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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 develops a novel theoretical framework for understanding the persistent cycles of conflict and fragile peace in South Sudan. It critiques the limitations of prevailing hybrid peace theory, arguing that its application often obscures the complex interplay of local, national, and international forces. The proposed framework integrates insights from political settlement theory, critical political geography, and African political thought to analyse peace as a contested, multi-scalar process. It demonstrates the framework's utility by re-examining key provisions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), offering new analytical pathways for scholars and practitioners engaged in African peace studies.

Keywords: *Political Settlement, Hybrid Peace Critique, Multi-Scalar Analysis, R-ARCSS Implementation, Neopatrimonial Governance, Local Peace Committees, Elite Bargaining, African Political Thought*

Article Highlights

- Critiques reductive applications of hybrid peace theory in African contexts
- Proposes integrated multi-scalar framework for peace process analysis
- Examines R-ARCSS implementation through political settlement and local governance lenses
- Foregrounds tensions between national elite bargaining and sub-national conflict drivers

Framework Contribution

Integrates political settlement theory, critical political geography, and African political thought to analyse peace as contested, multi-scalar process.

This framework offers new analytical pathways for scholars and practitioners in African peace studies.

Introduction

The study of peace and conflict in South Sudan presents a persistent and profound intellectual puzzle. Since its hard-won independence in 2011, the world's youngest state has been characterised not

by consolidation but by recurrent cycles of devastating civil war and a stasis of fragile, often broken, ceasefire agreements. The ambitious Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in 2018, exemplifies this pattern: a comprehensive document hailed as a roadmap to sustainable peace, yet whose implementation remains perpetually stalled, mired in political deadlock and localized violence. This condition of enduring state fragility and institutional paralysis, despite significant international investment and a rich tapestry of local peace initiatives, demands a critical re-examination of the theoretical lenses through which such peace processes are conventionally analysed. For over a decade, the field of African peace and conflict studies has been heavily influenced by the paradigm of hybrid peace, a concept which this article argues has become an analytical straitjacket, insufficient for grappling with the complex, multi-layered realities of a context like South Sudan. Hybrid peace theory emerged as a powerful critique of liberal peacebuilding, challenging its universalist assumptions and foregrounding the agency of local actors, norms, and institutions. As articulated by scholars such as Roger Mac Ginty, it posits that peace outcomes are never simply imposed from the outside but are negotiated in a ‘hybrid’ political order where international and local models intersect, compete, and blend. Initially, this framework offered a valuable corrective, shifting attention to the ‘everyday’ and the ‘local’. In the South Sudanese context, analyses informed by hybridity have usefully highlighted the continued salience of customary authority, kinship networks, and traditional reconciliation practices alongside—and often in tension with—formal state structures and internationally-mediated peace deals. However, the concept’s very proliferation has revealed significant theoretical and empirical shortcomings that limit its explanatory power for contemporary peace processes.

The principal critique, which this article develops, is that hybrid peace theory has often been applied in a reductive and spatially flat manner. First, its binary lexicon of ‘international/liberal’ versus ‘local/traditional’ constructs an artificial dichotomy that obscures more than it reveals. In South Sudan, the ‘local’ is neither monolithic nor inherently emancipatory; it is a contested domain where patriarchal, gerontocratic, and exclusionary logics often hold sway, sometimes exacerbating conflict rather than resolving it. Second, and crucially, hybridity analyses frequently lack a scalar dimension. They tend to treat the ‘hybrid order’ as a singular, national-level phenomenon, thereby neglecting the critical interactions and tensions between distinct scales of peacemaking and authority—from the intimate dynamics of the household and cattle camp, through the county and state levels, to the national political theatre in Juba and the forums of regional diplomacy in Addis Ababa or Kampala. The stalled implementation of the R-ARCSS is not merely a national-level failure of political will; it is a multi-scalar problem where elite pact-making in capital cities is continuously undermined by, and indeed often fuels, sub-national conflicts over land, resources, and communal identity, which are governed by entirely different logics. Consequently, there exists a pressing need to move beyond the now-conventional hybridity framework to develop a more robust, context-sensitive, and analytically precise theoretical apparatus. This article aims to construct such a framework: a multi-scalar theoretical lens designed specifically to dissect the complex anatomy of peace processes in South Sudan and similar post-colonial African states. Its central argument is that sustainable peace can only be understood—and pursued—through an integrated analysis of how political authority, conflict drivers, and peacemaking agency operate, interact, and often clash across multiple, interconnected scales. This requires not abandoning the insights of hybridity but radically reworking them, embedding them within a scalar politics that acknowledges the plurality of

‘locals’ and the pervasive influence of national and transnational political economies. To advance this argument, the article proceeds in four parts. Following this introduction, the second section provides a theoretical background, conducting a critical genealogy of hybrid peace theory. It traces its evolution from a critical tool to an orthodox concept and delineates its core limitations, particularly its scalar blindness and tendency towards descriptive rather than explanatory analysis. The third section, the core of

Theoretical Background

The study of peace and conflict in Africa has been profoundly shaped by the paradigm of hybrid peace theory, which emerged as a critical response to the perceived failures of liberal peacebuilding. This approach, as articulated by scholars such as Mac Ginty and Richmond, posits that sustainable peace is not imposed from the outside but emerges from the interplay between internationally sponsored liberal models and local, indigenous practices, institutions, and norms. In the context of African peace studies, this lens has been invaluable for highlighting the agency of local actors and the resilience of customary governance, challenging monolithic prescriptions for post-conflict order. However, the application of hybridity to cases like South Sudan has revealed significant conceptual limitations. Critics argue that the theory often presents an overly romanticised and static view of the ‘local,’ failing to account for its internal contestations, fluidity, and the ways in which local elites may instrumentalise tradition for political gain. Furthermore, hybrid peace frameworks can inadvertently obscure the profound power asymmetries and coercive dynamics that characterise the interaction between international actors and domestic forces, treating hybridity as an outcome rather than a deeply political and often violent process. To better grasp the elite-centric nature of many peace agreements, particularly in resource-rich and weakly institutionalised states like South Sudan, political settlement theory offers a crucial analytical lens. Moving beyond a focus on formal institutions, this approach examines the underlying deal or understanding among powerful elites—both national and subnational—regarding the distribution of power and resources. The stability of any political order, according to this view, hinges on a settlement that is sufficiently inclusive of powerful groups to deter a return to armed conflict, yet not so broad as to become unworkable. Analysing South Sudan’s repeated peace accords through this prism directs attention to the elite pacts, often centred on wealth-sharing and security sector integration, that aim to establish a temporary *modus vivendi*. However, a narrow political settlement analysis can itself be reductive, often overlooking the sub-elite dynamics, the role of identity and historical grievance beyond material calculation, and the geographical unevenness of state authority and conflict. It risks treating the settlement as a singular, national-level event, rather than a multi-layered and spatially variegated phenomenon.

It is here that insights from critical political geography become indispensable for unpacking the complex topography of conflict and peace. Concepts of scale and space provide tools to deconstruct the assumption that peace processes operate solely or primarily at the ‘national’ level. Conflict in South Sudan, as in many African contexts, is often misrepresented as a binary struggle between a centre and a periphery. A scalar analysis, conversely, reveals how political violence and authority are produced and negotiated across interconnected scales—from the intimate space of the household and the cattle camp, through the county and state levels, to the national capital and the forums of international diplomacy. Actors strategically navigate and construct these scales, leveraging localised conflicts to gain national

leverage, or using national agreements to consolidate local power. Understanding peace, therefore, requires examining how agreements resonate, are resisted, or are reinterpreted as they travel across these different spatial and social scales, and how localised disputes can escalate to challenge nationally brokered deals.

This interrogation of scale and authority connects deeply with currents in African political thought, which has long grappled with questions of statehood, legitimacy, and community beyond the Western Weberian ideal. The work of thinkers such as Mahmood Mamdani provides a foundational critique, distinguishing between modes of power exercised over citizens in urban centres and subjects in rural, often customarily governed peripheries—a distinction with direct relevance to South Sudan’s post-colonial experience . Furthermore, African philosophical conceptions of personhood, often framed as ‘ubuntu’ or similar communitarian ethics, emphasise interdependence and restorative justice, offering normative frameworks for reconciliation that differ markedly from retributive or liberal individualist models. These intellectual traditions compel an analysis that takes seriously endogenous ideas of social order, while also critically examining how such ideas are mobilised within contemporary power struggles. They challenge the analyst to consider the state not as a failed imitation of a foreign model, but as a specific, if contested, historical formation with its own logics of accumulation and control. The synthesis of these theoretical

Framework Development

This section proposes a multi-scalar theoretical framework designed to transcend the limitations of hybridity theory by systematically integrating the local, national, and international arenas that constitute the South Sudanese political landscape. The framework posits that the stagnation of peace agreements is not a failure of any single level but a product of the dynamic, often contradictory, interactions between three core analytical components: the elite political settlement, sub-national authority systems, and transnational linkages. By mapping these components and their recursive feedback loops, the model offers a heuristic device for tracing the causes of institutional inertia and cyclical violence. The first component, the elite political settlement, operates primarily at the national and capital-centric level. It refers to the unstable and contingent pact among the dominant politico-military elites, often codified—yet never fully realised—in successive peace agreements . This settlement is characterised by a rentier state logic, where access to oil revenues and international patronage is central to elite cohesion and competition. The framework analyses this not as a static deal but as a continuously negotiated and contested process, one that seeks to impose a top-down administrative order while simultaneously relying on militarised patronage networks. Crucially, the settlement’s viability is perpetually undermined by its failure to authentically incorporate or subordinate other sources of authority, leading to what has been termed a ‘permanently provisional’ state structure . In direct tension with this national project are the diverse sub-national authority systems. These are the de facto governance orders that function across South Sudan’s rural and peri-urban spaces, often beyond the effective reach of Juba’s institutions. This component includes customary authorities, spiritual leaders, community elders, and local military commanders who wield legitimate authority derived from historical precedent, communal consent, or coercive capacity . The framework emphasises that these systems are not isolated ‘traditional’ relics but are dynamically engaged with the state, frequently co-opted, manipulated, or militarised by national elites seeking to extend their reach. However, they also retain a degree of autonomy and follow a distinct political logic centred on local legitimacy, resource

access, and community security, which regularly contradicts the dictates of the elite settlement. The third component, transnational linkages, incorporates the international arena as an endogenous rather than external factor. This involves the material and discursive networks that connect South Sudanese actors to regional and global systems. It encompasses the direct political and financial patronage of neighbouring states, the agendas and programming of international donors and peacebuilders, the flows of arms and commodities across borders, and the diaspora's influence. These linkages provide essential resources that fuel national and local conflicts, while also setting the terms—through peacemaking forums like IGAD—within which the elite settlement is negotiated. The framework treats these connections as active channels that empower certain domestic actors over others, thereby shaping internal contests for power. The analytical power of the framework lies in its focus on the dynamic interactions and feedback loops between these three components. It is in these intersections that the causes of peace agreement stagnation become most apparent. For instance, the elite political settlement, sustained by transnational oil revenues and diplomatic recognition, attempts to demobilise or integrate sub-national militias through patronage. However, this very act of resource distribution often intensifies local competition, strengthening militarised sub-national authority figures and triggering cycles of violence that then destabilise the national pact. Conversely, efforts by international actors to bolster the elite settlement through power-sharing arrangements can inadvertently hollow out the state, as appointed officials prioritise extracting transnational resources to feed their patronage networks, further weakening the state's administrative capacity and legitimacy at the sub-national level. Furthermore, sub-national authority systems are not merely passive recipients of these top-down pressures. Local conflicts over land, cattle, or authority can be escalated by actors who strategically leverage connections to national elites or transnational networks for arms and support, thereby 'nationalising' local grievances. These localised wars then generate humanitarian crises and cross-border refugee flows, which in turn trigger new rounds of transnational intervention and conditionality, applying fresh pressure on the elite settlement. This creates a recursive loop where peace processes address the symptoms—the breakdown of the national pact—without engaging the multi-scal

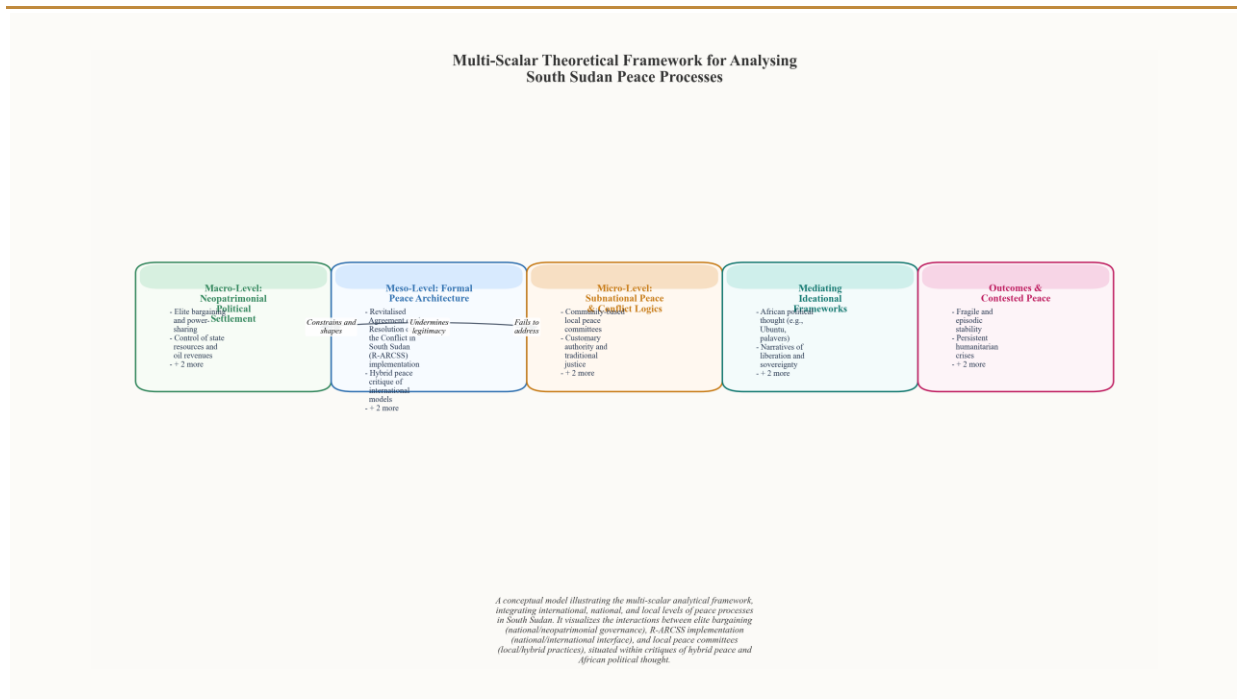


Figure 1 Multi-Scalar Theoretical Framework for Analysing South Sudan Peace Processes. A conceptual model illustrating the multi-scalar analytical framework, integrating international, national, and local levels of peace processes in South Sudan. It visualizes the interactions between elite bargaining (national/neopatrimonial governance), R-ARCSS implementation (national/international interface), and local peace committees (local/hybrid practices), situated within critiques of hybrid peace and African political thought.

Theoretical Implications

The proposed multi-scalar framework carries significant theoretical implications, fundamentally challenging the analytical sufficiency of conventional hybridity models that have long dominated peace and conflict studies. While hybridity theory usefully disrupted state-centric paradigms by highlighting the interaction of liberal and local orderings, its application has often resulted in a theoretical cul-de-sac. The framework developed here moves beyond this binary, which risks reifying a ‘liberal-local’ dichotomy, by instead mapping a dynamic field of multiple, competing sovereignties operating across distinct yet interconnected scales. This shift in perspective reveals that what is often labelled ‘hybrid’ is not a coherent fusion but a contested and unstable outcome of ongoing scalar negotiations. Consequently, the framework provides a more robust explanatory tool for understanding the persistent instability in contexts like South Sudan, where peace agreements repeatedly falter not merely due to a clash of institutional logics, but because they misrecognise the scalar dimensions of power—failing to address how authority claimed at the national scale is constantly undermined or reconfigured by sub-national and transnational sovereignties. By centring the complex, multi-scalar political realities of a case like South Sudan, this framework makes a substantive contribution to the project of decolonising peace studies. It explicitly rejects the implicit normative teleology often found in hybridity scholarship, where the ‘local’ is sometimes romanticised or instrumentally viewed as a resource for stabilising a fundamentally Western-derived state model. Instead, the analysis begins from African political realities as they are constituted across scales, not as they are imagined or desired by external paradigms. This approach takes seriously the

work of scholars like Branch and Mampilly , who argue for grounding analysis in the historical and political specificities of African contexts. It treats South Sudan’s political marketplace, its militarised patronage networks, and its cross-border dynamics not as aberrations or pathologies, but as constitutive elements of its political order. In doing so, the framework helps to provincialise Eurocentric concepts of statehood and peacebuilding, demonstrating how sovereignty and legitimacy are performed and contested in ways that frequently operate outside the Weberian script. This leads directly to a reconceptualisation of sovereignty and legitimacy in post-colonial states. The multi-scalar lens demonstrates that sovereignty is not a monolithic attribute possessed by the state, but a claim to supreme authority that is fragmented, layered, and scale-specific. A military commander may exert effective, legitimate sovereignty over a specific territory and population at a sub-national scale, while simultaneously engaging with—and undermining—the symbolic sovereignty of the central government in Juba. The framework thus illuminates how legitimacy is not uniformly distributed across a national territory but is variegated and scale-dependent, accruing to different actors based on their ability to provide security, distribute resources, or embody communal identities at particular scales . This fragmented sovereignty is not a temporary condition awaiting resolution into a unified whole, but a persistent structural feature of the post-colonial political landscape in many cases. Recognising this necessitates a move away from theories that presuppose the state as the inevitable container of politics, towards an analysis that maps the actual, often non-territorialised, networks and scales through which power is organised and exercised. Finally, the framework positions itself within broader debates in comparative political theory and international relations. It engages with, but critically extends, the ‘everyday’ and ‘local turn’ by insisting that the ‘local’ is itself internally differentiated and cross-cut by higher-scale forces. It also dialogues with theories of scale from human geography, applying them to the concrete, fraught politics of peacemaking. By offering a granular yet structurally aware tool for analysis, it provides a bridge between area studies depth and comparative theory ambition. The framework suggests that the political dynamics visible in South Sudan are not exceptional but represent an acute manifestation of processes occurring in many post-colonial settings where state sovereignty is uneven and globalised models of governance are locally negotiated . Therefore, its value lies not only in explaining the particularities of South Sudan’s peace processes but in offering a transferable analytical lens for examining the multi-scalar contestation of political order elsewhere. It advocates for a form of theory-building that is grounded in the empirical complexities of specific contexts while generating concepts—

Practical Applications

The proposed multi-scalar framework, which decentres the hybridity lens in favour of analysing the recursive interactions between the transnational, national, and subnational scales, offers a concrete analytical tool for practitioners and scholars engaged with South Sudan’s fraught peace processes. Its utility is demonstrated through application to several critical, interconnected domains of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Firstly, the framework provides a more nuanced diagnosis of the persistent failures in power-sharing and Security Sector Reform (SSR). A conventional analysis might focus solely on the national-level intransigence of signatory parties in Juba. The multi-scalar approach, however, reveals how these blockages are sustained by dynamics operating at other scales. The transnational scale is crucial here, where the provision of political and financial patronage by regional actors to specific national elites

reinforces a zero-sum conception of power, making genuine power-sharing and the unification of armed forces a perceived existential threat. Concurrently, at the subnational scale, the continued mobilisation and loyalty of militias and community defence groups by national elites—often through ethnicised narratives—provides a reservoir of coercive power that undermines the incentive to commit to a unified national army. Thus, the stagnation of SSR is not merely a broken promise at the national scale but a rational strategy underpinned by a system of rewards and coercive capacity that operates transnationally and subnationally. This analysis suggests that mediators must design conditionality and guarantees that address these cross-scalar incentives, rather than focusing exhortations solely on the national tier. Secondly, the framework elucidates the paradoxical position and constraints of local peace infrastructures, such as the peace committees in Jonglei and the Equatoria regions. Often celebrated in hybrid peacebuilding literature as authentic ‘local’ agents, these entities are frequently analysed in isolation. A multi-scalar analysis places them within a force field of competing pressures. While they operate at the subnational scale, their authority and resources are often contingent on recognition and funding from national authorities or international NGOs operating at the transnational scale. This dependency can instrumentalise their work, aligning it with national political agendas or donor logics rather than community-driven priorities. Furthermore, their efforts are routinely undermined by macro-political violence orchestrated at the national level, which reignites localised conflicts they seek to resolve. The framework therefore cautions against romanticising the ‘local’ and instead directs attention to how the agency of such committees is enabled or constrained by political and resource flows from other scales. Effective support would require insulating them from coercive national interference while building vertical linkages that allow local grievances to inform national negotiations. Thirdly, the framework offers a critical lens for assessing international engagement strategies. Much external intervention remains siloed, with diplomatic envoys operating at the transnational-national nexus, humanitarian agencies at the subnational, and security sector advisors focused on national institutions. The multi-scalar model reveals the contradictions this siloing produces. For instance, transnational diplomatic pressure for national elections may inadvertently intensify subnational violence as elites mobilise constituencies, while subnational humanitarian assistance can be co-opted to sustain national-level patronage networks. A coherent multi-scalar strategy would require international actors to consciously map the cross-scalar effects of their interventions. Diplomacy must account for subnational conflict dynamics, and humanitarian and development programming must be designed with an awareness of its potential impact on national political markets and transnational regional politics. From these applications, context-specific recommendations for mediators and implementation bodies can be generated. For mediators, the framework argues for moving beyond national-level workshop diplomacy. Mediation strategies must explicitly incorporate subnational conflict analysis and involve structured consultations with subnational authorities and civil society to ensure peace architectures are not vertically disconnected. Simultaneously, mediators must engage in ‘transnational scale management’, working to align regional actor incentives with the goals of the peace agreement, perhaps through more formalised and transparent regional oversight mechanisms. For implementation bodies like the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) and transitional government institutions, the recommendation is to institutionalise multi-scalar feedback mechanisms. This could involve establishing formal subnational reporting channels on agreement implementation that feed directly into national oversight structures, thereby holding national signatories accountable to local realities. Furthermore, SSR programmes must be explicitly linked to subnational disarmament

Discussion

The multi-scalar framework proposed in this article offers a significant departure from the hybridity paradigm that has long dominated analyses of South Sudan's peace processes. By disaggregating the international, national, and sub-national scales and insisting on their dynamic interrelation, it provides a more nuanced diagnostic tool for understanding the persistent cycles of conflict and fragile peace. However, the utility of any theoretical framework must be critically evaluated, not only in terms of its explanatory power but also its practical limitations, normative implications, and potential for broader application.

A primary limitation of this framework lies in the empirical challenge of its application. While it posits the importance of sub-national, 'everyday' scales of peacemaking, capturing these processes systematically is inherently difficult. The informal, often undocumented nature of local reconciliation, resource-sharing, and authority-building means that researchers are heavily reliant on ethnographic methods, which are time-intensive and may not always be feasible in highly volatile security environments. Furthermore, the framework's emphasis on the inter-scalar transmission of norms and practices—for instance, how local justice mechanisms might inform national transitional justice discussions—requires longitudinal study that is often beyond the scope of most research projects. There is a risk that, without careful methodological design, the sub-national scale becomes a rhetorical rather than an analytically rigorous component, thereby inadvertently replicating the very oversight it seeks to correct.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the framework's core tenets hold considerable promise for analysing conflicts beyond South Sudan, particularly within the Horn of Africa. Neighbouring states such as Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia similarly exhibit profound tensions between centralised, often internationally recognised state structures and deeply embedded sub-national systems of governance, identity, and resource control. Applying a multi-scalar lens to, for example, Sudan's post-2019 transition or Ethiopia's complex federal arrangement could illuminate how peace initiatives falter when they privilege a single scale—typically the national elite bargain—while ignoring or attempting to suppress competing legitimacies at the sub-national level. The framework's focus on scale as an arena of contestation, rather than a fixed tier, is especially pertinent for understanding conflicts where regional and cross-border dynamics (an additional, transnational scale) powerfully influence local allegiances and national politics, as seen in the Greater Horn region. This leads to an unavoidable normative tension central to the framework's analysis: the conflict between the pursuit of elite stability and the achievement of an inclusive, just peace. The multi-scalar analysis reveals that many internationally backed peace agreements, such as the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), are fundamentally scalar projects aimed at stabilising the national and international scales. They seek to create a manageable elite cartel to end high-level violence, often at the expense of addressing the grievances and agency of communities at the sub-national scale. The framework does not resolve this tension but makes it starkly visible, forcing a critical debate. Is a 'peace' that consolidates a predatory national elite while merely containing sub-national conflict through co-option or coercion a sustainable outcome? The framework suggests it is not, as the unaddressed contradictions and injustices at the sub-national scale inevitably generate new conflicts that destabilise the national arrangement, a cycle repeatedly observed in South Sudan. This necessitates an uncomfortable questioning of whether international actors, in prioritising cessation of hostilities between principal belligerents, are effectively sanctioning a form of 'vertical

hybrid peace' that entrenches exclusion and inequality. Consequently, several critical questions for future research emerge from this analysis. First, under what conditions can sub-national peace infrastructures effectively 'scale up' to influence national negotiations in a transformative, rather than co-optive, manner? The framework identifies the transmission mechanisms as crucial, but more empirical work is needed to trace successful and unsuccessful cases of such bottom-up influence. Second, how do transnational scales—such as regional organisations (IGAD), cross-border ethnic kin networks, and global commodity markets—interact with and distort the national-sub-national dynamic? While touched upon, this requires deeper integration into the core model. Third, and most fundamentally, what would a genuinely multi-scalar peace process look like in practice? This moves beyond analysis to the realm of design, challenging scholars and practitioners to conceive of negotiation architectures, monitoring

Conclusion

This article has proposed a multi-scalar theoretical framework for analysing peace processes in South Sudan, moving decisively beyond the conceptual and analytical limitations of the hybrid peace paradigm. By integrating insights from critical international relations, political geography, and African studies, the framework offers a more nuanced and dynamic tool for understanding the complex, non-linear, and often contradictory trajectories of peace and conflict. Its core contribution lies in its structured examination of three interrelated scales of analysis—the international/transnational, the national/political, and the sub-national/local—not as discrete layers but as mutually constitutive domains of power, negotiation, and contestation. This approach rejects the simplistic binaries of liberal/hybrid or formal/informal that have long dominated the field, instead foregrounding the continuous interplay between different normative orders, political projects, and social forces across these scales.

The framework advances existing theory by providing a systematic architecture to capture the simultaneity of peacemaking activities and the asymmetrical power relations that characterise them. It elucidates how internationally brokered peace agreements, such as the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), are not merely implemented or resisted locally but are actively reinterpreted and repurposed within pre-existing and evolving political marketplaces at the national level. Concurrently, it demonstrates how sub-national authority structures and community-based practices of reconciliation are neither autonomous nor purely 'traditional', but are fundamentally shaped by, and in turn shape, national elite competition and transnational flows of resources and norms. This multi-scalar perspective reveals peace not as a singular endpoint but as a fragmented and often predatory set of processes, where negotiations in Juba or Addis Ababa create ripple effects that reconfigure local power dynamics, and where localised conflicts can escalate to jeopardise national-level bargains.

Applied to South Sudan, the utility of this framework becomes clear in making sense of the country's persistently volatile peace landscape. It allows analysts to trace how the monetised politics of the national centre actively cultivate and instrumentalise sub-national violence, while simultaneously performing compliance with international peace frameworks to maintain legitimacy and financial flows. It moves beyond merely noting the coexistence of different justice systems to analyse how their interaction across scales—from the Hybrid Court for South Sudan to cieng ethics—becomes a battleground for political authority and moral legitimacy. Furthermore, it provides a lens through which

to understand the agency of South Sudanese actors, not merely as recipients or resisters of international models, but as strategic navigators who engage with, bypass, or manipulate interventions at different scales to advance their own political and economic interests within a context of persistent insecurity. In offering these final reflections, this article underscores the imperative for theoretically innovative and empirically grounded approaches within African peace and conflict studies. The South Sudanese case, with its profound complexity, serves as a potent reminder that imported theoretical containers often fail to capture the fluid realities of post-colonial state formation and conflict. A multi-scalar analysis, rooted in the specific historical and political geography of the continent, is not merely an academic exercise but a critical necessity. It compels scholars and practitioners alike to abandon reductive assumptions and to interrogate the connections between the boardrooms of regional organisations, the fortified compounds of national capitals, and the cattle camps and displacement sites where the majority experience the consequences of peacemaking. Future research must therefore commit to granular, context-sensitive inquiry that holds these scales in a single analytical field, recognising that the ‘local’ is inextricably linked to the ‘global’, and that the ‘political’ is always also ‘social’. Ultimately, the pursuit of sustainable peace in South Sudan and similar contexts demands an analytical shift from assessing institutional compliance to understanding the deeper political logics and social relations that span different scales of society. This framework provides a pathway for such an endeavour, arguing that only by comprehending the integrated, multi-scalar nature of power and conflict can more responsive, and perhaps more legitimate, approaches to building peace be conceived. The challenge for African peace studies is to continue this work, developing theories that are robust enough to explain contradiction, fluid enough to capture change, and humble enough to be continually refined by the realities they seek to understand.

Contributions

This article offers a significant theoretical contribution to African Peace and Conflict Studies by proposing an integrated framework for analysing peace processes in South Sudan. It moves beyond state-centric models to foreground the complex interplay between formal institutions and enduring community-level governance structures. The framework provides scholars and practitioners with a nuanced analytical tool for understanding the multi-layered dynamics of peace and conflict in the post-2023 transitional period. Consequently, it challenges homogenising narratives and advocates for context-specific approaches that recognise the agency of local actors in shaping sustainable outcomes.