace process, many points of contention still had to be tackled. With most of the underlying disagreements resolved by late 2003, chief mediator Sumbeiywo allowed the US, the UK, and Norway – which were referred to as the Troika – to start putting pressure on the conflict parties in order to move them towards signing a final peace agreement. In addition, Sumbeiywo acknowledges that “Whenever one party reneged, I always rang Colin Powell. He came to Nairobi to combat heel dragging as we were trying to give the final push.”⁶ The US had leverage over the Sudanese government, as Washington had promised to normalise relations with Sudan if the government would make peace with the SPLM/A.

In order to ensure that the conflict parties would sign a final peace agreement, a UN Security Council meeting was held in Nairobi on November 18 and 19, 2004. Vladimir Zhagora, who was the UN observer to the Naivasha process, explains how the UN Security Council meet-

ing in Nairobi provided the peace process with a new impetus: “The main objective of getting the UN Security Council to Nairobi was to make sure that the Naivasha process was ended as soon as possible. It was an organised exercise in external political pressure on the parties to stop procrastinating.”⁷ The CPA was signed in Naivasha on 9 January 2005.

The final phase of the Naivasha process suggests that the use of pressure can be effective in bringing a mediation process to completion. Yet, it was the problem-solving process led by the IGAD mediation team that allowed the conflict parties to resolve the underlying problems.

Doing it Wrong: The Abuja Peace Process

In June 2004, the African Union (AU) became involved in mediation in the conflict between the Sudanese government, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), which had started in Darfur in early 2003. Though the conflict parties were still far from a settlement, they slowly progressed towards peace after September 2005. Senior JEM negotiator Abdullahi El-Tom notes in this regard that “We were moving in the right direction. Yes, too slow for the liking of everybody, including the conflict parties themselves. But every...few days we were making some progress with regard to wealth sharing, power sharing, or security arrangements.”⁸

On the basis of progress made in the negotiations AU chief mediator Salim Ahmed Salim briefed the UN Security Council on April 18, 2006 that the conflict seemed to be ripe for resolution. The UN Security Council subsequently set a deadline for concluding negotiations by the end of the month, and the US also applied pressure for a resolution. In response, Salim distributed a draft peace agreement which had previously been written by his mediation team.

Moreover, a number of diplomats arrived on May 2 in order to force a breakthrough, including the US Deputy Secretary of State, Robert Zoellick, and the British Secretary of State for International Development, Hilary Benn. Together with Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, Zoellick and Benn took over the mediation process. The AU mediators were mere spectators during the final days of the Abuja talks. Zoellick and Benn made it clear that the conflict parties had 48 hours to approve the draft agreement. The Sudanese government accepted it, and Zoellick and Benn pressed the rebels to do the same.

The US promised to guarantee the implementation of an agreement, but also threatened sanctions. The sanctions

did not influence the decision-making calculus of the rebel parties. When Zoellick promised that anyone obstructing the peace process would be prosecuted by the ICC, Khalil Ibrahim allegedly responded that the mediators could handcuff him and bring him to The Hague, but he would not sign if the content of the agreement could not be changed. Crucially, Zoellick and Benn’s strategy made negotiations on the content of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) virtually impossible.

In addition to putting pressure on the conflict parties, Zoellick and Benn focused on the Minni Minnawi faction of the SLM/A, which still had reservations. In the final meeting of the Abuja process, Zoellick allegedly told Minnawi, “Have no doubt where I stand. I am a good friend and I am a fearsome enemy.”⁹ Minni Minnawi signed the DPA on May 5, 2006, but two other rebel leaders, Khalil Ibrahim and Abdul Wahid, refused. The DPA quickly collapsed, as most of Minni Minnawi’s fighters joined the other rebel groups.

The refusal of the JEM leadership and Abdul Wahid to sign the DPA illustrates how a mediation strategy based on coercion and inducements is ineffective if the underlying conflict issues remain unresolved. SLM/A commander Abdulaziz Juma asserts that “What Zoellick did not understand was that we were fighting for our fundamental rights. He pressured us to sign an agreement that would not solve the fundamental problem of Sudan and Darfur. The threats of Zoellick were similar to threatening someone not to eat. The threats were unfair.”¹⁰

Conclusion and recommendations

While acknowledging that third party pressure can contribute to mediation success, the smart pressure concept emphasizes another, fundamental, condition for mediation

Further Reading

When to Get out of the Trench: Using Smart Pressure to Resolve Civil Wars *Allard Duursma, Civil Wars 17, no. 1, 2017*

An academic article that presents the concept of smart pressure.

When Push Comes to Shove: The Failure of International Mediation in African Civil Wars *Lauri Nathan, Track Two 8, no. 2, 1999*

An academic article that explains how a forceful mediation strategy has often backfired in civil wars in Africa.

In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace: The Seven Deadly Sins of Mediation *Lakhdar Brahimi and Salman Ahmed, Center on International Cooperation, 2008*

A report by two mediation practitioners who discuss common pitfalls of mediation, including pressuring conflict parties to sign an unsustainable negotiated settlement.

success: conflict parties need to agree on a mutually acceptable formula to resolve the conflict. The Naivasha peace process shows how well-managed pressure can help in nudging conflict parties towards a final peace agreement. However, mediators often start to exert pressure when a mutually acceptable agreement has yet to be developed, as the Abuja negotiations illustrate.

Three recommendations follow from the concept of smart pressure:

- Mediators should ensure that conflict parties largely own the peace process, particularly in the early phases when the underlying issues have not been resolved. Patience is essential in mediation processes.
- A mediator should apply pressure only when the conflict parties can live with the endpoint of this pressure. Conflict parties often drag their heels in the final stages of peace processes even if they have agreed on a resolution. If this is the case, a well-planned, high-powered mediation effort can combat heel dragging and move the conflict parties toward an agreement.
- The chief mediator should coordinate and manage external pressure. External third parties that are at the fringes of a mediation process might be impatient for a deal and push the conflict parties towards signing an agreement. A chief mediator should combat signature obsession and shield the peace process from too much pressure. At the same time, if the conflict parties are dragging their heels, the chief mediator can strategically use the leverage of external third parties to conclude the peace process.

The interaction between the use of pressure and problem-solving is a major determinant of mediation success. Indeed, the comparison between the two mediation efforts in Sudan supports Sumbeiywo's assertion that a mediator that "gets out of his trench" to put pressure on the conflict parties will only "hit its target" if a mutually acceptable agreement has been formulated.

Selected sources

1. K. Beardsley et al., "Mediation Style and Crisis Outcomes," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 1 (2006).
2. A. Duursma, "When to Get out of the Trench: Using Smart Pressure to Resolve Civil Wars," *Civil Wars* 17, no. 1 (2017).
3. Interview with Lazaro Sumbeiywo in Addis Ababa, February 1, 2015.
4. Lakhdar Brahimi and Salman Ahmed, *In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace: The Seven Deadly Sins of Mediation* (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2008), 9.
5. Interview with Sayed el-Tayeb in Khartoum, January 8, 2015.
6. M. Simmons and P. Dixon, "The Mediator's Perspective: An Interview with General Lazaro Sumbeiywo," in *Peace by Piece: Addressing Sudan's Conflicts*, ed. M. Simmons and P. Dixon (London: Conciliation Resources, 2006), 25.
7. Interview with Vladimir Zhagora in Boston, October 16, 2014.
8. Interview with Abdullahi El-Tom in Oxford, February 22, 2015.
9. A. De Waal, "Darfur's Deadline: The Final Days of the Abuja Peace Process," in *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*, ed. A. De Waal (London: Global Equity Initiative, 2007), 273. Confirmed in an interview with Hilary Benn in London, November 21, 2014.
10. Telephone interview with Abdulaziz Juma, February 11, 2015.

Dr. Allard Duursma is a senior researcher at the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich.

Policy Perspectives is edited by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich. The CSS is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy. It offers security policy expertise in research, teaching, and consultancy. The CSS promotes understanding of security policy challenges as a contribution to a more peaceful world. Its work is independent, practice-relevant, and based on a sound academic footing.

Editor: [John \(Jack\) Thompson](#)

Comments welcome at PolicyPerspectives@sipo.gess.ethz.ch

Recent editions of **Policy Perspectives**:

- ! **When terrorism and organized crime meet** (6/7) by Mark Shaw and Prem Mahadevan
- ! **Religion and the Prevention of Violent Extremism** (6/6) by Owen Frazer and Anaël Jambers
- ! **Russia's Turn to Eurasia** (6/5) by Jeronim Perović

For more editions, and for a free online subscription, visit www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/css-policy-perspectives

© 2018 Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich www.css.ethz.ch
ISSN: 2296-6471; DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000310306