

# WHAT IS A GOOD MEDIATOR?

Personal insights on the essentials of a good mediator

Martti Ahtisaari, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2008

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**CRISIS  
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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on an interview of Dr. Antje Herrberg with Martti Ahtisaari.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of recording the interview for display and sharing it on websites is to portray excellence and practice in international peace mediation.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded Mr. Ahtisaari the Nobel Peace Prize for his role as an outstanding international peace mediator. Through his constant efforts and personal commitment, Mr. Ahtisaari has demonstrated how important mediation can be for the resolution of international conflicts. The following paper will summarise key issues brought out in the discussion with Martti Ahtisaari and will thus give insight into some of his personal working principles. It should be noted that this account is one of the multitude of approaches in mediation, thus this paper does not claim to list all essential characteristics of a good mediator or Mr. Ahtisaari himself.

The interview with Martti Ahtisaari marks the beginning of a series of interviews with mediators. The goal of these short clips is to contrast and show a wide array of mediation practices. The aim of 'letting the mediators speak for themselves' is to highlight the need for different practices to come together so as to arrive at a coherent understanding but also to develop and refine professional approaches in international peace mediation. This audiovisual way of communication should also foster a movement in the debate around this important topic of mediation among EU officials and professionals. An equally important effect of sharing such films on platforms like YouTube is to raise awareness and verve for mediation amongst a broader audience. In addition to the topic of good mediators, Ahtisaari also discusses in two further videos different negotiations and mediation scenarios and advocates for a stronger role of the European Union as an international peace mediator.<sup>2</sup>

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1 A. Herrberg & M. Savolainen (CMI) (2008). Martti Ahtisaari on: What is a good mediator? Available at <http://www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu/video/index.php> and <http://www.youtube.com/user/CMIFinland>.

2 See A. Herrberg & M. Savolainen (CMI) (2008). Martti Ahtisaari on: Negotiation vs. Mediation – Namibia, Aceh, Kosovo; and Martti Ahtisaari on: Mediation in the EU. Available at <http://www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu/video/index.php>.

## ESSENTIALS OF A GOOD MEDIATOR

Martti Ahtisaari discusses common characteristics of “what is a good mediator”:

**Mediators come from different walks of life:** Martti Ahtisaari believes that mediators can come from all different walks of life. He compares the role of mediators to those of managers who come from different fields and backgrounds. As mediator or manager, one faces similar problems: how does one get his or her staff to come up with the best they can produce? How does one treat people in general? Hence, these are common features in different professions.

**‘If we think we are the most important, we are in the wrong business’:** *‘The mediator’s role is very much like that of a midwife, you have not caused the pregnancy and you don’t own the child. It’s theirs, it’s the parents, the parents in this case are the ones who are trying to mediate peace. You also have to realize that the midwife’s role ends, but you still may need the advisory services from very crucial faculties even when the child is growing up. You have to realize that is theirs and that the success that is theirs, they should be enjoying that ‘we did it’. I would also say that the mediator’s ego should not come in the way’.* In this sense, Ahtisaari stresses that what is important in the peace process is the parties not the mediator.

**Honest broker:** A mediator is somebody with integrity who needs to coach parties to work together towards a solution; this does sometimes mean being “tough” when issues get critical. In this sense, according to Martti Ahtisaari, the mediator cannot be absolutely neutral; he needs to support one party over the other if one party strongly misbehaves. Parties should get the feeling that they are both being treated fairly. In other words: the mediator should be “*all-partial*.” Martti Ahtisaari describes this in his own words as if “*You would be a good adviser for both – or confidant of both.*”

**Integrity and Independence:** Mediators, especially in international peace mediation, have to display and enact their independence. Therefore, the independence of the mediator underlines his or her integrity. In this context, integrity and independence are closely interlinked. As a rule of thumb, Martti Ahtisaari determined the independence of the mediator as a situation in which the mediator’s life does not depend on the direct work he is providing in a peace process.

**Favouring a directive approach:** According to Martti Ahtisaari, a mediator needs to know what he or she wants from the process and in which direction he/she is guiding it. The frame around which a peace process is going to be negotiated should be clear to the parties and the mediator. For instance, the process varies if it is about the independence (as in the cases of Namibia or Kosovo) or the autonomy (e.g. Aceh) of one of the parties. Although the framework of the peace process has to be clear to the involved parties, Ahtisaari stresses also that a mediator should not pretend that he or she has all the answers to all the problems that occur in a peace process.

## SUPPORT FOR MEDIATION PROCESSES

**Support from the key actors:** Martti Ahtisaari asserts that in international peace mediation, the way in which the mediator consults and works with the international community is crucial. Mediators need to be realistic and include the support from the major actors concerning a conflict: *'There is a sort of realism involved that you need some of the major actors. If you can't have their support, I would not even start a mediation exercise...'* Whilst the international community does not need to stand 100 percent behind the mediator's ideas, they need to support the process in general. At the same time, the mediator should also inform the stakeholders of the process, i.e. more than just the core group of those included in the actual mediation process.

**Mediation support:** Martti Ahtisaari highlights the role of mediation support. This means that mediators need, in most cases, support from others in order to engage successfully in peace processes. Internally such mediation support can be technique training for the mediator as well as providing the mediator with a "sparring partner", conventionally called supervision in professional mediation. This allows the mediator to do his work more systematically and to try out different ideas. Furthermore, mediators need outsiders, i.e. academics and individual experts, who evaluate their work and give valuable feedback to the mediator and the team.

## THE “AHTISAARI” BRAND

Martti Ahtisaari reflects some of his personal attributes as a peace mediator.

**Finnish origin:** Parties will always be aware of the mediator's personal background, and potential or perceived biases resulting from it. For Mr. Ahtisaari, for example, it helps that he comes from a democratic society and a small country. Such origins make you less threatening to the parties and mostly more acceptable as a mediator. However, this also means often that you can't do it alone; you may sometimes need the support of the actors involved in a peace process.

**Inclusion and “bridge-building”:** Essential for peace talks is the ability to include all stakeholders – the main parties, major powers, eminent personalities and women – into the peace process, build up a broad range of support and thus share with all a common vision of the main goal: peace. The basis for the inclusion of all stakeholders stems from an understanding that you need to take into account all parties that can influence, in the positive or negative, the peace talks.

**Language:** Ahtisaari believes that positive wording rather than harsh language works best, also as a sign of respect to human dignity: *‘The best compliment I ever got was from an Eritrean, he said: “Look, I would like to work half a year with you so that I would learn how to say difficult things in a nice manner”. I thought it was the best compliment I ever received because you had to open difficult issues that my host didn't want to hear. But I had to try to say it in such a manner that they realized that I had to raise them’.*

**Ahtisaari believes that personalities do matter.** Personality influences how a mediator handles issues and whether he or she gains the confidence and has the credibility from the parties or not.

***‘We are a little bit like artists – my generation’.*** There is a generational shift in mediation practices from art to technique taking place. *‘Younger ones are coming. [...] We have a much more professional cadre of mediators coming...’* Martti Ahtisaari recognises the new generation of mediators where techniques and professional approaches matter as much as personality.

**Every conflict can be resolved:** Martti Ahtisaari strongly believes that any conflict can be resolved. It is a question of the willingness of parties involved, the international community in supporting conflict resolution and in the ability of a good mediator to work with the parties.

## MARTTI AHTISAARI ON MEDIATION IN THE EU

Martti Ahtisaari discusses the importance of mediation for the EU and advocates for a stronger role for the EU as an international peace mediator.

**Build up the EU's mediation capacity:** Martti Ahtisaari believes that the EU should build up its mediation capacity. The EU enlargement process can be seen as a whole peace process in itself. In this context, it can be argued that peace mediation is part of the identity of the EU. Moreover the EU has the capability to act as a more consensus mediator. From his personal experience, Ahtisaari was very impressed at how professionally and quickly the EU reacted to his request for sending peace agreement monitors to Aceh.

**Improve the organisational arrangements:** According to Ahtisaari, there is a trend of developing different regional actors in trying to solve conflicts. Therefore, the EU needs to have the right facilities to deal with conflicts. One way to improve the organisational arrangement of the EU is a careful assessment of the UN (mediation) arrangements. The capacity for mediation has to be strengthened in the EU. The EU can also draw upon the experience and capacity of its Member States in order to do so.

**The importance of preventive diplomacy:** In his final statement, Martti Ahtisaari advocates for a more forthcoming and preventive diplomacy by the EU: *'So that we don't need to come into the picture when everything has already failed'*.

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