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Sticher, Valerie

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Healing Stalemates: The Role of Ceasefires in Ripening Conflict

VALERIE STICHER  ^{*,**}

*Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, Switzerland, **Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, Leiden University, Netherlands

ABSTRACT Ceasefires are often associated with inhibiting conflict ripeness because they remove the immediate costs of conflict and the pressure on conflicting parties to negotiate. Yet, in many intrastate conflicts, ceasefires have proven instrumental in reviving or enabling peace talks. This article provides an analytical framework to systematically assess the impact of ceasefires on conflict ripeness and identify key factors that condition their effects. Enriching ripeness theory with insights from the related bargaining theory of war and ceasefire research, this article identifies three key milestones in the transition from war to negotiated settlement—ripeness for negotiations, for concessions and for settlement—and the conditions that help conflicting parties reach these milestones. It demonstrates how and why ceasefires have the potential to foster ripeness at all three stages, whereas ceasefire violations threaten to undermine the ripening process, particularly after the onset of negotiations. The analysis suggests that temporal limits to ceasefires in the first two ripeness stages increase the probability that ceasefires contribute to ripening, while in the third stage, it is better that parties agree on an indefinite ceasefire or link it to the progress of negotiations in order to enable movement towards settlement. External enforcement of a ceasefire can pose a significant impediment to conflict ripeness.

In the Philippines, a longstanding ceasefire transformed relations between conflicting parties but led to a long, drawn out negotiation process (see Akebo, 2019). In the Sudan North–South process, a ceasefire provided important momentum to revive peace talks. In Colombia, peace talks survived the collapse of a ceasefire, while in Sri Lanka, an ineffective ceasefire remained in place after peace talks were suspended. What explains these different trajectories associated with ceasefires in intrastate conflicts? Why and when do ceasefires either facilitate or hinder progress towards a peace agreement?

This article offers a systematic discussion of the role of ceasefires in creating the conditions that are conducive to progress towards conflict settlement and highlights key factors that condition these effects. To achieve this, the article builds on ripeness theory (e.g. Haass, 1988; Pruitt, 2005; Vuković, 2019; Zartman, 1989, 2001, 2015), supplemented with insights from the related bargaining theory of war and ceasefire research. Ceasefires

Correspondence Address: Valerie Sticher. Email: sticherv@gmail.com

are understood here as the process that follows a declaration by at least one party to a conflict to suspend or terminate conflict violence from a specific point in time (adapted from Clayton et al., 2019). The analysis focuses on the relationship between ceasefires and peace negotiations, and is, therefore, limited to ceasefires that are put in place prior to the conclusion of a peace agreement. Future research could extend the analysis beyond this specific time frame, assessing the implications of ceasefires on enduring rivalries and unstable peace.

The article proceeds as follows: The first section considers ripeness as a dynamic process rather than a single moment, identifying three key milestones in the transition from war to negotiated settlement and laying out the conditions that facilitate progress towards these milestones. The second section uses deductive reasoning to discuss the impact ceasefires have on satisfying these conditions. It shows how at different stages of the ripeness process, ceasefires affect progress towards settlement in different (and sometimes conflicting) ways. Based on these insights, the concluding section discusses the implications of these discussions, and potential strategies for warring parties and third parties interested in promoting conflict settlement.

1. Analytical Framework

This section proposes an analytical framework to help dissect the contrasting impacts of ceasefires on conflict ripeness.

1.1. Empirical Puzzles

Ripeness theory, as introduced more comprehensively by Siniša Vuković in this special issue (Vuković, 2021) highlights the need for a mutually hurting stalemate as a necessary condition for conflict ripeness. *Stalemates* refer to situations where neither side believes that they can win the armed conflict militarily. *Mutually hurting* stalemates arise when the costs of conflict appear unbearable and are perceived to outweigh the potential gains of a military approach.

The theory's application to intrastate conflicts poses two important, connected empirical puzzles. The first relates to the role of ceasefires in achieving a ripe moment for the resolution of conflict. As ceasefires remove or reduce the costs of conflict, they tend to be seen as undermining conflict ripeness (Pruitt, 2005, pp. 15–16; Zartman, 2008). Indeed, we see a 'freezing' of conflicts with long-standing ceasefires in places such as Cyprus or the Western Sahara.¹ At the same time, in places as varied as the Sudan, the Philippines or Northern Ireland, ceasefires have played a crucial role in enabling or reviving peace negotiations, contributing to the conclusion of a peace agreement.

Secondly, and relatedly, ongoing hostilities play a contradictory role in ripening a conflict situation. The continuation of battlefield violence creates the objective conditions that arguably increase the chances that each side perceives the situation as painful (Zartman, 2001). But at the same time, as Zartman readily admits, it is possible that 'increased pain increases resistance rather than reducing it' (Zartman, 2001, p. 12). This suggests that under some circumstances, continued hostilities pose an impediment to conflict settlement and undermine rather than foster ripeness (Greig & Diehl, 2005, pp. 625–626; Mahieu, 2007, pp. 9–10).

These conflicting expectations about the impact of fighting and ceasefires on conflict ripeness are at least partly rooted in a static understanding of ripeness. In its original formulation, ripeness theory was developed to identify the ripe moment to initiate negotiations. It offers an important explanation of why some attempts to initiate negotiations fail while others are successful; however, it is only one factor contributing to the success or failure of settlement attempts more broadly. Depending on how close the parties have moved towards settlement and, relatedly, what obstacles lay in the way of progress, different conditions may be conducive to progress towards a negotiated peace agreement.

Later iterations of ripeness theory and contributions by other scholars (e.g. Haass, 1988; Pruitt, 2005; Vuković, 2019) show how the underlying idea of the theory—that the timing of consensus based initiatives is important—can be fruitfully extended to identify conditions enabling progress towards settlement more generally. Building on these efforts, this article understands ripeness as a dynamic process, where the conditions that create a conducive environment for conflict settlement shift as the belligerents reach specific ripeness milestones. This makes it possible to analyze the effects of ceasefires on progress towards these milestones, showing how they vary at different stages of the process.

1.2. *Ripeness as a Process*

Figure 1 suggests a simple conceptualization of the ripeness process in three stages. The squares depict key moments of ripeness—or milestones—in the transition from war to negotiated settlement. The black arrows indicate conditions that significantly increase the likelihood of reaching the next milestone. These conditions are elaborated and justified more fully below. The term ‘ripening’ is used here to describe the dynamics and actions that increase the likelihood that these conditions are fulfilled, and the next milestone is reached.

The first key moment of ripeness matches the original formulation, i.e. a situation where conditions are conducive to initiate negotiations. The primary conditions necessary to reaching this situation are a mutually hurting stalemate and the willingness of the parties to explore a way out through negotiations (see Kleiboer, 1994; Zartman, 1989, 2001). A second key moment occurs when the leaders of the warring parties are prepared to make key concessions that are essential to reaching a mutually acceptable agreement. The perception of a mutually enticing opportunity (Zartman, 2001, p. 14; Zartman & Berman, 1982; Vuković, 2019) will greatly facilitate movement towards this milestone. A third key moment is ripeness to settle. Without sufficient internal support for an

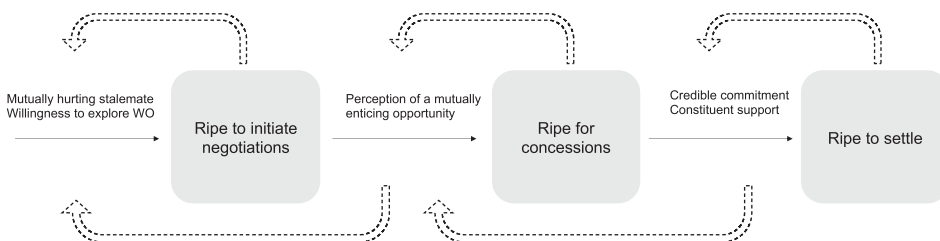


Figure 1. Conditions and milestones in the ripeness process

agreement (Haass, 1988; Pruitt, 2005; Sticher, 2021a) and the ability of those involved to trust in its eventual implementation (Walter, 1997), leaders will find it very difficult to reach this final milestone.²

Assumptions and limitations. To keep the framework parsimonious, ripeness is understood here as a *dyadic* process, even if groups involved in the conflict may differ in their perception of what constitutes a hurting stalemate and their willingness to explore a way out, as well as other conditions conducive to achieving a settlement (see Pruitt, 2005).³ The aim here is to identify key milestones, and a shift towards a mutual perception of ripe moments undeniably affects opportunities to move towards settlement. This framework could be further refined to address how individual perceptions affect these dynamics.

As the dotted arrows in Figure 1 indicate, ripeness is not necessarily a linear process: real-life conflicts are often messy, with several moments of ripening and unripening over the course of a conflict (Lederach, 2003). Such circularity may be triggered by changes in context, but can also be endogenous to conflict dynamics, resulting from unilateral or consensus-based actions taken by the warring parties. Indeed, an important aspect of the analysis below is to examine when and how ceasefires may contribute to unripening.

The order in which conditions are presented relates to when their absence becomes a *salient obstacle* for a conflict to move to the next stage of ripeness. Some conditions, such as the lack of constituent support or credible commitments, may affect perceptions of ripeness to start negotiations or make substantive concessions. However, at these earlier stages of ripeness, other factors present more systematic obstacles to settlement. For example, as long as the conflicting parties do not perceive the benefits of a negotiated settlement, it is unlikely that they will be concerned about constituent support or a failure to enforce an eventual agreement.

The above conceptualization also implies that the conditions outlined are not absolutely necessary for parties to reach the next ripeness milestone.⁴ For example, leaders of the warring parties may decide to accept a peace agreement, even if they lack sufficient constituent support. However, such a lack of constituent support will likely impede the implementation of the peace agreement and put the leader at serious risk of being sidelined by an internal challenger (Sticher, 2021a). Consequently, it is unlikely that a conflict will proceed to the next stage of ripeness unless the conditions in Figure 1 are met.

2. Ceasefires in Relation to the Ripening Process

To identify when, why and how ceasefires make it more or less likely that a conflict becomes ripe for settlement, this section describes in more detail the conditions that facilitate progress to each new ripeness milestone. It then assesses how dynamics around ceasefires may (1) foster or impede ripeness, by increasing or decreasing the likelihood that salient obstacles to reaching the next milestone are overcome, and (2) affect the risk of unripening, i.e. why and how ceasefires affect the likelihood that obstacles that had been overcome might reemerge.

This analysis does not assume that ceasefires only arise once conflicting parties experience a mutually hurting stalemate. While such a stalemate certainly encourages the conclusion of a ceasefire, conflicting groups may engage in a ceasefire for a variety of reasons—including the creation of a military advantage (see Chounet-Cambas, 2011; Mahieu, 2007; Sticher & Vuković, 2021 for comprehensive discussions). Similarly, an

actor in an armed conflict with several other warring parties may engage in a ceasefire to focus its energy and resources on another conflict dyad. This appears to have been the case in 2018 in Myanmar, when the government entered into a temporary ceasefire with armed actors in one part of the country, while escalating combat with groups in other geographical areas (Bynum, 2019). In such cases, parties may engage in a ceasefire for strategic or tactical reasons even in the absence of a mutually hurting stalemate.

Conversely, a mutually hurting stalemate does not necessarily produce a bilateral ceasefire, as the case of Colombia demonstrates: In the 2012–2016 peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC), both sides recognized that they could not win militarily and that continued armed conflict would result in unnecessary pain. Yet, they negotiated in the absence of a bilateral ceasefire because, among other reasons, the government feared that a ceasefire would prolong the armed conflict (Millán Hernández et al., 2020).

2.1. *Ripe Moment to Initiate Negotiations*

To reach a ripe moment to initiate negotiations, parties need to experience a mutually hurting stalemate and be willing to explore a way out through negotiations (Zartman, 1989, 2001). This section considers how ceasefires affect these conditions.

Mutually hurting stalemate. Objective conditions, such as the costs inflicted by violent conflict, make it more likely that warring parties perceive a conflict situation as painful (Zartman, 2001, p. 13). However, these conditions do not suffice to constitute a mutually hurting stalemate. In addition, leaders need to recognize this pain and understand that any eventual outcome of a military approach will be worse than what could be achieved through a political settlement (Fearon, 1995; Kleiboer, 1994, p. 110; Pruitt, 2005, p. 7; Zartman, 2001, pp. 8–9).

Objective conditions

The most direct and apparent link between ceasefires and a mutually hurting stalemate is that ceasefires lower the direct costs of conflict and, consequently, make it less likely that the situation is perceived to be mutually hurting (Pruitt, 2005, pp. 15–16). Ceasefires may also reduce third party pressure to find a negotiated solution, which again reduces the objective conditions necessary to perceptions of a hurting stalemate. This could prolong a conflict and the process of reaching a ripe moment to initiate negotiations (Mahieu, 2007, pp. 210–212).

To avoid these outcomes, the threat of a return to violence must remain real (Zartman, 2015, p. 481). We would normally expect conflicting parties, particularly those who challenge the status quo, to restart hostilities if a ceasefire threatens to impede progress towards settlement (see Chounet-Cambas, 2011, pp. 15–17; Darby, 2001, p. 120). One exception is when third parties impose a ceasefire, for example, through a peacekeeping mission. This may change actors' motivations and make it too costly to return to violence, even when a ceasefire blocks progress in negotiations (see Greig & Diehl, 2005). This suggests that ceasefires imposed and enforced by third parties are more likely to impede the ripening process than those negotiated and implemented on a voluntary basis.

The risk of a ceasefire collapse or a major violation is arguably high in this early stage of the ripeness process, as those who do not recognize the benefits of settlement are likely to engage in behaviour that goes against the letter or spirit of a ceasefire. A collapse may lead to conflict escalation (see Zartman & Faure, 2005), which could potentially increase the immediate costs of conflict and thus ripen the objective conditions for pain on both sides.

Subjective perceptions

Ceasefires may also alter perceptions of the objective conditions fostering a mutually hurting stalemate. After long periods of war, continued hostilities become a part of life for many affected communities (Coleman, 2011, p. 541). A period without hostilities could increase awareness of these costs and may lead to increased pressure on leaders involved in the conflict to find a way out. This increases the likelihood that parties experience a mutually hurting stalemate after a ceasefire expires or collapses. The costs of war may also become more discernible in the aftermath of a major ceasefire violation. If violence subsides prior to the violation, a violation foreshadows what a return to full-out war could mean, with an effect comparable to the idea of an impending catastrophe (see Zartman, 2001, p. 8).

Willingness to explore a way out. Willingness to explore a (consensus based) way out is related to the notion of a stalemate: it requires leaders to recognize that efforts to impose unilateral actions will be ineffective and that they could reach a better outcome through a conflict settlement (Kleiboer, 1994, p. 110; Zartman, 2001, p. 8, 13). However, a stalemate alone is not sufficient: leaders may often be unwilling to explore a way out if they doubt their opponent's seriousness in negotiations because negotiations create expectations and entail political costs (Kaplow, 2016). Pro-settlement leaders may only be willing to incur such costs if they are reasonably confident of the serious intent of their opponent. Some basic *working trust*, i.e. trust based on an assessment of the opponent's interest in a negotiated settlement (rather than interpersonal trust) (Kelman, 2005) will therefore greatly increase the willingness to explore a way out through negotiations.

Ceasefires may help warring parties establish this working trust. In the absence of clear information, parties may decide to test each other through a limited ceasefire arrangement that can easily be reversed should the opponent fail to comply (Clayton and Sticher, 2021). By sticking to the terms of such an arrangement, even when defection would offer short term benefits, leaders can signal that they perceive the long-term benefits of settlement and act in good faith (Akebo, 2013, pp. 201–203). When one side is hesitant to engage in even a limited arrangement, the opponent may consider declaring a unilateral ceasefire to signal its intent. For example, in Colombia, peace talks with the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN) ended after a large-scale ELN attack in January 2019. Fifteen months later, in the wake of the UN Secretary General's call for a 'coronavirus ceasefire', the ELN declared a one-month ceasefire in what many saw as an attempt to revive peace negotiations (Rustad et al., 2020, p. 3).

While ceasefire compliance helps establish working trust, major ceasefire violations will likely undermine it, particularly if violations are perceived as intentional. Note that at this stage of a conflict, when uncertainties about intentions abound, it is (a) more likely that intentional violations occur and (b) more likely that violations are interpreted as intentional (Sticher, 2021b)—even if they are perpetrated by errant subordinates. This suggests that incidents spiral more easily out of control in the earliest stage of the ripeness process,

potentially undermining the establishment of working trust and fuelling hatred, which makes it less likely that leaders are willing to risk their political careers and explore negotiations as a way out of war.

2.2 *Ripe Moment for Concessions*

Even when leaders recognize the benefits of settlement and the situation is ripe to initiate negotiations, they may have widely diverging perceptions of their relative strength and the costs of continued conflict (Fearon, 1995; Werner & Yuen, 2005). These perceptions shape what leaders consider to be a fair settlement (Druckman, 1986, p. 186). Accordingly, even though both sides are willing to consider some concessions when the first milestone—ripeness for negotiations—is reached, these concessions do not result in a zone of agreement. Therefore, divergent expectations will often result in negotiation impasses or a breakdown of talks, as leaders on both sides will believe that their opponent is making unreasonable demands.

A second milestone—ripeness for concessions—is reached when leaders overcome such impasses and crises, and manage to agree on the broad outline of an eventual peace deal. This may be in the form of an explicit formula for settlement, e.g. through a framework agreement (Druckman, 1986; Zartman & Berman, 1982). Some conflicting parties may also choose an incremental decision making process rather than focusing first on agreeing to the broad parameters of a deal (Zartman & Berman, 1982, p. 89). Therefore, more important than an explicit formula for settlement is an implicit understanding between leaders on the outline of a deal and, most importantly, a recognition of what concessions will be necessary to eventually settle (see also Pruitt, 2005, p. 13).

Shared perceptions of a mutually enticing opportunity will greatly increase the chances of reaching this milestone (see Druckman, 1986, pp. 332–333; Zartman, 2001, p. 14; Zartman & Berman, 1982; Vuković, 2019). Without the willingness to explore a way out through negotiations, leaders of the conflicting parties will lack the appropriate mindset to perceive such mutually enticing opportunities. In addition, leaders are much more likely to agree on the broad outline of a deal if they converge in their assessment of the expected outcome of a military outcome—that is, if they roughly agree on their relative strengths and the expected costs of continued conflict (see Fearon, 1995; Werner & Yuen, 2005). To assess how ceasefires affect the ripeness process after the onset of negotiations, it is therefore necessary to understand how ceasefires affect information provision, which helps leaders converge in their expectations of the outcome of a military approach to the conflict.

Ceasefires and information provision. Fighting reveals important information about the relative strength of each side and the expected costs of continued armed conflict (Slantchev, 2003). By suspending the fighting, ceasefires disrupt this flow of information (see Greig & Diehl, 2005, p. 628; Werner & Yuen, 2005). At the same time, ceasefires provide new information that may not be revealed through fighting alone, such as demonstrating group cohesion and a functioning chain of command (Akebo, 2019; Höglund, 2011). This can lead to a reassessment of the expected fighting capability or resolve of the group. For example, in the ‘coronavirus ceasefire’ mentioned above, the ELN demonstrated its ability to control its forces (Rustad et al., 2020, p. 3), surprising those who had questioned this possibility due to the horizontal organizational structure of the group.

Ceasefire compliance can thus provide important information that may lead leaders of warring groups to converge in their assessment of a military outcome of the conflict, which contributes to ripening.

After the onset of genuine negotiations, a ceasefire collapse and its potential impact on negotiations appear more costly, creating higher incentives to comply with such arrangements. Leaders may also be more willing to implement time and resource intensive mechanisms, such as ceasefire monitoring and verification, because the stakes are high (Clayton and Sticher, 2021). This lowers the probability of major intentional violations (Sticher, 2021b). At the same time, once negotiations begin in earnest, there is a risk that members of the warring groups who disagree with the decision to negotiate will engage in spoiling behaviour. Moreover, when a ceasefire is in place, violent acts of spoiling are arguably more visible and disruptive than in the absence of a ceasefire.

However, even these ceasefire violations can provide information in at least two ways. Firstly, they may indicate a lack of command and control, and the possibility of leadership disputes or factionalism within an armed group (Smith, 1995). Secondly, and perhaps counter-intuitively, such violations provide leaders with an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and signal their commitment to peace talks if they punish or sideline internal challengers. In the Bangsamoro peace process, for example, negotiators from both sides met in the wake of a major ceasefire violation in October 2011 to clarify the circumstances and agree on how to move the peace negotiations forward (Junio, 2012, pp. 34–35). Following an investigation by various entities of the ceasefire monitoring architecture, the Philippine Armed Forces court martialled four senior military officers and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) suspended three officers involved in the violation. These actions served as clear signals of serious intent (see also Akebo, 2019).

The type of information provided through ceasefire compliance and violations would not be revealed through fighting alone, which is particularly valuable after long periods of fighting when little new information may be available (Sticher & Vuković, 2021). By providing relevant information about fighting capabilities and the belligerent's resolve, ceasefires can enhance perceptions of a mutually enticing opportunity. However, as is the case with prolonged fighting, the effect of increased information provision may wane over time, when continued compliance or continued violations cease to provide additional meaningful information.

Risk of unripening. Before a conflict is ripe for concessions, assessments of a military outcome may diverge and impasses in peace negotiations are common. In the absence of progress in negotiations, leaders may reconsider their assessment of the benefits of settlement vis-à-vis a military outcome in light of the apparent lack of a zone of agreement. To assess the risk of unripening at this stage of the process, we therefore have to consider how ceasefires put in place after the onset of (genuine) peace negotiations affect perceptions of a mutually hurting stalemate and willingness to explore a way out.

A ceasefire may undermine perceptions of a mutually hurting stalemate by reducing the experienced pain of war, as discussed above. After the onset of negotiations, major impasses may lead to the collapse of a ceasefire and the breakdown of negotiations. If third parties enforce a ceasefire, stalled talks may lead to unripening without a return to open hostilities; for example, in Cyprus, a long-standing ceasefire suspended conflict violence, but efforts to resume peace negotiations in 2015 ended in 2017 without a negotiated settlement.

Similarly, ceasefire violations may lead to a collapse of peace talks or a process unraveling. The ceasefire between the Philippine Government and the MILF collapsed in 2003 after a major ceasefire violation by the government, resulting in a temporary end to the peace talks. In Sri Lanka, the 2002 ceasefire was initially successful in suspending conflict violence, but, within months, the number of violations (particularly by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, LTTE) began to increase. The international monitoring mission proved ineffectual in containing these violations, which exacerbated tensions and distrust (Akebo, 2013, pp. 175–182). The LTTE suspended direct talks in 2003 and, while it remained in place, the ceasefire was deemed largely ineffective. War resumed after failed efforts to revive the peace talks in 2006, eventually resulting in a military victory for the government.

In short, the same ceasefire dynamics that threaten to undermine ripeness to initiate negotiations now risk leading to the collapse of negotiations. Without external enforcement, it is unlikely that a ceasefire will remain in place during major impasses that often result from diverging assessments about a fair and mutually acceptable agreement. This suggests that during this stage of the ripeness process, peace processes are particularly vulnerable: if ceasefires break down or suffer major violations it is hard to maintain peace negotiations, and a collapse of peace talks amidst escalating conflict violence will make it even harder to establish working trust and engage in negotiations in the future.

2.3. *Ripe Moment to Settle*

Even when leaders agree on the broad outline of a settlement, finalizing a deal is more than a mere technicality. Specifically, leaders need to establish trust in the eventual implementation of a peace agreement and ensure that this agreement (which entails considerable concessions to an opponent) enjoys sufficient constituent support. Achieving these conditions may have been a relevant consideration at earlier stages of the ripeness process, but their absence becomes a salient obstacle once leaders in the conflict agree on the outline of a final settlement.

Trust in implementation. In intrastate conflicts, the problem of time-inconsistent incentives is particularly high, as conflicting parties have to agree on a joint governing structure, usually requiring the non-state actor to disarm and demobilize (Walter, 1997). The state actor may also have to make important concessions that provide incentives to the non-state actor for post-agreement defection (Svensson, 2007). Therefore, to reach the third and final milestone of the ripeness process—ripeness to settle—leaders need to be able to credibly commit to the implementation of an eventual peace agreement. They may do so through enforcement guarantees (Walter, 1997) or by invoking external and internal audience costs (Fearon, 1997). Ceasefires can also increase trust in implementation (thus contributing to ripeness) if leaders are able to establish a positive track record, and demonstrate their commitment and ability to deliver on a promise (see Akebo, 2013, pp. 201–203; Höglund, 2011, p. 238; Nathan & Sethi, 2020). Major ceasefire violations or the collapse of an arrangement is likely to have the opposite effect (Akebo, 2013, pp. 201–203), leaving doubts about the opponent’s willingness and ability to implement an eventual deal.

Constituent support. Ongoing hostilities fuel hatred and potentially undermine the internal support that makes a peace agreement politically feasible (see Haass, 1988; Pruitt, 2005, p. 8; Sticher, 2021a). Ceasefires can disrupt the cycle of violence and hatred, helping leaders gather support for a peace agreement. Significantly, more than any other interim agreement, ceasefires link what is happening at the negotiation table to what is happening on the ground, demonstrating that the relationship between the conflicting parties is improving (Sticher & Vuković, 2021). This can help overcome a lack of constituent support and thus help ripen a conflict for settlement. In contrast, major ceasefire violations or a ceasefire collapse may undermine support for an agreement (Sticher, 2021a), impeding progress towards the next ripeness milestone. At this stage of the ripeness process, such violations are often due to errant behaviour among subordinates, since leaders have a vested interest in ceasefire compliance to enable progress towards a final settlement.

Risk of unripening. At this stage of the process there is no longer a need for a mutually hurting stalemate, provided leaders continue to see a mutually enticing opportunity and a ceasefire does not become a de-facto alternative to a negotiated settlement. Indeed, some of the earlier strategies to ensure continued perceptions of a mutually hurting stalemate may arguably backfire at this stage: constituents may view a temporary ceasefire bookended by surges in violence as an act of bad faith, and an explicit threat of a return to violence as blackmail, fuelling hatred and resistance rather than furthering support for a peace agreement.

For a mutually enticing opportunity to remain in place no new information is required because leaders' assessments already converge at this stage. In fact, major changes in context or dynamics that require a reassessment of the situation may undermine perceptions of a mutually enticing opportunity. Under a ceasefire, the likelihood of the latter is arguably lower than during ongoing hostilities as ceasefires create some stability on the ground (Mahieu, 2007, p. 210).

Major ceasefire violations tend to play into the hands of internal challengers (Sisk, 2009) and undermine public support for a conflict settlement (Sticher, 2021a), meaning they go against the interests of leaders in the conflict. They may still occur, for example, if disagreeing factions seek to undermine incumbent leaders. Such violations increase the pressure on leaders to suspend peace talks and return to full-out war. However, at this stage of the ripeness process, when leaders have already invested considerable energy and political capital in the peace process, they are likely to resist such pressure. For example, during the 2012–2016 Havana peace talks, the Colombian government reversed a suspension of its air strikes in the wake of a major ceasefire violation by the guerilla organization FARC, but it did not suspend the negotiations. The peace talks continued even after government retaliation and the eventual collapse of the unilateral FARC ceasefire, demonstrating strong commitment on both sides to finding a negotiated settlement (Millán Hernández et al., 2020). The FARC later reinstated the unilateral ceasefire and the government all but reciprocated, facilitating the negotiation of the remaining agenda items. This case therefore further illustrates how a ceasefire or other forms of conflict de-escalation tend to facilitate, rather than impede, conflict ripeness in later stages of the ripeness process.

3. Conclusion

Ceasefires are often portrayed as an impediment to conflict ripeness. This article dispels this myth by providing a nuanced discussion of the various effects of ceasefires at different stages of the ripeness process. It shows how, as is the case with ripeness theory more generally, timing matters. Dynamics around ceasefires affect ripeness in different ways before a conflict situation becomes ripe for negotiations, after the onset of peace talks, and once leaders agree on the broad outline of an eventual settlement.

Before the onset of negotiations, ceasefires may decrease objective conditions for a mutually hurting stalemate. Conversely, ceasefires may increase perceptions of the pain associated with conflict, especially in contexts where many have become accustomed to the costs of fighting. After the onset of negotiations, ceasefires can provide important information about group cohesion, and command and control, helping leaders converge in their assessment of a military outcome and thus contributing to ripening. However, a longstanding ceasefire may decrease the pain incurred by a stalemate, which risks unripening the situation. Once a conflict is ripe for concessions, the effects become more straightforward: ceasefire compliance fosters progress and the risk of unripening is relatively low. Leaders are now 'in this together' because they need to rally internal support and find ways to commit themselves to the future implementation of a deal.

Ceasefire violations also affect conflict ripeness in several ways. Major violations may make the costs of war more discernable but tend to fuel hatred and distrust. This may become an impediment to the onset of negotiations or, once peace talks commence, may result in their collapse. In later stages of the ripeness process, especially once leaders agree on the basic outline of a settlement, ceasefire violations may provide opportunities to strengthen rather than undermine cooperative behaviour. However, major ceasefire violations often lead to a public outcry and embolden internal critics of a peace process, which may undermine pro-settlement leaders.

The analysis leads to a number of propositions that should be tested and refined through future research. Firstly, it suggests that in the early stages of the ripeness process it is preferable for conflicting parties to engage in a limited ceasefire arrangement. They may put in place temporal limits or clearly define the conditions under which a ceasefire is supposed to hold. Such limited arrangements are sometimes criticized because they are conditional or imply a return to hostilities at a future time. However, clear conditions and limitations offer distinct advantages in these early stages of the ripeness process: they increase the chances of ceasefire compliance, which in turn makes it more likely that a ceasefire contributes to ripening; by keeping the threat of a return to a full-blown conflict alive, such limited arrangements are also less likely to undermine the creation of a hurting stalemate; and, in defining clear criteria for a return to open hostilities, conditions and limitations decrease the chances that a ceasefire is stressed to the point of collapsing, which could fuel hatred and undermine working trust. In later stages of the ripeness process, when leaders are prepared to make key concessions, temporal limits or the threat of a return to violence are no longer necessary and may indeed backfire. Therefore, a ceasefire is likely to help increase constituent support if it is indefinite or its continuation is tied to progress in negotiations (which will likely be smoother when leaders agree on the broad outline of a deal).

Secondly, the analysis points to the risks of an 'unripe' ceasefire. Ceasefire violations are often interpreted as a sign of devious intent, even if they are committed against the leadership's orders. When leaders are unable to enforce a ceasefire within their own ranks, it may

be more productive to negotiate in the absence of a ceasefire. In this context, reluctance to engage in a ceasefire may indicate genuine interest in a negotiated settlement rather than a preference for a military solution. However, at the last stage of the ripeness process, continued hostilities may become a key impediment to conflict settlement. At this stage of the process, warring groups that are unable to engage in a formal ceasefire should seek alternative measures to de-escalate the conflict in order to foster progress towards settlement.

Thirdly, the analysis suggests that the second stage of the ripeness process is the most vulnerable phase of a peace process. Before leaders converge in their assessment of a military outcome and agree on the broad outline of an eventual peace agreement, negotiations are likely to stall. Such impasses may lead to a collapse of talks and a resumption of hostilities, which often increase hatred and make it harder to resume negotiations in the future. As outlined above, clear conditions and limitations can decrease the chances of this outcome. Furthermore, leaders should carefully announce the impending end of a ceasefire and be aware that impasses are a normal occurrence at this stage of the process, even when both sides are fully committed to finding a negotiated settlement. Lastly, while it may be useful to make a ceasefire dependent on progress in peace negotiations, making peace negotiations dependent on a ceasefire is likely to inhibit rather than facilitate the ripeness process.

Finally, the analysis has important implications for third-party engagement. As the analysis demonstrates, ceasefire compliance harbours the potential to foster ripeness at all stages of the ripeness process, while ceasefire violations threaten to undermine such progress. Some third-party engagement, such as participation in joint ceasefire monitoring missions, can increase the chances of ceasefire compliance and may mitigate the fallout following involuntary ceasefire violations (see Fortna, 2003, pp. 343–346). At the same time, and perhaps most controversially, from a ripeness perspective, ceasefires should be designed in a way that allows the belligerents to escalate back to violent conflict. This suggests that third parties interested in promoting conflict settlement (as opposed to merely managing a conflict) should assist rather than enforce ceasefire compliance. Indeed, a ceasefire enforced by third-party actors may risk undermining perceptions of a mutually hurting stalemate in the early stages of the ripeness process. Conversely, when warring parties comply with a ceasefire in the absence of third-party enforcement, leaders can convey important information about command and control of their forces, establish working trust, and increase public support for an eventual settlement.

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Notes

1. Note that the belligerents may have conflicting views on whether these cases constitute intrastate conflicts.

2. It is important to note that other aspects may facilitate or impede progress towards conflict settlement. This article focuses primarily on conditions that relate to the use of conflict violence or ceasefires, as the main purpose is to investigate the effects of ceasefires on conflict ripeness.
3. See Sticher and Vuković (2021) for a monadic conceptual framework that resonates with the ripeness process presented in this article but is framed in terms of bargaining theory.
4. Future research may refine the analysis to identify the threshold that needs to be reached for conflict parties to progress in the ripeness process. In some cases, a combination of specific factors may allow conflict parties to substitute for one of the conditions identified in Figure 1.

ORCID

Valerie Sticher  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0827-8958>

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