

(The National Interest, October 5, 2010)



A diplomatic device for bridging the negotiating gap in otherwise intractable conflicts is to leave resolution of major issues to some future mechanism, the ultimate outcome of which is indeterminate. The mechanism might be arbitration, an election, or a referendum, or it may be some shaky political arrangement that admittedly is not built to last but whose future evolution is difficult to predict. The peace agreement that brought the Vietnam War to an end in 1973 is an example of the latter. It left Vietnam divided and the core issues of the war unresolved, but it did end combat for the United States and brought home American prisoners of war and the remaining U.S. troops. No one could have predicted with certainty whether South Vietnam would have much staying power or whether, as would happen two years later, it would be unified with the North through force. Thus both Washington nor Hanoi could sign the agreement without admitting to having given up key objectives in the war.

Such sloughing off of major disagreements into the future can buy peace, at least for a time, but it often is a buy now, pay later proposition. Whatever made a conflict intractable may remain, and the consequences of disagreement may still have to be faced in the future. Two such conflicts may soon present the international community with this kind of delayed reckoning. One is the ethnic conflict in Bosnia among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. The Dayton Accord that ended the Bosnian War was generally considered to have a ten-year shelf life; it now has been in place for fifteen. The complicated peace agreement established a Serbian Republic and a Muslim-Croat Federation, as well as a collective federal presidency. The minimal amount of goodwill needed to keep this apparatus intact is showing signs of dissipating, especially with the [election victory over the weekend](#) of a Serbian nationalist party that seems bent on secession.

An even bigger reckoning is about to take place in Sudan. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended a long civil war in 2005 provided for reintegration of rebellious southerners into the national government, but the key provision in southern eyes was a referendum, to be held five years after the peace accord, in which southerners would be given the option of secession. Five years maybe seemed like a long time when the agreement was reached. Now it is just three months away. All signs point to a political and maybe military train wreck in January, when the referendum is supposed to be held. The overwhelming majority of southerners appear to favor secession, while the northern leadership appears unwilling and unprepared to accept any such decision by the south. Possible outcomes are the prevention by the central government of the referendum, the fomenting by the central government of enough disorder to call the legitimacy of a vote into question, or a simple refusal by Khartoum to

Crunch Time, Delayed but not Avoided

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петак, 08 октобар 2010 14:00

recognize a pro-secession vote.

Delayed trouble of this sort is not necessarily a reason to reject the negotiating tactic of sloughing difficult issues off into the future. Sometimes that's the only way to get any agreement at all, and even a flawed agreement can do a lot of good. The U.S.-Vietnamese peace agreement got American POWs and troops back home. The Dayton accord ended a war that had killed over 100,000 people. The Sudanese agreement ended an even bigger civil war, which may have killed 2.5 million people.

The appropriate lesson is instead to stay focused on a conflict and not to pretend that an agreement has resolved major issues when it really hasn't. [Bosnia probably has suffered from U.S. inattention](#), distracted by wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even with attention, the intractability of some conflicts may mean almost inevitable trouble, and we have to brace for that. The Obama administration seems to be giving major attention to the southern Sudan problem, but that may be insufficient to prevent a restart, come January, of the Sudanese civil war.