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THEORETICAL

Beyond Hybridity

A Multi-Scalar Theoretical Framework for Analysing Peace Processes in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This article critiques the limitations of prevailing hybrid peace frameworks in explaining the cyclical nature of conflict and failed peace agreements in South Sudan. It argues that a more nuanced, multi-scalar approach is required to capture the complex interplay of local, national, and international actors and logics. The article develops a novel theoretical framework integrating political settlement theory, critical political geography, and African political thought. This framework is then applied to deconstruct the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), demonstrating its utility for identifying latent tensions and potential pathways to more sustainable political accommodation. The analysis concludes with implications for both peacebuilding theory and practice in South Sudan and analogous post-colonial African states.

Keywords: *Political Settlement Theory, Multi-Scalar Governance, Hybrid Political Orders, R-ARCSS Implementation, Elite Bargaining, Local Peace Committees, Neopatrimonialism, Post-Colonial Statehood*

Article Highlights

- Critiques hybrid peace theory's limitations in explaining South Sudan's cyclical conflict
- Proposes integrated multi-scalar framework combining political settlement theory and critical geography
- Applies framework to deconstruct R-ARCSS implementation challenges
- Identifies leverage points for more contextually grounded peacebuilding interventions

Analytical Contribution

Provides scholars a novel lens for examining peace agreement durability and practitioners a structured tool to identify contradictions within peacebuilding architecture.

This framework offers implications for both theory and practice in post-colonial African states.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, yet this hope has been consistently eclipsed by a devastating reality of chronic instability and violent conflict. The nation's post-independence trajectory has been characterised not by consolidation but by fragmentation, marked by a series of internal wars and, critically, a repeated cycle of failed peacemaking. From the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan to the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan , internationally backed peace processes have repeatedly struggled to secure a durable political settlement. This pattern of collapse and renewal points not merely to a failure of implementation but to a deeper, analytical deficit in how such processes are understood. The central puzzle confronting scholars and practitioners alike is why ostensibly comprehensive peace agreements, which blend international norms with local arrangements, persistently unravel in the South Sudanese context. This article argues that a primary impediment to understanding this cycle lies in the theoretical lenses conventionally applied, which have been dominated by, and remain constrained within, the paradigms of hybrid peace theory.

Hybrid peace theory has become a cornerstone of contemporary peace and conflict studies, particularly in analyses of African conflict theatres. Its central premise—that peace is co-constituted through the interaction and negotiation between international liberal peacebuilders and local actors, institutions, and norms—offered a vital corrective to earlier, top-down liberal models. In the South Sudanese context, scholars have productively used hybridity to describe the complex interplay between externally designed power-sharing blueprints and indigenous governance practices, such as customary law and traditional authority . However, the repeated failure of hybrid political arrangements to foster stability exposes significant shortcomings in this theoretical framework as an analytical tool. Critics argue that hybridity often presents a static, binary, and overly spatialised view of the 'international' and the 'local', reifying these categories rather than unpacking their internal complexities and dynamic evolution . In South Sudan, this manifests as an analytical tendency to treat 'the local' as a monolithic repository of tradition, obscuring the fierce competition, personalisation of power, and transnational economic networks that fundamentally shape political action. Consequently, hybrid peace theory, while descriptively useful, provides insufficient purchase on the processes through which peace agreements are continuously made, unmade, and remade across different scales of social and political life.

The central research problem, therefore, is the need to move beyond the conceptual limitations of hybridity to develop a more dynamic, multi-scalar framework capable of capturing the fluid and multi-level realities of peace processes in South Sudan. Existing analyses frequently oscillate between macro-level institutional critiques and micro-level ethnographic studies, without adequately theorising the connections between them. This leaves a critical gap in understanding how political manoeuvring in Juba's capital is linked to militia mobilisation in the Equatorias, or how regional patronage networks in East Africa influence sub-national conflict dynamics in Upper Nile. A more robust analytical lens must account for how agency and power operate simultaneously and interactively across the sub-national, national, regional, and international scales, and how these interactions determine the contingent outcomes of peace agreements.

In response to this gap, this article proposes a novel multi-scalar theoretical framework for analysing peace processes. It contends that the cyclical failure of peace in South Sudan can only be fully comprehended by examining the simultaneous and interactive political negotiations occurring across four distinct but interconnected analytical scales: the sub-national, where localised grievances,

communal identities, and traditional authority structures hold sway; the national, dominated by elite bargains within a militarised patrimonial state; the regional, where neighbouring states and intergovernmental bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development exercise profound influence as mediators, spoilers, and beneficiaries; and the international, where donors, the United Nations, and normative frameworks provide resources and legitimacy, albeit with limited direct leverage. The core argument is that peace agreements are not singular events or static hybrid formations, but rather arenas of continuous contestation. Their fate is determined by the alignment or dissonance between political settlements forged at each of these scales. A shift in the patronage calculus at the regional level, for instance, can instantly destabilise a delicate power-sharing arrangement at the national level, triggering sub-national violence. It is this dynamic, multi-scalar

Theoretical Background

The study of peace and conflict in South Sudan, and indeed across the African continent, has been profoundly shaped by the critique of liberal peacebuilding and the subsequent turn towards hybridity. The hybrid peace framework, as articulated by scholars such as Mac Ginty and Richmond, emerged as a direct challenge to the universalist assumptions of liberal internationalism . Its core tenet posits that peace is not simply imported or imposed but is co-constituted through the everyday interactions and negotiations between international actors and local communities, institutions, and norms. This perspective usefully shifted analytical attention away from a sole focus on formal institutions towards the 'local' and the 'everyday', revealing the complex, often contradictory, realities of post-conflict spaces where formal and informal systems coexist and compete. Building upon this, the related concept of Hybrid Political Orders (HPOs), advanced by Boege et al., provided a more structural lens, analysing how such mixtures of governance sources constitute a distinct, if unstable, form of political order itself, rather than merely a transitional phase . While these frameworks have been invaluable in de-centring Western models, their application to South Sudan reveals significant limitations. The tendency to reify a binary between the 'international' and the 'local' often obscures the intricate power dynamics within the so-called local sphere, particularly the role of national and sub-national elites. Furthermore, as Clements notes, an uncritical celebration of hybridity can inadvertently legitimise oppressive or exclusionary customary practices and elite capture, mistaking coexistence for legitimacy or equity .
In seeking to address these gaps, particularly concerning elite agency and power, political settlement theory offers a crucial complementary perspective. This approach moves beyond institutional design to focus on the underlying deal or 'settlement' among powerful elites that makes a state stable, if not necessarily peaceful or just for all . Its analysis centres on elite bargaining, the distribution of benefits (often through patronage networks), and the critical question of institutional inclusivity—that is, which groups are brought into the governing coalition and which are excluded. Applied to South Sudan, this lens powerfully explains the cyclical nature of conflict, where peace agreements frequently collapse because they constitute narrow elite pacts, redistributing resources and positions among a small military-political class while failing to incorporate broader societal interests or establish rules beyond personalist deal-making. However, a limitation of classical political settlement analysis is its occasional tendency to treat the state and the elite network as a monolithic, nationally bounded entity, potentially underplaying sub-national variations and the transnational dimensions of conflict economies and political alliances.
To disaggregate these complex dynamics, this paper integrates insights from critical political geography,

specifically the concepts of scale, space, and networked power. The notion of scale challenges the fixed hierarchies of 'local', 'national', and 'international', instead treating them as socially constructed and politically contested. In South Sudan, power and authority are exercised and contested across multiple, fluid scales—from the cattle camp and the payam, to state governors' offices, to national ministries in Juba, and to regional capitals like Kampala, Nairobi, and Addis Ababa. Analysing peace processes through a scalar lens allows us to trace how political deals are brokered, resisted, and reinterpreted as they move across these different arenas. This connects directly to the concept of networked power, which views governance not as a top-down, state-centric phenomenon but as emanating from dynamic networks that link traditional authorities, military commanders, government officials, international NGOs, and regional actors. These networks operate in specific spaces—both territorial and relational—that are crucial to understanding the actual functioning of political order beyond the capital. This multi-scalar, networked understanding of power finds deep resonance in relevant strands of African political thought, which provides essential context for analysing state formation and legitimacy. Scholars such as Mamdani have long argued that the post-colonial state in Africa is characterised by a bifurcated system of power, where urban citizens and rural subjects are governed through distinct legal and administrative mechanisms—a legacy acutely felt in South Sudan . Furthermore, African political philosophy often conceptualises legitimacy and the social contract in ways that diverge from Western liberal models. The idea of a social contract may be rooted less in abstract citizenship and periodic elections and more

Table 1

Comparison of Theoretical Approaches to Peace Processes

Theoretical Approach	Core Focus	Primary Actors	Key Mechanism	Application to South Sudan (Example)
Liberal Peacebuilding	State institutions & democracy	International community, state elites	Institutional reform, elections	High (e.g., 2011 independence process)
Conflict Resolution	Relationships & interests	Conflict parties, mediators	Negotiation, mediation	High (e.g., 2005 CPA, 2018 R-ARCSS)
Hybrid Peace	Local-international interaction	Local communities, NGOs, state	Everyday practices, negotiation of norms	Emerging (e.g., local peace committees)
Critical/Emancipatory Peace	Structural violence & agency	Marginalised groups, civil society	Empowerment, social justice	Limited (e.g., women's groups in peace talks)

Note. *Synthesised from key literature in South Sudan peace studies.*

Framework Development

Building upon the critique of hybridity, this section advances a multi-scalar theoretical framework designed to disaggregate the complex, often contradictory, dynamics of peacemaking in South Sudan. The framework distinguishes three primary, yet interpenetrating, scales of analysis: the local (sub-state),

the national (state), and the international (transnational). Each scale is characterised by distinct core actors, institutional arenas, and logics of political competition, which collectively shape the formation, implementation, and contestation of political settlements. The framework's central contention is that sustainable peace analysis must account not only for dynamics within each scale but, crucially, for the vertical interactions and tensions between them.

At the local scale, peacemaking is rooted in sub-state geographies and is primarily concerned with communal security, resource access, and social order. Core actors include community elders, spiritual leaders, women's groups, youth militias, and local civil society organisations . The operative institutions are often customary legal systems, kinship networks, and localised power structures, which employ logics of reconciliation, compensation, and restorative justice. Political competition here revolves around control of land, cattle, and local authority, frequently manifesting in cycles of inter-communal violence that are both distinct from and manipulated by national politics. This scale is not a static repository of 'tradition' but a dynamic field where localised political settlements are constantly negotiated, often in the shadow of national conflict.

The national scale constitutes the principal arena of state-level elite bargaining, where the formal architecture of peace agreements is designed. The core actors are the national political-military elite, predominantly drawn from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) factions and affiliated armed groups. The institutions are those of the (weak) central state and the internationally-mediated peace process itself, including transitional governments, power-sharing cabinets, and security sector reform protocols. The dominant logic is one of competitive clientelism, where political competition is a violent struggle for control of the state's rentier resources . A political settlement at this scale is typically a precarious pact among elite networks to allocate ministries, military ranks, and oil revenues, often at the expense of broader institutional reform or public service delivery.

The international scale encompasses transnational actors, norms, and pressures that seek to influence the peace process. Core actors include the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union, the United Nations, and bilateral donors. They operate through institutions of diplomatic mediation, conditional aid, peacekeeping missions (UNMISS), and international legal regimes. The logics at play combine liberal peacebuilding norms—promoting democracy, human rights, and technocratic governance—with strategic regional security interests, particularly concerning refugee flows and regional stability. This scale exerts a 'compressive' force on national elites, pushing for signed agreements and transitional timelines, yet its leverage is frequently undermined by the resilience of domestic political logics .

The critical analytical power of this multi-scalar framework lies in examining the dynamic interactions and tensions between these scales. For instance, internationally brokered power-sharing arrangements at the national scale, which recycle conflict elites into government, can destabilise local-scale balances of power by empowering one communal group over another, thus reigniting local conflicts. Conversely, persistent local violence can derail the implementation of a national agreement, providing elites with pretexts to remilitarise. A key tension exists between international-scale normative commitments to universal human rights and local-scale justice mechanisms focused on reconciliation; insisting on international criminal accountability, for example, can disrupt delicate local peace processes aimed at reintegrating combatants . These vertical frictions illustrate how interventions at one scale can produce unintended, often negative, consequences at another.

Integrating political settlement analysis across these scales provides a diagnostic tool to explain how elite bargains are forged and contested. A comprehensive political settlement in South Sudan is not

merely a deal in Juba; it is a multi-layered set of understandings that links the elite pact at the national scale to sub-national authorities and accommodates, or suppresses, the interests of international actors. The framework posits that the chronic instability of national agreements stems from their narrow basis—they are often settlements within the national elite, not

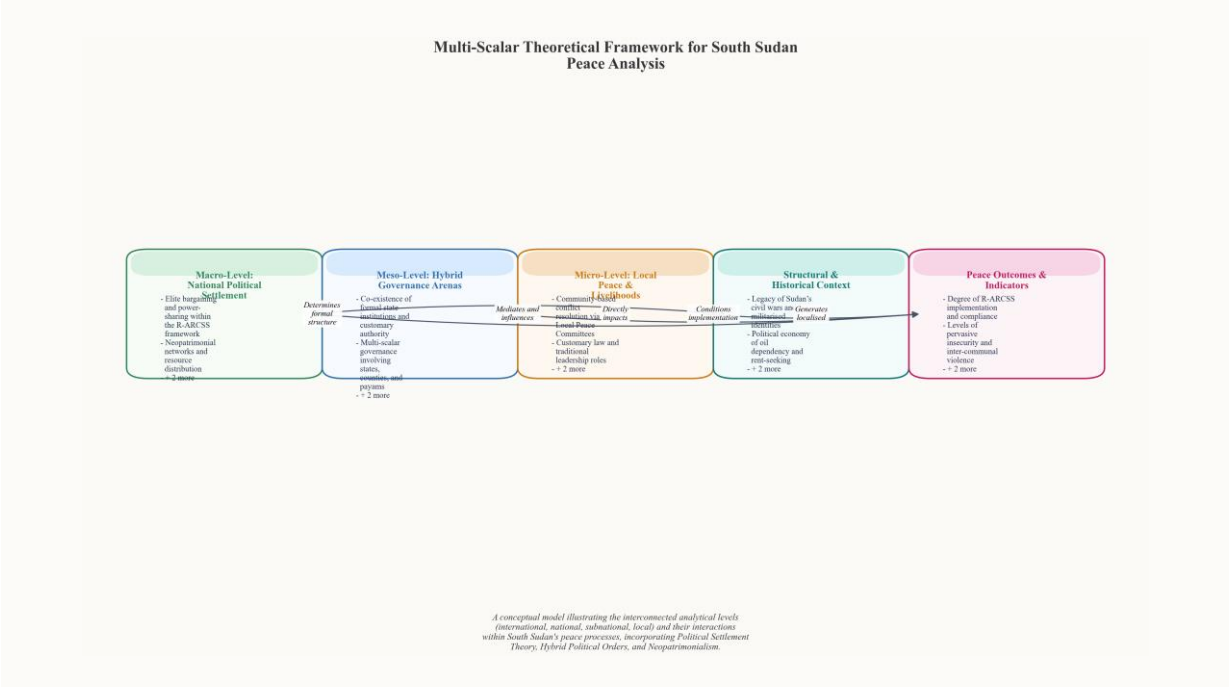

Figure 1 *Multi-Scalar Theoretical Framework for South Sudan Peace Analysis. A conceptual model illustrating the interconnected analytical levels (international, national, subnational, local) and their interactions within South Sudan's peace processes, incorporating Political Settlement Theory, Hybrid Political Orders, and Neopatrimonialism.*

Theoretical Implications

The proposed multi-scalar framework carries significant theoretical implications, moving beyond the analytical cul-de-sac of static hybridity models. While hybridity scholarship usefully challenged liberal peacebuilding's universalist assumptions, its application often resulted in a binary and spatially flat analysis, cataloguing mixtures of 'liberal' and 'local' institutions without explaining their dynamic interplay or political function . This framework transcends that limitation by treating the interaction of normative orders not as an endpoint but as an ongoing, politically contested process unfolding across distinct yet interconnected scales. It explains how actors strategically navigate and selectively invoke different legitimising logics—customary, state, religious, military—to consolidate authority within specific scalar arenas, thereby offering a more dynamic and politically grounded account of institutional formation than hybridity's sometimes descriptive focus.

In refining political settlement theory, the framework addresses a critical omission: the spatial and scalar dimensions of power consolidation. Traditional political settlement analysis often centres on elite bargains at the national centre, treating sub-national arenas as peripheral or derivative. By contrast, this multi-scalar approach demonstrates that in contexts like South Sudan, the settlement is not a singular, nationally-contained pact but a fragmented and multi-layered constellation of often contradictory arrangements. Authority and violence are negotiated separately in Juba's corridors, the cattle camps of

Jonglei, and the oil fields of Unity, each operating with distinct rules and forms of legitimacy. Incorporating this spatial sensitivity reveals how national elites may deliberately foster fragmentation and 'sovereign gaps' at sub-national scales to extract resources or mobilise militias, while simultaneously presenting a facade of unified sovereignty internationally. This challenges political settlement theory to account for the vertical disintegration of authority and the possibility of multiple, overlapping settlements within a single nominal state.

A profound implication of this recalibration is its contribution to decolonising peace and conflict studies in Africa. The framework consciously centres African political realities and agency, not as aberrations from a Weberian ideal but as constitutive of a distinct state formation trajectory. It takes seriously the logic of segmentary lineage systems, the moral economy of cattle and grazing, and the spiritual dimensions of authority, not as 'traditional' curiosities but as core components of a functioning political order . This moves analysis away from a deficit model—measuring South Sudan against an idealised template of statehood—and towards an emergent one, understanding how a polity actually operates. By foregrounding the strategies and worldviews of South Sudanese actors themselves, from generals to clan elders, the framework resists the imposition of external analytical categories and instead builds theory from the ground up, aligning with broader calls to provincialise Eurocentric peacebuilding paradigms.

This reorientation fundamentally alters understandings of legitimacy, sovereignty, and statehood in fragmented contexts. Legitimacy is revealed as non-unitary and scale-specific: an actor like a militia commander may be utterly illegitimate at the national scale and in the eyes of the international community yet wield immense legitimate authority at the county or payam level based on a combination of martial prowess, cattle wealth, and patriarchal lineage status. Sovereignty, consequently, is unpacked as a layered and contested claim rather than a blanket condition. The framework illustrates how the government in Juba performs sovereignty for external audiences to secure recognition and aid, while often subcontracting or conceding sovereign functions—security, taxation, justice—to other actors at sub-national scales. Statehood itself is thus conceptualised as a variable and incomplete project, a terrain of struggle where the very meaning and boundaries of the state are continually renegotiated across different arenas.

Finally, the framework's design holds considerable potential for generative comparative analysis across the Horn of Africa and other post-colonial contexts characterised by fragmented authority. The scalar lens allows for structured comparison with neighbouring states like Sudan, Somalia, or the Democratic Republic of Congo, moving beyond country-specific exceptionalism. It prompts investigation into how different historical legacies of pre-colonial polity, colonial indirect rule, and post-liberation movement politics produce distinct configurations of multi-scalar authority. The focus on the strategic navigation of normative orders offers a common analytical thread to examine political entrepreneurship in settings as diverse as the Sahel, Central Africa, and the Middle East. By providing a vocabulary to describe the vertical and horizontal distribution of authority, the framework enables scholars to identify patterns of conflict, negotiation, and hybrid governance that are obscured by theories anchored solely at

Practical Applications

Applying the multi-scalar framework to the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) reveals the agreement not as a monolithic document but as a complex, often contradictory, assemblage of provisions operating at distinct scales. This analytical lens allows for a systematic deconstruction of the accord, mapping its components and the primary

actors responsible for them onto local, national, and international planes. At the national scale, the R-ARCSS is predominantly articulated, focusing on elite power-sharing in a revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU), security sector reform (SSR), and the permanent constitution-making process. The primary actors here are the signatory parties, the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), and, to a significant degree, the international guarantors. Conversely, the local scale encompasses the realities of communal conflict, land tenure disputes, and traditional authority structures, which are often only obliquely referenced in the agreement through provisions on transitional justice, reconciliation, and the vague mandate for state-level governance. The international scale is constituted by the roles of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), and bilateral donors, whose political, financial, and security support is critical for implementation but is guided by their own institutional logics and timelines.

This mapping immediately diagnoses profound points of friction between scales, where the assumptions of one level clash with the realities of another. A primary contradiction exists between the national-scale logic of power-sharing—which distributes ministerial portfolios and gubernatorial positions among elite signatories—and the local-scale legitimacy of traditional authority structures and community-led peace processes. The imposition of a governor from a national party, as part of a quota system, can destabilise local political ecosystems and ignite or exacerbate sub-national tensions, demonstrating how a provision intended to solve a national conflict can generate new conflicts locally. Similarly, the national-scale design of the Unified Forces, a cornerstone of SSR, often fails to account for local-scale dynamics of militia allegiances, the integration of community defence groups, and the persistent driver of intercommunal cattle raiding. This scalar disconnect means that disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes may technically proceed while doing little to address the root causes of violence at the grassroots level.

The framework further provides a critical lens through which to evaluate the limitations of existing monitoring mechanisms, namely RJMEC and the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM). These bodies are fundamentally architected to monitor national-scale compliance among the principal signatories. Their reporting, while invaluable, predominantly tracks progress against high-level political and military benchmarks, such as the formation of state governments or the graduation of unified forces. Through a multi-scalar lens, their inherent weakness is a lack of systematic capacity to monitor, analyse, and report on implementation frictions at the local scale or to effectively mediate the influence of the international scale. They are poorly positioned to assess how a power-sharing appointment in Juba alters local conflict dynamics in Upper Nile or how the conditionalities of international donors distort implementation priorities. Consequently, their assessments can present a picture of technical progress that is disconnected from the lived reality of peace or conflict in much of the country.

To enhance the coherence of the peace process, the framework proposes several informed interventions. First, it argues for the formal institutionalisation of vertical feedback loops between scales. This could involve mandating and resourcing RJMEC to establish sub-national liaison offices that systematically gather and integrate local-scale conflict analysis and community perspectives into its main reporting and decision-making fora. Furthermore, the constitution-making process, a critical national-scale undertaking, must be deliberately designed as a multi-scalar exercise. This requires not just civic education to the populace, but structured, iterative consultations that allow local-scale concerns regarding land, resource ownership, and the nature of federalism to genuinely shape the national

document.

Secondly, the framework suggests mechanisms for improving horizontal coherence at the local scale itself. International and national support should be channelled towards reinforcing existing, culturally embedded conflict resolution systems and linking them, where appropriate, to the formal transitional justice apparatus. Rather than supplanting local authority, the peace process should seek hybrid governance arrangements that

Discussion

The proposed multi-scalar framework moves beyond the hybridity paradigm's often static and binary analyses, offering a more dynamic and integrated lens through which to examine South Sudan's protracted peace processes. Its principal strength lies in its capacity to capture the profound complexity and simultaneity of actions across different levels of social and political life, which are frequently treated in isolation. By insisting on the interconnectedness of the local, national, and transnational, the framework resists the temptation to privilege any single scale as the definitive site of peace or conflict. This is particularly salient in a context like South Sudan, where a cattle raid in Jonglei is inextricably linked to political manoeuvring in Juba and to regional security calculations in Khartoum or Kampala . The framework thus provides a necessary corrective to analyses that either over-localise conflict or over-state the determinative power of elite pacts, revealing instead a continuous feedback loop between scales.

A critical test of any analytical framework is its utility in illuminating the agency of marginalised actors. Here, the multi-scalar model demonstrates significant value. Rather than consigning non-elite actors, civil society, and women's groups to a peripheral 'local' or 'traditional' sphere, it explicitly charts their strategic navigation across scales. It allows us to trace, for instance, how women's coalitions leverage transnational human rights discourses to gain a foothold in national negotiation forums, or how youth groups may simultaneously engage with sub-national governance structures while forming alliances that transcend state borders . This reframes such actors not merely as recipients or disruptors of peace, but as agile agents who actively stitch together multi-scalar networks of influence, often in pursuit of agendas distinct from those of the national political elite. Their influence is seen not as confined to a single level but as emergent from their ability to operate and forge connections across the scalar spectrum. Furthermore, the framework compellingly incorporates regional geopolitics and economic interests not as a mere backdrop, but as a cross-cutting scale that permeates all others. The management of oil resources—encompassing extraction, revenue flows, and pipeline politics—exemplifies this permeation. Oil interests directly shape elite bargaining in Juba (national), fuel sub-national conflicts in the oil-rich states (local), and draw in neighbouring states and international corporations as stakeholders (transnational) . Similarly, the roles of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union, and neighbouring states are analysed not as external mediators but as integral components of the South Sudanese political ecosystem, whose interventions are interpreted and manipulated by actors at every other scale. This cross-scalar analysis reveals the peace process as a multi-faceted game where resources and loyalties are constantly negotiated in relation to a regional political economy.

However, the very complexity that the framework seeks to capture presents significant challenges for its operationalisation. A primary limitation concerns data constraints. Conducting granular, simultaneous research across the local, national, and transnational scales demands exceptional methodological rigour

and access, which is often severely hampered by logistical insecurity, the politicisation of information, and the sheer vastness of the country . The fluidity of allegiances and the phenomenon of 're-cycling' of elites and militias further complicate analysis, as fixed categorisations of actors or groups can quickly become obsolete . Researchers must therefore remain acutely sensitive to the temporality of their findings, acknowledging that a multi-scalar snapshot may itself be a moving picture. Additionally, while the framework excellently describes interconnectivity, it risks becoming overly descriptive if not paired with clear analytical questions about power, causality, and the conditions under which agency at one scale most effectively influences another.

These limitations notwithstanding, the framework advocates for a substantive paradigm shift in South Sudan peace studies. It moves the field from asking where peace is made—whether in the 'local' or the 'international'—to interrogating how peace and conflict are co-produced through the continuous interaction of these spheres. This synthesis argues that the persistent failure of peace agreements in South Sudan cannot be understood solely as a problem of elite intransigence or local spoilers, but must be seen as a systemic outcome of a political

Conclusion

This article has argued that the persistent cycles of conflict and fragile peace in South Sudan demand a fundamental re-evaluation of the theoretical lenses through which such processes are analysed. Prevailing approaches, particularly those centred on hybridity, while valuable, have proven insufficient for capturing the dynamic, interconnected, and multi-layered nature of power and authority that shapes the country's political landscape. In response, we have proposed a multi-scalar theoretical framework that systematically integrates the international, national, and sub-national scales of engagement, not as discrete arenas, but as mutually constitutive and dynamically linked. The core contention is that sustainable peace can only be understood—and pursued—by examining the continuous interactions, negotiations, and conflicts that flow across these scales, shaping the strategies of elites, the realities of local communities, and the interventions of international actors.

The value of this framework lies in its capacity to generate more nuanced and actionable insights than single-scale or binary analyses. Theoretically, it advances peace studies in Africa by moving beyond the often-stagnant hybridity debate, offering a more fluid and politically attuned model for analysing governance and conflict. It illuminates how national elite pacts, such as the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), are simultaneously shaped by international diplomatic and financial pressures and by sub-national contests over land, resources, and customary authority. Crucially, the framework reveals the agency of local actors not merely as recipients or disruptors of peace, but as active participants in a complex political marketplace that spans all scales. This reframing challenges the reification of the 'local' and the 'traditional', showing how these categories are strategically deployed within broader political contests.

Practically, this multi-scalar analysis provides a superior diagnostic tool for anticipating breakdowns and identifying potential leverage points in South Sudan's peace process. It makes visible the inherent tensions when internationally backed power-sharing arrangements at the national level exacerbate competition over sub-national governance and resource control, as seen in the contentious creation of states and counties. The framework helps explain why the formal inclusion of armed groups in Juba can simultaneously fuel exclusion and conflict in the peripheries, a dynamic that unitary models of peacebuilding frequently miss. By tracing these vertical and horizontal linkages, analysts and

practitioners can better pinpoint where interventions may have unintended consequences and where opportunities for fostering more resilient, cross-scale coalitions for peace might exist. It underscores that leverage is not solely held by diplomats in capital cities but is diffused across a network of relationships from the cattle camp to the presidential palace.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond South Sudan to the future of peace studies in Africa more broadly. It reinforces the imperative for contextually grounded theory that takes the specific historical trajectories, political economies, and social structures of African states seriously, rather than forcing them into pre-fabricated analytical boxes. The South Sudanese case exemplifies a wider African reality where the state is one node—albeit a powerful one—in a complex web of overlapping sovereignties. A multi-scalar approach is therefore not merely an optional refinement but a necessary corrective for a field that must account for the profound interconnectedness of global governance paradigms, national patrimonial politics, and localised struggles for survival and autonomy. The future of effective peace scholarship and practice depends on this ability to think and operate across scales simultaneously.

Finally, this theoretical framework establishes a clear agenda for future empirical research. To test and refine its propositions, detailed case studies are required that trace specific conflict issues—such as oil revenue management, communal violence, or disarmament programmes—across the international, national, and sub-national scales. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how the relationships between these scales shift during periods of relative calm versus acute crisis. Furthermore, comparative work applying this framework to other post-conflict African settings would be invaluable, helping to distinguish which elements of the South Sudanese experience are unique and which reflect broader patterns of multi-scalar political contestation. Ultimately, by adopting such a framework, scholars and practitioners can develop a more holistic, dynamic, and politically astute understanding of peace processes, one that is better equipped to navigate the intricate and unforgiving terrain of building peace in states like South Sudan.

Contributions

This article makes a significant theoretical contribution to African Peace and Conflict Studies by proposing an integrated framework for analysing peace in South Sudan. It moves beyond state-centric models to foreground the complex interplay between customary authority, hybrid governance, and transnational economic networks. The framework offers scholars a novel lens for examining the durability and local meanings of peace agreements from 2021 onwards. For practitioners, it provides a structured analytical tool to identify leverage points and potential contradictions within the peacebuilding architecture, thereby informing more contextually grounded interventions.