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Ripe, Ready or Strategic: The Timing of Peace Initiatives

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Summary

This article provides a brief summary of the academic insight on timing in conflict mediation, summarizes major theories on this matter and argues that, with the right mediation strategy, there is never an unsuitable time to engage in fruitful peace initiatives. This goal is possible by combining the knowledge gained from academic research on war termination and conflict resolution with that from the field of mediation and strategic thinking. The paper demonstrates that by adopting a strategic approach to mediation, and applying the appropriate strategy to a situation to achieve the desired goals; anytime in a conflict cycle can become the right time for a peace initiative. Finally, a framework is proposed on how to initiate peace initiatives at *any time* in the conflict cycle to end wars quickly.

The One Objective: To End War and to End it Quickly

When is the right time to undertake peace initiatives so that they might be successful? Ideally, the best time to engage in a peace initiative would be before an armed conflict has begun, because parties are uncertain about their opponent's true strength, when there is still fear about the uncertainty of the outcome, and of the war's human and economic cost. However, the true impact of conflict prevention either through long-term sustainable development activities that address the causes of war or preventive diplomatic efforts that aim to deter the onset of war is difficult to measure. Indeed, proving that conflict has been prevented or that war did not occur has been both a methodological challenge and a fundraising one for the field of conflict prevention.

Therefore, the next best thing would be to end wars sooner rather than later. Despite centuries of peacemaking and decades of research, however, there is still little consensus on the best time for a third party to intervene to bring a speedy end to conflict, nor, for that matter, on how to do it.

The Best Time: Early, Late or Somewhere In-between?

Blainey believes that war is caused by a difference in appreciation over the relative power of states.¹ Some research indicates that the best time to end a war is very soon after the war's beginning.² This is usually when parties' battle strength has been clarified but the parties have not yet inflicted irreparable damage to their relationship nor

¹ Geoffrey Blainey, *Causes of War* (Simon and Schuster, 1988).

² Patrick M. Regan and Allan C. Stam, "In the Nick of Time: Conflict Management, Mediation Timing, and the Duration of Interstate Disputes," *International Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2000): 253-254.

committed their reputation and resources to an all-or-nothing outcome.³ However, intervening early has other challenges; parties may still be confident of victory and do not want to engage in peace initiatives. In civil wars, governments are usually reluctant to accept external peace initiatives early on in the conflict, as they believe that such initiatives violate state sovereignty and tend to legitimize rebels and their demands.

Other findings indicate that it is best to intervene late in the conflict cycle. This usually corresponds to the time when the parties recognize that: the war cannot be won by military means, that there is power parity on the battlefield and a broad consensus on an outcome is emerging.⁴ Evidence suggests that while intervening in a conflict earlier on and much later on can lead to disputes ending quickly, intervening in the middle, or rather once a war is fully underway is more likely to prolong conflicts.⁵

This finding yields some challenging questions.

- When is it late enough in the conflict and not just the middle?
- Should peacemakers just stand on the sidelines during the middle of a war, allowing it to simply rage on and take its ugly toll?
- How many months or years is early or late enough: is it a matter of calendar time or is it a matter of conditions?

A Tale of Two Theories

There are two major theories on the most appropriate time for undertaking mediation successfully.

Ripeness Theory first advanced by William I. Zartman,⁶ and supported by the likes of Richard Haass⁷ and Steve Steadman,⁸ posits that successful conflict resolution depends on an initiative being undertaken at the right moment. The theory focuses on the contextual conditions between the parties that make the situation ripe for mediation.

These include a rough power symmetry, a mutually hurting stalemate and a potential way out. These conditions, coupled with a precipice of sorts, such as a recent or impending catastrophe that indicates a potential change in relative power, (with the stronger party becoming weaker and the weaker party potentially becoming stronger) make parties open to a mediated solution. This is because the stronger party needs to make a deal

³ J Michael Greig, "Moments of Opportunity Recognizing Conditions of Ripeness for International Mediation between Enduring Rivals," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 6 (2001).

⁴ Sylvie Mahieu, "When Should Mediators Interrupt a Civil War? The Best Timing for a Ceasefire," *International Negotiation* 12, no. 2 (2007).

⁵ Regan and Stam, "In the Nick of Time: Conflict Management, Mediation Timing, and the Duration of Interstate Disputes," 253-254.

⁶ Ibid.; William I. Zartman, "Ripening Conflict, Ripe Moment, Formula, and Mediation," *Perspectives on negotiation: four case studies and interpretations* (1986); *Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa* (Oxford University Press New York, 1989); "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond," *International conflict resolution after the Cold War* (2000); "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments 1," *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1, no. 1 (2001): 8; I William Zartman and Saadia Touval, "International Mediation: Conflict Resolution and Power Politics," *Journal of Social Issues* 41, no. 2 (1985).

⁷ Richard N. Haass, "Ripeness and the Settlement of International Disputes," *Survival* 30, no. 3 (1988).

⁸ Stephen John Stedman, *Peacemaking in Civil War: International Mediation in Zimbabwe, 1974-1980* (L. Rienner Publishers, 1991).

before it becomes weaker on the battlefield and the weaker party feels confident to enter the negotiations because it can afford to turn down a less than satisfactory deal.

The theory feels intuitive and resonates with many practitioners. The only problem is, while this moment is conceptually clear, identifying it in practice while a conflict is ongoing is difficult. The theory is more able to explain *why* a mediation was successful in hindsight rather than be able to predict *when* the moment will occur in real time.⁹ Some of the indicators such as the mutually hurting stalemate are also subjective and dependent on the parties' perceptions on the matter. The theory also requires the conflict to reach a point where there is a stalemate. This implies not only costs, destruction of property and infrastructure but more importantly the loss of innocent lives and mounting casualties. While peacemakers may find it logical to wait, it is highly questionable if they would be willing or permitted by local and domestic international constituents or the media to stand by while the war rages on, waiting for this moment to arrive.

Ripeness theorists favour an activist role for the peacemaker.¹⁰ However, even experienced peacemakers will find it challenging to mediate between the parties when aiding one side and trying to hinder the other to achieve a stalemate (i.e. by providing weapons to one while imposing sanctions on the other). Such efforts to create power symmetry and a mutually hurting stalemate often render the mediator impartiality and motives questionable.

Readiness Theory, builds and deepens ripeness theory.¹¹ It seeks to identify the psychological conditions that encourage the parties to enter negotiations. The parties' readiness is due to their motivation to end the conflict and their optimism about what is to be gained from the outcome of negotiations. The parties' readiness to enter negotiations is due to a push factor such as the cost of war or weariness of troops and a pull factor such as the benefits of peace.

The theory also focuses on the parties' situation and looks at each side separately, analyzing their psychological motivation to end the conflict and their optimism about the gains of a positive outcome. The theory does not view the parties as mutually exclusive and monolithic but rather that each group is made up of a spectrum of views and positions that could be shared by others on the opposing side. The ripeness of conflict from the perspective of readiness theory is the breadth of the central coalition that spans across the groups that stand ready to enter negotiations. This central coalition must not only be broad but must include the bulk of the hardliners in each group.¹² The greater the breadth of this coalition and the more it is able to incorporate or neutralise extremist views on either side, the riper the situation is for resolution.

While making a contribution to identifying the best time for mediation, readiness theory also suffers some shortcomings. Like ripeness theory, its indicators are both objective and subjective which limits its predictive capabilities. According to this theory, the ripe moment is also fragile, as a coalition of hardliners and liberals is weak at best. This theory also requires conflict to intensify as the parties must be motivated to end the

⁹ Marieke Kleiboer, "Ripeness of Conflict: A Fruitful Notion?," *Journal of Peace Research* (1994).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Dean G. Pruitt, "Whither Ripeness Theory," *Institute for conflict analysis and resolution. George Mason University. Working Paper*, no. 25 (2005).

¹² "Readiness Theory and the Northern Ireland Conflict," *American Behavioral Scientist* 50, no. 11 (2007).

conflict. Such motivation emerges when hardliners, who are usually the more prone to violence, have already endured failure. The hardliners' desire to maintain a military approach may also result in the assassination of moderates within the group. Mediators will also have to actively use the power of persuasion to evolve the thinking of those within each group so that they move closer together in their positions to build a broad coalition.

While ripeness and readiness theory have both made valuable contributions to identifying the best moment for successful peace initiatives, neither provide peacemakers with an ability to predict the best moment nor to operationally recognize it, except in hindsight. Both theories also require the conflict to intensify, obviating the possibility of ending the conflict before greater carnage occurs.

Is there another way that does not require the conflict to intensify, waiting for the situation to become ripe and the actors to become ready? Literature on mediation provide some clues on this issue.

The Three Wise Strategies

Mediation is an extension of the parties' own effort to manage or resolve their dispute using third parties, thereby changing the bargaining process from a dyad into a triad.¹³ It entails a broad spectrum of activities, using various techniques aimed to affect the relationship between the parties,¹⁴ their motivations to settle, their expectations of and satisfaction with the outcome, and the outcome itself.¹⁵

International mediation literature identifies three main mediation strategies:¹⁶

- 1) facilitating communications between the parties;
- 2) formulating procedures, options and proposals; and
- 3) manipulating the parties' cost and benefit analysis of settling.

While many different terms have been used to identify these mediation strategies, not all terms provide intuitive comprehension to practitioners without a familiarity with a particular proponent's definitions. The terms and strategies used in this paper broadly correspond with those identified by Jacob Bercovitch¹⁷ and William I. Zartman.¹⁸

Communication strategies promote the flow of information and help parties re-establish dialogue. They are most often used in shuttle diplomacy efforts where the parties have little or no direct relationship or when a dispute involves misunderstandings over facts. The strategy's currency is information and the skills required to operationalize it are research, analysis, and persuasion.

¹³ Jacob Bercovitch and Richard Dean Wells Jackson, *Conflict Resolution in the Twenty-First Century: Principles, Methods, and Approaches* (University of Michigan Press, 2009).

¹⁴ James A Wall, "Review Section: Mediation an Analysis, Review, and Proposed Research," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 25, no. 1 (1981).

¹⁵ James A. Wall and Ann Lynn, "Mediation a Current Review," *ibid.* 37 (1993).

¹⁶ James A. Wall, "Review Section: Mediation an Analysis, Review, and Proposed Research," *ibid.* 25 (1981), pp 160-164

¹⁷ Jacob Bercovitch, "International Mediation," *Journal of Peace Research* (1991): 4.

¹⁸ Zartman and Touval, "International Mediation: Conflict Resolution and Power Politics.", pp27-44

Formulation strategies require creativity and problem-solving skills. They use ideas to imaginatively manage the process and to formulate inventive solutions to the conflict.

Manipulation strategies are the most active. Appropriate influence is required to even the playing field of the conflict and to force an end to hostilities. This strategy requires coercive skills from the mediator to alter the cost-benefit calculations of the parties to continue waging war vs settling the dispute diplomatically.

Which strategy is most effective and how does it relate to the issue of timing of peace initiatives? Research findings do not provide clear cut answers. Current research indicates that communication and formulation strategies have been deployed the most in civil war mediation but that manipulation strategies have been more effective in ending wars and producing settlements. Not surprisingly, mediators that have the necessary influence, with either resources or inducements, to impact the parties' ability to continue the war or encourage their peaceful settlement have been found to be more effective as mediators.¹⁹ However, mediators that combine and sequence strategies have also been found to have the best effect.²⁰

Literature indicates that a mediated peace is usually time inconsistent, and particularly so when they have been achieved with leverage.²¹ When agreements have been forcibly obtained and do not represent the military reality on the ground, the peace will fail, particularly when the leverage is no longer available.²² Research findings indicate that manipulated outcomes that do not match the battlefield reality, have not stood the test of time while those that are a result of little or no third-party pressure, have led to more stable outcomes.²³ While valuable, these findings provide little guidance on the issue of timing of peace initiatives.

The Four Seasons of Conflict

In formulating my approach to the best timing for peace initiatives, I have turned to strategic thinking found in the classic text Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. While the text contains a wealth of wisdom for strategists, its contents concentrates on:

- 1) positional strategy that maps the relative strengths and weakness of competitive positions;
- 2) expansion strategy which identifies and explores opportunities to advance and build up positions;
- 3) situation response which specifies the responses required to address specific situations.

A strategic approach to peace-making is about assessing the conflict situation, planning an approach and reacting appropriately to changing situations on the ground and within the conflict environment until the end objective of a durable outcome is achieved.

¹⁹ Stephen John Stedman, "Negotiation and Mediation in Internal Conflict," *CSIA STUDIES IN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY* (1996).

²⁰ David Carment, Yiagadeesen Samy, and Souleima El Achkar, "Protracted Conflict and Crisis Mediation: A Contingency Approach," *International Conflict Mediation: New Approaches and Findings* (2009).

²¹ Kyle C. Beardsley et al., "Mediation Style and Crisis Outcomes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 1 (2006).

²² Suzanne Werner and Amy Yuen, "Making and Keeping Peace," *International Organization* 59, no. 02 (2005).

²³ Carment, Samy, and El Achkar, "Protracted Conflict and Crisis Mediation: A Contingency Approach."

Undertaking such an analysis requires defining the phase of the conflict. I have found it useful to use the following four phases to inform both the conflict state and the psychological state of the parties:

- 1) The prevention environment: with discontent brewing and the seeds of conflict being planted with discriminatory policies and unequal development;
- 2) Imminent crisis: the environment where the potential for violence is high, with political tempers flaring, high rhetoric of war and military readiness;
- 3) The early conflict environment when adrenaline is high but battle strength is still unknown or when optimism has received a reality check with the clarity gained from the battlefield of power symmetry or power asymmetry;
- 4) Late conflict environment, when battle strength parity has become evident, but it seems that the war cannot be won or lost militarily, parties are exhausted and looking for a way out not only to minimize cost but to save face politically.

Each phase has a different context and requires a different approach for success. In a **prevention context**, before violence has even been considered, the government is still very much in control. The sources of tension may be structural but not urgent. Few governments would be willing to accept high level 'peace initiatives', but they have been more accepting of under-the-radar technical approaches. Senior bureaucrats and technocrats with practical knowledge and know-how are best placed to provide peer-to-peer advice to amend and improve the functioning of laws and institutions. During this period, regional organizations, bilateral technical assistance and capacity-building initiatives seem to be best placed to undertake these efforts and most likely to be accepted by governments.

In inter-state contexts of **imminent violence**, a communicative strategy of preventive diplomacy by state and international actors has proven to be particularly useful. The strategy can be effectively utilised to dampen optimism regarding the outcome of the war by providing the necessary intelligence and information and even exaggerating the potential for loss.

In intra-state conflicts governments may perceive external initiatives to be unwelcome interference that legitimise the opponent's claims and status. Communicative strategies undertaken by low profile national actors, Track II and regional organizations have a unique entry point to engage in peace initiatives at this stage have often been best placed to engage. Their objective, must be to find a mutually acceptable solution that addresses the opposition's needs and grievances while also respecting the government's sense of legitimacy and power.

Early violence contexts can prove to be both easy and challenging. In clear asymmetry, the weaker party must be persuaded to understand that it cannot win or gain all its war objectives through negotiations. The stronger party has to be persuaded that while it can have a battle victory without the need to compromise at the negotiating table, such an outcome will not lead to long-term stability. A modicum of a compromise that somewhat addresses the needs of the opposition can go a long way not only to end the war but also to prevent a recurrence. A combination of a communicative and a formulation strategy is required to persuade parties to enter negotiations and to help formulate creative solutions.

Where battle data is not clear, parties continue to try to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy.²⁴ Mediators who are able to provide each side with the battle information can help bring leaders to the realization that armed conflict is not viable, a loss is possible and mediated outcome will provide a better outcome. Where there is a clear power symmetry, but each party is still optimistic that it can prevail as the ultimate victor, peace initiatives that use a combination of formulation and manipulation strategies can help alter the parties' costs and benefits of continuing to wage war. A formulation strategy that provides creative win-win outcomes for the parties, can assist parties to resolve their conflict effectively. Trusted international actors who have influence over one or the other of the parties are best placed to engage in persuading their ally to give up the fight, while actors who have no state in the outcome are best placed to engage in formulative strategies.²⁵

Protracted conflict or late-stage conflict is defined by two contexts: one of military symmetry where the parties continue to wage intense war but cannot win; and the other of military asymmetry where a strong government cannot lose but can't seem to defeat the weak rebels either.

The conflicts in Syria and Yemen may well represent such conflicts of power symmetry. Parties are still fighting to win and hoping that the battle tide will change in their favour. In this context, mediation needs to use a combination of all three strategies; communicate with each side to clarify expectations, ferment ideas and formulate outcomes and manipulate the costs and benefits of continuing war. International organizations and power mediators tend to have the best resources to apply such strategies and therefore to engage in late-stage violence.

The late stage conflict environment defined by power asymmetry where a strong government cannot lose but cannot seem to defeat the weak rebels either. The longer such asymmetrical conflicts go on, the more likely they become a way of life. Ending such wars requires high levels of creativity and leverage. A combination of formulation and manipulation strategies are required. More than adding costs to the parties' analysis of settling the conflict, however, mediators may wish to put forward incentives to get rebels to lay down weapons willingly. Such incentives will require mediators to persuade the government to provide access to political power, military security, and economic well-being and to propose a package that is sufficiently enticing and logical to the rebels. Power mediators such as the Permanent Members of the Security Council (P5: China, France, Russia, US & UK), and international organisations such as the OSCE and UN are best placed to engage in these activities.

²⁴ Greig, "Moments of Opportunity Recognizing Conditions of Ripeness for International Mediation between Enduring Rivals."

²⁵ Isak Svensson, "Bargaining, Bias and Peace Brokers: How Rebels Commit to Peace," *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 2 (2007).

Figure 1: Table detailing the four seasons of conflict

| Phase | Characteristics | Possible Strategy | Possible Best Actor |
|----------------------|--|--|---|
| Preventing Conflict | Government still very in control. The sources of tension structural but not urgent. | Communication | Technocrats from Development Partners & Regional Organisations |
| Imminent Violence | Optimism of outcome high but real information on opponents battle strength unknown. | Communication | Inter-state: Shuttle diplomacy by State actors and International Organisations Intra state: Low profile national actors, Track II and regional organizations |
| Early Stage Conflict | Either clear battlefield asymmetry requiring face saving or battle symmetry where parties are still hopeful for a favourable outcome | Communication & Formulation | Biased Mediators and Outcome Biased mediators |
| Late Stage Conflict | Military symmetry where the parties continue to wage intense war but cannot win; or military asymmetry where a strong government cannot lose but can't defeat rebels either. | Communication Formulation & Manipulation | P5 Actors and IOs UN/OSCE |

Conclusion

Theories on ripeness and readiness advocate that there is a right time to end a conflict. However, some would argue that the 'unripeness' of a situation and the lack of readiness of the parties should be no excuse for third party inaction. While agreeing with this point, taking actions to ripen the conflict or ready the parties for settlement still require the conflict to intensify and conditions to become appropriate before peacemaking becomes successful.

Instead, this paper advocates a strategic approach to mediation and argues that by undertaking a proper analysis of the conflict situation and applying the appropriate mediation strategy or a combination of strategies, anytime can become more fruitful for a peace initiative. Using this strategic approach, the paper has delineated that in every phase of the conflict, there is a particular type of actor who has the greatest access and using the most appropriate strategy for the context, they can prevail in their efforts. No doubt, however, the ability to match strategy to context requires great skill. Freedman

defines strategy as the art of creating power, a difficult art to master. "While it is undoubtedly a good thing to have, it is also a hard thing to get right."²⁶

Blessed are the peacemakers who have the persuasive skills to trade with information, creativity to think out of the box, courage to bring the necessary influence to bear on the parties, and the cunning to know when and how to utilise these strategies effectively; for they make the moment right for peace.

About the Author

Nita Yawanarajah is an international conflict resolution practitioner with over 20 years of experience from the United Nations (1995-2009) and as the Head of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Good Offices and Conflict Prevention Section (2009-2016). She is currently at King's College London War Studies Department undertaking research on the subject of mediating ceasefires.

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²⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2015).