The Trouble with Interim Peace Agreements: An Analysis of Six Cases

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Draft, please do not cite

Transitional peace agreements have become one of the International Community's preferred remedies in case of protracted intra-state conflicts. Such agreements postpone the final settlement of the conflict for later, but include transitional arrangements in the form of an interim government or an interim territorial settlement. The hope is that the transitional period allows for violence to cease and tempers to cool and that a more sustainable peace settlement can then be arrived at; one that addresses the key underlying issues of the conflict and, in many cases, allows the international presence to come to an end.

The transitional element most commonly refers to the government; in fact, a transitional power-sharing government has become the dominant model for negotiated settlements in non-territorial conflicts (Caspersen, 2016), and is currently being mooted in the case of Syria. The transitional period is intended to allow time for state-building and create the conditions for free and fair elections (Gutteri & Piombo, 2007). But a newer, less tested form of transitional agreement is found in territorial conflicts. These interim agreements postpone the final decision on the status of the contested territory and grants autonomy in the interim period. The final status is then in most cases

decided through an independence referendum, although the process and even the available options may be less well-defined.[1] Postponing the decision on permanent status is typically done in order to make an agreement possible, since the conflict parties are still too far apart on this issue (Weller, 2005). The hope is that the interim period will help create the conditions for either peaceful reintegration or peaceful separation. Weller (2008) views interim agreements as a new conflict resolution strategy that escapes the "self-determination trap", and Bell (2008, p. 111) similarly describe deferred independence referenda as an example of a "new law of hybrid self-determination" which dislocates power by blurring the state's sovereignty.

So far there are five examples of such interim agreements: the Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Sudan (2005); the Belgrade Agreement for Serbia and Montenegro (2002); the Bougainville Peace Agreement (2001); the Declaration of Principles for Israel-Palestine (1993); and the Khazavuyrt Accord for Russia-Chechnya (1996).[2] Interim agreements have also been suggested in other protracted conflicts as a way of squaring the circle between territorial integrity and self-determination, such as in the cases of Kosovo (1999) and Western Sahara (2003). These proposals provided for an independence referendum after a transitional period, but this was in both cases rejected by the parent state. The Basic Principles that frame the ongoing efforts to reach a settlement for Nagorno Karabakh (Azerbaijan) would also constitute an interim agreement, if accepted by the conflict parties. A decision on the status of the contested territory is postponed until a future "expression of popular will". However, despite over a decade of talks, the mediators have failed to come up with a version of these principles that is mutually acceptable. Interim agreements are therefore clearly no panacea but there is currently no systematic analysis of the conditions under which conflict parties have been willing and able to accept such a settlement.

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[1] I adopt a broader definition than Weller (2005), as will be discussed below.
[2] In addition, the settlements for Northern Ireland and Gagauzia could also be seen as open-ended interim agreements, due to the 'principle of consent' on which the former is based and due to the conditional status of the latter: Gagauzia gains the right to self-determination if Moldova's status were to change. UN Resolution 1244 for Kosovo also set up an interim arrangement, but this was imposed on Serbia, rather than a negotiated agreement.

In order for transitional agreements to work as intended, significant transformations are needed during the interim period. The terms of a final settlement are to be arrived at through elite negotiations and, in some cases, through a popular vote. But in order to avoid a continuation of wartime dynamics, or even a resurgence of violence, this necessitates a transformation of power relations and attitudes. Scholars have pointed to the difficulty of achieving this when it comes to interim governments. As Manning argues "There is little reason to suppose that elite beliefs and strategies or the distribution of political power established by interim arrangements can easily be changed". Although these arrangements may be short lived they "cast a long shadow into the future" (2007, pp. 54, 57). Such problems could be expected to be even greater in case the continued existence of the state is still unresolved, and the conditions that led to the acceptance of such an agreement will consequently impact on its sustainability.

This paper analyses the conditions that made it possible to reach interim agreements in Sudan, Serbia-Montenegro, PNG-Bougainville, Israel-Palestine, and Chechnya, and discusses what this means for their sustainability, in particular the difficulty of ensuring the necessary transformations during the interim period. It then asks if these conditions are found, or could be created, in the case of Nagorno Karabakh and if the current framework therefore provides a realistic solution. The method used for this analysis is Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) which allows for analysis of combinations of conditions and different causal paths leading to the same outcome (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). Due to the lack of existing theorizing, the conditions will mostly be arrived at inductively, albeit within a framework that draws on existing literature on interim governments in peace agreements and the broader literature on conflict ripeness and commitment problems. The analysis points to two distinct causal paths, one for agreements that specify the mechanisms for deciding on the final status, and one for agreements that leaves this vague. In practice the line between these two types of interim agreements can be blurred but they tend to reflect a balance of power in favour of, respectively, the rebel forces and the central government. Balance of power matters, but so do intra-communal divisions, ambiguities in the proposed settlement, and third party involvement.

Currently the conditions for an interim agreement are not found in the case of Nagorno Karabakh and seem unlikely to be created in the near future. The general problem with interim agreements is that unless the separatist forces are significantly divided, the final outcome will either be too predictable (independence referendum) or too unpredictable (status postponed). In the former case, the central government is highly unlikely to accept, while rebel forces in a strong position will not accept the latter, and the central government may also be very reluctant.

Interim agreements

The benefit of an interim agreement is that it allows for a compromise settlement, despite a lack of agreement on the key underlying issue. Since the final status has yet to be decided, both sides can argue that they have won, that their maximalist objective will prevail in the end. Weller argues that an interim agreement entails the recognition of the contested territory as a self-determination unit that has the right to independence, but the separatist forces agree to freeze the implementation of that right for a certain period. During the interim period, the separatist region is granted autonomy and continued territorial unity is therefore "given a chance" (Weller, 2005, pp. 159-160). However, these agreements are in practice often highly ambiguous and the right to (external) self-determination is not always accepted by the government, even if an independence referendum is provided for in the agreement. For example, although the 2001 peace agreement for Bougainville promises the holding of a referendum, this is dependent on certain conditions and the popular vote is *not* binding; the PNG parliament retains the final say. Other possible ambiguities regard who has the right to vote in a referendum, which could be decisive, or the territory that is to be covered by this right to self-determination. In the case of Sudan, the precise location of the 1956 border that delineates South Sudan remained contested, and the control of the oil-rich territory of Abyei has proved particularly explosive. An interim agreement does therefore not necessarily include mutual agreement on the option of independence following the transitional period. I will therefore also consider as interim agreements, settlements that postpone the issue of final status for future talks

and create interim institutions in the meantime. This refers to the Oslo Accords for Israel-Palestine and the Khazavuyrt Accords for Chechnya. These agreements both defer final status talks, but the mechanisms for making this decision are not specified and they are both deliberately ambiguous when it comes to the precise options available.

When Is It Possible To Square A Circle?

Zartman (2004, p. 153) once argued that the way around stark invisibility in peace talks "has been a challenge to which creativity has responded positively," but Hopmann and Zartman also contend that this is difficult or indeed impossible when it involves the issue of sovereignty: solutions necessarily fall on one side or the other of the "crest of sovereignty"; "there is no in between" (2010, p. 3). An interim agreement is meant to provide such an "in between", but only as a transitional situation. These agreements do not envisage sovereignty to be fudged in the longer term. Following the interim period, a permanent settlement will either see the contested territory reintegrated into the parent state, presumably with extensive autonomy, or the existing state will dissolve peacefully and the contested territory will gain independence. From a transitional, unstable situation we are therefore meant to end up with a stable equilibrium. Under what conditions are we likely to see such agreements?

The literature on interim governments, do not offer us many clues, as it primarily focuses on the implementation of transitional agreements; on their effect on stability and democracy. Some authors point to the importance of the balance of power between the two sides, which affects the kind of interim arrangement to which they agree (see e.g. (Manning, 2007) (Shain & Linz, 1995). A focus on the 'objective' balance of power is however not enough. Conflict ripeness is, as Zartman (2004) has argued, about the *perception* of a mutually hurting stalemate. Several authors have moreover pointed to the importance of intra-communal dynamics. Internal rivalry constrains leaders willing to compromise (Haas, 1988) - and the kind of settlement they are able to accept - but the

impetus to compromise can also come from such challenges or from a change in leadership (Lieberfeld, 1999). A widened understanding of balance of power and conflict ripeness will therefore be employed in the analysis.

Another thing to consider is the commitment problem that often undermines attempts to reach a settlement: how can the other side be expected to keep its side of the bargain (see e.g. (Walter, 2002)? Commitment problems are arguably even more severe in case of interim agreements, since they defer the resolution of the key underlying issue. Actions taken during the interim period, which could for example affect territorial control by the two parties and the demographic balance in the contested region, will clearly impact on the final status. An interim agreement does not simply postpone status for later; it sets the scene for, and constrains, what is to come. The degree of this commitment problem would appear to be affected firstly by the level of ambiguity in the agreement; this would be particularly high in agreements that do not set out the mechanisms for agreeing on the final status; secondly, the powers retained by the rebel forces; thirdly by the involvement of third parties (see also (Walter, 2002).We would normally expect a sustainable settlement to depend on the commitment problem being addressed. However when it comes to interim agreements, the stronger party (typically the central government) may actually have an interest in such commitment problems.

Central governments overwhelmingly reject a right to external self-determination for the separatist community. Agreeing to a settlement that recognises such a right, even if its implementation is deferred, will likely result in outbidding by hardline forces who can readily portray it as a betrayal and a legitimation of separatist forces. In the case of Abkhazia, the Georgian Government was for years adamant that any peace agreement had to resolve the issue of status, i.e. confirm Georgia's territorial integrity.[3] The central government retains the upper hand in most intra-state conflicts and the inclusion of an independence referendum is therefore highly unlikely. The international bias

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[3] Author's interview with former UN official, 16 December 2015

against secession remains strong and the central government will in most cases have international support on its side when insisting on the continued existence of the state. I would therefore only expect such agreements in cases where the central governments find itself under significant pressure. But even so, an interim agreement should also leave some doubt about the outcome of the independence referendum; unity has to be a possible outcome. If it is completely certain from the outset that independence will be favoured, then the interim period achieves nothing. The parties might as well agree on the final status now, even if implementation is delayed. This is of course possible, as when Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia, but it is very rare indeed that central governments agree to give up on their territorial integrity.

I therefore hypothesise that one of two things need to be added to significant pressure on the central government: Either internal divisions in the breakaways region, and its leadership, give reason to believe that independence is not a foregone conclusion, *or* the interim period provides an opportunity for manipulation and possibly for reneging on core provisions. This explains why rebel forces are also reluctant to accept interim peace agreements; they will be keen to get the issue of status settled as soon as possible to avoid the risk of being cheated, especially if the interim period involves the disarmament of non-state actors and therefore deprives the rebels of their main bargaining power.

The conditions that may make an interim agreement acceptable to both sides can therefore be analysed along three dimensions: conflict context, content of the peace agreement, and the specifics of the process, or more specifically: balance of power and internal divisions; level of ambiguity contained in the agreement; third party guarantees.

Cases Studies: Concluding Interim Agreements

The above theoretical discussion provides a framework for analysing the conditions under which interim agreements are acceptable to the conflict parties. However, we need case studies to test these broad hypotheses and add details. The analysis of the five agreements - Sudan, PNG-Bougainville, Serbia-Montenegro, Chechnya and Israel-Palestine - is based on secondary sources and in-depth analysis of the settlements. The subsequent analysis of whether similar conditions exist in the case of Nagorno Karabakh also includes interviews conducted with international officials and with the conflict parties. The analysis identifies two broad causal pathways, depending on whether an independence referendum is included or not.

A. Agreements with Independence Referendum

Three of the agreements include the holding of an independence referendum. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Sudan promised South Sudan an independence referendum six years after the signing of the agreement. A future independence referendum is also included in the case of PNG-Bougainville. This has to be held between ten and fifteen years after the establishment of the autonomous government (i.e. between 2015 and 2020). In the case of Serbia & Montenegro, either republic could request an independence referendum following an interim period of three years.

Balance of Power and Internal Divisions

The three cases share important similarities when it comes to the balance of power between the two sides. In all three cases the contested territories had achieved what amounted to de facto independence. The Sudanese Peoples' Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) controlled significant territory and had managed to build some system of governance, focused in particular on security (Mampilly, 2011). Despite years of blockade, Bougainville had managed to survive on meagre

resources and build rudimentary state institutions (see e.g. (Caspersen, 2012), and serious

negotiations started only when the central government accepted that independence would be part

of the agenda (Ghai & Regan, 2006, p. 603). Montenegro's de facto independence did not come

about as a result of a war, but it had gradually separated itself from Serbia, and its de facto

statehood included a separate visa regime, currency and a police force (Caspersen, 2003)

Despite this relative position of strength, the "rebel" leaders accepted that their right to self-

determination would be deferred. This can be explained by the existence of a hurting stalemate and

by internal divisions. These entities were not able to achieve their maximalist goal through military

escalation and the status quo was costly. The SPLA/M had come to realise that they could not

achieve victory in the Sudanese war through military means, and they were weakened by divisions

within the movement, ongoing intra-South violence, and loss of regional support (Ahmed 2009: 136-

8) (Aalen, 2013). The leader of the SPLM, John Garang, still preferred a new reformed Sudan, to

secession, but the movement was divided and the independence referendum was actually

negotiated by Garang's deputy and appears to have caught everyone by surprise (Young, 2013, pp.

93-4). Garang's New Sudan in any case required fundamental transformations during the interim

period, and the referendum provided an exit option if this failed (Johnson, 2013, p. 149). In the case

of Bougainville, the rebels were also deeply factionalised, with one powerful faction supporting the

continued existence of the state. In order to keep the intra-communal peace, the two main factions

agreed before the peace talks commenced that the independence referendum would be deferred,

thereby allowing for communal reconciliation to take place first (Ghai & Regan, 2006, p. 597).

Montenegro was also internally divided, but following the 2001 elections, the Montenegrin Prime

Minister came to rely on the staunchly pro-independence Liberal Alliance and he pressed ahead with

his demand for a loose union of two internationally recognised and independent states. However,

whereas the creation of a de facto independent entity had enjoyed significant international support

during Slobodan Milošević's rule, the tables had turned following Serbia's democratic transition, and

Djukanović was now under pressure to accept a federal solution. The EU insisted that Serbia's and

Montenegro's only path towards closer integration with the EU was as a joint state. Deferred independence, and continued economic separation, was therefore the best deal Djukanović could get, without paying a hefty price (Gallagher, 2003) (Kim, 2005). In all three cases, we therefore see contested territories where the separatist forces hold the upper hand, but the community is divided over the issue of independence and the separatists are unable to achieve their goal of independence through military means.

The willingness of the parent state to accept a possible exit can similarly be explained by the existence of a hurting stalemate. The National Congress Party (NCP) in Sudan was facing both an external and internal legitimacy crisis as a result of the ongoing war, which they had concluded that they could not win (Ahmed 2009: 136-8). The US threatened further sanctions, if the government did not continue negotiating, and the government also feared that the US would increase its support for the SPLM/A and other armed groups (Young, 2013, pp. 90-91) and possibly renew the policy of regime change (Aalen, 2013, p. 179). The cost of the Bougainville conflict was similarly taking its toll on the Papua New Guinean government: it had a negative impact on the economy, it was damaging morale in the police and army, and undermined the country's international human rights reputation. (Ghai & Regan, 2006, pp. 597-8). Serbia was clearly in a stronger position than Montenegro militarily and could have forcefully reintegrated the republic. However, this would have seriously jeopardised the international reputation of the new Serbian regime. Moreover, although there were some concern in Serbia about a potential precedent being set by Montenegrin secession, it would also mean the "departure of awkward partner ready to be a constant drain on its resources" (Gallagher, 2003, p. 67). In other words, feelings in Belgrade did not run very high when it came to Montenegrin independence. But just as importantly, secession was in none of the three cases a foregone conclusion when the agreements were signed.

Unity Still Possible

An interim agreement can be said to prejudge the final status, in particular if it recognises the separatist region as a self-determination unit, but the interim period is meant to provide an opportunity for territorial integrity to be maintained. The factions within the separatist movements and the divisions among the populations in the contested territories meant that the outcome of the referendum was not a given. The leader of the SPLM/A, John Garang had visions of a New Sudan (Brosché, 2008, p. 247) and he, along with other SPLM leaders, also had political ambitions in the North (Weller, 2005, p. 176). The agreement explicitly requires the two sides to make unity an attractive option especially to the people of South Sudan (Ch.1, art. 2.4.2). The agreement for PNG-Bougainville contains no clear commitment to work for unity in the interim period, but the conflict was not simply a separatist conflict (Boege, 2009), and powerful factions supported integration, including the future president of the Autonomous Bougainville Government (Ghai & Regan, 2006). The PNG government was convinced that the common state can be maintained if (extensive) autonomy is given a chance (Weller, 2005, p. 161) (Woodbury, 2015). The 2001 elections in Montenegro showed how divided the republic was with the pro- and anti-independence camp finishing almost head to head. A complicating factor concerned the lack of details regarding the referendum: would a simple majority be enough, would Montenegrins living in Serbia be allowed to vote? These issues could significantly affect the outcome of the vote. Although the agreement included no commitment to facilitate unity, the EU's hope was that further EU integration would make a joint state more appealing (Kim, 2005).

Unity was always going to be a hard sell after a bloody war, or in Montenegro's case years of increasing separation. However, ambiguities in the agreement could still mean that it would never come to a referendum, or that its specific terms would make independence unlikely.

Commitment Problem: Separate Forces and Third Party Guarantees

Even if a referendum is promised, the risk - from the rebels' point of view - is that this will never be honoured, or that the process will be manipulated. In the case of Sudan, the SPLM/A rejected a UN security guarantee but insisted on separate army for southern Sudan, which they described as "the only fundamental guarantor" (Young, 2013, p. 117). They consequently made sure that an exit option was available, even if the government were to renege on its promise. Moreover, the international presence in the form of a UN peacekeeping mission ensured that a failure to hold the promised referendum would at least be met with an international reaction. The commitment problem was much less severe in the case of Montenegro, due to the non-violent nature of the conflict. Moreover, international involvement also provided a guarantee against cheating. The deal was strongly pushed, or indeed dictated, by the EU and it would likely have put considerable pressure on Serbia to honour its terms, even if it would rather avoid Montenegrin secession. The outstanding issues, such as the majority required for independence (55 pct) was negotiated internally in Montenegro, on the basis of recommendations from the Venice Commission (Kim, 2006). The commitment problem was much more severe in the case of Bougainville, for three reasons in particular: firstly, the referendum is not binding; the PNG parliament retains the final say. Secondly, the disposal of weapons by the Bougainville forces is a precondition for the holding of the referendum and the rebel forces therefore surrender much of their effective veto power. Thirdly, although there was an initial international presence, this was unarmed and no international oversight of the referendum process, or arbitration in case of disputes over its preconditions, were included. The risk, which should have been apparent to the Bougainville negotiators, is therefore i) that the referendum will not be held, with unmet conditions of 'good governance' or weapons disposal being cited; b) that the result will not be implemented if the vote is for independence, as presently looks likely (Woodbury, 2015). The Bougainville negotiators had insisted on a binding referendum, but eventually gave into international pressure. They believed that if they could unify the community and achieve a very high vote for independence, then it would be difficult for the PNG

government to ignore the result (Ghai & Regan, 2006). Part of the explanation can therefore be sought in the divided community, at the time of the talks, and a belief in continued international interest and involvement. Ghai and Regan (2006) argue that the PNG government could not have agreed to anything more than a non-binding referendum since this allowed them to argue that the state's sovereignty had not been undermined. This fudging of the issue of sovereignty was therefore the key to the settlement: "the promise not so much of independence but the willingness of PNG to consider it" (Ghai & Regan, 2006, p. 602). But that brings the Bougainville agreement closer to the other type of interim agreements that simply postpone the issue of status, with no agreement on the specific mechanism that will lead to a decision. The conditions for such agreements will be explored below.

 In order for an interim that includes an independence referendum to be acceptable to the conflict parties, the following conditions therefore appear to be necessary: Rebel forces have achieved de facto independence; pressure on central government, both internal and external; continued territorial integrity is not ruled out, either due to a divided separatist movement, or due to ambiguities in the agreement.

B. Agreements without Independence Referendum

A much more ambiguous or open-ended form of interim agreement is found in the cases of Israel-Palestine and Russia-Chechnya. In both of these cases, the outcome of an independence referendum would almost certainly have been a foregone conclusion, but none was promised and final status negotiations were postponed. According to the Khasavurt Accord, the final status of Chechnya would be determined within five years. The Declaration of Principles for Israel-Palestine also postpones a number of key issues, including borders and the 'final territorial arrangement', for future talks. These talks were to begin two years after Gaza and Jericho became autonomous (i.e. May 1996). The fact that these agreements postpone the status issue for later does not mean however that they offer no

hint as to what this status will be, or that the interim period has no bearing on this. It is precisely this ambiguity that made agreement possible.

Commitment Problem: Ambiguity, No Third Party Involvement

Hughes (2001, p. 32) argues that a masterstroke to secure the Khasavyurt accord for Chechnya "was its "core ambiguity" regarding the status of Chechnya. "Brevity and ambiguity" was, as Atrokhov (1999, p. 379) puts it, "elevated to an art form" by the agreement, and both sides could argue that their interpretation would prevail. The Chechen side had achieved de facto independence and believed that the agreement was a precursor to full international recognition. They based this interpretation on the wording of the agreement which held that relations between Russia and Chechnya would be "determined in accordance with universally recognised principles and norms of international law" (art. 1), implying a treaty between independent states (Atrokhov, 1999, p. 379). The agreement also referred to "the right of nations toward self-determination" and "the principles of equal rights of nations", and did not include any references to Russia's territorial integrity (Atrokhov, 1999, p. 380). The Russian interpretation was however markedly different and they had no intention to allow Chechen independence (Hughes, 2007, pp. 90-93). The agreement had not required Russia to relinquish its sovereignty over Chechnya and the Russian Government argued that "international law" is a component of the Russian's Federation's legal system and the provision does therefore not imply Chechen independence (Atrokhov, 1999, p. 379). The Russian Government could moreover point to the lack of mention of Chechen independence in the agreement and argue that the right to (internal) self-determination is enjoyed by all constituent units of the Russian Federation (Atrokhov, 1999, p. 379).

The Oslo accords for Israel-Palestine entailed that a territorial compromise, or 'land for peace', had been accepted by both sides, but there was still no agreement on what form this would take (Shlaim,

2005, pp. 246-247). Newman (1995-6, p. 79) argues that "final territorial arrangement" is an Israeli euphemism for the creation of a Palestinian state. However it does not guarantee which territory this will include, nor does it necessarily point to full independence; independent statehood could for example be subject to a set of "servitudes or disabilities in favour of Israel", such as the maintenance of Israeli military bases, right of passage for troops etc (Cassesse, 1993, p. 569). The Palestinian negotiators had previously rejected an interim agreement, but with the Declaration of Principles the PLO accepted an agreement that did not predetermine the final status. However, among Palestinians the agreement was widely perceived as an agreement on Palestinian independence and the leadership did little to dispel this view (Heller, 1994, pp. 57-59). For the Israeli side, the interim period was an experiment and the lack of defined options, or mechanisms, for the final status decision provided a safety net if Palestinian autonomy turned out to present a security threat (Heller, 1994, p. 58).

Both agreements therefore had ambiguity at their core, which allowed the conflict parties to present the agreement as a victory. However, the lack of predetermined final status in this type of interim agreement benefits the stronger side, which in most cases means the central government, especially in cases where the rebels are seen to violate the principle of territorial integrity. The central government is therefore the one with the safety net, whereas in the first type of interim agreement, the separatist forces retained an 'exit option'. This is only reinforced by the lack of international involvement or guarantees in both cases; no third party can ensure that final status negotiations will take place and that the outcome is not prejudged by the interim period. The resulting commitment problem is reinforced by the more asymmetrical nature of these conflicts: there is no effective veto power.

Balance of Power

The central government would therefore appear to hold the upper hand, but this does not mean that such an agreement would be acceptable in most conflict contexts. These interim agreements do not confirm the territorial integrity of the state; independence remains on the table, which is likely to cause further pressure for secession and the interim period may have implications for the legality of such a demand (Benvenisti, 1993). Just like the three first cases, Chechnya and Palestine could be said to have achieved de facto statehood, although not based on territorial control in the latter case. Palestine has been recognised by a significant number of states and UN General Assembly resolutions have proclaimed its right to self-determination (Cassesse, 1993). In terms of balance of power, widely understood, it can therefore also be regarded as a de facto independent entity. This helps explain the preparedness of the Israeli-Government to accept an interim agreement. In addition, the stalemate could be said to be mutually hurting in both cases, at least if we consider internal dynamics.

Russia's incentive for signing the agreement was first of all that it was losing the war: Grozny had been recaptured by Chechen forces, making it clear that the offensive was failing. With elections pending, the Russian leadership was moreover keen to end an unpopular war (Shedd, 2008, p. 97). The Russian side needed a delay, a limbo in the conflict and the agreement provided that (Hughes, 2007a, pp. 90-93). Another factor may however have been power struggles on the Russian side (Jean, 2000). The agreement was heavily criticised in the Kremlin and the Russian envoy, Alexander Lebed, was removed by Yeltsin shortly thereafter (Shedd, 2008, p. 98), possibly due to opposition to the deal he negotiated (Cornell, 1997). The Chechen side may have been winning the war, but they still did not have full territorial control over the republic and could expect a new Russian offensive against Grozny (Atrokhov, 1999). Moreover, they could not achieve their objective of international recognition through military means. Finally, the Chechen leader, Dzhokhar Dudayev had been killed earlier that year and the new Chechen leadership was divided over whether or not to insist on

outright recognition of independence: Lebed appears to have shrewdly played on these divisions and made a deal with the more pragmatic - or more trustful - faction (Hughes, 2007, p. 90). A stalemate could be said to exist in Israel-Palestine in the early 1990s, but it was far more costly to the Palestinian than to the Israeli side. Instead of a mutually hurting stalemate, Zartman (1997, p. 197) refers to a "mutually enticing opportunity": it was the prospect of a better settlement that pulled the parties to the negotiating table. However, both sides also had important internal incentives to accept an agreement. Lieberfeld (1999, p. 75) argues that both Labour and the PLO had an interest in reaching an agreement that would preserve their political dominance; the stalemate was hurting in terms of individual incentives. Rabin had promised the Israeli voters a settlement within six to nine months of becoming prime minister and Yassir Arafat was keen to reach an agreement as soon as possible, as the PLO was facing bankruptcy and losing support to Hamas (Lieberfeld, 1999, p. 70).

Two Causality Paths

The five cases therefore share similarities, including the de facto independent statehood of the contested territory [DEFACTO] and the existence of a mutually hurting stalemate [MHS]. But the specific causality path differs between the two types of interim agreements [INTAGR].

An agreement that includes an independence referendum [REF] appears to depend on divisions within the separatist movement [SEPDIV] which means that continued territorial integrity is not ruled out. This uncertainty regarding the outcome can be compounded by ambiguities within the agreement, although such ambiguities were counterbalanced by international involvement or by the retention of coercive capacity by the separatist forces.

Path A: DEFACTO * MHS * SEPDIV * REF ⟶ INTAGR

If the outcome of the independence referendum is not in doubt, the central government is highly unlikely to accept such an agreement. This is illustrated by two unsuccessful proposals. The 1999

Interim Agreement for Kosovo postponed the issue of the province's final status: "Three years after the entry into force of this Agreement, an international meeting shall be convened to determine a mechanism for a final settlement for Kosovo, on the basis of the will of the people…" (Ch. 8, art. 1). US officials confirmed that this was to be understood as an independence referendum (Weller, 2005). The second version of the Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara, also known as Baker II, similarly proposed an independence referendum following an interim period of five years.[4] However, in both cases the outcome of such a referendum would have been clear and the Serbian and the Moroccan governments unsurprisingly rejected the proposal.

It may be possible to get the parties to agree to an interim settlement even if these preconditions are not met, but it seems that much greater ambiguity [AMBIG] is then needed when it comes to the final status and the mechanisms for deciding upon it, thereby allowing both sides to think that their preferred outcome will prevail.

Path B: DEFACTO * MHS * sepdiv * ref * AMBIG → INTAGR

These two causality pathways are based on the five existing cases of interim agreements, and are moreover supported by cases where it has not been possible to reach such an agreement. They are moreover also supported by existing theories of conditions for peace settlements. This does not mean that other pathways to an agreed interim settlement are not possible, but although the details will vary for specific cases - for example the combination of factors leading to a mutually hurting stalemate, or affecting the prospect for future unity - I would argue that such pathways are unlikely to differ significantly. We can therefore use this model to assess the prospect of an interim agreement in other conflicts and it gives us some clues as to the likely longer-term outcome of such arrangements.

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[4] Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara, Annex 2, http://www.arso.org/S-2003-565e.htm

How Sustainable?

The risk to future stability would appear to be particularly significant if the final status decision is simply postponed. These agreements are only possible due to the use of constructive or indeed destructive ambiguity. In order for them to ensure stability, significant transformations must take place during the interim period. One of the architects of the Oslo Accords for Israel-Palestine argues that a new relationship had to develop; one not based on the asymmetry of power (Pundak, 2001, pp. 32-33). Similarly, in the case of Chechnya, the hope was that the issue of status would be easier to resolve once feelings of fear and resentment had had time to fade away (Coppiters, 2003, p. 377). But such transformations appear to be undermined by the transitional nature of the agreement. The focus will invariably be on the final status and this is likely to lead to tensions. Instead of focusing on improved relations and on vital immediate issues such as reconstruction, meetings between Russian and Chechen officials "diverted into fruitless bickering over the question of formal independence" (Hill, et al., 2005, p. 3). Part of the problem is that policies pursued in the interim period will affect the final status, and this is likely to undermine efforts at normalisation and confidence-building. The prospect of Palestinian statehood was effectively undermined by the lack of contiguity of the Palestinian autonomous territory: By 2000, the Palestinian authorities only controlled 17.2 pct. of the West Bank and between 66 and 80 pct. of Gaza in isolated, encircled enclaves (Roy, 2002; see also Newman, 1995-6). The Israeli policy of closure further undermined the ability to create a functioning state (Roy, 2002). Unless the process is broadened, and determined efforts are made to transform attitudes and build trust. the interim period will be characterised by the same power asymmetries and maximalist positions that predated the agreement. The risk is therefore that conflict is simply postponed for later.

Similar problems are encountered when it comes to agreements that include a promise of an independence referendum. In order for unity to become attractive, a transformation of relations and attitudes is needed, but the logic of an interim agreement again appears to undermine this. On the

face of it, the government has an incentive to make the interim institutions work, so they can demonstrate the benefits of continued co-existence. However, they may also fear that by implementing the agreement they will create more effective institutions in the separatist region, resulting in the emergence of a proto-state that will strengthen their opponents and make secession more likely. Only significant reforms of the state would have convinced South Sudan to remain (Johnson, 2013), but as the separatist faction of the SPLM became more dominant following the death of Garang, the NCP became reluctant to implement the peace agreement. It reportedly feared that implementation of the agreement would strengthen the SPLM and increase the risk of an independent South Sudan (Brosché, 2008, pp. 238-9). The PNG Government has similarly failed to transfer promised funding and powers to Bougainville. This has caused frustration in Bougainville and likely increased support for independence, and it could also mean that the referendum precondition of 'good governance' will not be met (Woodbury, 2015) (Wallis, 2013). Such a lack of co-operation would seem especially likely if the agreement is deliberately ambiguous, and the central government has been able to claim that it has not accepted the possibility of independence.

Another risk is that a change in the balance of power makes the central government unwilling to keep its side of the bargain. The signing of an agreement is likely to result in a reduction of international pressure and attention; the urgency that produced the agreement disappears. The Chechen-Russian balance of power changed during the interim period and the conflict was no longer ripe for resolution (Shedd, 2008, p. 97). In the case of Bougainville, the PNG government still has reasons to oppose secession, including the economic costs and the risk of further fragmentation (Woodbury, 2015), and the fear is that it will try to avoid holding a referendum or refuse to implement the result.[5] This is an argument for including international guarantees in an agreement, even if an agreement could be reached without it. The case of Nagorno Karabakh, where an interim

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[5] Its reaction to Australia's decision to establish a diplomatic mission in Bougainville is ominous: Australians were banned from travelling to the autonomous region (Lasslett, 2015).

agreement has been discussed for more than a decade, however illustrates the obstacles to reaching

such an agreement in the first place.

Nagorno Karabakh: Possible Interim Agreement?

Nagorno Karabakh (NK) has enjoyed de facto independence ever since separatist forces, backed by

neighbouring Armenia, gained control of the territory in the early 1990s. The entity has however

failed to gain international recognition and Azerbaijan maintains that it has the right to reintegrate

the territory, through force if necessary. A ceasefire agreement was signed in 1994 and the

stalemate has persisted since then, but the situation is volatile and heavy weapons are occasionally

being used across the front line. The conflict does not receive much international attention, but a

renewed outbreak of war would be catastrophic and would risk drawing in regional powers,

including Russia, Iran and Turkey (De Waal, 2013). There are therefore pressing reasons to try to

reach a negotiated settlement, and negotiations under the auspices of the OSCE's Minsk Group are

ongoing. The international co-chairs frequently announce that a breakthrough may be imminent.

"There is a possibility of a Karabakh settlement in the course of this year", the US Co-chair declared

optimistically in 2005 (International Crisis Group, 2005). Four years later, the Russian Co-chair was

again hopeful that a meeting between the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan "could lead to a

breakthrough" (Fuller, 2009). But these optimistic statements have so far amounted to nothing.

The principles of the talks have developed over the years. Initially, the international position was

that an agreement had to respect Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and grant Nagorno Karabakh the

highest degree of self-rule *within* the existing state.[6] However, Armenia vetoed these principles, as

they ruled out NK independence from the outset and the two sides remained diametrically opposed

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[6] See the Lisbon Summit Declaration, Annex 1: http://www.osce.org/mc/39539?download=true

on the issue of status. Since 2005, the so-called Basic Principles have formed the basis of negotiations. They include the following:

- Return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control;
- An interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance;
- A corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh;
- Future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will
- The right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; and
- International security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation.[7]

Both presidents have accepted these principles, but only as a basis for further discussion and we seem no closer to an agreement now than we did in 2005. One former OSCE official argues that the basic principles have simply "put in one document what the parties cannot agree on."[8] The main disagreement concerns the meaning of the popular "expression of will". The Armenian side sees this as a framework for an interim agreement of the first type: with an independence referendum for Nagorno Karabakh at the end. Azerbaijan however rules this out and insists that full independence cannot be an option. It therefore sees it more as an interim agreement on the second type that defers the final status decision and does not specify the mechanisms that will lead to it. The mediators seem to have something in-between in mind: the expression of will does refer to an independence referendum, but the modalities of this referendum are to be agreed in later talks.[9] These "technical issues" have however become crucial stumbling blocks in the negotiations (Huseynov, 2010, p. 16). Since the precise nature of the interim agreement is therefore still being negotiated, I will consider both causal paths below.

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[7] This is the version made public by the Co-chairs in 2009, http://www.osce.org/mg/51152. The principles have been revised over time, but without any fundamental changes, author's interview with former OSCE official, 11 November 2015.
[8] Author's interview, 11 November 2015.
[9] Author's interview with former OSCE official, 11 November 2015.

Unity: Lack of Divisions over Independence

The first problem concerns the prospect of making unity an attractive prospect; of making separation less of a foregone conclusion. The Karabakh leaders have no interest in unity. Unlike in the cases of South Sudan, Bougainville, and Montenegro there are no internal divisions on this issue. When it comes to the issue of independence we find almost complete unanimity within the entity (Caspersen, 2011). The Azerbaijani Government has, despite its insistence on reintegration of the entity, made no effort to try to reach out to the Karabakh Armenians and build trust. Instead it relies on militaristic rhetoric and continued threats of a "military solution" which will not make unity appear attractive to the Karabakh Armenians. This is actually reinforced by the principles themselves which also only emphasise separation, not any form of co-existence. The return of refugees and IDPs to Karabakh is included but there is no mention of local power-sharing, nor any attempts to tie to the region to the centre.

If a referendum is held, then the result would therefore be entirely predictable and merely depend on where it is held and who is allowed to vote. If a referendum is held in Karabakh only, which is the common practice in interim agreements,[10] then the result would be a resounding Yes to independence - even if Azeri IDPs returned and were able to vote. If the referendum is held in Azerbaijan as a whole, as Azerbaijan insists (see for example Trend Agency, 2011), then the No would be similarly resounding. If the vote were to be held in the areas currently controlled by the Armenian forces, i.e. Karabakh and the surrounding districts, then the result would depend on whether IDPs were able to return; if they were, then it would again be a No. This means that there is really nothing to be gained from the interim period; there is little prospect that co-existence will be the outcome of a referendum held in Karabakh. The conditions for what has been referred to as Path A do therefore not appear to exist. Are the conditions for Path B met?

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[10] Since the territories have been recognised as units of self-determination (see Weller, 2005).

Commitment Problem: Deep Mistrust

If the issue of status is postponed - with no agreement on the specific mechanisms - or if the agreement is left deliberately vague, the commitment problem becomes accentuated. The deep mistrust between the two sides in the Karabakh conflict makes this very hard to overcome.

In the 1990s, the Minsk Group co-chairs suggested that the issue of status was simply left for later, but the Armenian side rejected this fearing that it would never be negotiated, that Azerbaijani forces would launch a military offensive once Armenian forces had withdrawn from the occupied districts. There were simply not enough guarantees against a forceful reintegration (see Navasardian, 2006, p. 111). They insist that any agreement must clearly include an independence referendum, which is to be held in Nagorno Karabakh only. But even with this, they still worry about the sequencing of events. When it comes to IDPs, the Armenian side argues that they will accept the right to return, but only once the issue of status is resolved.[11] Their main concern is that NK's security will not be protected in the interim period; they are concerned that if the withdrawal of troops happens before the vote on NK's status, then the latter will never materialise or will be manipulated by the Azerbaijani Government. The agreement is supposed to provide international guarantees against such 'cheating', in the form of an international peacekeeping force. However, the Armenian side maintains that they would not trust such a force to protect Nagorno Karabakh. They point to the Serb statelet in wartime Croatia which was forcefully reintegrated, despite the presence of UN forces who were supposed to uphold the ceasefire.[12] The Armenian side is therefore in a sense worried about possible "transformations" in the interim period; however not in the form of changed Armenian attitudes, but rather based on demographic changes, the use of force, or failure to honour

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[11] Author's interview with David Babayan, advisor to the NKR president, Stepanakert 28 October 2008. The recent ECHR ruling that the rights of Azeri IDPs have been violated by their inability to return, has made this position even more problematic for the Armenian side. See http://www.asil.org/blogs/european-court-human-rights-rules-rights-refugees-displaced-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-june-16

[12] Author's interviews in Nagorno Karabakh, September-October 2008

commitments. Such concerns over credible commitment are however not limited to the Armenian side. The Azerbaijani side is also concerned about the ambiguity contained in the principles. The Azerbaijani side fear that they would eventually have to comply with a decision against their will: the independence of Nagorno Karabakh (Huseynov, 2010, p. 19).

Given the absence of an agreement on the outcome, both sides are trying to reduce the ambiguities, and turn them in their favour. This helps explain why negotiations over a framework agreement have been ongoing for more than a decade. But underlying the unwillingness to accept a risky settlement is also the balance of power between the two sides; the lack of conflict ripeness.

Balance of Power: Lack of Ripeness

The conflict over Nagorno Karabakh involves a de facto independent entity and like the cases where an interim agreement was reached the situation is also characterised by a stalemate. It is however not a hurting stalemate. Neither the Armenian nor the Azerbaijani President face significant pressure, externally or internally, to reach a deal and both sides remain hopeful that time is on their side; that they can achieve their maximalist objectives if they just wait long enough. The Karabakhi leaders, along with their supporters in Armenia, hope that time will create irreversible facts on the ground: it will normalise the status quo and make international recognition of Nagorno Karabakh's de facto independence more likely. In the meantime, they are working on making the status quo more attractive, which they argue is preferable to an uncertain agreement (Caspersen, 2015). The Azerbaijani Government on the other hand hopes that time and the international isolation of Nagorno Karabakh will gradually weaken the entity. Combined with Azerbaijan's much increased military spending, this is intended to weaken the resolve of the Armenian side thereby making reintegration more likely - through negotiations or perhaps through military means (see e.g. De Waal, 2010, p. 160; Özkan, 2008, p. 583). The stalemate is "soft, stable, self-serving" (Hopmann &

Zartman, 2010, p. 2) (see also Mooradian & Druckman, 1999), and there is consequently no sense of urgency surrounding the peace talks.

This is therefore not the kind of balance of power that was found to be conducive to interim agreements: the parent state is not under significant pressure and the de facto state is also in a fairly secure position. Azerbaijan consequently has no reason to even raise the prospect of compromising on its territorial integrity, especially given the lack of divisions within Nagorno Karabakh. And there is a lack of preparedness in Karabakh to gamble with its de facto independence.

Could conditions be created?

Conditions for an interim agreement do not appear to exist at the moment, but could they be created? The most obvious thing to focus on would be conflict ripeness. This could be created by making the stalemate more costly, or making a settlement appear more attractive. At the moment there is very little pressure on the two presidents; if anything they are the ones putting pressure on the mediators.[13] The Co-chairs are even careful not to publicly criticise one side. They instead reprimand "the sides" in general (International Crisis Group, 2005, p. 8). If the presidents reject a proposal, the mediators simply go back to the drawing board and there are no attempts to incentivise the presidents. "What goes on in the negotiations does not affect the multi-million dollar cooperation and aid programs the U.S., Russia and EU have with Armenia and Azerbaijan" (International Crisis Group, 2005, p. 8). The local leaders are not assigned any responsibility for failed talks and bear no costs (see also (De Waal, 2010).

Although the mediators could clearly put more pressure on the leaders, and be more honest about the difficulties they are facing (De Waal, 2010), there is a limit to what international pressure can do. As Andrzej Kasprzyk (2003), the Personal Representative for the OSCE Chairman-in-Office for Nagorno Karabakh, has argued, enforcing a solution would both be extremely costly and risky for the

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[13] Authors interviews with EU official and former OSCE official, 15 and 11 November 2015

international community. Another problem is a lack of agreement between the three Co-chairs. Pressure will only work if Russia, the US and France agree on imposing sanctions unless an agreement is forthcoming. In the present international climate that seems highly unlikely.

Even if the stalemate was to become more costly, the local leaders will find themselves constrained. Armenia's leaders have already experienced domestic backlashes when seen to adopt a too moderate position in the peace talks, and the "Karabakh card" is used routinely by the opposition to denounce the ruling regime (Tchilingirian, 2005). Azerbaijan's President, Ilham Aliyev, is usually seen as a stronger leader than Armenia's Serzh Sargsyan and may be able to carry a settlement. However, the hardening of rhetoric, which is primarily meant for an internal audience,[14] would likely constrain his ability to agree to a settlement, especially if it means compromising on Azerbaijan's territorial integrity (Musabekov, 2005) (see also Caspersen, 2012). The existence, or not, of a mutually hurting stalemate is not the only factor of importance; bottom-up processes would be needed to prepare the ground for a settlement. This is also required if the other conditions for an interim agreement are to be addressed: prospect for unity and/or reduction of commitment problems.

One option for promoting co-existence would be to insist on a double majority or a super majority in the referendum, which would necessitate that at least a proportion of returning IDPs supported independence (see (Huseynov, 2010). However, such a requirement would likely be rejected by both sides and would presently result in deadlock. It would have to be combined with a prolonged interim period to allow for the gradual development of confidence. This would also make unity a more realistic outcome. The length of the proposed interim period is not publicly known. 10-15 years is a common speculation but Azerbaijani analysts have suggested that this is too short and that there should ideally not be a time limit.[15] An extended interim period would however be akin to postponing the status issue indefinitely; it would present significant commitment problems and would, with the present balance of power, be rejected by the Karabakh leaders.

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[14] Author's interview with Fariz Ismailzade, political analyst (Baku, 11 June 2009).
[15] Author's interview with Eldar Namazov, political analyst. Baku, 16 June 2009. See also (Musabekov, 2005).

Given the deep level of mistrust between the two sides, the commitment problem will have to be addressed, regardless of the form of the interim agreement. This necessitates international engagement in the post-settlement period. De Waal (2010) criticises that the Minsk Group has not been preparing for the post-settlement phase, for example by designing the peacekeeping force that is meant to form a cornerstone of a settlement. The EU would almost certainly be asked to help fund an international mission, but they are not part of the OSCE High Level Planning Group that is charged with such preparations.[16] This makes it harder to the parties, and especially the Armenian side, to take the leap into the relatively unknown, which is required for an interim agreement to be accepted. The risk of being cheated could also, to some extent, be addressed through conditionality, for example by specifying that if Azerbaijan fails to implement the agreement, then Nagorno Karabakh would immediately be recognised by the international community. As with the other strategies this however requires a robust international commitment to the peace process, which has so far been lacking.

The changes required for an interim peace agreement to be realistic in the case of Nagorno Karabakh therefore go beyond making the stalemate more costly. The biggest hurdle would be to make the referendum result anything but a foregone conclusion. Some ambiguity regarding the referendum is therefore likely necessary, but this requires the commitment problem to be addressed. This can to some extent be done through confidence-building measures and bottom-up processes, but it is hard to get away from the need for robust international guarantees.

Conclusion

Interim agreements are typically proposed when all else fails, but they are only acceptable to both sides under fairly specific conditions. Two causal paths were identified: one for agreements that promise an independence referendum at the end, and one for agreements that simply postpone the

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[16] Author's interview with EU official, 15 November 2015

issue. The key difference was the extent of divisions within the contested territory and the relative strength of the parent state and the separatist forces. These conditions are presently not found in the case of Nagorno Karabakh, which makes an interim agreement an unlikely prospect, even if the current "soft" stalemate were to become more painful. This helps explain the decade-long impasse. This case also highlighted the importance of the commitment problem, especially in a fairly balanced conflict, and the need for international guarantees.

The combination of conditions that lead to interim agreements also affect their longer-term sustainability. The interim period is meant to provide a breathing space that will allow attitudes to moderate and co-existence to be given a chance, but it is impossible to separate the transitional period from the permanent status. Firstly, in many conflicts the outcome of an independence referendum will be easy to predict. Although the interim period is meant to provide an opportunity for the central government to demonstrate the virtues of co-existence, this is likely to prove a tall order, especially after a bloody war and a prolonged period of de facto separation. Secondly, the interim nature of the agreement will tend to undermine the significant transformation - of power relations and attitudes - that would be required for it to work as intended. These problems have been highlighted in other forms of transitional agreements (Manning, 2007), but are accentuated when the core underlying issue is left unresolved. The fudging of sovereignty may be the only solution in some conflicts, but making this transitional is associated with significant constraints. Ambiguity may help seal the deal, but the more ambiguous the agreement, the greater the risk of renewed conflict once a more stable equilibrium between territorial integrity and independence moves closer.

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