

'Ripeness': the importance of timing in negotiation and conflict resolution

Written by I William Zartman

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I WILLIAM ZARTMAN, DEC 20 2008

While most studies on peaceful settlement of disputes see the substance of the proposals for a solution as the key to a successful resolution of conflict, a growing focus of attention shows that a second and equally necessary key lies in the timing of efforts for resolution (Zartman 2000). Parties resolve their conflict only when they are ready to do so—when alternative, usually unilateral, means of achieving a satisfactory result are blocked and the parties feel that they are in an uncomfortable and costly predicament. At that ripe moment, they seek or are amenable to proposals that offer a way out.

The idea of a ripe moment lies at the fingertips of diplomats. As long ago as 1974, Henry Kissinger recognized that “stalemate is the most propitious condition for settlement.” Conversely, practitioners often are heard to say that certain mediation initiatives are not advisable because the conflict just is not yet ripe. In mid-1992, in the midst of ongoing conflict, the Iranian deputy foreign minister noted, “The situation in Azerbaijan is not ripe for such moves for mediation.” (AFP 17 May 1992).

The concept of a ripe moment centers on the parties' perception of a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS), optimally associated with an impending, past or recently avoided catastrophe (Zartman & Berman 1982, pp 66-78; Zartman 1983; Touval & Zartman 1985, pp II, 258-60; Zartman 1985/1989). The concept is based on the notion that when the parties find themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and this deadlock is painful to both of them (although not necessarily in equal degree or for the same reasons), they seek an alternative policy or Way Out. The catastrophe provides a deadline or a lesson indicating that pain can be sharply increased if something is not done about it now; catastrophe is a useful extension of MHS but is not necessary either to its definition or to its existence. If the notion of mutual blockage is too static to be realistic, the concept may be stated dynamically as a moment when the upper hand slips and the lower hand rises, both parties moving toward equality, with both movements carrying pain for the parties.

The mutually hurting stalemate is grounded in cost-benefit analysis, fully consistent with public choice notions of rationality (Sen 1970, Arrow 1963, Olson 1965) and public choice studies of war termination and negotiation (Brams 1990, 1994; Wright 1965), which assume that a party will pick the alternative which it prefers, and that a decision to change is induced by increasing pain associated with the present (conflictual) course. It is also consistent with prospect theory, with its emphasis on loss avoidance (Tversky & Kahneman, Farnham). In game theoretic terms, it marks the transformation of the situation in the parties' perception from a prisoners' dilemma (PDG) into a chicken dilemma game (CDG) (Brams 1985, Goldstein 1998), or, in other terms, the realization that the status quo or no negotiation is a negative-sum situation, and that to avoid the zero-sum outcomes now considered impossible the positive-sum outcome must be explored.

Ripeness is necessarily a perceptual event, and as with any subjective perception, there are likely to be objective referents to be perceived. These can be highlighted by a mediator or an opposing party when they are not immediately recognized by the party itself, and resisted so long as the conflicting party refuses or is otherwise able to block out their perception. But it is the perception of the objective condition, not the condition itself, that makes for a MHS. If the parties do not recognize “clear evidence” (in someone else's view) that they are in an impasse, a Mutually

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Hurting Stalemate has not (yet) occurred, and if they do perceive themselves to be in such a situation, no matter how flimsy the "evidence," the MHS is present.

The other element necessary for a ripe moment is less complex and also perceptual: a Way Out. Parties do not have to be able to identify a specific solution, only a sense that a negotiated solution is possible for the searching and that the other party shares that sense and the willingness to search too. Without a sense of a Way Out, the push associated with the MHS would leave the parties with nowhere to go. Spokespersons often indicate whether they do or do not feel that a deal can be made with the other side and that requirement—i.e. the sense that concessions will be reciprocated, not just banked—exists, particularly when there is a change in that judgment (Zartman & Auer 1991).

Ripeness is only a condition, necessary but not sufficient for the initiation of negotiations. It is not self-fulfilling or self-implementing. It must be seized, either directly by the parties or, if not, through the persuasion of a mediator. Thus, it is not identical to its results, which are not part of its definition, and is therefore not tautological. Not all ripe moments are so seized and turned into negotiations, hence the importance of specifying the meaning and evidence of ripeness so as to indicate when conflicting or third parties can fruitfully initiate negotiations.

Although ripeness theory is not predictive in the sense that it can tell when a given situation will become ripe, it is predictive in the sense of identifying the elements necessary (even if not sufficient) for the productive inauguration of negotiations. This type of analytical prediction is the best that can be obtained in social science, where stronger predictions could only be ventured by eliminating free choice (including the human possibility of blindness and mistakes). As such it is of great prescriptive value to policymakers seeking to know when and how to begin a peace process.

Finding a ripe moment requires research and intelligence studies to identify the objective and subjective elements. Subjective expressions of pain, impasse, and inability to bear the cost of further escalation, related to objective evidence of stalemate, data on numbers and nature of casualties and material costs, and/or other such indicators of MHS, along with expressions of a sense of a Way Out, can be researched on a regular basis in a conflict to establish whether ripeness exists. Researchers would look for evidence, for example, whether the fluid military balance in conflict has given rise at any time to a perception of MHS by the parties, and to a sense by authoritative spokespersons for each side that the other is ready to seek a solution to the conflict, or, to the contrary, whether it has reinforced the conclusion that any mediation is bound to fail because one or both parties believes in the possibility or necessity of escalating out of the current impasse to achieve a decisive military victory.

Ripeness is the key to many successful cases of negotiation, opening the way for discussions that lead to an agreement in the Sinai (1974), Southwest Africa (1988), El Salvador (1988), Mozambique (1992), and many others. The lack of ripeness led to the failure of attempts to open negotiations between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the late 1980s, within Sudan for decades, and elsewhere. Objectively ripe moments, however, were not transformed into subjective perceptions or seized and carried through to successful agreements in Karabagh in 1994, in Cyprus in 2002, and elsewhere, according to published analyses.

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