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THEORETICAL

Beyond Hybridity

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

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a novel theoretical framework for analysing the persistent cycles of conflict and fragile peace in South Sudan. It critiques the limitations of prevailing concepts like hybrid peacebuilding and liberal institutionalism, which often fail to capture the complex interplay of local, national, and international dynamics. The proposed framework synthesises insights from political settlement theory, critical security studies, and the political economy of conflict to construct a multi-level analytical model. This model foregrounds the centrality of elite bargains, the political marketplace, and the instrumentalisation of identity and insecurity. The article concludes by outlining the framework's theoretical contributions to African peace studies and its practical utility for policymakers and practitioners engaged in South Sudan's protracted transition.

Keywords: *Political Settlement, Elite Bargaining, Political Marketplace, Conflict Political Economy, South Sudan Peace Process, Multi-Level Analysis, Post-Colonial Statehood, African Peacebuilding*

Article Highlights

- Critiques limitations of hybrid peacebuilding and liberal institutionalism
- Synthesizes political settlement theory with critical security studies
- Foregrounds elite bargains, political marketplace, and identity instrumentalization
- Provides structured model for analysing international, national, and local dynamics

Analytical Contribution

Proposes an integrated framework for examining elite bargains, societal fragmentation, and external intervention in South Sudan's hybrid political order.

This framework offers scholars and practitioners a nuanced tool for diagnosing conflict drivers in post-conflict African states.

Introduction

The study of peace and conflict in South Sudan presents a persistent and profound analytical puzzle. Since its hard-won independence in 2011, the world's youngest nation has been ensnared in a devastating cycle of large-scale violence, political fragmentation, and humanitarian catastrophe. This grim reality has unfolded despite a seemingly continuous procession of internationally supported peace agreements, from the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that midwifed the state, to the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan . The intractable nature of this conflict, persisting in the face of concerted peacebuilding efforts, suggests a fundamental disconnect between the paradigms guiding these interventions and the complex socio-political realities on the ground. This article argues that a primary source of this disconnect lies in the theoretical lenses through which South Sudan's peace processes are predominantly analysed and, consequently, designed. It posits that moving beyond the current analytical impasse requires a deliberate theoretical shift towards a bespoke, multi-level framework capable of capturing the unique and layered dynamics of conflict and peacemaking in the South Sudanese context.

Dominant approaches to peacebuilding, both in practice and in academic analysis, have often been critiqued for their reliance on liberal-institutionalist models that prioritise top-down statebuilding and power-sharing arrangements amongst elite belligerents . In the case of South Sudan, such approaches have yielded agreements that are frequently described as 'elite pacts', which may temporarily silence guns in the capital but fail to generate a sustainable or inclusive peace. These paradigms tend to treat the state as a neutral container for political contest, overlooking its character as a central prize in, and instrument of, protracted social conflict. Furthermore, the recent scholarly turn towards 'hybridity' as a corrective, which seeks to acknowledge the interaction between international and local norms and institutions, has itself reached a conceptual dead end in this context. As critics note, the hybridity lens often becomes a simplistic celebration of complexity or a static binary, failing to account for power relations, agency, and the deliberate instrumentalisation of both 'traditional' and 'modern' systems by conflict actors . The result is an analytical framework that describes a condition of mixture but offers little explanatory power regarding the underlying drivers of cyclical violence or the potential pathways out of it.

Consequently, there exists a pressing need to develop a more nuanced and context-sensitive theoretical apparatus. This article aims to address this gap by constructing a multi-level theoretical framework specifically designed for the critical analysis of peace processes in South Sudan. Its core contention is that understanding the repeated failure of these processes requires simultaneous and interconnected analysis across three distinct yet interrelated levels: the international/regional, the national/political, and the local/social. The international level encompasses the agendas, pressures, and resources of external actors, including neighbouring states, regional bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and Western donors, whose interventions are often shaped by paradigms ill-suited to the South Sudanese reality. The national level focuses on the political marketplace of Juba, characterised by a volatile political economy of violence, elite competition structured around patronage networks, and a militarised state where sovereignty is persistently contested . The local level, often neglected in high-level peacemaking, involves the diverse communal landscapes, historical grievances, and micro-political economies of violence that fuel and sustain conflict at the sub-national level, and where the consequences of national breakdown are most acutely felt.

The article will proceed by first examining the theoretical background and limitations of existing

peacebuilding and hybridity approaches, establishing the necessity for a new framework. It will then elaborate the proposed multi-level model in detail, defining its constituent levels and articulating the dynamic interactions between them. This will be followed by an analytical demonstration of the framework's utility, applying it to a critical examination of key South Sudanese peace agreements to reveal the cross-level tensions and contradictions that have undermined their implementation. The article will conclude by discussing the implications of this multi-level analysis for both the study and the practice of peacebuilding, arguing that only by acknowledging and engaging with the distinct logics operating at each level can more resilient and legitimate political settlements be conceived. Ultimately, this theoretical intervention seeks to provide scholars and practitioners with a more robust toolkit for diagnosing the pathologies of peace processes in South Sudan, moving beyond descriptions of hybridity

Theoretical Background

The dominant paradigm in international peacebuilding for the post-Cold War era has been the liberal peace model, which posits that sustainable peace is achieved through the simultaneous promotion of democratic governance, market-oriented economies, and the rule of law . This approach, often operationalised by international actors, assumes a universal template for state-building, wherein the establishment of formal, Weberian institutions is paramount. In contexts like South Sudan, this translated into a peacebuilding architecture heavily focused on constitutional processes, elections, security sector reform, and technical capacity-building. However, the persistent recurrence of violent conflict in South Sudan, despite significant international investment in such liberal frameworks, has rendered this model the subject of sustained and cogent critique. Scholars argue that the liberal peace is inherently top-down and externally driven, often amounting to a form of institutional imposition that fails to resonate with local socio-political realities . It tends to prioritise the form of institutions over the function of power, neglecting the entrenched informal networks and authority structures that genuinely govern political life and resource allocation in many post-colonial African states.
In response to these critiques, the hybrid peace thesis emerged as a influential counter-perspective, seeking to provide a more nuanced understanding of peace formation. This school of thought rejects the binary of liberal international and local traditional orders, instead conceptualising peace as a hybrid outcome of their interaction, contestation, and negotiation . It rightly shifted analytical attention to the agency of local actors and the complex, often contradictory, political orders that arise from such encounters. Nevertheless, the application of the hybridity lens to South Sudan reveals significant limitations. While hybridity usefully describes the coexistence of formal and informal systems, it often lacks explanatory power regarding the core drivers of violence and the logic of political competition. It can over-celebrate local agency without sufficiently accounting for how that agency is frequently deployed in the service of violent predation and elite accumulation. Consequently, hybrid peace theory struggles to adequately explain the dynamics of what has been termed South Sudan's 'violent political marketplace', where political loyalty is commodified, and state power is exercised primarily as a tool for elite rent-seeking and militarised patronage . The framework thus risks becoming a descriptive account of institutional pluralism rather than a critical analysis of a political economy geared towards war.
To move beyond this impasse, it is necessary to engage with a set of concepts that directly address the material and political foundations of conflict and elite behaviour. The notion of political settlements offers a critical entry point, defined as the forging of a common understanding, usually among elites, on

the rules of the political game and the distribution of public resources . In South Sudan, peace agreements have largely functioned as elite pacts—short-term bargains over power-sharing and wealth-sharing between rival factions, rather than as foundational social contracts aimed at transforming governance. These pacts are inherently unstable, as they are predicated on the distribution of a finite pool of rents (primarily oil revenues) to a constantly expanding set of claimants, incentivising fragmentation and recurrent bargaining through coercion. This logic is inextricably linked to the political economy of war and peace, where the transition from war does not necessarily dismantle the networks of profit and power established during conflict. Instead, a wartime political economy can become entrenched in peacetime, with peace agreements themselves becoming key moments for reconfiguring access to lucrative rents, thereby blurring the distinction between political and criminal enterprise .

While these concepts—political settlements, elite pacts, and the political economy of conflict—provide crucial macro-level insights into the structural drivers of violence, a significant theoretical gap remains. Existing frameworks often operate at separate levels of analysis: macro-structural political economy, meso-level institutional hybridity, or micro-level studies of local conflict. There is a paucity of integrated theoretical approaches that systematically connect the macro-structures of the rentier state and the globalised political marketplace with the micro-dynamics of everyday bargaining, sub-national violence, and the agency of mid-level commanders and community leaders. The hybrid peace literature acknowledges local complexity but frequently divorces it from the overarching political economy that shapes and constrains local options. Conversely, political economy approaches can sometimes present an overly deterministic view of elite predation, underplaying the spaces for negotiation, resistance, and

Table 1

Comparison of Theoretical Approaches to South Sudan Peace Processes

Theoretical Approach	Core Focus	Primary Actors	Key Mechanism	Critiques/Challenges
Liberal Peacebuilding	State institutions, democracy, market economy	International community, donors, national government	Top-down institutional reform	Ignores local power dynamics; fosters dependency; high cost.
Hybrid Peace	Interaction of international & local norms/practices	International actors, local elites, civil society	Negotiation & blending of governance models	Can entrench elite power; romanticises the 'local'; unstable equilibrium.
Conflict Transformation	Addressing root causes, relationships, structures	Civil society, communities, mid-level leaders	Bottom-up dialogue & long-term societal change	Slow process; difficult to scale; vulnerable to spoilers.
Elite Bargaining/Political Settlement	Power-sharing among contending elites	National political & military elites	Negotiated pacts & patronage distribution	Excludes broader society; perpetuates corruption; unstable.
Local Peace	Community-level	Elders, religious	Indigenous mediation	Limited influence on

Committees	reconciliation & security	leaders, women's groups	& customary law	national processes; variable legitimacy.

Note. *Synthesis based on key literature in African peace and conflict studies.*

Framework Development

The proposed framework moves beyond hybridity's binary and static conceptions by constructing a multi-level, dynamic model for analysing peace processes in South Sudan. It posits that sustainable analysis must simultaneously account for three interconnected spheres: the international, the national, and the sub-national. Each sphere is characterised by a distinct but interlinked core component: the internationalised political settlement, the domestic elite bargain, and the localised systems of authority and insecurity. The framework's primary analytical power derives not from examining these levels in isolation, but from tracing the dynamic, often contradictory, interactions between them, wherein the logic of 'competitive clientelism' operates as the pervasive mechanism bridging and distorting formal peace architectures.

At the international level, peacemaking is predominantly structured around the negotiation and enforcement of an internationalised political settlement. This component refers to the formal agreements, roadmaps, and governance blueprints brokered by external actors such as IGAD, the African Union, and the UN, often with support from Western powers . These settlements typically aim to establish a ceasefire, a transitional power-sharing government, and a timeline for elections and constitutional reform. They are premised on a liberal institutionalist logic, seeking to create inclusive, representative state institutions. However, as critiques of liberal peacebuilding underscore, these externally designed frameworks often misread or deliberately overlook the internal political economy of the conflict state . In the South Sudanese context, international actors have consistently treated the conflict as a national-level political dispute between elite factions, thereby reifying the very elite networks that perpetuate violence and marginalisation.

This leads directly to the second component: the domestic elite bargain. This level constitutes the primary objective for national political elites engaging with the international settlement. For these actors, notably the presidency and the major opposition commanders, peace agreements are less about instituting good governance and more about negotiating a temporary truce that codifies the distribution of state resources—most importantly, access to oil revenues, ministerial portfolios, and security sector control . The elite bargain is inherently unstable and exclusionary, functioning as a cartel arrangement that consolidates a kleptocratic system. It operates on a winner-takes-all logic, where control of the central state is the supreme prize, rendering power-sharing agreements inherently fragile. The domestic elite bargain thus acts as a filter, translating the international settlement's normative language into a vernacular of patronage and positional advantage.

Crucially, the framework insists that neither the international settlement nor the elite bargain can be understood without reference to the third component: localised systems of authority and insecurity. This sub-national sphere encompasses a complex tapestry of customary authorities, community defence groups, youth militias, and fragmented military units whose loyalties are often fluid. Here, the state's presence is frequently defined by predation or absence, leaving local governance and security in the hands of hybrid arrangements . These local systems are not isolated; they are directly impacted by and actively shape the higher levels. National elites mobilise local militias and ethnicised rhetoric to bolster their bargaining position in Juba, instrumentalising local grievances and command structures.

Conversely, the implementation—or collapse—of a national ceasefire immediately alters the calculations of local commanders, who may shift allegiances based on the flow of resources or the perceived strength of their patrons.

The critical innovation of this framework is its focus on the dynamic interactions between these three levels. The process is not linear or hierarchical but dialectical. For instance, the signing of an international settlement (international level) recalibrates the domestic elite bargain, prompting new alliances and exclusions (national level). This, in turn, triggers a reconfiguration of local alliances and violence as elites seek to secure their hinterlands or punish communities associated with rivals (sub-national level). Subsequently, outbreaks of localised violence can derail the national bargain, forcing international mediators to re-engage, often by further accommodating the very elites responsible for the instability. Peace processes are thus shaped in a continuous feedback loop of negotiation, adaptation, and subversion across all three spheres.

The operational logic that permeates and connects these interactions is competitive clientelism. This concept describes a political system where rival elite networks compete for control of the state, which is viewed principally as a resource to be captured and distributed through personalised patronage chains (de Waal 2014

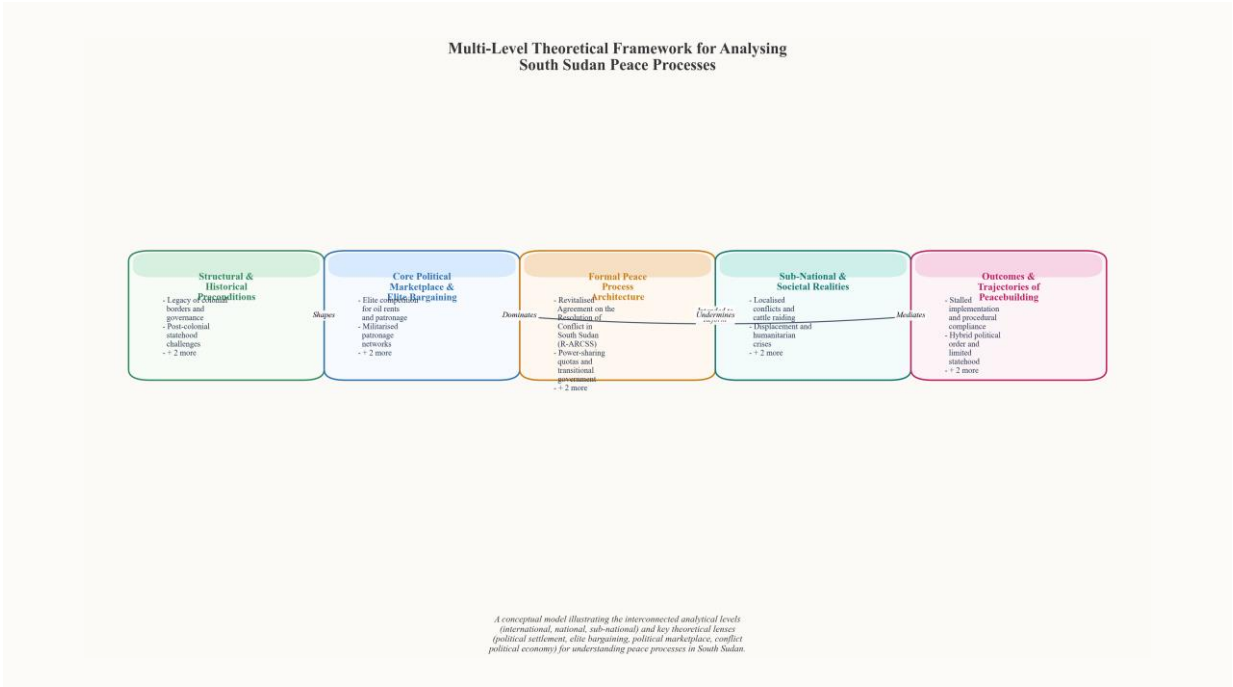

Figure 1 *Multi-Level Theoretical Framework for Analysing South Sudan Peace Processes. A conceptual model illustrating the interconnected analytical levels (international, national, sub-national) and key theoretical lenses (political settlement, elite bargaining, political marketplace, conflict political economy) for understanding peace processes in South Sudan.*

Theoretical Implications

The proposed multi-level framework carries significant theoretical implications, challenging several entrenched assumptions within peace and conflict studies, African studies, and political science. Firstly, it directly contests the linear, state-centric models of peacebuilding that have long dominated political

science and mainstream international policy. These models, often derived from liberal peacebuilding paradigms, presuppose a sequential transition from war to a consolidated peace, typically culminating in the establishment of a Weberian state monopoly on violence . By analysing the recursive, non-linear interplay between elite pacts, sub-national violence, and transnational flows, this framework demonstrates that peace processes are not straightforward journeys toward a predefined end-state. Instead, they are complex, often contradictory systems where formal agreements can coexist with, and even stimulate, localised conflict and economic predation. This moves analysis beyond a focus on institutional blueprints and compliance monitoring, offering a dynamic systems view that better captures the reality of protracted transitions like South Sudan's.

For the field of African peace studies specifically, the framework provides a vital non-teleological model for analysing stalled and recursive political transitions. Much analysis of African conflicts remains burdened by an implicit expectation of progression, framing setbacks as 'failures' or 'reversals' against a normative pathway. By treating the peace process itself as a multi-layered political system—comprising the Juba-level negotiation table, the militarised local political marketplace, and the regionally embedded political economy—the framework allows for the study of continuity within apparent change. It posits that periods of 'stalemate' or 'violation' are not aberrations but constitutive elements of a distinct political order. This enables scholars to analyse how power is reproduced and negotiated during these extended interim periods, rather than merely diagnosing the absence of peace. Such an approach is particularly salient for understanding contexts like South Sudan, where the process has become a permanent, if volatile, feature of the political landscape, shaping authority, accumulation, and identity in its own right.

A further critical implication is the framework's substantive refinement of the concept of hybridity, which has been influential in peacebuilding scholarship. While hybridity theory usefully shifted attention to the interplay between liberal and local institutions, it has often been critiqued for presenting an overly normative and apolitical vision of institutional blending . This framework addresses that lacuna by explicitly foregrounding power, coercion, and political economy. It demonstrates that the interaction between different normative and institutional orders is seldom a benign fusion. Instead, it is a contested process where elites may strategically deploy 'traditional' authority to legitimise power, or where international resources fuel localised coercion. The 'multi-level' perspective reveals how what appears as hybrid governance at one level can be underpinned by violent extraction at another, challenging romanticised notions of the local. By centring the questions of who benefits and who is coerced within these interactions, the framework re-politicises the study of institutional arrangements in post-conflict settings, moving hybridity from a descriptive to a critical analytical tool.

Ultimately, these contributions position the framework within broader interdisciplinary debates on post-colonial state formation and the nature of sovereignty in Africa. The protracted, multi-level peace process in South Sudan is not an anomaly but a stark manifestation of wider patterns of state-making on the continent. The framework illuminates how sovereignty is negotiated, shared, and contested among a plurality of actors—national elites, foreign governments, regional militaries, and sub-national strongmen—rather than being a binary condition held by the state . This resonates with analyses of the 'negotiated state' or the 'mediated state', where central authority is constantly brokered through deals with other power centres. By tracing the connections between elite rent-seeking, cross-border networks, and community-level insecurity, the framework shows that the South Sudanese state is being formed not just in Juba's ministries but in the murky intersections of the peace economy. This challenges classical theories of sovereignty and statehood, suggesting that in contexts like South Sudan, the peace process

itself is the primary arena of state formation, producing a diffuse and networked form of political authority that defies conventional categorisation.
In conclusion, the theoretical implications of this multi-level framework are therefore threefold: it displaces linear peacebuilding models with a dynamic systems approach; it provides African peace studies with a non-teleological lens for recursive conflicts; and it refines

Practical Applications

The multi-level framework developed in this paper, which integrates the political marketplace with the political settlement and the everyday, provides a powerful diagnostic tool for practitioners engaged in the arduous work of building peace in South Sudan. Its primary utility lies in moving analysis beyond a superficial assessment of formal compliance with agreements, towards a deeper understanding of the underlying political logics and blockages. For instance, applying the framework to the stalled implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) reveals a constellation of interconnected failures across all three levels. At the level of the political marketplace, the agreement's power-sharing provisions have been treated not as a foundation for governance but as a mechanism for elite resource distribution, reinforcing a monetised political system . The constant renegotiation of positions and budgets, rather than the establishment of accountable institutions, exemplifies how elite competition continues to subvert formal processes. Concurrently, at the political settlement level, the R-ARCSS has failed to transform the underlying deal amongst the armed elite into a broader social contract. The exclusion of significant constituencies and the persistent use of violence as a bargaining tool indicate a settlement that remains narrow, unstable, and militarised . This directly impacts the everyday level, where communities experience the agreement's failure through continued insecurity, a lack of basic services, and the persistent dominance of militarised patronage networks, thereby eroding any local legitimacy the peace process might have held.
For international mediators and donors, this diagnostic clarity should fundamentally reshape intervention design. Programmes that focus solely on technical capacity-building or institutional templates, while ignoring the pervasive logic of the political marketplace, are likely to be co-opted or rendered irrelevant. A politically-informed approach, guided by this framework, would instead seek to engage with and cautiously reshape elite incentives. This could involve, for example, structuring financial and diplomatic support in ways that rewards verifiable steps towards genuine institutionalisation and public goods provision, rather than merely backing the signing of documents. It necessitates recognising that peace agreements in such contexts are not blueprints for a Weberian state, but are themselves transient artefacts within a dynamic marketplace . Support should therefore be adaptive, anticipating and responding to elite re-bargaining while consistently channelling it towards more inclusive and less violent forms. Crucially, external actors must use the framework to identify which aspects of the political settlement show potential for incremental broadening, and align their leverage accordingly, avoiding the reinforcement of a purely exclusionary deal.
Furthermore, the framework offers a superior foundation for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of peace processes. Traditional M&E often tracks the completion of discrete, quantifiable activities listed in an agreement's implementation matrix. The proposed multi-level analysis shifts the focus towards qualitative shifts in the nature of the political settlement and the operation of the political marketplace. Key indicators would include changes in how elite bargains are enforced (moving from violence

towards law or party politics), the diversification of elites admitted to the settlement, and the allocation of national resources (away from pure patronage and towards development). Monitoring the everyday level provides a crucial reality-check: are local perceptions of security, justice, and economic opportunity improving in tandem with political-level manoeuvres? This approach reveals whether a process is achieving mere 'negative peace'—a pause in large-scale conflict—or fostering the deeper, 'productive' conditions necessary for a more resilient order .
Finally, the framework identifies critical entry points for supporting inclusive peacebuilding that is cognisant of national-level distortions. While elite pacts are negotiated in Juba, sustainable peace requires engaging the sub-national level where conflict is often most acutely experienced. The integrated framework warns, however, against treating local dialogues as isolated exercises. Sub-national conflicts are frequently instrumentalised by national elites as arenas for proxy competition within the broader political marketplace . Therefore, supporting local peace dialogues must involve a careful analysis of how they are linked to, or vulnerable to manipulation by, national patronage networks. Practitioners can use the framework to map these connections and design dialogues that either seek to insulate local processes from destructive national politics or, where possible, to create feedback loops where local peace dividends exert positive pressure on national elites. Efforts to strengthen hybrid forms of local authority and dispute resolution must be pursued with an understanding that these are

Discussion

The proposed multi-level framework, while offering a robust analytical tool, is not without its potential limitations and points of contention. A primary critique likely to be levelled against it is its inherent complexity. By integrating macro-, meso-, and micro-level dynamics and insisting on their interrelation, the framework demands a significant depth of empirical investigation and theoretical synthesis. Critics may argue that such an approach is unwieldy for policymakers seeking clear, actionable insights. In response, it must be asserted that the complexity of South Sudan's conflict, characterised by what Pinaud terms a 'political marketplace' at the elite level and profound localised grievances, cannot be accurately captured by simpler, linear models (de Waal; Pinaud). The framework's value lies precisely in its ability to mirror this complexity, providing a structured yet nuanced map of the terrain rather than a reductive flowchart. A related concern may be a perceived structural determinism, particularly in its emphasis on the constraining power of the macro-political economy. However, the framework explicitly incorporates agency, especially at the meso-level of sub-national elites and the micro-level of communities, showing how actors navigate, resist, and occasionally reshape these structural constraints, as evidenced by local peace initiatives that persist despite national breakdowns (Schomerus and de Vries).
When compared to alternative theoretical approaches, the framework's explanatory power is particularly evident in analysing recent, faltering transitions in South Sudan. Liberal institutionalist models, focused primarily on formal power-sharing and elections, have repeatedly failed to account for the resilience of violent kleptocracy and the subversion of state institutions. The framework explains this by highlighting how the logic of the macro-level political economy, where control of the state is the paramount economic resource, directly undermines the meso-level institutional bargains of peace agreements (de Waal; Pinaud). Similarly, purely identity-based explanations centred on ethnic antagonism are insufficient. While ethnic mobilisation is a key meso-level strategy, the framework contextualises it within the macro-level competition for resource access and the micro-level experiences of insecurity

and predation, thereby moving beyond primordialism to show ethnicity as a politically activated cleavage within a specific political-economic structure.
The applicability of this framework extends beyond South Sudan to other protracted conflict settings in the Horn of Africa and similar contexts. The core dynamic of a rentier political economy, weak formal institutions, and the centrality of violent entrepreneurship in state formation and contestation is evident in several regional cases. In Somalia, for instance, the macro-level collapse of the central state and the growth of a transnational political marketplace, the meso-level authority of clan-based militias and business elites, and the micro-level realities of displacement and clan protection mirror the analytical levels proposed here. Applying the framework to such cases would test its transferability and refine its components, potentially revealing how different configurations of transnational flows (e.g., diaspora remittances, regional power interventions) or local resource endowments alter the dynamics at each level. This comparative potential is a key strength, moving analysis from country-specific description towards a more general, yet context-sensitive, theory of conflict in hybrid political orders.
Employing a political economy lens within peace studies, however, introduces distinct ethical and methodological challenges. Ethically, foregrounding the economic motivations of conflict actors risks cynicism and may inadvertently legitimise violence by presenting it as a rational career choice. It is crucial, therefore, to balance this lens with a normative commitment to human security and justice, ensuring the analysis of 'how' peace processes are subverted does not eclipse the question of 'why' they should succeed for the populace. Methodologically, researching the clandestine flows of resources, shadow networks, and elite bargains that underpin the political marketplace is fraught with difficulty. Reliance on elite interviews can reproduce biased narratives, while investigating corruption and illicit finance poses security risks to researchers and informants (de Waal). A multi-level approach mitigates this somewhat by triangulating data from different strata—for example, contrasting elite discourses with micro-level testimonies of taxation and extortion—but the challenge of accessing reliable data on sensitive transactions remains a significant constraint.
Ultimately, the framework serves as a necessary corrective to apolitical, technocratic, and institutionally fetishised approaches to peacebuilding that have dominated international practice. By relentlessly connecting the international and national architecture of peace agreements to the sub-national logics of accumulation and the lived experiences of communities, it provides a more honest

Conclusion

This article has advanced a multi-level theoretical framework designed to transcend the analytical limitations of hybridity in the study of South Sudan's peace processes. By integrating the macro-level of international peacebuilding architectures, the meso-level of national elite political settlement, and the micro-level of sub-national community governance and conflict logics, the framework provides a more holistic and politically grounded tool for analysis. Its core contention is that sustainable peace in South Sudan cannot be understood, nor pursued, through a focus on any single level in isolation. The perpetual cycle of agreement and collapse characterising the country's post-independence trajectory is, rather, a product of the dynamic and often contradictory interactions between these tiers. The framework's analytical value lies in its capacity to trace how interventions or dynamics at one level produce unintended consequences and resistances at another, thereby explaining the persistent failure of technically sound peace agreements to alter fundamental conflict drivers.
The framework makes a distinct contribution to theorising South Sudan's peace process by

systematically accounting for its distinctive and challenging nature. It moves beyond diagnoses of 'state weakness' or 'institutional hybridity' to illuminate the active political projects at each level that sustain conflict. At the macro-level, it highlights how the liberal peacebuilding template, with its focus on ceasefire monitoring, power-sharing, and constitution-making, has consistently been subverted by a meso-level elite political settlement founded on a militarised patrimonial system. As noted, international actors often treat the state as a tabula rasa upon which institutions can be built, failing to engage with the reality of a 'vampire state' where formal arrangements are hollowed out by informal, exclusionary networks. Concurrently, the framework insists that neither macro-international designs nor meso-elite pacts can monopolise the space of peace and conflict. The micro-level of enduring community governance structures, localised resource conflicts, and cross-border ethnic solidarities constitutes a powerful realm of agency that national signatories and international mediators frequently ignore, yet which fundamentally determines local security and the viability of any national accord. Consequently, this theoretical undertaking strongly emphasises the necessity of politically-grounded, rather than technically-driven, approaches to peacebuilding in South Sudan and analogous contexts. The chronic implementation gaps in agreements such as the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) are not mere technical failures but are indicative of profound political disconnects. A multi-level analysis reveals that technical benchmarks on security sector reform or fiscal transparency clash directly with the logic of the elite settlement, which relies on controlling armed factions and resource flows to maintain a precarious balance of power. Similarly, community-level reconciliation and land tenure issues, critical for enduring peace, are seldom accorded serious political weight in high-level negotiations. Therefore, the framework argues that effective peacebuilding must involve a form of 'political translation,' consciously navigating and negotiating the divergent interests, legitimacies, and temporalities that operate across these three levels, rather than attempting to override them with imported blueprints.

To test and refine the propositions of this framework, significant avenues for future empirical research are required. Firstly, detailed ethnographic and historical research is needed at the micro-level to better document the specific logics of sub-national governance and conflict across South Sudan's diverse regions, moving beyond generalisations about 'local' or 'traditional' authority. Secondly, process-tracing studies could fruitfully examine specific episodes of peace agreement negotiation and breakdown through the lens of multi-level interaction, analysing precisely how provisions were shaped by, and subsequently impacted, dynamics at each tier. Thirdly, comparative research applying this framework to other post-conflict settings in the Horn of Africa or beyond would help distinguish which elements are particular to South Sudan and which reflect broader patterns of multi-level friction in peace processes. Finally, research should investigate existing or potential 'connective tissue'—mechanisms, actors, or forums that might constructively mediate between the levels, such as civil society movements that span communities and national politics, or international facilitation strategies that are genuinely responsive to sub-national realities.

In conclusion, the multi-level framework proposed here offers a robust alternative for analysing the complex and protracted peace process in South Sudan. By insisting on the interconnectedness of the international, national, and sub-national, it provides a more complete and less normatively biased picture than hybridity-focused approaches. It underscores that peace is not a product to be delivered through technical compliance, but a contested,

Contributions

This article makes a primary contribution by synthesising diverse theoretical lenses—including critical peace studies, political settlement theory, and post-colonial statehood—into an integrated analytical framework for South Sudan. It moves beyond descriptive accounts to propose a structured model for examining the interplay between elite bargains, societal fragmentation, and external intervention. The framework offers scholars and practitioners a more nuanced tool for diagnosing conflict drivers and evaluating peace processes within the unique context of South Sudan's hybrid political order. Consequently, it provides a foundation for future comparative research on peacebuilding in Africa's post-conflict states.