The British Academy

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Global (Dis)Order
international policy programme

Understanding the interlocking shifts, actors and institutions contributing to peace and security today

Contents

The Global (Dis)Order international policy programme

Today's international system is in flux with the need to navigate competing power aspirations and nodes of order. To generate fresh insights and creative thinking for policymakers and practitioners in this contested environment the British Academy and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have begun a new joint international policy programme on Global (Dis) Order. The programme is centred around four main themes: illuminating dynamics of and within international order, diagnosing and rethinking a changing world economy, governing transnational and planetary challenges, and managing violence and (in)security.

The programme is focused on shedding light on the history, current nature, and potential future trajectories of global orders, while acknowledging that these understandings are diverse and often contested. It also provides an opportunity to think in broader, longer-range ways, drawing in a breadth of disciplines and expertise from policy, practice and research that is both historical and future-oriented. This requires us to marshal diverse perspectives and visions from around the world, as well as expertise that bridges the worlds of research, policy, and practice. It also requires us to take a long view, to better understand the historical antecedents and precedents for contemporary geopolitical, economic, political, societal, technological, ecological, and other trends.

To achieve this goal we will analyse potential pathways and trajectories for global (dis)order and propose strategies and approaches to collectively manage shared geopolitical, economic,

transnational, planetary and security challenges and dilemmas. To this end, the British Academy and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have commissioned a series of policy discussion papers to prompt engagement and debate among policy audiences, by posing challenging questions and highlighting gaps and opportunities for policy.

Preface

Whilst horrific incidents of violence and conflict at multiple scales have remained an embedded feature of the post-Cold War world, a limited success of our international order has been that the scale of 21st Century violence has been orders of magnitude below that of the 20th Century. This has been achieved in part through the effective limitation of interstate war via UN processes and structures, as well as underpinned by US led security activities and incentives. But we find ourselves at a very worrying turning point. According to Peace Research Institute Oslo, state-based conflicts in 2024 reached a historic peak since 1946.[1] The implications are concerning for all actors involved in security and peacebuilding efforts.

Spiking violence is a symptom of a wider unravelling and contestation of principles and norms at the core of the intergovernmental security architecture, and the ensuing responses of actors at all levels to rising uncertainty and changing opportunity structures. To achieve comprehensive and sustainable peace in the 21st Century, policymakers and peacebuilders alike must account for the feedback loops that span their domains and find new ways to navigate the shifting macro and granular dimensions that define the moving landscape of peace and security.

To aid their efforts, The British Academy and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have commissioned this collection of discussion papers. These pieces provide policy relevant analysis across a range of scales, contexts, themes, and actor groups. The goal is to illuminate for policymakers critical interactions that require attention if we are to reverse the worrying trend of escalating conflict in the coming century.

Our first paper explores higher-level geopolitical architecture. Focusing on the UN, Chen argues that its retrenchment from peacekeeping operations reflects a wider doctrinal shift from peace-making towards militarised stabilisation. Through a series of case studies, Chen identifies dynamics that decrease the likelihood of UN invitation and increase the risk of UN operational expulsion. He provides recommendations on how the UN might preserve vital elements of its peace and security toolkit.

Focusing on a specific country, Adhikari, Hodge and Wise use the case study of Myanmar to identify and analyse a wider phenomenon that they term ‘peace process lite’. They argue that global fragmentation limits the ambitions and capacities of international and regional actors to broker and sustain successful peace initiatives. Turning to the domestic dynamics of peacebuilding, Dvornichenko and Nehring outline the complexities and contradictions involved in securing sustainable peace in Ukraine, both in advance of and after any formal ceasefire. Analysing the lived experiences and expectations of citizens, they move beyond the question of what peace settlement Ukrainians will accept to a wider discussion of the civic institutions and political processes required to build a sustainable internal consensus.

1 Rustad, Siri Aas (2025) Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024. PRIO Paper. Oslo: PRIO.

Turning to how technical developments are affecting the prosecution of warfare itself, McCauley examines the increased impetus to use AI within strategic, operational and tactical contexts. The increased adoption of AI tools in decision support systems, he argues has the potential to fundamentally alter calculations about violence and targeting and thus the norms and thresholds of warfare, with serious escalatory and ethical consequences. Sindre considers the possible policy pathways required to de-escalate and integrate non-state armed groups and their use of conventional weapons into sustainable peace and political processes. Drawing on comparative case studies, Sindre puts forward an actor typology to support policymaker and practitioner work on demilitarisation and political integration.

Our final two papers examine the shortcomings of the global humanitarian system, including mechanisms to aid displaced persons. Davey focuses on how humanitarian organisations are navigating Australia's decision to detain refugees in an offshore "enforcement archipelago", just one prominent example of wealthy countries hardening their borders to the entry of refugees. She examines the wider implications of this trend, both for humanitarian standards and the future of INGO service providers. Lastly, Thompson documents the multiple and increasing challenges to humanitarian principles globally. She proposes the shift to what she calls 'politically resilient humanitarianism', a set of operational guidelines to sustain and improve such efforts in fragile and resistant contexts.

This diverse range of papers offers fresh light on the complex interplay among geopolitics, mediation, technology, militarisation and humanitarianism and how their manifestations and machinations risk generating destabilisation and escalations. Understanding how new norms, ambitions and capacities are being co-constructed is vital for policymakers to develop alternative pathways for effective peacebuilding, and this collection offers an opportunity to reflect and act on that critical undertaking.

So long, farewell: stabilisation and the exit of UN peacekeeping operations

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Abstract

United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations have reached an inflection point. After decades of expansion, they are now in a period of retrenchment, with several missions having been asked in recent years to draw down or depart. This paper argues that the steps taken by the UN Secretariat to have missions adopt a more militarised posture under pressure from the Security Council have made those missions susceptible to instrumentalisation into tools of regime preservation. Yet peacekeeping remains rooted in the logic of liberal peace and the promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, which host governments with authoritarian tendencies see as threats to their power. The emergence of securitized alternatives—such as regional forces, ad hoc coalitions, and private security companies—therefore increases the likelihood of substitution in favour of these alternatives. This paper illustrates such effects in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, and the Central African Republic.

For the UN to regain its effectiveness as a tool for conflict resolution requires acknowledgement of the shortcomings of the militarised approach. This is more easily said than done because of bureaucratic interests in maintaining existing structures and processes, but should be a focus of UN reform efforts.

Introduction

Peacekeeping operations have been one of the most visible manifestations of the work of the United Nations (UN) since the end of the Cold War, representing the majority of the budget of the organisation and the majority of the personnel deployed across the world. However, UN peacekeeping operations are in a period of retrenchment. It has been over a decade since the Security Council last authorised—in 2014—the establishment of a new peacekeeping mission, and several have since closed. Most of these mission closures have been the result of the Security Council deciding that sufficient progress has been made in the implementation of their respective mission mandates, but UN missions in Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Somalia were asked by their host countries to depart in 2023 and 2024 despite ongoing conflict and fragility in these countries and despite the fact that, in all three cases, the UN had been supporting the host government to restore state authority and defeat armed opposition groups.

The decline in the apparent appeal of UN peacekeeping operations is taking place despite ample evidence of their effectiveness. Over the past three decades, missions have facilitated the implementation of peace agreements, built and strengthened state institutions, overseen and supported electoral processes, and even administered disputed territory (Lacroix 2024). Numerous peer-reviewed quantitative studies have found that countries hosting peacekeeping operations 'experience less armed conflict, fewer civilian and combatant deaths, fewer mass killings, longer periods of post-conflict peace and fewer repeat wars than those that do not receive peacekeepers' (Walter et al., 2021). Even so, countries increasingly seek militarised alternatives to the UN, such as regional forces, ad hoc coalitions (Brosig & Karlsrud 2024), or private security companies. This is despite the fact that there is little evidence that these alternatives to UN peacekeeping operations are effective in helping shepherd a country from conflict to sustained peace. In fact, militarised interventions create a 'stabilization dilemma' that reduces the incentives for political elites to find long-term political solutions (de Coning & Tchie 2023).

Understanding the reasons why UN peacekeeping operations have struggled in recent years and have been asked to leave is important not only in understanding broader trends in multilateral approaches to the maintenance of international peace and security but also in informing ongoing discussions taking place at the UN within the Secretariat and among member states on changes that may be needed to how the organisation plans and conducts its peace operations. This paper explains that the requests for mission exit are the result of a combination of factors, including an increased skepticism towards the liberal international order, the emphasis in peacekeeping operations on military approaches to the protection of civilians, and the fact that measures taken by the UN to adapt to changing demands for peacekeeping operations have ironically served to undermine the relevance of the UN in conflict management and resolution in the eyes of both the Security Council and host governments alike.

Background

Evolution of peacekeeping after the Cold War (1992-2006)

The end of the Cold War was a period of both optimism in multilateralism and confidence in the ability of the UN to play a greater role in peace and security. A vision for this expanded role was presented by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his 1992 report titled 'An Agenda for Peace', which—among other things—introduced the concept of peacebuilding to the UN as an element of the peace and security toolkit alongside preventative diplomacy, peacemaking, and peacekeeping (United Nations 1992). Peacebuilding activities are intended to reduce the likelihood of a relapse into conflict through the promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Member states largely accepted this vision, which was reflected in both an increase in the number of peacekeeping operations deployed and the range of mandated tasks, including peacebuilding activities, performed by those missions.

However, the ambition of this new generation of peacekeeping operations quickly outpaced the organisation's ability to execute them, as demonstrated through the failure to prevent genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the collapse of the UN Operation in Somalia II—a mission authorised to proactively use force instead of being limited to using force only in self-defence—in 1995, and the fall of Srebrenica later that year. These high-profile failures drove some internal reflections that resulted in two notable developments. The first was the codification of three basic principles of peacekeeping: impartiality, consent of the parties, and non-use of force except in self-defence (United Nations 1995). The second was the creation of the protection of civilians mandate in 1999 and with it the emergence of the multidimensional protection of civilians mission as the preferred model for peacekeeping operations.

Peacekeeping under Ban Ki-moon: Stabilisation (2007-2016)

In the 2010s, ineffective responses by peacekeeping operations to violence against civilians provided an impetus for Western countries to push for missions to adopt a more robust approach to implementing their protection mandates. The fall of Goma in the Eastern DRC to the March 23 Movement (M23) in 2012 led to the Security Council to adopt resolution 2098 (2013) creating the Force Intervention Brigade, a specialized formation within the UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) tasked with 'neutralising armed groups'. This foray into peace enforcement—a major departure from the three principles of peacekeeping—was controversial at the time and necessitated a paragraph in the resolution

insisting that the creation of the Brigade did not create a precedent or prejudice the principles of peacekeeping. Even so, a precedent had been set. Later that year, the Security Council adopted resolution 2100 (2013) establishing the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) with a mandate 'to use all necessary means' to 'stabilise the key populations centres' and 'to deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas'. A year later, the Security Council adopted resolution 2149 (2014) establishing the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), which was authorised to use force against armed groups even if they did not pose an imminent threat.

No official UN definition exists for stabilisation, though stabilisation missions are generally understood to be peacekeeping operations that are deployed in the midst of an ongoing conflict and without a clear or credible political process for the resolution of the conflict, which support the host government including in the extension of state authority and in building the capacity of host state security forces, and which are expected to use force against armed groups that pose a threat to the civilian population and the host government (Aoi et al., 2017: 299). The ambiguity over the term 'stabilisation' allows missions to perform functions that would otherwise be described as peace enforcement or counter-terrorism while retaining the form of multidimensional peacekeeping operations.

Peacekeeping under António Guterres: Retrenchment (2017-present)

Over the past decade, UN peacekeeping operations have experienced a significant retrenchment that shows no sign of abating. Several peacekeeping operations have closed, including in Côte d'Ivoire (2017), Haiti (2017 and 2019), Liberia (2017), Darfur (2020), and Mali (2023). The overall level of resources appropriated for peacekeeping operations has declined by a third and the total number of personnel (military, police, and civilian) deployed has decreased by half since the 2015/16 financial period. In lieu of new large multidimensional peacekeeping operations, the Security Council has authorised special political missions with smaller footprints and limited mandates, but even these have not been immune to the recent wave of mission closures.

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In parallel with the retrenchment in UN peacekeeping operations has been the rise of alternatives to UN peacekeeping operations, whether in the form of African-led peace support operations, ad hoc military coalitions as in the case of the Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission in Haiti, or the engagement of private military and security companies such as the Wagner Group. In many cases, these forces have been deployed in parallel with a UN mission, whether operating in a complementary fashion or as a potential replacement to the UN mission, including in Mali, the DRC, and Somalia.

Argument

Several explanations have been offered for the current crisis of confidence affecting UN peacekeeping operations. Scholars and practitioners argue that peacekeeping operations have struggled in recent years to implement their mandates due to the lack of focus on political strategies (de Coning 2023a) as well as their emphasis on top-down approaches and elections (Autesserre 2018). The UN Secretariat, on the other hand, argues that existing approaches are not the problem and that the challenges experienced by peacekeeping operations stem from

the lack of sufficient political and financial support from member states (Lacroix 2024). These explanations, however, do not fully explain why the UN—despite having compromised its own principles to align missions with the preferences for host governments—has been asked to depart by these same host countries.

UN peacekeeping operations are not the most attractive mechanisms to host governments for regime preservation because they remain, at their core, tools intended for the promotion of liberal peace.

Instead, I argue that UN peacekeeping operations are struggling because the embrace of stabilisation to better align with member state preferences carried within it the seeds of its own demise. The UN adopted more robust approaches to implementing protection of civilians in response to criticism from western Security Council members. But even when host state security forces were perpetrators of violence against civilians, missions were unlikely to be willing to use force against the host state, for fear of losing consent for deployment. These dynamics helped make missions susceptible to being co-opted into instruments of regime preservation by host governments with increasingly illiberal tendencies. At the same time, UN peacekeeping operations are not the most attractive mechanisms to host governments for regime preservation because they remain, at their core, tools intended for the promotion of liberal peace. As such, when host governments primarily see the value of UN peacekeeping operations in terms of regime preservation, the parallel deployment of militarised alternatives that are unconcerned with liberal peace increases the likelihood that a UN mission will be asked to depart.

Protection of civilians as Trojan horse for stabilisation

Although military capabilities have been an important aspect of peacekeeping missions since their inception, the fundamental objective of peacekeeping operations—the resolution of armed conflict—is political. This, however, has been gradually diluted since the introduction of the protection of civilians mandate in 1999. The UN policy on the protection of civilians includes a combination of political, military, and peacebuilding activities in support of protection of civilians (United Nations Department of Peace Operations 2023). In the past decade, however, the Security Council has specified that missions should prioritise, amongst all of their mandated tasks, the protection of civilians "under threat of physical violence". As a result, peacekeeping operations have become increasingly militarised such that their focus has shifted to pursuing military objectives—protecting civilians from non-state armed groups—at the expense of political solutions, to the alarm of many practitioners (Andersen 2018). The emphasis on applying military force to overwhelm opponents, however, fails to account for the limits of what can be achieved through force alone (Freedman 2025), as there is no purely military solutions to modern armed conflicts (Smith 2005). The experience of United States counter-terrorism efforts since 9/11, for example, has shown that emphasising security assistance over governance and development programs not only failed to eliminate terrorism but also contributed to coups d'etats in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Jett 2024).

In 2015, the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) convened by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon emphasised the importance of maintaining the "primacy of politics" in UN peace operations and cautioned against UN peace operations undertaking offensive military operations, whether in the form of peace enforcement or counter-terrorism mandates (United Nations 2015). Jean Arnault, a member of the HIPPO and former head of several UN peace operations, explained that the call for the "primacy of politics" was to counter the effective "primacy of the military" in the settlement of conflicts. He noted that large peacekeeping missions had become "almost entirely disconnected from any political process" and that "the Security Council was increasingly embracing forceful 'protection of civilians' as central to the mandate of peacekeeping missions. But it did so without a corresponding effort

to find long-term political solutions that could make the protection of civilians effective and sustainable" (Arnault 2015).

The turn away from the liberal international order

In contrast with the emphasis on liberal peace that has dominated UN peace operations in much of the post-Cold War era, authoritarian powers such as China and Russia have been pushing for alternative notions of peace that "rely on the instruments of state coercion and hierarchical structures of power" (Lewis et al., 2018: 491). Two competing visions of peaceful societies compete at the UN; one is of a "pluralist polity that manages its internal differences through open discussion and institutionalized processes of compromise; on the other is the idea of a domineering state that controls its society, suppresses dissent, and imposes its will" (Paris 2024: 2170). The traditional liberal peacebuilding model is intended to promote the former while stabilisation is increasingly enabling the latter. Even when UN peacekeeping operations have liberal objectives, they can "reinforce and amplify patterns of authoritarian politics that are already ongoing and thus offer an added layer of stability to existing regimes" (Von Billerbeck et al., 2025: 3).

African countries have been instrumental in enabling the drift of UN peacekeeping operations from peacebuilding towards stabilisation, both in terms of the host countries seeking more securitized interventions and in terms of troop-contributing countries willing to engaging in kinetic operations. However, commitment to liberal democracy is shallow in many African states and few African troop-contributing countries promote liberal values (Coleman & Job 2021: 1460–1461).

Indeed, many of the governments in countries hosting UN peace operations display authoritarian tendencies. These governments are generally primarily concerned with maintaining power and are therefore uninterested in—and indeed threatened by—democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Instead, what they want from multilateral interventions is regime security. Instead of enabling political solutions and addressing the root causes of violent conflict, the deployment of a militarised force—whether a UN mission with a stabilisation mandate or a non-UN peace enforcement or counter-terrorism force—reduces the incentive for the government to engage in dialogue with opposition groups, enables authoritarianism by building the security capabilities of the government, and makes it more difficult for a mission to exit because of the reduced likelihood that an insurgency can be decisively defeated (Williams 2024: 6)

Weaponization of host country consent

On paper, UN multidimensional peacekeeping operations remain tools to promote liberal peace, as they are intended to contribute to peacebuilding and sustaining peace in countries affected by conflict and fragility through the promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Host governments accept these peacebuilding mandates because they see this as the price to pay to obtain the security benefits from the deployment of a peacekeeping mission (Abós 2023). But as peacekeeping operations have become increasingly militarised, a shift has occurred. Over the past two decades, authorisation under Chapter VII of the UN Charter has increasingly signaled the support of the government for the deployment of a stabilisation mission with a mandate to proactively use force; this marks a significant departure from the original understanding of Chapter VII as authorisation to deploy a mission despite the lack of host country consent (Labuda 2020: 347).

Impartiality is practically impossible in stabilisation missions where the UN is supporting the host government against opposition groups (Hunt & Curran 2020; Williams 2024). Despite the fact that consent of the parties to the conflict is one of three principles of peacekeeping, the UN "increasingly limits itself to obtaining consent from the host state only", which "aligns peacekeeping with host governments and calls into question their impartiality" (Labuda 2020: 346). But host governments, particularly ones with authoritarian tendencies, often violate the norms that underpin the engagement of UN peacekeeping operations, such as when they commit human rights abuses or obstruct the work of the UN. UN officials face a difficult balancing act when deciding whether they take a more conciliatory or confrontational tack when engaging with the host government (Oksamytna et al., 2023). The need to maintain host country consent for deployment places constraints on the options available to UN peacekeeping operations, which makes missions ineffective in reducing host government violence against civilians and creates pressure for peacekeeping operations to operate in a manner in line with host government preferences (Villa 2021).

In practice, the emphasis of missions on physical protection of civilians and the privileging of host country consent allows stabilisation missions to be co-opted by host state authorities into prioritising security over peacemaking and peacebuilding. Although the UN asserts that stabilisation can pave the way for liberal, inclusive peace settlements, experience suggests that stabilisation missions inadvertently reinforce political exclusion, violence, power inequality and authoritarianism (Rosas Duarte & Souza 2024). Stabilisation therefore makes peacekeeping operations susceptible to instrumentalisation into vehicles of regime preservation and therefore tools to promote illiberal peace.

Rise of alternatives to UN peacekeeping operations

In the past few decades, missions deployed by regional organisations have also been deployed as mechanisms for the resolution and management of conflict, particularly in Africa. These include missions deployed by the African Union as well as missions deployed by subregional configurations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Beyond such missions, host countries have also invited ad hoc coalitions, bilateral military deployments, and private military companies such as the Wagner Group to deploy in parallel to UN peacekeeping operations, often with much weaker (or nonexistent) human rights accountability frameworks (Brosig & Karlsrud 2024: 2). The operations of these parallel forces often impedes the ability of peacekeeping operations to implement their mandates and creates the possibility of confrontation (Druet 2024: 465–468).

The invitation of these non-UN forces can be seen as a type of hedging on the part of host governments seeking external protection against their enemies. When a UN peacekeeping mission prioritises stabilisation over the facilitation of a political strategy for the resolution of conflict to such an extent that the host government primarily sees the value of the mission in terms of its regime preservation potential, the deployment of a seemingly more effective alternative increases the likelihood that the UN mission will be expelled.

In the past decade, Secretary-General Guterres has responded to the retrenchment of peacekeeping operations and this shift in host government, thereby repositioning the UN as a provider of predictable financing and operational support to non-UN forces. Although this is a way of maintaining the relevance of the UN in the maintenance of international peace and security, at least in the short term, this has also had the effect of accelerating the marginalization of the UN from political solutions and the relegation of the role of the organisation to that of a service provider (Chen 2024: 40).

Case studies

The UN peacekeeping operations deployed in these three countries have many similarities, including the absence of a viable political or peace process, a mandate to support the host government and extend the authority of the state, military operations in support of and alongside the security forces of the host nation, and the authorisation to use force robustly.

The experience of UN peacekeeping operations in Mali, CAR, and the DRC demonstrate the manner in which stabilisation, instrumentalisation, and parallel deployment interact to determine whether a mission is expelled by its host government. The UN peacekeeping operations deployed in these three countries have many similarities, including the absence of a viable political or peace process, a mandate to support the host government and extend the authority of the state, military operations in support of and alongside the security forces of the host nation, and the authorisation to use force robustly (de Coning 2023b). In each case, non-UN forces have also been deployed in parallel.

Mali

MINUSMA was established in 2013 as the successor to an earlier ECOWAS mission deployed in the aftermath of the 2012 coup d'état to support the Malian authorities in restoring state authority in northern Mali. For most of its existence, it deployed alongside a French military operation focused on counter-terrorism operations in northern Mali and the Sahel. Despite the fact that MINUSMA helped deter insurgents from taking over cities and larger towns in Mali, the Malian authorities regularly requested that the mission be more proactive in the use of force against opponents of the regime and to further prioritise the security dimension of its mandate (Boutellis 2023). MINUSMA, however, was committed to supporting the 2015 Algiers Agreement, which effectively froze the conflict in the north and reduced the prospects of the restoration of government control, a situation that was not satisfactory to the military juntas that took power after coups d'état in 2020 and 2021 (Giustozzi et al., 2025: 19).

In 2021, the junta invited the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group to deploy to Mali as a potential replacement for the French operation. The Wagner Group "offered strike forces who would accompany the Malian military and enable attacks planned and orchestrated by the Malian armed forces" (Watling & Wilén 2024: 68). The Malian authorities strongly approved of Wagner Group contributions to counterinsurgency operations, which were reportedly conducted in a brutal manner without regard to human rights (Giustozzi et al., 2025: 21). Amidst worsening diplomatic tensions and accusations of French interference, the junta expelled the French forces in 2022. At the same time, its frustrations with MINUSMA intensified because of the perceived ineffectiveness of the mission in pursuing the junta's security objectives as well as with human rights reporting by the mission, which frequently implicated Malian security forces and their partners. With the Wagner Group in place, the junta no longer believed that it needed MINUSMA. The tensions between MINUSMA and the Malian authorities culminated on 16 June 2023 when the Malian foreign minister, addressing the Security Council, declared MINUSMA to be "part of the problem" and called for the immediate withdrawal of the mission (United Nations Security Council 2023). The mandate of the mission was therefore terminated on 30 June 2023. Later that year, the Wagner Group supported the recapture of Kidal in northern Mali a decade after the city fell to separatists, which appeared to justify the decision of the junta to change partners.

Central African Republic

On the surface, CAR presents a very similar case to Mali, but with a different outcome. MINUSCA was established in 2014 as the successor to an earlier ECCAS mission to stabilise the country following the 2013 coup d'état and was also initially deployed alongside a French counter-terrorism force. As in Mali, the Wagner Group is also active in CAR, playing "coup-

proofing" roles such as training armed forces personnel and the Presidential Guard, performing targeted security operations against rebel militias, securing mining operations, and protecting senior government officials (Amoah 2023: 142). The Wagner Group deployed to CAR in 2018 in large part to fill the security vacuum left by the departure of the French forces in 2016 following allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse of children by French troops. Its posture changed in late 2020 to focus more on combat operations, and—as in Mali—it brought a particularly brutal approach to counterinsurgency. Despite its human rights abuses, the Wagner Group is seen as effective by national authorities, and its contributions to the extension of state authority have also helped legitimise the host government (Giustozzi et al., 2025: 23–25)

The CAR authorities, however, have not signalled a desire for the departure of MINUSCA. This may be because the UN mission and the Wagner Group—along with Rwandan troops deployed to safeguard the 2020 general elections—are seen by the government as complementary, rather than being in competition. The security challenges in the CAR are seen as being too great to be able to be fully met by any of the government's external partners (Amoah 2023). Although MINUSCA initially struggled to curb the activities of armed groups and protect civilians, including in high-profile failures in Bria and Kaga Bandoro in late 2016, it played an important role in protecting the capital, Bangui, and its deployment of quick reaction forces beginning in 2017 helped improve the ability of the mission to reduce violence against civilians (Silva 2024). For the time being, MINUSCA remains in place, but the fact that its' contributions are primarily viewed in security terms means that its continued presence rests in large part on whether mission is seen by the host government as an effective tool for bolstering state authority.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

In the DRC, the Force Intervention Brigade was created in 2013 as a direct response to the failure of MONUSCO to prevent the November 2012 occupation of Goma by the Rwanda-backed M23 armed group. The Brigade was deployed relatively quickly, with its headquarters established in April and full deployment achieved by October. Its operations against the M23 were a resounding success, prompting the group to declare the end to its rebellion in November 2013. The effectiveness of the Brigade, however, evaporated after the defeat of the M23, in large part due to the fact that it was originally a SADC initiative aimed at addressing Rwandan interference in the eastern DRC and therefore not as interested in engaging other armed groups such as the anti-Rwanda FDLR or the anti-Uganda ADF armed groups (Tull 2018).

M23 re-emerged as a threat in 2021. MONUSCO was unable to repel an M23 offensive in eastern DRC that began in March 2022. As a result, the DRC invited the deployment of an East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) in November 2022 with a mandate to jointly plan and conduct operations with the Congolese armed forces to defeat the armed groups operating in the eastern DRC. However, the EACRF was hamstrung by the different interests of its contributing countries and financial challenges (Muhire 2024). The ineffectiveness of the EACRF prompted the Congolese government to approach SADC in 2023 to deploy another force to replace the EACRF. Frustrations with the inability of MONUSCO to effectively confront the M23 also prompted the DRC to call for the expedited withdrawal of the mission beginning in late 2023 (United Nations 2023). However, the SADC Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC), which replaced EACRF in December 2023, also failed to conduct major military counterinsurgency operations (Williams 2024: 20). Given the struggles faced by both the EACRF and SAMIDRC, the government of the DRC paused the MONUSCO withdrawal and informed the Security Council in 2024 that it supported a more flexible and gradual approach to the withdrawal of the mission.

Conclusion

It is ironic that decisions taken by the UN in the past decade to try to better respond to demand have only served to exacerbate the crisis of confidence in peacekeeping operations. The militarisation of peacekeeping operations responded to the desire of the Security Council for a more muscular approach to protection of civilians. And the desire for the UN to "stay in the game" prompted a misguided pivot to support non-UN forces deployed by regional organisations and ad hoc coalitions instead of engaging in a reflection on how to improve its approach to peacekeeping operations. In doing so, the UN is not only squandering its unique role under international law for the maintenance of peace and security but is diminishing its own relevance by relegating itself to a supporting role as a service provider while promoting the militarised interventions that are unlikely to resolve conflict, but may instead enable authoritarian tendencies in host governments.

No other actor has the same responsibility or legitimacy as the UN or potential to act as an objective, impartial mediator in a dispute. UN peacekeeping operations must return to focusing on promoting and facilitating credible political processes for the resolution of violent conflict.

UN peacekeeping operations are worth salvaging given their track record of reducing violence and help countries in sustaining peace. No other actor has the same responsibility or legitimacy as the UN or potential to act as an objective, impartial mediator in a dispute. UN peacekeeping operations must return to focusing on promoting and facilitating credible political processes for the resolution of violent conflict. The Secretariat and member states must recognize that the principles of peacekeeping are not arbitrary limitations on the role of UN peace operations, but are instead the necessary but not sufficient conditions for the success of UN peacekeeping operations in this fundamental political role.

However, the retrenchment of peacekeeping operations is likely to continue, at least in the short term. The adoption of Security Council resolution 2719 in December 2023, which created a framework through which African Union-led missions could receive UN funding, has further reduced the demand for UN peacekeeping. And the disdain of the Trump administration for the tenets of liberal internationalism and its championing of military responses to security challenges, as seen in its championing of a new Gang Suppression Force in Haiti and its military strikes on alleged drug traffickers, create a hostile environment for UN political and peacebuilding initiatives. But the political and technical challenges to operationalizing the 2719 framework and the fact that alternatives to UN peace operations often prove to be less effective may set the stage for a future return to peacekeeping, especially after the Trump administration.

Despite recent challenges, there remains broad support amongst the wider UN membership for peacekeeping operations. The Pact for the Future adopted by the General Assembly in September 2024, called for a "review of the future of all forms of United Nations peace operations" and to provide recommendations "on how the United Nations toolbox can be adapted to meet evolving needs, to allow for more agile, tailored responses to existing, emerging and future challenges" (Resolution 79/1. Pact for the Future 2024). As part of this review, the Secretariat needs to reflect on how peacekeeping operations, in attempting to pursue the laudable goal of more robustly protecting civilians from physical violence, made themselves susceptible to instrumentalized by host governments into tools of regime preservation. At a time in which intensified geopolitical contestation is driving increased insecurity, member states and the Secretariat should not squander this opportunity to ensure that the next generation of peacekeeping operations can avoid the stabilisation trap and that the UN peace and security toolkit can be adapted to help resolve and prevent the relapse of violent conflict.

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Peace process lite: when global fragmentation meets conflict fragmentation

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Abstract

The parallel phenomena of global fragmentation of peacemaking and conflict fragmentation in civil wars are fundamentally restructuring peace processes. Drawing on the example of Myanmar, we argue that such changes exacerbate collective action problems for conflict actors and external third parties, leading to the emergence of pragmatic and reductionist forms of conflict resolution that we term 'peace process lite'. Peace process lite is marked by four key features: 1) the primacy of stabilisation through ceasefires and local peace agreements rather than comprehensive peace plans; 2) a focus on immediate 'wins' such as humanitarian assistance rather than long-term conflict termination; 3) short-term and ad hoc institutional arrangements to bring actors into talks; and 4) transactional mediation relationships conditioned by the economic and security interests of regional powers. Peace process lite is reductionist in that it rearticulates liberal visions and practices of peacemaking in a minimalistic form, bringing both opportunities and risks.

Introduction

The parallel phenomena of the global fragmentation of peacemaking and conflict fragmentation in civil wars – as witnessed in Myanmar, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen – are fundamentally restructuring how peace processes are understood and delivered. Shifts in the global balance of power have accelerated a new age of global fragmentation marked by deep geopolitical competition, 'thin' multilateralism, competitive bilateralism, the contestation of established global norms, and weakened multilateral frameworks (Carothers & Samet-Marram 2015; Duncombe & Dunne 2018; Hurrell 2018). These shifts have implications for contemporary peacemaking in conflict-affected contexts where multilateral forums such as the United Nations (UN) are increasingly struggling to maintain primacy and legitimacy (Iji 2017).

Meanwhile, the engagement of an increasing number of states and multilateral organisations in conflict management – including notable non-Western states such as Qatar, Turkey, China, and Kenya – has brought distinct new norms and practices and elicited multiple mediation processes that are crowding the 'marketplace' of peacemaking (Adhikari 2023; Beaujouan 2024; Peter & Rice 2022). While the rising diversification of peacemakers has energised some peacemaking initiatives (Lanz & Lustenberger 2024), it has also made peacemaking more fragmented, competitive and transactional (Hellmüller & Salaymeh 2025), with conflict parties navigating the competing forums and interests of different external actors (Adhikari & Hodge 2024).

Such global fragmentation also contends with new levels of domestic conflict fragmentation marked by the increased splintering of armed actors, 'more active involvement of geopolitical conflict underwriters, and more fluid conflict landscapes' within and across borders (Bell & Wise 2022: 564). Conflict fragmentation interacts with global fragmentation and influences the nature of peace processes in two distinct ways. First, with an increased number of conflict actors comes a greater number of distinct agendas and political motives, making the task of successfully negotiating the end of violence by all parties more challenging. This is evident in complex conflicts globally: comprehensive peace agreements have become rarer (Badanjak et. al, 2025), replaced by localised peace processes that limit themselves to addressing specific issues, geographies, and actors within the wider conflict, reducing the primacy of

the national in peacemaking (Bell, Pospisil & Wise 2021). Second, in fragmented conflicts with multiple parties or sides, different conflict actors are likely to prefer the involvement of different third parties, due to factors such as pre-existing social or cross-border relationships with certain external states, views on the partiality of third parties, or the leverage that different mediators have in arming and logistical support (Adhikari et al. 2025).

...unlike historic comprehensive peace processes which sought to undertake the deeper transformation project of redesigning the state – by committing in peace agreements to democracy, rule of law, and inclusive state structures – contemporary peace processes are largely focused on containing physical violence and limiting civilian harms.

While there has been widespread discussion of the changing landscape of peacemaking and the impacts of conflict fragmentation, what remains underexplored is a robust appraisal of what constitutes, and what the objectives are, of contemporary peace processes. In this paper, we introduce the idea of 'peace process lite', building on the scholarship on illiberal peace, authoritarian peace, and limited stabilisation (Lei 2011; Richmond 2025; Smith 2014), to highlight not only how non-Western states shape peace processes but the type of peace processes their engagement births. We use 'liteness' to describe contemporary peace processes in two ways. First, it is lite in temporal terms: relative to peace agreements of the 1990s that set out longer timeframes and envisioned a clear pathway from ceasefires to more substantive political negotiations, contemporary peace processes are limited to short-term or limited ceasefires that are disconnected from future, more explicitly political processes. Second, it is lite in ambition: unlike historic comprehensive peace processes which sought to undertake the deeper transformation project of redesigning the state – by committing in peace agreements to democracy, rule of law, and inclusive state structures – contemporary peace processes are largely focused on containing physical violence and limiting civilian harms.

We draw on empirical evidence from contemporary dialogues in Myanmar as a representative case of both multi-mediation by diverse regional actors and highly fragmented, violent armed conflict. Whilst peace process lite is often contextually defined, the case of Myanmar highlights phenomena found in other contemporary conflicts, and supports analogous exploration of how peace process lite has functioned in Libya, Sudan, Syria (before the fall of Assad in December 2024), and Yemen. We demonstrate how peace process lite operates in practice, showing how it opens up opportunities such as localised violence reduction, maintaining dialogue even if a comprehensive settlement seems unlikely, and temporary humanitarian access, but also risks stalling discussion of core conflict issues, increasing transactionalism, and incoherent or counterproductive competition among interested third parties.

Global fragmentation and contemporary dialogues in Myanmar

Five years since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, violence and displacement are rising, with at least 25 different groups controlling significant portions of territory, and alliances frequently shifting (ACLED 2024). While Myanmar has grappled with the twin crises of authoritarianism and civil war since the early days of its independence, the scale and intensity of the conflicts have multiplied since 2021. Multiple ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) have fought for decades against their exclusion at the hand of the Bamar Buddhist majority across the country's multiple borderlands; their resistance movements have intensified in many areas since the coup. Meanwhile, the coup has also led to heavy fighting in central Myanmar, home to the Bamar majority ethnic group and an area which historically has not witnessed violence; multiple People's Defence Forces (PDFs) have emerged in this region to fight the Myanmar military (Loong 2022). Nationally, an alliance of democratic opposition to the coup formed

the National Unity Government (NUG) as a parallel government, bringing together additional representation from EAOs, civil society, and ethnic and women leaders and challenging the Myanmar military's claim to power. A coalition of multiple groups against the Myanmar military has also engaged in dialogue to discuss the future institutional shape of the country as well as military coordination among them, forming groups such as KC3[1]. Dialogue between the Myanmar military and the wider opposition, however, remains a contested option due to a lack of trust and peace-process fatigue from previous failed dialogue processes, which is perceived to have only emboldened the military further (Adhikari & Hodge 2024).

Such conflict fragmentation within Myanmar intertwines with simultaneous global fragmentation, as evidenced by the conspicuous absence of robust internationally-supported peacemaking initiatives. This absence has fostered multiple discreet peace processes largely convened by regional actors – a mosaic of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, some national level and others subnational, often including different constellations of conflict actors and focused on different thematic priorities. However, these have yet to crystallise into an agreement or forum that succeeds in bringing all key parties to the table. Instead, the rising peacemaking ambitions of various states with different practices, approaches to international norms, and motivations have brought forward diverse models of mediation and dialogue. The mainstreaming of violence by both the Myanmar military's State Administrative Council (SAC)[2] and the opposition points to the failure of such peacemaking initiatives, which have left a mixed legacy of continued repression by the Myanmar military, fragile ceasefires, and some subnational 'islands of agreement' – 'temporary and issue-specific conflict management agreements when a comprehensive peace process and deal are out of sight' (Wittke 2023: 6).

Post-coup, the dominance of regional mediation is even more prominent in peacemaking, with a conspicuous absence of Western states who have been occupied with conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, as well as a reduced presence of the UN.

In Myanmar, there is a visible difference in mediation practice between regional and non-regional actors. Myanmar demonstrates a regionalisation of international security due to: the absence of robust, coherent global engagement in conflict management; the rise of regional powers who seek greater power and influence in managing regional affairs; the inability of multilateral institutions to shoulder the entire burden of Myanmar's complex conflicts; and the prevalence of transborder economic linkages that have made historically regional dynamics more salient (Alagappa 1995). Throughout the 1990s, as authoritarianism and repression in Myanmar triggered a raft of Western sanctions, making it difficult for Myanmar to engage globally, economic and diplomatic engagement by Asian neighbours facilitated greater regional connectivity (Taylor 1998). Post-coup, the dominance of regional mediation is even more prominent in peacemaking, with a conspicuous absence of Western states who have been occupied with conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, as well as a reduced presence of the UN. Instead, discreet and disaggregated dialogue processes have emerged in Myanmar, brokered by different international third parties, including: regional organisations such the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); multilateral bodies such as the UN; and regional states such as India, China, Japan, and Thailand.

The shape of these disaggregated dialogue processes results from the third parties' varied objectives and motivations, with regional peacemaking initiatives visibly tied to the geostrategic and economic interests of the intervening states. Multilateral regional engagement in Myanmar by ASEAN, however, is limited. Unlike the African Union (AU), in which the African Peace and Security Architecture mandates certain peace and security roles for AU-recognised Regional Economic Communities (Coe & Nash 2020), non-interference is considered the core norm

1 K3C includes four of Myanmar's oldest ethnic armed organisations: the Kachin Independence Organisation, Karenni National Progressive Party, Karen National Union, and Chin National Front.

2 In July 2025 the SAC was effectively rebranded as the National Security and Peace Commission (NSPC). For consistency we use the term SAC throughout to refer to the leadership of the Myanmar military.

underpinning ASEAN regionalism (Acharya 2013). While seen as key to minimising interstate conflicts in the region, the principle of non-interference has paradoxically prevented ASEAN from effectively intervening in intra-state conflicts that are considered to be domestic issues of member states (Thompson & Chong 2020).

Despite ASEAN's normative principle of non-interference, its most prominent and comprehensive form of mediation in Myanmar has been the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) framework, focused on five priorities: the cessation of violence; dialogue among all parties concerned; the appointment of an ASEAN Special Envoy to facilitate dialogue; humanitarian assistance by ASEAN; and an ASEAN visit in Myanmar to meet all relevant parties (Caballero-Anthony 2022). Many Western states have supported the principle of 'letting ASEAN lead' on the resolution of the Myanmar crisis (Alexandra & Adhikari 2023). With an annually rotating ASEAN chairmanship, the 5PC has been steered by Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, and Malaysia, and the interests and ambition of these individual chairs has influenced its effectiveness. In the initial post-coup period, under the chairmanship of Brunei and Cambodia, dialogue attempts were focused on two primary actors, the SAC and NUG; but under the Indonesian and ongoing Malaysian chairmanship of ASEAN, talks have been held with multiple stakeholders to foster de-escalation of violence and dialogue.[3] By ASEAN's own admission, however, there has been a lack of substantial progress in implementing the 5PC (Bandial 17 October 2021): while the SAC has committed to a cessation of hostilities, it has continued to launch airstrikes throughout Myanmar (Rainsy 2022). Additionally, the delivery of humanitarian assistance to EAO- and NUG-controlled regions has been obstructed by the SAC in multiple occasions (Caballero-Anthony 2022), and the SAC has denied requests by the ASEAN Special Envoy to meet the National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi (Radio Free Asia 2022).

With the 5PC severely stalled and domestically-led comprehensive peace deals seemingly distant, regional actors – both within and outside of ASEAN – have started multiple overlapping initiatives focused primarily on protecting their own security and economic interests. These initiatives have been disaggregated across scales (focused on subnational or distinct territories), actors (focused on distinct constellations of conflict actors that do not include all), and themes (focused on specific issues of ceasefires or humanitarianism, rather than a comprehensive solution). As a comprehensive national-level settlement is unlikely to emerge in the near future, third parties may have greater incentives to selectively choose which armed groups to engage with, which discrete thematic aspects of the conflict to try to address, and which distinct subnational disputes to seek to resolve based on their core geostrategic and economic interests (Parlar Dal 2018; Sun 2017).

Regional hegemon China has engaged in subnational peacemaking with EAOs that focuses on cessation of violence, commitment to cross-border stability, and protection of Chinese interests. While some of these processes have led to final agreements, others have not. Between the coup and March 2024, China engaged in at least sixteen rounds of formal negotiations, notably with EAOs based in the Northern Myanmar-China borderlands.[4] However, China has also pledged support for the ASEAN's 5PC framework and was a formal observer to the multilateral 2011–2020 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) dialogue process (Roy 2020).

3 Interview with a Myanmar interlocutor engaging with ASEAN, Chiang Mai, February 2025.
4 Interview with EAO representative who attended one round of the formal negotiations, Bangkok, March 19, 2024.

Similarly, Japan has invested both in reviving the NCA process and a subnational ceasefire initiative in Rakhine state. In 2022, Japan's Special Envoy for National Reconciliation in Myanmar met representatives of the EAOs who had earlier signed the NCA (The Irrawaddy 2022). In Rakhine, Japan's Special Envoy facilitated an informal ceasefire in 2020 between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military. Focused at the subnational level and on the cessation of violence, this fragile ceasefire lasted intermittently until October 2023 but lacked broader linkages to the wider conflict in Myanmar or to other priority issues for the AA such as federalism and self-governance (Adhikari et al. 2025). Despite its limited scope, this ceasefire demonstrated the potential of islands of agreement (Wittke 2023) to reduce violence in subnational localities, with a significant drop-off in violence in Rakhine (IISS 2024).

India and Thailand, in turn, have pursued their own bilateral processes, aimed at garnering stability and enabling delivery of humanitarian assistance. Both ASEAN Regional Forum members have engaged with the Myanmar military and started Track 1.5 forums.[5] Thailand has held a number of informal meetings among countries affected by the Myanmar crisis, including at least three at the ministerial level, with the objective of finding a way to resolve the crisis peacefully (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand 2023). At least one such recent meeting included representation from the SAC (Reuters 2024). In 2024, India convened workshops on constitutionalism and federalism which brought together EAOs from the India-Myanmar borderlands, including, the NUG and ethnic- minority rebels from the states of Chin, Rakhine, and Kachin, along with another session for SAC representatives (Lone & Ghoshal 23 September 2024).

The UN has also sought to meet all 'concerned parties', with dialogue focused on instituting an Inclusive Humanitarian Forum (IHF), to increase the operational space for delivery of humanitarian aid (Heyzer 16 March 2023). At the multilateral level, the UN's focus has been on condemning the use of force by the Myanmar military, calling for an end to the flow of arms into the country, urging restraint, seeking release of prisoners, and de-escalating tensions as per the UN General Assembly Resolution 75/287 in June 2021 and UN Security Council Resolution 2669 in December 2022 (Nichols 22 December 2022). In terms of dialogue, the current UN Special Envoy has not been given access to the imprisoned NLD leader, only meeting the SAC leader during their visits to Myanmar. Prior to the March 2025 earthquake, Thailand and India were not allowing large-scale deployment of aid via their neighbouring borders to Myanmar (Neelakantan 30 July 2022), further constraining the UN's cross-border engagement.

The diverse peacemaking initiatives at play in Myanmar point to a fundamental reset of the imagination, practices, and objectives of contemporary peace processes. The sheer number and variety of peacemaking attempts demonstrate a complicated crowding of the marketplace of peacemaking, in which domestic parties need to engage with multiple 'masters'. Further, with the UN adopting a marginal role while struggling to maintain its primacy and legitimacy and ASEAN institutionally constrained by the principle of non-interference and sovereignty, and differences among its member states, there is a notable absence of an international entity able to broker, connect, and cohere these multiple and overlapping discrete dialogue processes. The limited capacity of both ASEAN and the UN, despite their interest, has also encouraged individual states in the region to simultaneously convene peacemaking initiatives dictated by their own security and economic interests, without solely relying on regional initiatives. Such disaggregation of initiatives makes their incremental development into a comprehensive, cohesive process unlikely.

5 We refer here to Track 1.5 as mediation activities in which 'unofficial intervenors work [sic] with official representatives of the conflict parties' (Nan, Druckman, El Horr 2009).

In Myanmar, conflict actors differ in terms of which peacemaking forums they are willing to participate in and which external parties they are prepared to engage with. Northern EAOs such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) have formal and informal socio-economic connections to China and have received significant arms from China; in turn, they have been more responsive to China-facilitated forums (Ong 16 June 2021). In March 2023, the powerful Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee, which represents these and other EAOs, issued a statement welcoming mediation by China (Michaels 7 August 2023). The UWSA lobbied against an internationalisation of the peace process and the involvement of the US, UK, EU, or Japan during the NCA process (Institute for Security and Development Policy 2015). Similarly, in mediations in Rakhine in 2020, the Myanmar military preferred Japan as the intermediary over China, given its discontent with China for failing to prevent arms supplies to EAOs in the Northern borderlands (International Crisis Group 2020). Some EAOs such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Karen National Union (KNU) are well-versed in human rights and democracy discourses and are often more comfortable engaging with Western states, with whom they have historic ties (Ong 16 June 2021). This was evident during the NCA process when the KNU expressed a preference for including Western actors like the EU and Norway as international witnesses (Institute for Security and Development Policy 2015).

In Myanmar and beyond, identifying a single mediator acceptable to all conflict parties is a significant challenge in the context of conflict fragmentation, given the diversity of relationships between different actors, the differences in views about the impartiality of specific external parties, and the range of influence exerted by various external parties over different domestic actors (Adhikari et al. 2025).

Peace process lite

Overall, as more conflict actors concurrently engage in contemporary conflicts, there are often a multitude of distinct preferences that need to cohere into a political settlement, which makes reaching comprehensive agreements more challenging. With a global order that is shifting from a world of hegemonic dominance to multi-order spheres of influence, international peacemaking initiatives are now increasingly investing in what are seen as more doable aspects of peacemaking in line with their strategic priorities (Adhikari et al. 2025). The scaling back of peacebuilding ambition by Western states and multilateral organisations, and their turn to more pragmatic peacebuilding (De Coning 2018; Pospisil 2019) can be attributed to more comprehensive processes seemingly being viewed as 'undoable' in contemporary conflicts, along with other domestic factors, such as growing populism in the West, which have reduced the penchant for liberal internationalism (Galston 2018). The resultant global fragmentation sees competing international motivations and interests underpinning the settlements that are being made today, leading to a more complex ecosystem for conflict actors to navigate – not only seeking agreement amongst themselves but also with the multiple, and diverse, external actors that seek to provide various forms of dialogue support. Cumulatively, the dual processes of global order fragmentation and domestic conflict fragmentation have made the collective action problem posed by conflict resolution more difficult to resolve. Consequently, contemporary peace processes have objectives that are less ambitious, more parochial, and limited in their focus, with settlements designed as a pragmatic response to the achievement of the narrow, often short- term, goals that are shared by the multiple actors involved.

Cumulatively, the dual processes of global order fragmentation and domestic conflict fragmentation have made the collective action problem posed by conflict resolution more difficult to resolve.

Closer analysis of dual global fragmentation and conflict fragmentation reveals four key features of contemporary peacemaking, which we term as 'peace process lite': 1) the primacy of stabilisation through ceasefires and local peace agreements rather than comprehensive peace plans; 2) a focus on immediate 'wins' such as humanitarian assistance rather than long-term stability and conflict termination; 3) short-term and ad-hoc institutional arrangements to bring actors into talks; and 4) transactional mediation relationships shaped by the economic and security interests of regional powers.

1. The primacy of stabilisation through ceasefires and local peace agreements rather than comprehensive peace plans

The objectives of the processes started in Myanmar since the 2021 coup have yet to go beyond ceasefires and localised peace settlements, even though such ceasefires have consistently failed to lead to political talks or concessions (Mon 2025). A comprehensive national-level peace deal is a distant prospect, with many EAOs and local PDFs publicly opposing the Myanmar military's inclusion in any form of dialogue to end the conflict, at least in the immediate period. Subsequently, international intervenors have pragmatically adopted a minimalist approach to peacemaking, aiming for stability rather than the grand ambition of inclusive comprehensive agreements prevalent in the 1990s and 2000s. Of all the contemporary peacemaking efforts, the ASEAN-led process is the most comprehensive in terms of its stated goals set out in the 5PC (ASEAN Secretariat 2021). However, even the 5PC neglects to specify what ASEAN's ambition of a 'constructive dialogue' to 'seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people' really means, as a 'peaceful solution' could involve different objectives depending on the perspective of the viewer, ranging from stabilisation and democratisation to transformative change in Myanmar.

Similarly, Japanese mediation in Rakhine began as a quest for stability after fighting between the AA and the Myanmar military disrupted the region, following the cancellation of voting for the 2020 elections due to security threats (International Crisis Group 2020). Likewise, despite their frequency, China-brokered peace talks have lacked ambitions beyond stability and the cessation of violence. As official Chinese sources acknowledge, the pattern of Chinese engagement has been to prevent spillover in the form of refugee flows, civilian casualties, or obstruction to cross-border trade from Myanmar (Xinhua 2016). Indeed, a temporary ceasefire in January 2024, facilitated by China between the junta and the Three Brotherhood Alliance in Shan State, enabled cross-border trade to resume following a four-month hiatus (Yumlembam 21 May 2024). China continued to pursue stabilisation in the northern borderlands throughout 2025, by brokering further ceasefire agreements between the Myanmar military and EAOs in Shan State (Romaniuk, Rejwan & Csicsmann 2025).

There are some benefits to limiting settlement objectives to the immediate cessation of violence. Longitudinal data analysis from conflict data and mapping produced by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) shows that in the months leading up to the first ceasefire between the AA and SAC, violence in Rakhine State was relatively high compared to Myanmar as a whole, but this situation reversed once the ceasefire regime was in place (IISS 2024). Aside from a flare-up of violence during a brief breakdown of the ceasefire in November 2022, this territory enjoyed relative stability in comparison to the rest of post-coup Myanmar until October 2023. Despite the emergence of local PDFs, conflict events in Rakhine remained consistently low in the three months following the coup, with only 13 attacks identified, compared to Myanmar's overall average of 151 attacks per state over the same period (ibid.) However, the fact that the ceasefire eventually failed and has had to be continually renegotiated reveals the fragility and limitations of agreements that centre solely

on local ceasefires without incorporating broader issues. Similar fragility is evident in the case of the Haigen Agreement, signed between the Myanmar military and the Three Brotherhood Alliance in January 2024, which collapsed within a year (Mon 2025). While such ceasefires can bring immediate stability to a specific locality, they are temporary and require continual renegotiation.

2. A focus on immediate 'wins' such as humanitarian assistance rather than long-term stability and conflict termination

Post-coup processes in Myanmar, including those led by the UN and ASEAN and in Rakhine, have all focused on immediate 'wins' such as humanitarian assistance rather than addressing the underlying causes of the conflict, revealing a scaling down of peace ambitions. Negotiated humanitarian access, while immediately impactful, can be detached from the broader political dimensions of a conflict. In Asia, where there are significant capacities and experience in delivering post-disaster humanitarian relief, humanitarian assistance is often accepted as an apolitical, uncontested arena in which external states can legitimately intervene. When the 2020 Japanese-mediated ceasefire in Rakhine broke down in November 2022, a further round of mediation led to what Japan's Special Envoy announced as 'not a military or political agreement, but rather a humanitarian ceasefire, and [it] is very significant because local residents will directly benefit from the fruits of peace' (The Nippon Foundation 2022). Similarly, as Myanmar was reeling from both Covid-19 and the 2021 coup, China offered the SAC and multiple EAOs in Northern Myanmar vaccines, medical workers, and construction materials for quarantine centres, which offset limited aid from Western states and multilateral bodies. Likewise, one of the first things that ASEAN sought to focus on within the 5PC framework was provision of vaccines and humanitarian assistance through a delivery arrangement framework (Adelina 2022). This reflects a broader pattern in which humanitarian spaces are increasingly fragmented and localised and must be continually renegotiated, either as part of subnational or local truces and peace or cooperation agreements or through ad hoc bargaining between humanitarians and armed actors (Kool, Pospisil & van Voorst 2021).

Agreements that centre humanitarian access do have benefits, such as the temporary alleviation of human suffering at the local level, but they also carry risks. Regional bodies such as ASEAN have struggled to go beyond short-term ambitions or engage with the political consequences of humanitarian assistance. For ASEAN, the modest starting points of the 5PC are the least common denominators among its member states, balancing states like Indonesia that call for a more interventionist approach with others who would resist anything more intrusive (Alexandra & Adhikari 2023). Further, in the context of political fragmentation and competing claims of legitimacy, continued engagement between the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre) and the junta's representatives risks humanitarian assistance being co-opted by the Myanmar military and compromising ASEAN's stated commitment to impartiality (Adelina 2022). Such appraisals come at a time when the principle of apolitical humanitarianism – rooted in neutrality, impartiality, and independence – is increasingly questioned by scholars and practitioners (Elnakib et al. 2024).

3. Short-term and ad hoc institutional arrangements to bring actors into talks

The lack of long-term institutionalisation of many contemporary processes reveals an ad hoc approach that prioritises current needs rather than the sustainable architecture that would be necessary to support comprehensive negotiations over time. While some criticize the liberal peacebuilding project for over-institutionalising peacemaking architecture, resolving complex conflict often requires coherence, consistency and resourcing that institutional peacemaking

architecture can provide (De Coning 2007). Although effective architecture varies across contexts, co-ordination across multilateral peacemaking mechanisms can prevent conflict parties from forum shopping (Goryayev 2001), whilst consistency of third-party involvement can build conflict parties' trust and confidence in a process. In recent years, however, institutionalised multilateralism has faced a crisis of both faith and funding, as ad hoc and competitive mediation initiatives become more common, whilst UN peacemaking bodies, such as the Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs, struggle to retain primacy as a lead institutional mediator.

ASEAN lacks institutional capacity and prioritisation to facilitate peace processes, in contrast to other regional organisations such as the AU, which has developed an extensive institutional architecture to resolve conflicts within and between member states (Coe and Nash 2023). Despite undergoing a process of institutionalising 'regional crisis response architecture', mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) 'still operate on ASEAN's principle of consensus-based decision-making' (Michaels & Laksmana 2025), limiting the bloc's ability to reach and enforce collective decisions in response to complex conflicts in which both member and non-member states have strategic interests. As the key regional architecture for addressing conflicts in Myanmar, the 5PC-mandated mechanism of the ASEAN Chair's Special Envoy has a term which expires with that of the Chair, with Myanmar thus continuously treated as a 'burning ball' to be passed on to the next Chair (Alexandra & Adhikari 2023). Limits to the power of Chair's Special Envoy have also become clear when they have struggled to access all relevant parties within Myanmar (Haacke 2023), whilst the strength of the Chair's approach to Myanmar can be conditional on the political character of whichever member state holds the position (Root 2024). Beyond the regional bloc, rising Asian states such as India and China do not have formal peacebuilding policies and largely rely exclusively on their diplomatic corps and other state institutions to engage with conflicts in the region. Such an institutional vacuum impacts the scale, pace, and continuity of peacemaking initiatives. It also limits the potential for different mediating actors in Myanmar to co-ordinate or cooperate across distinct processes to respond to diverse actors' priorities.

4. Transactional mediation relationships conditioned by the economic and security interests of regional powers

A key feature of peacemaking initiatives since the 2021 coup is the primacy of regional actors that have clear economic and security interests in Myanmar. China, the most visible peacemaker in Myanmar, is explicit in linking the objectives of dialogue processes with its own economic priority to protect its investments in Myanmar, which are threatened by the scale of instability in the country. For example, an agreement facilitated by China between the Three Brotherhood Alliance and the SAC in 2024 states that 'all parties ensure that China's interests in Myanmar are not harmed' (Northern Alliance 2024, unofficial translation). China's engagement with a key EAO in Northern Myanmar, the MNDAA, has focused on addressing cross-border scams following the junta's failure to stop illegal telecom fraudsters and gambling operations along the border that have scammed thousands of Chinese nationals. In response, the EAO has extradited Chinese nationals operating illegally from territories it controls (Shan Herald 2024). Similar transactionalism is also evident in India's engagement with EAOs operating across the India-Myanmar borderland, which only began when resistance forces gained territorial control across the approximately 1,000-mile border (Yumlembam 2024).

Prior to that territorial gain, India had only engaged with the SAC. While more detached than China and India, Japan's motivation for engagement in Rakhine includes countering China's entrenched investment and supporting Japanese businesses to invest in the state (Strefford 2021). Beyond Myanmar, transactionalism can be seen in contexts such as Syria, Libya and Yemen, where interest-based, exclusive mediations focused on short-term deals have triumphed over long-term work towards conflict transformation (Hellmüller & Salaymeh 2025).

The overt transactionalism and reductionism of contemporary peace processes in Myanmar have also led to a greater domestic demand for peacemaking initiatives by Western actors. A recent survey of 1,203 citizens in Myanmar commissioned by PeaceRep suggests that people are most likely to entrust the United States (27.9%) and the UN (22.53%) as facilitators, with regional states such as China (10.6%), Thailand (3.24%), and India (0.9%) scoring the lowest. This reveals that, contrary to narratives of the decline and death of liberal peace, recipients of peace process lite in conflict-affected contexts such as Myanmar advocate for more liberal forms of peacemaking (Roy 2020). It also underlines how China's dominance in the wider political economy has allowed it to leverage its transnational economic relations and shape the peace process in ways that reflects its interests, which has often reduced the space for Western actors to step in (Kumbun 2019).

Conclusion

Peace process lite is reductionist in that it rearticulates liberal visions of peacemaking in its most minimalistic form and points to how the substance and objectives of peacemaking endeavours are becoming less institutionalised and more piecemeal, parochial, and transactional. It is the result of conflict and global fragmentation, and the accompanying disaggregation of peacemaking processes across actors, scales, and themes departs from the heyday of comprehensive peace settlements in the 1990s and 2000s. Positively, such lite peace processes have the potential to enable islands of agreement amid broader conflict contexts (Wittke 2023) and fill gaps in humanitarian efforts. Lite peace processes also have the ability to keep parties engaged in a variety of dialogue fora, maintaining opportunities for agreement during periods when comprehensive settlements appear unthinkable. Yet, it also comes with risks. The prioritisation of short-term, localised violence reduction and piecemeal issue-based agreements may amplify the difficulty of cohering multiple actors into a more comprehensive peace process and distract from the longer-term thinking that is needed for sustainable peace and inclusion. The multiplicity of overlapping concurrent processes, involving distinct constellations of domestic and external actors driven by varying norms and motivations, also offers conflict parties and the external states that seek to support them the opportunity to forum shop – picking and choosing when to engage with different processes, actors, or institutions, if at all. In Myanmar, the demands of competing regional and international powers have led domestic actors to construct different sets of advocacy messages to suit these different audiences, with some parties shying away from committing to certain dialogue platforms as doing so might contravene the interests of competing powers. Peace process lite, thus, gives name to an approach to peacemaking that has emerged as an alternative to multilaterally-driven comprehensive peace processes and is contextually defined, localised, regionalised, and adapted, presenting both opportunities and challenges.

For mediation practitioners and funders, peace process lite presents a key dilemma. While these processes may be more attractive than waiting for a comprehensive bargain that might never appear, the potential for unintended consequences is high. Any international support

to such processes will need to confront difficult questions of how to incrementally build lite processes amid constraints posed by conflict dynamics and the international context, map how such lite processes relate to other initiatives within the multi-mediation ecosystem, and take note of what risks investing in lite peace processes could bring.

Multilateral bodies such as the UN are also constrained in their ability to engage with such lite processes given the issues of co-ordination, cooperation, and collective action engendered by global fragmentation and the diverse priorities of international intervenors. Such competing interests and peacemaking initiatives raise questions of the UN's role in contemporary peacemaking. If peace process lite creates a need for mediation between mediators (Bell 2024), is this where the UN could play a more central role? The case of Myanmar demonstrates the emergence of a 'regionalised lottery' in which the regionalisation of conflict management can be uneven and drastically different based on the normative values and institutional capacities of regional organisations. Could greater UN involvement mitigate the emergence of piecemeal mediation in regions that are averse to intervention? In today's fragmented climate, the phenomenon of 'minilateral' peacemaking initiatives that complement multilateral mediation, such as the International Contact Group for Mindanao and the Troika for Sudan, is gaining renewed attention in policymaking, although such initiatives have a mixed record of efficacy (Whitfield 2025). As peace process lite highlights the tensions between norms that have underpinned peacebuilding as a policy framework, does the UN need to further shift towards engaging with minilateral mediation initiatives? It may be that the UN no longer holds enough sway to cohere parties that do not wish to engage, and its previous barometers of success and impact need to change.

Identifying the use of peace process lite in Myanmar does not suggest a blueprint for resolving these impasses: as lite processes are contextually defined, localised, regionalised, and adapted, so too must be any engagement with such processes in order to cohere competitive interests. However, characterizing peace process lite starts to help us understand the current nature of peace processes in an age of fragmentation and global disorder and devise policy responses that better fit the realities of contemporary conflict.

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The social foundations for peace: violence, peace, and (dis)order in Ukraine

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Abstract

While peace is often associated with stability, the process of peace building involves a range of conflicts. Using Ukraine as a powerful case study, we examine how violence, insecurity, resilience, and desire for peace intersect within state borders. The paper's main purpose is to raise awareness of the local political and social dynamics that will shape the implementation of any peace settlement following Russia's war against Ukraine – dynamics that adversaries may seek to exploit.

We challenge conventional assumptions about peace by focusing on the lived experiences of those directly affected by the war, in particular internally displaced women. We stress the diversity of Ukrainian agency in peacebuilding and seek to elevate voices often excluded from dominant narratives of Russia's war against Ukraine.

After every war
someone has to clean up.
Things won't
straighten themselves up, after all.
...
Photogenic it's not,
and takes years.
All the cameras have left
for another war.
from 'The End and the Beginning' (Szymborska 2001)

Introduction

Discussions for a peace settlement to Russia's war against Ukraine imply that peace and stability in international relations and domestic politics occurs just as Jack Plumb, a historian of 17th- and 18th-century England, imagined the arrival of political stability: 'quite quickly, as suddenly as water becomes ice' (Plumb 1969: 13). Our paper queries this assumption about a sudden, swift, and straightforward transition from war to peace. It conceptualises the transition from war to peace as a conflictual and often contradictory process. Any strategy towards peace between Russia and Ukraine must account for the fundamental risk posed by significant political and social instability in Ukraine. Ukrainian civil society actors in particular have drawn attention to the importance of creating a 'fair' and 'real' peace in the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine (Matviichuk 2025).

There is currently very little analysis of what this entails and very little detailed empirical information on what Ukrainians think this entails. Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we seek to highlight the importance of peacebuilding in Ukrainian society and the inherently conflictual nature of this process. Second, we discuss important, yet often neglected Ukrainian voices – internally displaced Ukrainians, most of them women – in terms of their expectations and hopes for the transition from war to peace.

Our analysis is based mainly on 70 in-depth interviews with internally displaced women conducted in August–September 2023 and July–August 2024.[1] These women represent a critical yet often overlooked voice in Ukraine's evolving debates about the meaning and shape of peace, particularly as their displacement is intimately connected to the course and nature of the war. Their experiences reflect the deep ruptures and unresolved tensions in post-war societies. Though they may not participate directly in combat, their lives are profoundly shaped by war and displacement: of the participants, 37 recounted direct experiences of violence in their hometowns or during evacuation; 30 had endured double displacement – first in 2014 and again in 2022; 22 had a close relative or partner currently serving in the Ukrainian armed forces; and 2 had survived captivity and torture.

Our study captures a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives, reflecting the diversity of participants' backgrounds, including former teachers, sales assistants, university professors, civil society activists, humanitarian workers, entrepreneurs, and homemakers. To contextualise and validate these qualitative insights, we also draw on relevant survey data including both male and female respondents, demonstrating that the views expressed by our interviewees are not isolated but reflect broader societal trends. In doing so, this research highlights how grassroots perspectives, particularly those of internally displaced women, challenge externally imposed and distorted narratives of how peace will be reached and what it will entail.

Among internally displaced people, women bear a disproportionate share of hardship, especially in conflict-affected settings.

Internally displaced women offer a particularly valuable case study for our analysis. Recent research has highlighted that experiences of displacement are closely intertwined with expectations of peace (Hujale 2023). Among internally displaced people, women bear a disproportionate share of hardship, especially in conflict-affected settings. As underscored by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), women and children make up the vast majority of civilians affected by armed conflict and are increasingly targeted by armed groups, and their experiences have profound consequences for achieving durable peace and reconciliation.

In Ukraine, internal displacement has disproportionately impacted women, who make up 60 per cent of all internally displaced people and 72 per cent of those receiving social protection. Many have assumed the role of sole caregivers, while male family members serve on the front lines (U4GenderEquality Reform Helpdesk 2023). Economic vulnerability is also more pronounced among women: according to a March 2023 survey by Info Sapiens, 50 per cent of internally displaced women in Ukraine reported job loss, compared to just 28 per cent of men (Volosevych 2023). These figures underscore the gendered dimensions of displacement and recovery.

While our paper does not focus explicitly on the gendered dimensions of peacebuilding, it is informed by scholarship that treats gender as an underlying structure shaping conflict and post-conflict realities (Hudson 2009; Pepper 2023:113). Our approach builds on and contributes to the literature that investigates the role of diverse social groups in peace processes (Ozcelik et al. 2021), offering new insights into how internally displaced populations, particularly women, understand, experience, and potentially reshape notions of peace.

Our findings have implications beyond our case study, as we draw attention to the fundamental mismatch between expectations, hopes, and aspirations of peace and the societal and political realities (Hedström/Olivius 2023a). We also underscore the importance of overcoming the 'fragmentation between fields' that characterises most research on post-war transformations

1 The interviews were conducted by Daryna Dvornichenko and ethics approval was obtained by the University of Oxford prior to data collection.

(Hedström & Olivius 2023b: 6); we build on research from a wide array of relevant research expertise pertaining to different geographical locales and disciplinary fields, from anthropology and sociology to history and heritage, including some insights from studies on women, peace, and security (Arimatsu & Chinkin 2024).

How do societies transition from war to peace?

Peace is widely understood as more than just the absence of violence or war; it is not merely 'symmetric to war' (Diehl 2016, 2). While war and peace may appear as opposites, they involve distinct experiences, expectations, and analytical approaches (Wegner 2002:XVIII–XIX). In this context, it is important to distinguish between negotiating and building peace. The former typically focuses on halting violence, whereas the latter addresses the deeper structural causes of conflict, such as poverty, inequality, injustice, and lack of opportunity.

Peacebuilding is a transformative process through which the norms of peace and civilian conflict management gradually replace reliance on violence. Over time, an expectation of violence gives way to an expectation of peace (Bonacker 2024, Brock 2024, 131-133, Brock 2002). Peacebuilding is an 'inherently conflictual process' that is characterised by a high degree of 'constant friction' (Björkdahl & Höglund 2013: 289 and 292). Indeed, what 'peace' entails is contested between different actors and the meaning of 'peace' is the subject of negotiations (Bonacker 2024: 112; Guarrieri et al. 2017: 2 and 8).

Though the liberal peacebuilding literature has assumed that peace can be created through social or political engineering, this has proven to be illusory (Paffenholz 2021:367 and 369, Berg 2020). We also know that transitions from war to peace have historically been longer-term processes rather than short events and that the end of war often cannot be clearly identified – it is relatively rare to end wars through negotiations and peace treaties (Wegner 2002:XXI; Herbert & Schildt 1998; Hoffmann et al. 2015).

War changes the fabric and structure of a society: it strengthens the position of the central state as it intervenes more directly and often more coercively in the lives of its citizens, while at the same time, society mobilises as part of the war effort. War also changes the nature of a country's economy and therefore the nature of its social and economic hierarchies, leading to a significantly higher degree of state intervention but also to strengthened informal networks, thus leading to 'mass informal practices' (Artiukh & Fedirko 2025: 59-60, 68; generally: Berdal & Zaum 2015: 36; Torjesen 2015: 85-86).

Given these changes, the period of transition from war to peace is a 'period of substantial, multidirectional societal changes that follow the end of war' and that have 'no set direction' (Hedström & Olivius 2023b: 6, following Klem 2018). 'Reconstruction' after wartime has therefore always been a misnomer, as war fundamentally changes pre-war politics and society: there is little there to reconstruct because society has changed.

In this paper, we explore these conceptual distinctions and tensions through the lens of Ukraine, using it as a case study to examine how peacebuilding, societal transformation, and the contested meanings of 'peace' unfold in the context of ongoing war and post-war transitions.

Actors and modalities of the transition from war to peace

Discussions for a peace settlement to end Russia's war against Ukraine have so far focused almost exclusively on diplomatic negotiations, the question of military peacekeeping afterwards (for example, European troop deployments (see Hedberg 2024; Fischer 2025), and historical models for a negotiated peace settlement (Heisbourg 2023).

A key factor influencing the prospects for any peace settlement between Russia and Ukraine is the interplay between domestic and international dynamics. Ukraine has been heavily reliant on economic and military support from the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom, and the United States (Arthiuk & Fedirko 2025). The willingness or reluctance of these international actors to continue their support directly influences the situation on the front line and, by extension, shapes the parameters of any potential agreement. As a result, Ukraine's domestic political agency is constrained by external factors it can attempt to influence but cannot fully control. This asymmetry risks positioning Ukraine more as an object than a subject in many international discussions for a potential peace settlement (Karjalainen 2024).

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This interaction between the domestic and international levels has implications for external actors vis-à-vis Ukraine. By aligning themselves with certain political actors over others, international partners become directly involved in Ukraine's internal political landscape (conceptually: Zaum 2017: 410). Given the scale of their political, economic, and military investments, it would not be in the interest of these actors to endorse a peace settlement that leaves Ukraine weakened and vulnerable to renewed Russian aggression. This reinforces their stake in the outcome and their influence over the process.

Shifting the focus from diplomacy to society: visions of peace among displaced Ukrainians

There is little evidence to suggest that current negotiations between Ukraine and Russia have meaningfully incorporated the visions or experiences of those most affected by the war. Yet, research in history and the social sciences consistently shows that peace is deeply tied to the lived experiences, hopes, and aspirations of diverse social actors (Weller 2025, cf. Edler et al. 2024).

Voices from Ukrainian society will become increasingly important. Peace negotiations alone have rarely resulted in the immediate arrival of peace, however defined (Nehring & Pharo 2008); thus, Ukraine's transition from war to peace will largely depend on reconciling the outcomes of high-level negotiations with the visions of peace held by those directly affected by the conflict. The extent to which these visions are reflected in the final settlement will shape its legitimacy and the prospects for building a sustainable peace. In this section, we examine how Ukrainians understand peace, and how these understandings should inform the design of a durable post-war settlement.

What kind of peace?

While a recent Gallup poll shows significant weakening of support in Ukrainian society for a position arguing for fighting towards victory and growing support for a negotiated settlement (Vigers 2025), the values and beliefs associated with such a settlement are an expression of moral beliefs that, as such, appear to have remained quite stable (Hrushetskyi 2025). Earlier opinion polls indicate that Ukrainians show an 'overwhelming' commitment to preserving the territorial and political integrity of their country, even at great cost (Dill et al., 2023:15). Displaced Ukrainians, primarily women, conceptualise 'peace' in ways that reaffirm, sharpen, and complicate that commitment. Their vision of peace is not defined simply by the cessation of hostilities but by the full restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, including the return of Crimea and Donetsk. Most respondents regard any concession of territory as a profound betrayal – both of justice and of those who continue to suffer under occupation.

One participant from Nova Kakhovka, now living in Zakarpattia, expressed clear frustration with international suggestions of compromise:

> I can't listen when foreign representatives suggest that our territories remain with the occupiers. No, only with the full return of the South and Crimea. I am ready to sacrifice more time and wait for the complete liberation of Ukraine's territories.

While displaced Ukrainians overwhelmingly aspire to the full liberation of all occupied regions, this aspiration is not necessarily tied to expectations of their immediate return. Many displaced individuals recognise that even if Ukraine regains full territorial control, the scale of destruction will make rebuilding a generational task. Barriers to return are not limited to damaged infrastructure but also include profound environmental risks, deep social fractures, and ongoing uncertainties about security.

Nonetheless, Ukrainians' commitment to complete territorial liberation remains fundamental. It is seen not merely as a symbolic or emotional goal but as a necessary condition to ensure long-term stability and prevent future cycles of violence. As explained by one participant, a twice-displaced woman originally from Donetsk who fled to Mariupol in 2014 and then to Kolomyia in 2022: if Ukraine does not regain its 1991 borders, 'this tumor will continue to pressure us. They [Russians] will simply regroup, take time to reformat, and in 5–10 years, everything will start again'.

This perspective reflects a broader sentiment shared by many Ukrainians, not just women, as evidenced by survey data showing that 96 per cent say Russia must withdraw from all occupied territories for peace to be achieved (Gonik & Ciaramella 2024). This overwhelming consensus underscores a widespread conviction that any form of incomplete territorial liberation would leave Ukraine vulnerable to future aggression. Building a sustainable peace, therefore, requires addressing what Roger MacGinty (2025: 2) terms 'anticipatory violence' – the individual or collective expectation that violence will return. These perceptions cast a long shadow over the prospective post-war period, shaping how Ukrainians envision the future and complicating efforts to establish lasting stability (Pepper 2023: 112).

While much of the Western media debates 'desirable' versus 'realistic' peace scenarios, for Ukrainians, especially those most affected by the war, the latter often represents a distortion of the very concept of peace (Lampert 2024), legitimising violence and paving the way for future aggression rather than preventing it. Understanding this perversion of 'peace' is crucial to grasping why Ukrainians so resolutely reject compromises that would legitimise ongoing occupation.

A fundamental tension, then, characterises Ukrainian attitudes towards peace: on the one hand, the desire for an end of the fighting and suffering; on the other, the hope for a peace settlement that fully satisfies Ukrainian demands that could mean the continuation of fighting until the hope has been fulfilled. Ultimately, this tension can be explained by the Ukrainians' desire to see that the sacrifices of war have been worth it (see e.g. Maidukov 2025). It is this fundamental constellation from which other questions spring.

Justice is a central demand among displaced Ukrainians. Firsthand testimonies from displaced individuals reveal the extreme scale and brutality of violations they have endured. In interviews with internally displaced women, many described directly experiencing or having witnessed acts of arbitrary body searches, forced nudity, gender-based violence, torture, and captivity. One respondent explained, without visible emotion: 'I was in captivity and tortured by the occupiers in the local detention centre'.

Such testimonies are not isolated; nearly every account documents serious crimes committed by Russian forces. Moreover, contrary to common assumptions that survivors avoid discussing their experiences, many participants were open and motivated by a clear desire for justice. As one woman stated, 'I want the world to know what horror is happening'.

These testimonies underscore a critical point: failure to address wartime atrocities risks perpetuating cycles of violence and resentment (Haider 2016). At the same time, approaches to addressing wartime atrocities currently face obstacles to the arrest and prosecution of those responsible for aggression against Ukraine and war crimes. In response, alternative mechanisms such as financial compensation have gained traction. In 2023, the Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine was established by the Council of Europe, detailing a wide range of eligible claims.

A total of 75 per cent of respondents in a nationwide opinion poll say that justice can only be achieved through the arrest and trial of those responsible for the aggression and war crimes, while 22 per cent say that justice might still be possible without prosecutions.

However, Ukrainian public opinion strongly favours legal accountability. A total of 75 per cent of respondents in a nationwide opinion poll say that justice can only be achieved through the arrest and trial of those responsible for the aggression and war crimes, while 22 per cent say that justice might still be possible without prosecutions. At the same time, a quarter of respondents identify financial compensation as a key priority (Rating 2024), which indicates that while compensation is a vital tool, it must complement – not replace – legal accountability.

There are different models for war crimes trials under discussion (Butchard 2024). The issue of reparations is directly related to this issue (Chassany & Foy 2025; historically: Fisch 1979). Irreconcilable differences on both issues have already been shown to be stumbling blocks for peace negotiations. It is likely that any implementation will be postponed till after a ceasefire. This will be a significant challenge for both domestic society and international politics: a pragmatic politics of the past by any Ukrainian government will likely lack legitimacy; international arrangements of a war crimes tribunal that do not fully satisfy Ukrainian needs will probably be met by Ukrainian unilateral action, for example through targeted killings or other covert operations. While the former approach is likely to destabilise domestic politics, the latter is likely to further destabilise the international system and could even undermine international support for Ukraine.

Building a credible, victim-centred justice process is therefore essential. It would not only address the immediate needs of those affected but also lay the foundation for long-term peace and prevent future violence.

This vision of peace – often labelled as maximalist – appears to diverge from the formal negotiation tracks and the positions of Ukraine's international partners. In official diplomatic discussions, a return to Ukraine's 1991 borders and the prosecution of those responsible for

aggression and war crimes are often seen as unrealistic, creating a perceived disconnect between the negotiation frameworks and public expectations. However, this divergence is not rooted in Ukrainians' ideological inflexibility but rather in a strategic concern shared by many Ukrainians: the prevention of future aggression.

Addressing this concern does not necessarily require fulfilling every demand of public opinion, such as full territorial restoration or immediate trials for war crimes. Instead, alternative security guarantees – such as NATO membership for Ukraine or the provisional application of NATO's Article 5 in the event of renewed aggression – could serve to reconcile public expectations with geopolitical realities.

The consequences of a peace settlement that fails to reflect these concerns could be profound. In this context, perceptions of social cohesion and public trust will emerge as critical variables in the peace negotiations and the following peacebuilding. In the remainder of this paper, we examine these dynamics more closely, exploring how they influence the prospects for long-term peacebuilding in Ukraine.

Peace and perceptions of social cohesion

While wartime societies are often marked by a high degree of political and social cohesion, the transition to peace can generate significant friction. The unity forged in conflict can quickly dissolve in the face of competing interests, divergent experiences, and unresolved grievances.

Building sustainable peace means creating inclusive spaces where all Ukrainians, regardless of background, language, or wartime roles, can engage, contribute, and feel recognised.

Despite the widespread perception internationally that normal political life in Ukraine came to a halt on 24 February 2022, with all attention shifting to the front line and military affairs, political debates and conflicts have persisted. The real risk lies in these political tensions evolving in ways that could undermine political authority. Productively addressing this challenge requires confronting sensitive and divisive issues. Building sustainable peace means creating inclusive spaces where all Ukrainians, regardless of background, language, or wartime roles, can engage, contribute, and feel recognised. As one respondent, displaced from Horlivka to Kyiv, explained:

> Now it's necessary to unite because we have soldiers who speak Russian, and they're fighting for our statehood. We need to unite, but not on the basis that everyone from the east must switch to the Ukrainian language. That's not unification; in essence, that's assimilation. It's important to show that language is not a border.

Divisions run deeper than language. Respondents described tensions between those on the front lines and those who avoided mobilisation, between those who fled Ukraine and those who remained, between those who donate to the Ukrainian armed forces and those who no longer do or never did, between internally displaced persons and their host communities. Such fractures are already visible: one participant now living in Kyiv noted that local residents rarely attend events at the Donetsk Hub, a cultural space established by displaced people from eastern Ukraine.

The question of how to address collaboration in the liberated territories is particularly urgent. Some collaborators, particularly former law enforcement officers, reportedly committed severe abuses against civilians. Respondents consistently emphasised the need for accountability measures. A displaced woman from Berdiansk, now in Kyiv, called for 'massive fines on collaborators so they feel that they are traitors'. Another respondent, now twice displaced and living in Dnipro, advocated revoking citizenship from those who switched sides.

Inclusivity must also extend to former prisoners of war returning from Russian captivity and veterans, whose integration into civilian life is fraught with challenges, not only due to their prolonged exposure to violence, but also because they represent the living embodiment of war. Their presence evokes strong symbolic and emotional responses, and their needs for medical, psychological, and social support are often complex (see Cohen 2001; Stegmann 2023).

Extensive reporting by the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine and the International Organization for Migration has brought sustained attention to the challenges facing Ukrainian veterans. Their findings highlight serious human rights concerns, including the unprecedented prevalence of conflict-related amputations, the often unseen psychological and social consequences of captivity among former prisoners of war, and entrenched cultural norms that deter veterans from accessing support services (UN OHCHR 2025). In addition, ongoing obstacles to veterans' social and economic reintegration have been emphasised (IOM, 2022; 2025). A report by the United Nations Population Fund published in March 2025, points to a significant rise in violence against women by returning soldiers. It warns that other political priorities and the status of soldiers as heroes have prevented the implementation of support and care for the victims of violence (UNFPA 2025). Addressing this issue will be a key political challenge for social reconstruction.

Additionally, as military violence subsides, new fault lines may emerge. Tensions between civil society actors and political elites are likely to intensify, and long-standing regional divides may resurface, influencing relations between the capital and other regions (Barrington & Herron 2004; Myshlovska 2020; Nizhnikau & Moshes 2020; Zarembo 2023; Zarembo & Martin 2023). These tensions will likely be compounded by increasing contestation over political authority, particularly that of President Zelenskyy and his administration. The recent debates around the independence of Ukraine's anti-corruption agencies offer a glimpse of what this may involve and the role that civil society actors can play in contesting authority (Miller 2025b). The subsequent widening of the investigation by the Ukrainian anti-corruption agency culminated in a number of high-profile arrests and led to the resignation of President Zelensky's chief of staff Andriy Yermak (Deprez 2025a). This episode highlights that the transition from a period where politics was dominated by the pragmatics of war time that followed previous patterns of state action (Méheut/Barker 2025) towards a post-war society has already begun. The appointment of Kyrylo Budanov to succeed Yermak signals the transition of Ukrainian politics and society towards one fundamentally shaped by war (Deprez/Miller 2026).

As the war's immediate urgency fades, political debates may shift towards perceived failures in military leadership and the handling of wartime governance (Trenkler 2025). Such tensions will be further compounded by potential conflicts between returning soldiers and a militarised civil society at home about how to interpret wartime experiences and, especially, about mistakes that have been made. These tensions are already visible in the growing debate about conscription (Deprez 2025).

In late November 2025, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the former Ukrainian commander in chief, offered one of the first Ukrainian political actors to open a debate around the relevance of this topic for a post-war transition, presumably with the aim of forming a political movement around this. While observing that 'war does not always end with victory of one side and the defeat of the other', he argued for an urgent focus on the importance of political reforms and a movement against corruption and criticised President Zelensky for preparing the country insufficiently for war (Zaluzhni 2025). More generally, such interventions are already beginning to take the form of a 'stab in the back' myth as international and domestic actors are looking to identify actors that

have betrayed Ukrainian interests (Bota/ Thumann 2025; Lucas 2025). We know from historical experience that such myths have destabilising effects in post-war societies (Barth 2003).

This is not only about physical or institutional demobilisation. The memorialisation of war and violence must also reflect the diverse and often painful experiences of those affected. These processes are rarely neutral. Competing interpretations of what the war and its future outcome will mean, who should be honoured, and what peace should look like can deepen existing divides. For some, the war is a story of heroic resistance; for others, it is marked by displacement or abandonment. Even the question of who counts as a fallen soldier is contested: civil society activists are challenging the official recognition of only front-line deaths as fallen soldiers (Hassel 2025).

Competing interpretations of what the war and its future outcome will mean, who should be honoured, and what peace should look like can deepen existing divides. For some, the war is a story of heroic resistance; for others, it is marked by displacement or abandonment.

These divergent interpretations, shaped by various wartime roles, risk crystallising into incompatible memories that hinder the emergence of a basis social consensus. Cultural demobilisation will therefore likely be highly contested, especially where national symbols, languages, or interpretations of key battles are concerned (cf. Pancheva et al. 2024; Macleod 2025). How Ukrainians choose to remember this war will shape not only the contours of collective memory but also the boundaries of belonging and the prospects for genuine, inclusive unity in the post-war era.

Heritage can play a key role in aiding this transition. Recent research on Ukraine has shown how efforts to preserve heritage locally are deeply embedded in local civil society networks and fulfil functions that go beyond care for material objects: just as the preservation of heritage is 'intertwined with humanitarian responses' by creating a social infrastructure of care in local communities in museums, parks, and galleries, heritage sites and organisations are uniquely placed to help with the work of 'social recovery' and 'collective grieving' (Vonnák & Jones 2025: 47, 72, 75).

There is growing evidence that Russia is exploiting internal tensions in Ukraine by recruiting teenagers as spies and saboteurs, often using financial incentives to do so. Orphans and internally displaced children are particularly vulnerable to such recruitment efforts. Since the spring of 2024, approximately 25 per cent of the 700 Ukrainian citizens arrested for collaboration have been under the age of 18 (Miller 2025a). As Ukraine transitions from war to peace, Russia is likely to continue to manipulate political and social fault lines. Preventing the fragmentation of wartime unity will require intentional efforts to foster inclusive dialogue, recognise the diversity of wartime experiences, and protect vulnerable groups from being instrumentalised in emerging post-war conflicts.

Peace and trust

Despite the challenges of a protracted war, public trust in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU) remains exceptionally high. This trust stems from a collective recognition that the army is exerting maximum effort under extremely difficult circumstances. Recent survey data confirm this sentiment, with trust in the army and satisfaction with its performance at an impressive six out of seven (Tamilina & Ma 2024).

The perception of the military as a symbol of bravery, determination, and national pride is also evident in interviews with internally displaced women. As one respondent, displaced from Kharkiv to Chernivtsi in 2022, explained:

> Our army has already been fighting this monster [Russia] for such a long time, that's already a victory. Ukraine has already won. It showed to the whole world how brave it is.

This view stresses that the military remains an embodiment of Ukraine's national identity and courage, even despite recent debates about its high degree of desertion and a lack of combat motivation (Koshiw 2024).

This high level of trust in the military extends beyond wartime efforts and shapes public perceptions of leadership and governance more broadly. A recent survey by the Razumkov Centre (2024) found that Ukrainians expect new political forces to emerge more from the military than from other sectors of society. However, the qualities Ukrainians value in future leaders remain diverse: only a small minority (9 per cent) prioritise military experience, while a larger share favour qualities such as a capacity for national healing (29 per cent), a firm anti-corruption stance (24 per cent), and economic competence (19 per cent) (Gonik & Ciaramella 2024).

Yet this trust in the ZSU stands in stark contrast to the public's perception of other state institutions. Many Ukrainians express deep frustration over the government's failure to adequately support its civilians throughout the war. A woman who was displaced from Donetsk to Kharkiv in 2014 and then again to Dnipro in 2022 described the lack of adequate shelter during the early months of the full-scale invasion despite years of prior conflict. Another respondent cited a complete lack of preparedness in providing basic safety infrastructure such as bomb shelters.

Corruption only reinforces this disillusionment. Displaced Ukrainians frequently point to the mismanagement and theft of humanitarian aid as a major breach of public trust. One respondent from Berdiansk, now in Kyiv, criticised the authorities for a lack of 'control over the flow of humanitarian aid'.

This is a clear paradox: while the military is a unifying and trusted institution, many civilian institutions are viewed as corrupt, inefficient, and disconnected from the lived realities of war. These findings align with what Tamilina and Ma (2024) term the 'Ukrainian syndrome', in which public trust in institutions is driven more by pragmatic satisfaction with their performance than by ideological convictions about the regime or nation's future. In this context, grassroots initiatives and volunteer networks have become vital, stepping in where official institutions fall short. For many Ukrainians, the army and volunteers have become the backbone of national resilience. As observed by one woman who was displaced from Odesa to Lviv: 'Ukraine relies on the army and volunteers. Without them, the war would have ended on February 25, but not in Ukraine's favour'.

Trust in international partners will be a defining factor in Ukraine's transition from war to peace. Our interviews reveal that displaced Ukrainians overwhelmingly perceive international partners, particularly the EU, as essential architects of the country's recovery. Trust in the EU is largely transactional, grounded in the belief that 'Europe will rebuild Ukraine' as shared by a Ukrainian who was displaced from Kherson to Odesa; it is a cornerstone of many people's faith in a future beyond the war.

In contrast, trust in the United States and NATO is tied primarily to security. Ukrainians view these actors as the only ones capable of providing credible defence guarantees. Their experience of the Budapest Memorandum, which failed to prevent Russian aggression, has left deep scepticism towards political assurances. As a result, there is little faith in vague promises – only clear, binding commitments about what will happen if Ukraine is attacked again are seen

as meaningful. Without such guarantees, trust in international actors may erode, undermining the peace process.

A lack of timely, comprehensive, and visible support from the EU, combined with the absence of credible security guarantees, could have serious consequences for Ukraine's peace process. Disillusionment may grow among the Ukrainian public, creating fertile ground for Russian propaganda. Narratives portraying the West as having 'betrayed Ukraine' could be weaponised to erode public trust, delegitimise Ukraine's Western-oriented transformation, and destabilise the post-war recovery.

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Key findings and policy recommendations

We have developed policy recommendations to support Ukraine's transition from war to peace once the weapons have fallen silent. Strategic planning and the development of scenarios for these should start now and should assume that there will not be a smooth transition from war to peace as a realistic assumption.

Key findings

1. Our interviews suggest that attitudes towards war and peace in Ukraine cannot be adequately analysed by focusing on the binary question of whether Ukrainians approve or oppose a particular peace settlement. Hopes for peace are closely tied to views on fairness and morality as well as the role of the state and society in Ukraine, and they reflect broader and often diverse views of community and society.
2. Even in the context of weakening support to pursue a strategy of war, we identified strong feelings about the war's aims, commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine, emphasis on the role of civil society as opposed to elites, and a transactional nature to trust and relationships with external partners. This means that if Ukraine is forced to accept a peace agreement that fails to address the main concern of its broader population – the prevention of future aggression – this could seriously undermine the legitimacy of its political leadership and erode public trust in its international partners. Such an outcome risks deepening internal divisions and triggering political instability. A weakened and fragmented Ukraine would be more vulnerable to renewed Russian aggression, whether through military means or political interference.
3. Our research suggests that the internally displaced Ukrainians we interviewed, in particular the younger and better skilled ones, would consider external migration if post-war Ukraine emerges as unstable or fragile. This would not only hinder Ukraine's ability to rebuild its infrastructure and institutions but also place additional pressure on the European countries that would receive new waves of displaced individuals. For the EU, such a scenario would create a strategic vacuum on its eastern border.

Specific recommendations for Ukraine

1. Strengthening trust in civilian institutions through transparency and responsiveness is essential to prevent citizens' political disillusionment and to reinforce democratic

resilience during the transition to peace. To avoid the risks of militarisation, Ukraine should focus on earning public trust, invest in civic education, and promote inclusive decision-making that reflects the diversity of Ukrainian society beyond the battlefield.

2. Emphasis should be given to sharing the costs of war across Ukrainian society socially and economically. The care for war veterans is likely to assume an especially important and symbolic role, as will support for displaced people as well as women affected by gender-based violence. In this context, working closely with civil society organisations will be essential. Equally important is the need to explore how experiences from other war and post-war transitions can inform and guide Ukraine's approaches to long-term peacebuilding.

3. Mechanisms, including at the local level, should be created for vulnerable groups, and especially women and the displaced, to be able to participate actively in the process of transition from war to peace. Establishing care for these vulnerable groups is also essential – work around heritage projects in local communities could offer good templates. Dialogue with good practices of involving civil society actors elsewhere, both inside and outside the EU, is important in this regard.

Specific recommendations for international actors

1. Ukraine, European actors, and other international partners share a common strategic goal - ensuring that the conditions of peace prevent future aggression from Russia. This objective should be treated as paramount in all decision-making processes. European actors must actively steer negotiations toward outcomes that support this objective, ensuring that Ukraine is presented with multiple strategic options. These options should define robust, enforceable security guarantees rather than vague political commitments like those in the Budapest Memorandum, where obligations to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity were ambiguous.

2. European actors should articulate its role as Ukraine's ally through explicit, actionable commitments. This includes specifying which countries will provide which resources, the scale and timing of military support, and other forms of assistance necessary to uphold Ukraine's security. Clear, detailed commitments will provide Ukraine with credible security assurances and represent a meaningful step toward establishing an enforceable security framework that deters future aggression from Russia.

General recommendations

1. Planning for post-war and post-civil war contexts should move beyond the idea of 'reconstruction': war and violence change societies; bringing the pre-war situation back is not possible.

2. When devising policies to accompany the transition from war to peace, a holistic approach is important: political and socio-economic factors as well as cultural norms will be intertwined in the ways that populations experience this transition.

3. In terms of evidence-based policymaking, this requires engaging across different forms of expertise, from history and heritage research to public policy, economics, anthropology, and sociology. Learning from different geographical experiences is also important.

4. Diverse historical memories of war and violence will need to be taken into account and the diverse heritage of war and violence engaged with. Cultural commemorations that are anchored in local networks and communities and civil societies could be a good way forward. They should be accompanied, if relevant, by mediation between different social groups.

5. The accountability for (in this case Russian) war crimes plays a key role in the transition from war to peace. The tension between a pragmatic approach on the one hand and an approach focused on retribution is unlikely to be resolved before a ceasefire or even a more formal peace agreement. As in the other area, transparency, a process governed by the rule of law and clear communication about these are essential for avoiding the weaponisation of the topic by bad actors.

6. The transition from war to peace only works if social actors experience this transformation as positive. Statistical indicators alone are not sufficient to measure success. This means that the success of the transition from war to peace cannot be gauged through key performance indicators alone, such as economic growth, spending on healthcare or other relevant public policy targets. Performance data should be correlated with the measurement of outcomes and the perception of these outcomes in these key policy areas as to whether the population can see progress in the provision of energy, of housing, of healthcare and of other public goods. This approach should be accompanied by an open discussion of the challenges posed by the transition from war to a sustainable peace in order to maintain the legitimacy of the government and the state. Issues that outsiders might regard as symbolic – such as achieving accountability for Russian war crimes or the treatment of vulnerable groups especially affected by the war – are likely to play a prominent role as mobilisation points for broader issues around political morality and social justice.

Conclusion

If we include the period since the occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas region, Ukraine has been at war for more than 10 years; and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine will, by late spring 2026, have lasted longer than the First World War. As a result, Ukraine – its state, its society, its economy, and its natural environment – have been remade by the violence of war. Regardless of the outcome of any negotiations for a ceasefire or a more comprehensive peace, Ukraine is facing a long period of transition. While the violence of war kept international society's attention, the silence of peace is much less likely to do so.

Our paper has drawn attention to the profound impact the war has had on Ukrainian society and emphasised the importance of Ukrainian agency in shaping the transition from war to peace. Instead of discussing economic or financial questions or issues relating directly to demobilisation, our paper has emphasised the importance of social perceptions and political-cultural repercussions of such developments for the legitimacy of Ukrainian state institutions as well as that of any post-war government. The political challenges arising from this are likely to be profound and will be difficult to resolve. They not only affect Ukraine, but they will also have repercussions for the politics of the EU as well as individual European countries. Magical thinking – bold rhetoric often not matched by action – in the way that characterised the European approach to the war itself is not going to help resolve these issues. The violence of war will influence the post-war period for a long time to come.

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Promise or peril? Artificial intelligence, human-machine interaction, and the risk of war

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of increasing global tensions, transformative technologies – notably artificial intelligence (AI) – are poised to revolutionise how the military wages war and how leaders think about, prepare for, and decide to go to war. Defence departments worldwide are betting hard on innovation as a catalyst for strategic advantage, eagerly integrating advanced sensing, collection, and analytical tools for strategic, operational, and tactical purposes. These capabilities tend to be nested in frontier decision support systems (DSS), which are increasingly pitched as critical to ensure decision-makers have sufficient information to compete against adversaries (and with allies) in an operational environment with shorter time horizons and voluminous data and, presumably, under conditions of existential threat. The focus of this paper is how specific AI-enabled DSS may alter how military and political actors make sense of, and ultimately act in response to, their threat environment – including whether to escalate a crisis or commence conflict.

The puzzle

This paper explores how the emergence of AI-enabled DSS is likely to alter how decision-makers navigate crisis or conflict decision environments. Understanding these dynamics is critical because, at the heart of all interactions between states, decisions are (for now) the responsibility of human agents. While this paper is prospective – AI-enabled systems are not (yet) employed at the highest, strategic levels of decision-making – it remains grounded in both present trends around digitalisation and the race for decision-advantage, and extant scholarship on military and political decision-making. This paper explores whether and how these emerging tools might exaggerate or minimise factors associated with conflict emergence or escalation and engages with discussions about how to best manage these new tools within defence and security ecosystems.

The first part of the paper outlines persistent uncertainties in political decision-making before explaining how DSS could influence the structure and shape of these decision spaces. It then explores the specific intersection between DSS and military/political decision environments and interrogates how DSS may interact with known and persistent human biases. It traces how micro- and meso-level changes to decision environments are likely to have global strategic implications and then offers a brief case study of three DSS/DSS-like systems currently in use. The paper closes with some outstanding considerations for policymakers and areas of future research.

What we know about uncertainty[1]

Scholarship by Muhammet A. Bas and Robert Schub has sought to distinguish three types or forms of uncertainty in international decision-making. The first form of uncertainty pertains to the asymmetry of information about an adversary vital for understanding their preferences around war, such as their military capabilities, war effort, or resolve (Bas & Schub 2017:2). The

1 Uncertainty lies at the heart of classic theoretical works of international relations, including (but not limited to): Hans J. Morgenthau, Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace, Brief ed (McGraw-Hill, 1993); Kenneth N. Waltz, Theory of International Politics, Addison-Wesley Series in Political Science (Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1979); Alexander Wendt, "On Constitution and Causation in International Relations," Review of International Studies 24, no. 5 (1998): 101–18, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598001028.

second form of uncertainty also stems from asymmetric information but refers to the unknown (and often unknowable) intentions of potential adversaries.[2] The third form is what Bas and Schub call 'fundamental or irreducible sources of uncertainty … such as elements of chance that sway war outcomes' – such as coups, natural disasters, or revolutions (Bas & Schub 2017:2). These different conceptions have been explored across distinct research agendas, which have informed everything from the bargaining theory of war to security dilemmas and escalatory dynamics, to deterrence failures and the unexpected contingencies (i.e. political coup or border skirmishes) that catalyse crises (Bas & Schub 2017:2). As DSS are designed to improve how information is gathered, processed, and leveraged to support decision-makers, this paper is concerned with the first two forms of uncertainty that stem from asymmetric information. Thus, we need to understand what DSS do and how their inclusion in defence and military institutions might affect how humans handle or exploit information in decision environments.

DSS and choice architectures

DSS are generally defined as 'interactive computer-based systems that aid users in judgement and choice activities' (Druzdzel & Flynn 2002:3). These systems are designed to offset 'human cognitive deficiencies by integrating various sources of information, providing intelligent access to relevant knowledge, and aiding the process of structuring decisions' (3). DSS are intended to improve how decision-makers frame problems, ultimately improving consistency and efficiency by reducing human errors owing to fatigue, bias, or oversight while allowing those actors to engage with more, and more complex, data. New AI-based DSS systems (sometimes called recommender engines or algorithmic advisors) have emerged as tools poised to provide comprehensive searches, sorting, and decision-guidance in support of more 'creative solutions' and 'critical alternatives'; they are marketed as a means to achieve higher quality decisions. Critically, DSS serve as an intermediary between a decision-maker and their environment.

When used, DSS play a critical role in structuring decision-makers' choice architectures, which refer to how options are presented in the decision environment. Importantly, these architectures have measurable effects on how individuals and groups make decisions (see Thaler et al, 2010). In the context of digital or computational interfaces, choice architectures are also related to user experience (UX) design, which considers the needs, behaviours, and sometimes the emotions of users when creating specific products, systems, or services. UX design principles are critical for digital or online properties (from points of purchase to social media ecosystems), with the most successful leveraging human behavioural insights to highlight or recommend products, strategically frame and present information, and simplify choice selection in ways that influence human behaviour (Geigl et al 2016). While advocates have praised the potential benefits of prosocial choice architectures (Thaler & Sunstein 2021) others, ranging from the philosopher Jeremy Waldron to the psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer, have criticised this mode of modifying behaviour as paternalistic – and manipulative 'an affront to human dignity' (Waldron 2014), and for viewing human cognitive biases as areas to be exploited (for context see Gigerenzer 2014). In many digital and online environments, choice architectures may generate 'dark patterns' – design features that manipulate users according to corporate or commercial interests and that are often misaligned with personal well-being.[3]

2 This uncertainty is understood across a range of disciplines but rests at the heart of an ancient philosophical quandary, usually defined as the 'problem of other minds.' For a fulsome discussion, c.f. Avramides, 'Other Minds."

3 Surveys have found roughly 75 per cent of e-commerce sites use 'dark patterns' to influence visitor behaviour. Source: ICPEN Sweep finds majority of websites and mobile apps use dark patterns in the marketing of subscription services | ICPEN

In the context of political and military decision-making, AI-enabled DSS and other advanced tools will alter how human decision-makers see, understand, and navigate a strategic environment plagued by information asymmetries.

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Deciding amid asymmetries: when more is not better

DSS aim to improve the information balance in decision environments. Advanced DSS tools, like the celebrated AI-enabled software offered by key private firms, can leverage large language models (LLMs), neural networks, and advanced algorithms to improve situational awareness, capture changes in the strategic balance, and generate real-time guidance. For example, Delta, a system designed by the Ukrainian armed forces, 'enables real-time battlefield awareness, supports operational planning, and facilitates information sharing within units, brigades, formations, and, when needed, with allies', according to Ministry of Defence of Ukraine (MOD News 2025). The American firm, Palantir, offers a diverse suite of advanced AI and machine learning tools to sort, filter, and identify critical data and enable decision-making. For their military clients, these services may include data architectures to support improved operational awareness and enable decision advantage in operational and tactical environments.[4] The potential of such systems has spurred calls for their rapid integration across the defence and security domain.

In 2023, former US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Michèle Flournoy, wrote in Foreign Affairs that emerging technologies would be increasingly essential for strategic preparation, stating that 'predictive AI could . . . give Washington a better understanding of what its potential adversaries might be thinking, especially leaders in Beijing' (Flournoy 2023:60). She suggested the intelligence community could 'develop a large language model that would ingest all available writing of speeches by Chinese leaders, as well as U.S. intelligence reports about these figures, and then emulate how Chinese President Xi Jinping might decide to execute stated policy.' (Flournoy 2023:60). Such an AI would undoubtedly be nested within a DSS that would feed real-time information and analysis to advisors and, ultimately, decision-makers. She envisioned that analysts might then ask the model: 'Under what circumstances would President Xi be willing to use force against Taiwan?' (Flournoy 2023:60). Such propositions around predictive AI, albeit fallaciously, lean heavily on extant scholarship of political leadership, which suggests that insights pulled from the decision-makers environment will aid others in understanding their ultimate decision (Brooks 2008:16).

The inference that AI-enabled systems in such a case would provide unique or novel insights (i.e. new and veritable information) is evident – and wrong. The claim that disparate data sources could be fused to offer predictions should be concerning, not only because the models mentioned are not predictive (they are inductive), but because machine learning software and LLMs merely compile historical data to compare how new information might match previous patterns (Hao 2025). Flournoy's error is in conflating more information with the right information. In international relations, this conflation highlights the problem of observational

4 Given the myriad uses of a data company, the description of Palantir (as a firm) remains opaque, see "What Does Palantir Actually Do? | WIRED," accessed January 11, 2026, https://www.wired.com/story/palantir-what-the-company-does/?_sp=d3884798-eddf-4414-bfc0-ec1884d562b2.1768185257648.

equivalence: we might know what has happened, but the reasons why it happened may be numerous and remain unclear.[5] This fundamental incompleteness of information (the pernicious asymmetry problem) also animates one of international relation's most irascible challenges, known as the security dilemma: the actions taken by one state for defensive purposes are interpreted by a second state as offensive intent, prompting them to strengthen their defences, which the first state sees as confirmation of the other's offensive interests.[6] This cycle can lead unsuspecting states into accidental conflict (Jervis 2015). Critically, amid this absence of information – this asymmetry of the right information – the limitations and biases of decision-makers become critical.

This decision-complexity was historically overlooked and under theorised. According to the political scientist Robert Jervis, international relations scholars have tended to assume that 'decision-makers usually perceive the world quite accurately' and often treat misperceptions as 'random accidents' (Jervis 2015:3). Jervis and subsequent researchers have leveraged insights from psychology to unpack a range of cognitive biases and tendencies that influence how decision-makers perceive (and misperceive) other actors in the international system.

Persistent decision-making obstacles

Confirmation, automation, and machine biases

As 'sense-making animals', Jervis warns, 'we are quick to reach interpretations, to tell others (and ourselves) stories about what is happening, and to explain puzzles as soon as we can' (Jervis 2015: xxxii). Our preference for cognitive preservation leads to an over-reliance on extant explanations even as our status quo changes. This confirmation bias can lock decision-makers into response practices that exacerbate old tensions or inflame new ones. As Jervis notes, '[d]ecision-makers assimilate evidence to their pre-existing beliefs without being aware of alternative interpretations. Conclusions are reached without careful thought' (Jervis 2015: chapter 12). Morozov's caution that 'how problems are composed matters every bit as much as how problems are resolved' is critical considering these tendencies (Morozov 2014).

A threat designation is based on an understanding of the actor's perceived intentions.

Parallel academic work by social constructivists has highlighted how 'threats' and 'enemies' in the international realm are both material and social constructions. Consider the hypothetical example of France and North Korea illegally testing their nuclear weapons. These two empirical events would be the same (i.e. a violation of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty), but from the United Kingdom's perspective, the aims of the respective state leaders would likely seem distinct. A threat designation is based on an understanding of the actor's perceived intentions. For instance, North Korea's actions might appear aggressive and offensive, even if they are – for reasons internal to that state – intended to deter foreign intervention. As Alexander Wendt famously argued, believing and subsequently acting as if some other state is a threat makes them so in the international system (Wendt 1992). Jervis's work sharpens this challenge by highlighting how one's perceptions and assumptions of an adversary can remain stable and stubborn. Enemies tend to remain enemies, even without evidence of continued malevolent intent.

5 This is sometimes framed as the problem of equifinality: many causes may produce the same outcome, which makes highlighting a single cause for an outcome difficult.

6 This dilemma informs the common, and empirically useless, maxim that the 'cause of war is preparation for war' (attributed to W.E.B. Du Bois), but this topic has been explored at length and remains a central tenet and teaching within the field. For reference, see Tang, 'The Security Dilemma'; Glaser, 'Fear Factor."

DSS could filter or strategically present new evidence that disconfirms adversarial intention – proactively working to counter our natural tendencies towards confirmation bias. But this possibility tells us little about whether the new information would alter a leader's cognitive balance. On the one hand, there are no guarantees that the decider would retain or process this information in line with the design intentions of the DSS (see cognitive dissonance, below). Second, while DSS may generate more empirical or observable information – i.e. troop movements, patterns of resource expenditure, and the frequency or nature of government communications – this information would remain strategically incomplete (i.e. the information may not reveal actual plans or highlight the specific intentions of the adversary). The asymmetry of (the right) information remains, making it unclear how DSS might alter this balance.

Perhaps most concerning for military and political decision-making, automation bias increases when human decision-makers are deluged with information and under stress to respond quickly.

As the future operating environment will be increasingly technologically enveloped, in which advanced systems must stitch together disparate and varied strands of information,[7] the risk of automation bias will likely increase. Automation bias refers to the impulse to favour guidance from automated systems, often leading individuals to privilege incorrect machine guidance over accurate information from other sources (Parasuraman & Manzey 2010; Skitka et al.1999). Automation bias is particularly persistent as it affects both individuals and groups – novices and experts. Perhaps most concerning for military and political decision-making, automation bias increases when human decision-makers are deluged with information and under stress to respond quickly. If we imagine that advanced DSS tools will be critical for navigating the data-heavy operational spaces of the future and that our adversaries will also leverage decision-speeding capabilities, decision-makers are likely to become more dependent on these automated tools. Automation bias also interacts with machine bias, which presents when qualities or characteristics – subjective, suggestive, or discriminatory – are inadvertently coded into a machine system, leading to skewed or incorrect outputs. We can think of these as 'proxy problems' which arise when an 'attempt is made to encode nuanced human experiences or concepts into computer systems' but for which there may be few observable variables (McDermott et al 2021). In this way, the selection of a proxy and its degree of alignment introduce 'technical constraints or limitations in the design process or computer tools' (90). In other words, the attempt to hard-code specific qualities, characteristics, and categories into DSS can introduce errors or imprecision that produce hidden or internal biases, which under quick decision-cycles may remain hidden from the human actors wielding these tools.

Cognitive dissonance and premature closure

Research suggests that individuals also tend to seek out information that confirms or aligns with their existing beliefs (Kiil 2024). Jervis explains that leaders often struggle when they receive information that runs counter to their extant or prior beliefs, producing a form of psychological discomfort known as cognitive dissonance. This state of unease often leads individuals to avoid or ignore new evidence and discount or reinterpret received information, ultimately recasting ambiguous information in line with previous assessments (confirmation bias, again) to preserve cognitive coherence. Cognitive dissonance can also trigger premature closure, which refers to the tendency to settle on a conclusion or decision without adequately considering – or seeking out – the available information.

7 In the military, these strands of information are sometimes referred to as C5ISR: Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance.

DSS might proactively surface dissent or contradictory information in ways that encourage critical reflection and reduce the reflex for premature closure.

On the one hand, a DSS could be designed to help mitigate cognitive dissonance, presenting information that highlights alternatives or a range of assessments of an observable event or detail. DSS might proactively surface dissent or contradictory information in ways that encourage critical reflection and reduce the reflex for premature closure. For example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) uses the Joint Conflict and Tactical Simulation (JCATS) to run simulations that are designed to force leaders to 'pre-model' the implications of multiple courses of action (Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory 2025). Prompting individuals to consider ideas and beliefs prior to a situation in which they must make a decision can be critical to encourage cognitive flexibility. However, these are exercises – not live operational instances. If these tools can present counterfactual information or competing hypotheses in real time, DSSs could theoretically create space for alternative explanations and work to challenge dominant assumptions.

On the other hand, as a form of choice architecture, a DSS may amplify or embed preexisting assumptions in ways that 'obscure trade-offs' and lead users to unchallengingly reify or bolster prior beliefs (Kahneman et al. 2025). One of the critiques of the US Defense Department's Project Maven, which uses machine learning protocols to assess drone footage and highlight potential threats in real time, is the program's tendency to remove the ambiguity of pattern-based anomaly assessment, ultimately altering how its users understand the system's accuracy (Suchman 2020). As Suchman has argued, the operational experience of deploying these tools reframes accuracy according to whether the system was effective at prosecuting the selected target, overlooking (or meaningfully sidestepping) conversations about whether the target was defined accurately (Suchman 2020). From the operational or tactical level, automated support systems may buffer dissonance, discourage scrutiny of extant assumptions, and limit opportunities for objections with respect to the DSS.

Communicating probabilities

Retired US Army General Stanley McChrystal, now advisor to AI firm Rhombus Power, has argued the benefits of leveraging LLMs to sift voluminous data, allowing these systems to explore whether '[w]henever X has happened in the past, Y has often been the outcome' (Roy & McChrystal 2023: 47). He notes Rhombus's ability to leverage this inductive and probabilistic methodology to forecast (or 'predict') the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. While he's careful to explain the model offers correlations – some weak, some strong – and not causation, he is bullish that these systems 'can make aggression predictions in future hot spots around the globe with specific levels of confidence.' Part of his pitch – for Rhombus and for AI more generally, we might presume – is that the calculations are valuable because they are arrived at dispassionately and thus 'circumvent human biases and wishful thinking' (Roy & McChrystal 2023:47).

However, humans struggle to understand probabilistic rankings of potential outcomes. Human decision-makers make persistent and systematic errors in probabilistic judgement (Kahneman et al. 1982) and when presented with probabilistic predictions often fixate on questions of representativeness, for example, rather than the implications of the probabilistic guidance (Kahneman et al. 1982). Our ability to navigate the complexity of probabilities is further hampered under time pressure, under which individuals tend to discard complex strategies for simpler heuristics, reduce the volume of information considered, and adopt less accurate decision rules (Payne et al. 1993). These tendencies are increasingly important because DSS are likely to deliver highly contingent or conditional guidance in probability form to decision-makers under duress. In instances where evidence or information is contested (i.e. competing epidemiological models amid the COVID-19 crisis), leaders can select the 'evidence' that best matches their assumptions or prior beliefs.

To complicate matters further, human decision-makers suffer from precision bias – the tendency to 'over-attribute certainty' to numerical estimates (i.e. probability rankings) as compared to identical information conveyed by qualitative language (Wallsten et al. 1986;[A1.1] see also Slovic 1972; Brainerd et al. 1991[A2.1]). This form of illusory rationality can serve as a psychological crutch, helping leaders justify decisions without challenging their underlying assumptions.

Taken together, the effect of DSS and other AI-assisted support tools on extant human biases remains nebulous. For all the theoretical and practical benefits that could emerge, the integration of these systems in highly uncertain and politically contentious environments produces a range of decision tendencies that may generate unique risks.

Prospect theory, AI interventions, and imagined certainty

If they change the decision environment, DSS are also liable to recast and rebalance how human actors understand risk and certainty. As developed by Kahneman and Tversky, prospect theory claims that decision-makers tend to prefer to avoid a loss rather than acquire an equivalent gain (Kahneman & Tversky 1979). Jervis adapted prospect theory for international relations, arguing that state leaders are more likely to take risks when they find themselves suffering declining power or credibility, or when merely perceiving themselves to be losing. Importantly, subsequent scholarship has highlighted that prospect theory effects are more prominent amid high uncertainty and time pressure, driven by framing effects (i.e. if the choices taken or not taken are associated with sure losses) and high stakes. This risk-acceptant framing, Jervis argued, could lead to increasingly aggressive foreign policies and decisions to mount military action (Jervis 1992).

This matters today because the future operating environment is frequently described as one of intensifying strategic competition between great powers and rapid technological advancement (namely the lightning fast integration of AI and automation tools), in which decision-makers must navigate more information in ever-shorter periods of time.[8] With less time to review and reflect on information and the tight integration between highly complex decision-support systems, we can imagine two parallel risks: an incentive for increased delegation of decision-authority to machines and a heightened propensity to suffer from automation bias.

The first of these risks emerges around the need for rapid strategic response and the belief that AI/DSS tools provide the only means to that end. In the second instance, a combination of increasing data collection, complex strategic environments, high stakes, and the competence (imagined or otherwise) of the DSS/assistance tools will likely foster environments susceptible

8 There are a countless sources tracing the emergence of these trends, including: Forrest E. Morgan and Raphael S. Cohen, Military Trends and the Future of Warfare: The Changing Global Environment and Its Implications for the U.S. Air Force (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2849z3.html.; John D. Winkler, Timothy Marler, Marek N. Posard, Raphael S. Cohen, and Meagan L. Smith, Reflections on the Future of Warfare and Implications for Personnel Policies of the U.S. Department of Defense (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE324.html; Barry R. Schneider and Lawrence E. Grinter, eds., Battlefield of the Future: 21st Century Warfare Issues, Revised ed. (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2008), https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CSDS/Books/battlefield_future2.pdf.; these trends are also captured in state defence policies and documents, including: Ministry of Defence (UK). Future Operating Environment 2035. Shrivenham: Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 2015. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-operating-environment-2035. Ministry of Defence (UK). Command and Control in the Future: The Defence C2 Enterprise. Shrivenham: Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 2023. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/command-control-in-the-future-the-defence-c2-enterprise; Australian Department of Defence. Future Operating Environment 2035. Canberra: Force Design Division, 2016. https://cove.army.gov.au/sites/default/files/08-09_0/08/Future-Operating-Environment-2035.pdf. Australian Department of Defence. ADF Concept for Command and Control of the Future Force. Canberra: Force Design Division, 2018. https://theforge.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/adf_concept_for_command_and_control_of_the_future_force_v.1_signed.pdf; Department of National Defence Canada. Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy. Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2017. https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/canada-defence-policy.html.; U.S. Department of Defense. Joint Operating Environment 2035: The Joint Force in a Contested and Disordered World. Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2016. https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joe_2035_july16.pdf.

to automation bias. The net effect is an atmosphere permissive, if not supportive, of what we might call the technological certainty fallacy: by conflating efficiency with efficacy and assuming machine guidance to be superior to human (flawed or biased) decision-making, we will reduce our potential to challenge guidance furnished through these frontier tools in ever-more challenging strategic environments.

The persistent obstacles presented above should caution our rush to integrate AI-enabled or advanced DSS in the strategic realm. We are also beginning to find evidence for how these systems influence military decision-making at the tactical and operational level. The next section draws on the work of Jessica Dorsey and Marta Bo to explore three DSS or DSS-like systems used by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) – Lavender, The Gospel, and Where's Daddy?

Case study

In 2024, investigations revealed the IDF's use of an AI-powered database and 'statistical mechanism' called Lavender that was 'designed to cross-reference intelligence sources' and register personal information of 'individuals allegedly linked to "terrorist organisations."' (Dorsey & Bo 2025:13). Lavender is guided by 'pre-set parameters that describe what the targeteers are looking for (c.f. Dorsey & Bo 2025).[9] and, using supervised learning practices, the system 'learns to recognize characteristics of known Hamas and PIJ [Palestinian Islamic Jihad] operatives from its training data' and then uses those traits and parameters to search for 'similar traits within the general population.' Further, Lavender also aggregates and analyses mass surveillance data from Palestinians' phone metadata, social media connections, and battlefield intelligence. The system then uses algorithms to generate predictions about the likely (probabilistic) affiliation between these civilians and terrorist organisations. Ultimately, Lavender assigns 'nearly every individual in Gaza a rating from 1 to 100, indicating the likelihood of their being connected to Hamas/PIJ' and is reported to have identified as many as 37,000 individuals for targeting (Dorsey & Bo 2025:14). By translating information from myriad systems into a target list, Lavender performs as a DSS, supporting military instruments as they prosecute alleged security threats.

These AI-enabled and generated lists were produced echelons faster than traditional intelligence. This preparation material enabled the IDF to execute strikes on a greater number of targets than any other period in its history. These tools have prompted (or at least co-presented) with changes in organisational processes, including the IDF's oversight protocols. As reported in testimony from an intelligence operator that was drawn upon in a report by +972 Magazine and shared with The Guardian, 'I would invest 20 seconds for each target at this stage and do dozens of them every day. I had zero added-value as a human, apart from being a stamp of approval. It saved a lot of time' (McKernan & Davies 2024).

The Gospel is another tool of the IDF whose first reported use was in the 11-day 'war' in Gaza in May 2021. It is a 'machine learning software built atop hundreds of predictive algorithms' (Dorsey and Bo 2025:14) – as an 'information aggregator' (15), it provides 'automated recommendations' for targets 'through the rapid and automatic extraction of intelligence' (Davies et al 2023). Aviv Kochavi, then head of the IDF, claimed in 2023 that the system 'produces vast amounts of data more effectively than any human, and translates it into targets

9 Targeteers are officers tasked with planning and co-ordinating bombardments,

for attack' (Davies et al 2023). Critical for the purposes of military targeting, The Gospel can cross-reference data collected from 'phone conversations, satellite imagery, and cellular signals' to identify target addresses and identify targets in real time for strike planning (Dorsey & Bo 2025, 15). As reported by Kochavi, these systems generate as many as 100 targets per day, up from 50 targets per year, and have enabled 50 per cent of those daily targets to be attacked (Davies et al 2023). With Lavender filtering the intelligence and The Gospel collating information for strike planning, the IDF then uses the system Where's Daddy? to combine mobile phone location data to enable persistent geographic surveillance, allowing them to target individuals for kinetic action once they arrive at a specific location – often their family home (Dorsey & Bo 2025: 15). The technological affordances of these DSS clearly increase the speed and quantity of violence, which, as Dorsey and Bo note, 'may alter how operators interpret the notion of feasibility in preventing civilian harm' (Dorsey & Bo 2025:27). Indeed, the bombing order issued by Israeli military commanders the day of Hamas's attacks on 7 October 2023 'had no precedent in Israeli military history' in both the leeway it provided for the number of attacks and the permissibility of harm towards civilians (Kingsley et al 2024). As reported in The New York Times, officers were authorised to risk up to 20 civilian deaths for each strike. The amended orders enabled the military to 'target rank-and-file militants as they were at home surrounded by relatives and neighbors' (Kingsley et al 2024). In other words, the affordances of these technological tools may play a critical role in reshaping – or enabling – new organisation-level protocols around the speed and scope of violence, altering how human agents accept or manage risk.

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These tools also influenced how individual officers executed their responsibilities, with accounts that '[IDF] officers were reportedly not required to independently review the system's assessments', as 'vetting and verification steps seem to have been eschewed in favour of trusting and accepting the AI-generated lists' (Dorsey & Bo 2025:25). These accounts suggest automation bias – or something approaching it – among system users. Further, the technological capability to speed up the identification and prosecution of enemy targets also meant officers understood their performance was also assessed in terms of output. 'We work quickly and there is no time to delve deep into the target,' noted one source who formerly worked in the IDF's targeting team. 'The view is that we are judged according to how many targets we manage to generate' (Davies et al 2023). As Klaudia Klonowska argues, 'speed and volume of target recommendations introduce a climate of risk where recommendations are not to be ignored' (2024).Taken together, these accounts suggest DSS systems, like those described above, may only further encouraging action (and action bias) and may work against reasonableness when it comes to targeting decisions (Klonowska 2024). Legal scholars Dorsey and Bo note the legal and moral implications of the IDF's use of AI-enabled DSS, seeing the use of these tools as challenging the military's compliance with the principle of precautions due to: a) the speed and scale of target generation and nomination; b) the lack of system-level explainability; and c) the incidences of bias – algorithmic, automation, and action – that have emerged from system use (Dorsey & Bo 2023: 23).

For the purposes of this paper, these examples show how the use of DSS technologies influenced an organisation's standard protocols and changed how individual agents navigate their decision environment. We can also see how enabling speed (and confusing this with efficiency) limited decision-makers' ability to review or verify the tools' effects in relation to their tactical or operational responsibilities. This balance of evidence illustrates that these systems demand additional review and design assessment before integration into more complex decision environments (Kleinberg et al. 2020). As Dorsey and Bo argue, 'the cognitive shifts [AI-DSS] systems engender must be studied more in-depth to understand all the implications at operational, strategic and tactical levels' (43).

Policy responses

While the risks of DSS are still emerging, the proper role of AI systems in defence and security institutions remains subject to heated debate. There is growing evidence of the substantive fusion of AI and national defence, as public and political rhetoric has pivoted from the importance of 'AI safety' (ensuring AI is safe) to 'AI security' (using AI as a tool to provide security) and as national security and defence strategies increasingly highlight the importance of automation and AI to remain ready and relevant (see Wilner & Atkinson 2025) . This securitisation of AI will continue to drive increased attention and resources, while also privileging the state – not civil society – in future conversations about the appropriate use of AI/advanced technology (Lynch 2025). Any erosion of transparency should prompt pre-emptive work on potential guardrails and policy guidance surrounding where and how AI-enabled DSS might be integrated into critical state institutions. Where possible, establishing an independent oversight mechanism, such as a review board, to assess potential risks will be critical – at minimum.

Any erosion of transparency should prompt pre-emptive work on potential guardrails and policy guidance surrounding where and how AI-enabled DSS might be integrated into critical state institutions.

Policymakers should also remain attuned to the creeping capture of mainstream culture by representatives of Big Tech's private industries. The UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's decision to interview Elon Musk as part of Britain's first AI Safety Summit and the persistence of narratives framing AI leaders (notably OpenAI's Sam Altman) as fonts of insight and guides to the future of AI should prompt healthy scepticism. These technologies may be new and complex, but military and political environments have long been the subject of rigorous study. Designing meaningful protections against AI misuse, in the context of DSS, will require leveraging a diverse array of expertise – from military studies and culture to computer science and psychology – to better interrogate and assess the implications and consequence of emerging technology in the defence and security ecosystem. However, these expert 'red teams' must be purposefully designed and granted appropriate security clearances to be effective. Military and political leaders must also be aware that corporate, capital, and celebrity influence will continue to shape conversations around the implications of AI, often leading to the disproportionate narrative influence of certain actors in shaping public opinion and influencing elected officials (Siegel et al. 2025).

At the strategic and interstate level, fulsome and technically-informed negotiations are vital to construct norms and regulations about where – and under what conditions – AI tools will be used in political and military decision-making. To facilitate this exchange, military and political institutions must leverage external experts such as academics, security practitioners, independent technologists, and system designers – all ideally unaligned with private tech firms – to better explore the risks and rewards of increasingly entangled tech-military partnerships. These mechanisms will impose costs – as security clearance and access to secret systems always come with risks – but can be managed organisationally.

While this guidance cuts against the logic of strategic competition (that secrecy provides advantage), it is also true that a future conflict unexpectedly enabled or sped up by AI systems is liable to generate a Pyrrhic victory at best. AI-latticed defence and security ecosystems are likely to be inherently vulnerable, according to an emerging field of study around 'normal' or system accidents. The supporting theory suggests that catastrophic accidents may be inevitable in complex, tightly coupled systems, particularly those involving high-risk technologies (see Perrow 1990: Chapter 1). For instance, complex systems – like high-speed, high volume DSS tools – require operators to rely on indirect or inferential information about how the system is operating, making it increasingly difficult to interpret if and when the system has failed or is failing. Under these conditions, regulations or red lines prohibiting the use of

complex systems in specific defence domains may be the one way to combat the latent danger of these technological systems.

Conclusion

The integration of DSS into high-stakes and uncertain decision environments is liable to create novel risks, including, but not limited to degrading the credibility and efficacy of strategic analysis; compromising established moral, ethical, and legal parameters of conflict; and altering critical procedures intended to avoid inadvertent escalation between nation-states. Further, this paper has highlighted how the introduction of DSS into critical decision environments can influence human agents' endemic biases and cognitive limitations.

The arguments in favour of DSS are rational – theoretically. In the words of Williamson Murray, 'war is neither a science nor a craft, but rather an incredibly complex endeavour" (Murray 2011:3) – which comes at the cost of human lives. If the moral, ethical, and practical responsibility for decision-makers rests on reducing the rate of errors in their decisions, and if AI- or automated computer assisted systems are shown to perform as well, if not better, than human operators, then it is morally responsible (and potentially necessary) that such tools be deployed in those environments. Less harm (enabled by greater decision-efficiency) is better. However, this should only be the case if system designers and those military and civilian personnel working within their institutions actively demonstrate – not merely advocate for – how and why these systems offer promise at acceptable levels of peril.

Established experts in the military domain will likely continue to argue for integrating advanced technological capabilities into critical systems and institutions of the nation-state. First, because AI-enabled tools in key military systems may improve their efficiency, accuracy, and operation; second, because AI-enabled systems might reduce the number of mundane bureaucratic tasks – an improvement on, and potential revolution in, the enterprise of defence. These arguments or lines of adoption have started to generate a kind of pincer manoeuvre, increasing pressure to greenlight adoption of these tools across the military. In these instances, AI tools may benefit from credibility creep: once they are introduced and effective in some limited domains, they may be applied in other, ill-suited, areas. The migration of these tools into different and risk-distinct spaces would invite error and harm.

Leaders, policymakers, experts, and citizens alike must remain attentive to the power of persistent public relations campaigns working to socialise the value and inevitable superiority of AI tools. The speed of AI adoption, combined with accounts of its ultimate (but still unrealised) potential, have generated potent myths about what AI or AI-enabled systems might achieve. At least in the abstract, the computational facility of new algorithms, neural networks, and machine learning practices may well perform a kind of intelligence that can improve or optimise decision assistance. But, as this paper has sought to illustrate, not all puzzles can be solved through computational analysis. And, as the political scientist David Runciman reminds us, 'treating a decision as an answer risks mistaking a prejudice for a fact' (Runciman 2024: loc 900).

Politics will remain a cage of our own design. Because we lack complete information, we continue to fill that lacuna with what Émile Durkheim called 'social facts' – those practices, rules, or duties that we define and accept, offering us a set of norms with which we navigate the world (Durkheim 1982). The increasingly potent norm of technological solutionism, for instance, leaves us vulnerable to the marketed promise of AI as a means of increasing our certainty about the present and future. This social fact becomes even more potent as we, as citizens of

popular culture, are increasingly socialised to believe in the eventual supremacy of machine minds. The interregnum between now and that imagined technological future will be shaped by amplified tensions and geopolitical narratives that privilege the importance of the technological race for advantage. Amid this search for technological certainty, it bears remembering that our salvation has historically come from our latent inefficiencies – our humility and imperfect navigation of an uncertain world. Sacrificing intuition and human ingenuity on the altar of technological innovation may ultimately cost us more than we should reasonably wager.

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The political integration of armed groups in a changing global security landscape: implications for sustainable peace

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Abstract

This paper discusses the prospects for political integration of armed groups in the context of contemporary dynamics of armed conflict. While the conversion of insurgent movements into political actors is not new, shifting global conflict dynamics are challenging the established liberal peace framework. Drawing on insights from comparative case studies of both negotiated settlements and rebel victories, the paper argues that wartime organisational cohesion, governance capacity, ideology, and external engagement decisively shape prospects for post-war political integration of armed groups. It introduces a novel typology of armed groups prospects and pathways for political integration. The analysis offers policy recommendations tailored to group type and context, situated within contemporary conflict environments marked by fragmentation and internationalisation. Ultimately, the paper argues that sustainable peace requires recognising rebel legacies, supporting incremental reforms, and fostering inclusive governance in the long term.

Introduction

In November 2024, the armed group Hayat-Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) successfully overthrew the sitting Syrian regime in an unexpected move towards Damascus. The HTS's military victory and government takeover have raised questions regarding the transition from armed opposition groups to governments and ruling parties, their capacity and strategy for governance and state-building, and how those impact the prospects for peace and security in Syria and the region. The process of transforming from an armed opposition group to a political party is by no means unique: it is a common feature of war-to-peace transitions across the globe, whether following a negotiated settlement or a rebel victory. Indeed, more than one third of the non-state armed groups that signed peace agreements between 1975–2018 transformed into political parties, exemplified by a diverse range of groups such as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in Kosovo, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador, Sinn Féin / the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines (Söderberg & Katz 2016; Manning & Smith 2016).

To date, the political transformation of armed groups into political parties has commonly been analysed in the context of the liberal peace paradigm, which is characterised by mediated settlements that include provisions for party formation and post-war electoral participation (For example Sindre & Söderström 2016; Söderberg Kovacs & Hatz 2016). However, recent shifts in the global conflict and security landscape, increasingly 'disordered' geopolitics, and the subsequent decline in the prevalence of international peace operations are challenging our once clear-cut expectations about armed groups' pathways towards demilitarisation.

The agenda of this paper is to align contemporary research on armed groups' political integration with the evolving global landscape of conflict and peacemaking, presenting a novel typology of armed groups' integration prospects alongside a series of policy recommendations.

The paper is organised as follows. First, through collating existing research, it identifies conditions for successful political integration of armed groups into political parties. It distinguishes between types of conflict endings, highlighting similarities and differences between negotiated settlements and so-called 'rebel victories'. Second, the paper discusses contemporary conflict and peacemaking dynamics and the challenges linked to supporting

political integration of armed groups. Third, it introduces a novel typology of armed groups, arguing that wartime group characteristics significantly influence the prospects and pathways for political integration. Finally, the paper offers a set of recommendations to chart a path towards demilitarisation and political integration of armed groups.

The paper draws on original research from two of the author's recent projects on the political transformation of armed groups and the impact of former armed groups on post-war politics and peace.[1]

How conflict endings shape post-war political orders

The way that a conflict ends shapes the post-war political order. This section examines two different conflict endings – mediated settlements and rebel victories – and explores the pathways to political integration of armed groups in these different contexts as well as their nuances.

Mediated settlements

The political transformation of armed groups following negotiated peace agreements is typically shaped by compromise, institutional and organisational adaptation, and the challenge of reconciling military identities with civilian politics. When insurgents transition into formal political actors following a negotiated settlement, they must often accept partial integration into pre-existing political systems, agreeing to share power with their former adversaries. This usually follows the ideals of the liberal peace framework and can involve demobilisation, power-sharing agreements, and participation in elections. The process tends to produce hybrid political organisations that are still influenced by wartime military structures and hierarchies but increasingly compelled to adopt civilian party practices, cultivate broader constituencies, and compete within pluralist systems (Ishiyama & Batta 2011; Ishiyama & Marshall 2015; Sindre 2016a). In some instances, these transformations have proven to be fragile, as rebel successor parties have struggled with legitimacy, internal factionalism, or limited capacity to recruit support beyond their wartime base, as exemplified by the RUFP, the party founded on the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia (e.g. Ibáñez & Jäger 2023; Söderberg Kovacs 2021). In other instances, however, rebel group successor parties have proven to be remarkably stable contenders that have contributed to long-term political stability, as exemplified in prominent post-settlement cases such as El Salvador, Mozambique, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Northern Ireland (Manning & Smith 2019).

'Success', then, depends on a number of factors. Traditionally, scholars have emphasised factors linked to the peace agreement itself, such as its inclusiveness and whether it contains provisions for armed groups to join formal politics, as well as the strength of post-conflict

1 The first project is in part funded by the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) Research Grants (2024–2026) and the second, Post-conflict political parties, was funded by the European Commission (2015–2019). The paper also draws on research findings from the wider research programme of the Politics After War Network (PAW). For a summary of research findings and recommendations on politics of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR), see for instance Cho et al. 2022. For a recent discussion about mediating armed groups' political integration, see Dudouet el al (2025).

institutions (e.g. Podder 2013; Söderberg Kovacs & Hatz 2016). However, recent comparative research on the political transformation of armed groups into political parties places more emphasis on the organisational and ideational foundations of the armed groups as central explanatory factors for their relative electoral successes (e.g. Manning & Smith 2019; Sindre 2016a) and their subsequent contributions to post-war political stability (Manning et. al. 2023; Marshall and Ishiyama 2016). Factors linked to a group's identity and organisational capacity, such as the ideas and ideology underpinning their political project (Curtis & Sindre 2019; Sindre 2019), their wartime administrative experiences (Ishiyama & Marshall 2023), the nature of their support networks, and the degree of their popular legitimacy (e.g. Ibáñez & Jäger 2023; Manning & Smith 2019; Sindre 2024a) significantly influence the likelihood of party formation and post-war electoral success.[2]

In sum, research shows that these factors – along with a group's willingness and capacity to invest in coalition-building and long-term peace rather than rely on coercion – positively impacts an armed group's chance of surviving as a political party in the short to medium term and its ability to contribute positively to political stability in the longer term (Ishiyama & Sindre 2023; Sindre 2024a). In addition, there are indications that the provisions set out in peace agreements to enable the political integration of armed groups can foster trust in democratic institutions and encourage the accountability of all parties involved, though this finding is less clearly articulated and reliant on definitions of democracy (Ishiyama & Sindre 2023; Manning et al. 2023).

Rebel victories

In these cases, victorious movements have transformed into dominant political parties that monopolise authority, centralise decision-making, and institutionalise former rebel command structures into state apparatuses.

In contrast, when armed groups achieve victory on the battlefield, their political transformation is less about accommodation and more about consolidation of power. Although rebel victories are less common than negotiated settlements, when rebels win wars, the victors often become the new state elite, establishing their military organisation as the foundation of post-war state-building and governance (Liu 2024; Lyons 2016a). Because they assume power unilaterally, they are less constrained by pre-existing institutions and more capable of reshaping political order according to their ideological vision or organisational preference (Liu 2024). This can enable strong state-building, as seen in cases such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in Ethiopia, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in Rwanda, and recently the Taliban in Afghanistan. In these cases, victorious movements have transformed into dominant political parties that monopolise authority, centralise decision-making, and institutionalise former rebel command structures into state apparatuses. Some scholars have highlighted how such transformations often privilege stability and control over pluralism, producing hegemonic regimes instead of competitive democracies (Liu 2025; Lyons 2016b). A legacy of military victory can entrench authoritarian practices, as former rebels in power may equate dissent with renewed rebellion and thus prioritise regime security above political openness. Yet, autocrats also often rely on compromise solutions and the division of power as part of their governance strategies. For instance, after the end of its war in 1991, Ethiopia's ethno-federal system that guaranteed local autonomy was seen by many as a pillar in ensuring political stability in the post-war period (International Crisis Group 2025). Hence, while the trajectory of victorious armed groups often contrasts heavily with groups emerging from

2 See the special issue of Government and Opposition co-edited by Devon Curtis and Gyda M. Sindre (2019) for conceptual discussion and a collection of case studies on the role of armed groups' ideologies in shaping their post-war state-building practices: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/information/what-happens-to-ideas-and-ideology-in-armed-groups-turned-political-parties. For an overview of these findings and policy recommendations, see also the Joint Research Brief Series by PAW, FBA, and UNDPO/OROLSI/DDR: https://fba.se/en/about-fba/publications/the-political-dynamics-of-ddr-key-research-findings/

negotiated peace – where the pursuit of compromise and legitimacy fosters more pluralistic political engagement – sustaining post-war settlements nonetheless can require rebel victors themselves to make careful accommodations through power sharing and compromise.

However, post-war political stability following rebel victory is by no means a uniform outcome. Ethiopia's post-war stability was disrupted by war between the federal and Tigray governments in 2020 followed by renewed tensions with neighbouring Eritrea (International Crisis Group 2025). Other regimes have also proven to be prone to internal dissent and civil wars, as exemplified by the experience of governments formed by rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (1996–1997), Libya (2011), the Central African Republic (2003 and 2012), and Afghanistan in the 1990s (Lyons 2016c, Young & Florea 2025). In the DRC and Libya, although insurgent groups succeeded in toppling the incumbent regimes, these were the result of short-lived wars over large swathes of territory that were fought by weakly organised insurgent groups whose victories were enabled with substantial external backing (Lyons 2016c). In contrast to the well organised and centralised insurgencies in Ethiopia and Rwanda, these rebel victors took power without having developed cohesive leadership structures or the administrative capacity that might otherwise have emerged through more sustained wartime governance, leaving them weak and internally divided once in control. Additional legacies such as 'residual threats' from the previous regime (Young & Florea 2025: 3) and the presence of competing insurgent groups and militias (Florea 2018) pose additional challenges to rebel victors who then struggle to achieve territorial sovereignty.

Nuances

What this tells us is that the distinction between negotiated and military outcomes is not necessarily clear-cut. There are also several cases in which armed groups, after entering politics through negotiated settlements, go on to win elections and consolidate themselves as ruling elites, blurring the line between compromise and dominance. In these cases, the armed groups emerge as victors with international support as an enabling factor in securing political rather than military victories (Sindre 2024b). In places like South Africa, Kosovo, and Timor-Leste, rebel organisations successfully converted their wartime legitimacy and mobilisational capacity into electoral strength, allowing them to dominate post-conflict politics (Sindre 2024b). Their credentials as resistance actors, coupled with strong nationalist or liberation narratives, provided a durable political brand that resonated with broader constituencies. Unlike groups forced into marginal participation, these movements – such as the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Kosovo Liberation Army's (KLA) political successors in Kosovo, and the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) in Timor-Leste – secured electoral mandates that empowered them to shape new state institutions from within.

In Bangsamoro (Philippines) and Aceh (Indonesia), peace agreements institutionalised forms of territorial power sharing that have enabled former insurgents to govern semi-autonomous provinces.

In fact, similar dynamics can be observed where negotiated settlements cement arrangements of regional autonomy, thus significantly restructuring power at the subregional level. Such regional autonomy arrangements can produce territorially concentrated elite power, with ex-rebel groups becoming dominant political actors in subnational regions rather than at the national level (Sindre 2024a). In Bangsamoro (Philippines) and Aceh (Indonesia), peace agreements institutionalised forms of territorial power sharing that have enabled former insurgents to govern semi-autonomous provinces. In those cases, the political inclusion of armed groups was tied to regional state-building, with ex-rebels becoming entrenched subnational elites, manoeuvring between the established political elites at national and regional

levels while exercising significant authority over the post-war political order (Söderberg Kovacs 2021; Sindre 2023).[3]

This trajectory demonstrates that negotiated settlements do not necessarily result in fragile or subordinate ex-rebel parties; under certain conditions they can become hegemonic political forces – whether nationally or regionally – with legitimacy rooted in their wartime achievements and legacies on the one hand and post-war electoral or institutional arrangements on the other. Where agreements have been negotiated in the context of the liberal peace paradigm, political integration is premised upon the armed groups transforming into political parties and doing well in elections, which means power is consolidated through mobilising supporters in electoral competition (Ishiyama & Marshall 2015; Suazo 2013). However, electoral politics is but one defining feature of post-war political orders. As the discussion highlights, rebel victors that take power militarily are also reliant on expanding support bases through accommodating political rivals, navigating competing power dynamics.

What often unites 'rebel political victors' (Sindre 2024a) is not a history of sustained territorial control but rather the development of unified leadership structures, effective political machinery, and a strong diplomatic presence. Examples such as Fretilin in Timor-Leste and the KLA in Kosovo illustrate this dynamic: despite relatively limited military capacity on the ground, both movements cultivated clandestine networks, transnational political organisations, and leaderships capable of mobilising international recognition and support.

In sum, what we can deduct from the broad comparative research in this field is that, across mediated settlements and so-called 'rebel victories', successful cases of 'rebel-to-party transformation' and their post-war political integration highlight that the internal characteristics of armed groups – ranging from organisational cohesion to external diplomatic engagement – play a decisive role in shaping their ability to transition into legitimate political actors after conflict.

Political integration in the changing landscape of conflict and peacemaking

One significant trend in contemporary conflict dynamics is the frequent involvement of highly fluid, decentralised, and fragmented actors with shifting alliances. This creates a challenging environment for peacemaking, which has traditionally been framed around seeking settlements between one armed group and the state. Notable contexts in which multiple armed groups are involved in civil wars are Myanmar, Syria, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Sudan, and the DRC. Across the Sahel, armed conflict involves numerous jihadist factions, local militias, and self-defence groups that operate with overlapping but competing agendas. In Mali and Burkina Faso, alliances between groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have repeatedly splintered, while local militias pursue their own community-based objectives, often mobilising around jihadist agendas (e.g. Cline 2023; Ibrahim 2025).

3 This is distinctly different from power-sharing arrangements in such places as Northern Ireland, where the peace settlement to a large degree cemented wartime sectarian divisions.

In Myanmar, the 2021 military coup triggered an escalation of armed resistance, with dozens of local People's Defence Forces (PDFs) emerging alongside long-standing ethnic resistance organisations (EROs), creating a fragmented armed landscape with limited political co-ordination (Centre on Armed Groups 2025).[4] Such fragmentation not only complicates peace negotiations but can also obstruct the political transformation of armed groups into coherent actors capable of meaningful participation in governance or integration into state institutions.[5]

A second development that complicates conflict resolution in general, and prospects for political integration specifically, is the increasing internationalisation of armed conflicts, in which domestic disputes travel across borders and draw in regional and global powers, transposing otherwise local wars onto an increasingly fragmented geopolitical arena (Dudouet et al. 2025). For example, even though the insurgents in Yemen propagate clearly articulated domestic concerns, the civil war has become a proxy battlefield between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Similarly in Libya, rival factions have been supported by Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia, embedding the conflict in broader regional rivalries.[6] In the Sahel, too, intra-state conflicts have increasingly attracted external intervention, as exemplified by the involvement of Russian private military companies that are impacting the trajectory of local wars and strengthening jihadist networks. These external actors provide resources and political backing to armed groups or state forces, with their presence often entrenches divisions and prolongs violence. Research also finds that the more an Islamist armed group has established formal allegiance with any global jihadist network, the harder it becomes to reach political settlement (Drevon 2024; Dudouet et al. 2025). For local armed movements, internationalisation complicates the prospects of reaching political settlement and envisioning pathways for political inclusion. External sponsorship can also harden the positions of an armed group, making political settlements less likely, while any shifts in the agendas of foreign sponsors can further undermine the frameworks that are supportive for armed groups' integration into political processes.

In the Sahel, too, intra-state conflicts have increasingly attracted external intervention, as exemplified by the involvement of Russian private military companies that are impacting the trajectory of local wars and strengthening jihadist networks.

Considerations and implications for reaching peaceful political settlements

The combined effect of fragmentation of non-state armed groups, internationalisation of intra-state conflicts, and a significantly restructured geopolitical context has contributed to a marked decline in the prospects of reaching negotiated settlements. In contexts such as Myanmar and Mali, the sheer number and diversity of armed actors make it exceedingly difficult to bring all relevant stakeholders to the negotiating table, let alone forge a unified agreement that addresses their divergent interests. At the same time, the involvement of powerful external actors in places such as Yemen, Libya, and the wider Sahel introduces geopolitical rivalries that further complicate compromise. Peace processes are no longer just about reconciling domestic factions but also require navigating the strategic interests of regional and global powers, which often pull in multiple and sometimes opposing directions. As a result, peace negotiations that previously would have aimed to reach comprehensive agreements increasingly struggle to gain traction or durability, with agreements either collapsing prematurely or excluding key actors whose buy-in is essential for lasting peace (Farquhar et.al, 2024). At the same time, the international apparatus that to date has

4 For an analysis of the escalation of conflict and manifestation of EROs in Myanmar after 2011 and prior to the military coup in 2021, see also Brenner (2021).
5 For a more detailed analysis of these dynamics, see Dudouet et al. (2025).
6 For detailed analysis, see for instance Global Conflict Tracker (2025), see also Hellmüller and Salaymeh (2021).

underpinned international peacebuilding is slowly being eroded (e.g. Whitfield 2024). Seen together, these dynamics signal a problematic trend in which armed conflicts are becoming increasingly more protracted, less amenable to reaching inclusive political settlements, and more likely to relapse even after partial accords are reached.[7]

A common key characteristic of a fragmented conflict landscape that impacts pathways towards peace is that the central state (or regime) is either considerably weakened or at the verge of collapse and thereby only one of many stakeholders to the conflict. Outcomes may therefore be strongly reliant on who essentially 'wins' the war. In many conflict contexts, sustained armed mobilisation by multiple – sometimes competing – armed groups significantly restructures state power, providing space for alternative governing models. These dynamics not only shape the prospects for reaching a political settlement but are also central to the type of political settlement that is feasible. If one armed group emerges as dominant, as in the case of the HTS in Syria, which succeeded with their military and (possibly) their political campaign, the premise of peace is also reliant both on the ability and willingness of the victor to negotiate and compromise with competing armed groups and authorities, and for the armed groups compromise around new political settlements.

Where armed groups have successfully taken control of specific territories and governed for sustained periods of time, any new political settlement will be shaped by this new configuration. When outlining the scope for political settlements in such instances, it is essential to ascertain the diverse logics underpinning rebel governance practices. In some types of conflict, the territory under armed groups' control may correspond to an 'ethnic' or regional homeland, as with the Kurds in Syria (i.e. the Party of Democratic Union (PYD) in Rojava) and EROs in Myanmar. In such instances, territorial acquisition is also an extension of their political project of seeking regional autonomy.

In other contexts, armed groups may not seek the autonomy of an ethnic homeland but rather to attain territorial strongholds as a result of strategic calculations of how to wrest control from government forces. The pro-democracy rebels in Myanmar, such as the PDFs and the allied National Unity Government (NUG), are rooted in a popular anti-regime front that aims to take power at the centre and then take the lead in reconciling a new federal structure. In such a situation, relations between armed groups is a key factor: armed groups operating in the same region are not necessarily in direct confrontation with each other. Some will strategise to build alliances, whether as a result of strategic political calculations or battlefield logics, while others become embedded in coalitions. Still others may become displaced or eradicated from a region as a result of intergroup fighting. These are patterns recently observed in Syria, as the HTS rose to power through securing alliances with groups previously seen as competitors (Drevon 2024). Such developments signal the importance of assessing intergroup relations as well as intra-group dynamics when seeking political settlement. In this landscape, it is important to assess the characteristics of an armed group when considering pathways and opportunities for political settlement that involve its political integration and position after the war.[8]

The next section presents a typology of armed groups that takes into account the integration prospects of armed groups.

7 For discussion on changing global orders and the decline in liberal peace frameworks, see for instance Holm (2025), which is also linked to broader debates about 'illiberal peace'.

8 Insights based on primary interviews conducted by the author with Myanmar civil society activists, PDF members in exile, and Syrian civil society groups, October 2024 and May 2025.

Typology of armed groups and their prospects for political integration

From the above discussion, we can identify some core traits that influence the likelihood of political integration, here presented as a typology. Categorising armed groups by their core characteristics, likelihood for successful political integration, and participation in peace processes, the typology distinguishes between four archetypes of armed groups: reformist movements, proto-state actors, opportunistic groups, and ideologically radical groups. Importantly, the categories are not mutually exclusive but serve the purpose of identifying main characteristics. The discussion below outlines the key traits of each and considers the nuances that need to be taken into consideration in deploying this typology. While a typology such as this will never capture the full reality on the ground and an armed group may fit several categories, it is meant to be a tool for researchers and policymakers to distinguish between groups and their potential likelihood of and pathways towards political integration. In order to illustrate its relevance to present-day peacemaking, the typology includes examples of contemporary armed groups in each category.

Reformist movements are characterised by moderate ideological goals, broad-based support, and demonstrated willingness to engage in formal political processes. These groups often actively seek inclusion in governance structures and possess a relatively clear political agenda. The reformist agenda can encompass a broad range of demands, but its core trait is that it is not premised upon seeking exclusionary political order. It is often formulated as seeking regime change and is anchored in popular legitimacy. Prominent contemporary examples of reformist movements include the People's Defence Forces (PDFs) in Myanmar that have strong links to the country's pro-democracy movement, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) in Northern Mali, an armed group that explicitly rejects Islamist rule and advocates for a secular political order opposing jihadist groups in the region, and the Sudan's People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-North) that has positioned itself as part of a broader Sudanese pro-democracy movement. Their history of constructive participation in peace talks, whether at international or local levels, alongside efforts at building alliances with broader civic movements, make reformist movements highly viable candidates for negotiated political integration that can play a constructive role in long-term peacebuilding. Although at times organised as military organisations with sustained fighting capabilities, they also display traits resembling social and political movements or parties.

Proto-state actors operate with substantial territorial control and governance capacity. They often fulfil state-like functions, administer services, and command some level of local legitimacy. However, their strategic participation in peace talks varies, driven in part by their bargaining power and desire for formal recognition. Their political aspirations are tied to their political goals. For instance, proto-state actors that mobilise around a regional or ethnic identity, such as the PYD in the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria in Rojava, will be more likely to seek political settlements that preserve their hold on power. These actors pose complex challenges, as their political integration often requires constitutional or power-sharing changes that alter the existing state structure while maintaining their own hold on power. Proto-state actors will choose to seek political settlements on the basis of battleground logic and their own territorial and political achievements.

Opportunistic militias include loosely organised, often predatory actors with fluctuating alliances and minimal ideological commitments. While these groups typically lack long-term political goals, they may be co-opted or demobilised through localised security arrangements or disarmament programmes. Examples include the Janjaweed in Sudan, Dozo groups in Mali and Burkina Faso, and various tribal and paramilitary forces in Yemen and Colombia respectively.

Ideologically radical groups – such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and certain splinters of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) – espouse rigid ideological positions and frequently engage in indiscriminate violence, especially after joining transnational jihadist networks that does not allow the armed group's local leadership on the inside of its power structures. There are often weak links between these groups and local communities. These groups generally reject negotiations to reach political settlements and tend to be excluded from peace processes due to proscription regulations. Their integration prospects are relatively low, at least at group level, and policy efforts typically focus on containment, counter-terrorism, and deradicalisation rather than political inclusion.

Nuances: Importantly, these categories are not rigid, as there is often overlap between group types. Reformist movements may evolve into proto-state actors as they establish territorial control and governance if the opportunity arises, for instance following advances on the battlefield or the withdrawal of state forces from regions. This was the case with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and the PYD in Rojava in Syria. Likewise, some proto-state actors can display radical ideological traits, such as ISIS during its territorial peak and the Taliban after its successful return to state control in Afghanistan in 2021. Even opportunistic militias can adopt ideological language or engage in governance if incentivised. Understanding these fluid boundaries is essential to avoid oversimplification and adapt policy responses as the groups evolve.

Table 1: Typology of armed groups and integration prospects

Group Type	Core Traits	Integration Prospects	Participation in Peace Talks	Examples
Reformist movements	Moderate ideology, broad popular support, sustained political engagement, organisationally diverse	High	Regular and constructive participation	PDFs / NUG (Myanmar), SPLM-N, al-Hilou faction (Sudan) MNLA (Tuareg, Sahel)
Proto-state actor	Holds territorial control, sustained governance, ideologically committed, centralised organisation Popular legitimacy reliant on type of governance	Medium to high	Often selective or strategic participation	PYD Rojava (Syria), Houthis (Yemen), Hezbollah (Lebanon), Arakan Army (AA) and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) (Myanmar)
Opportunistic militias	Shifting alliances, predatory behaviour, low ideology, fragmented organisational structure	Low	May be included in local agreements or disarmament deals	Sudanese Janjaweed, Dozo groups/militias (Mali / Burkina Faso), Colombian paramilitaries
Ideologically radical	Rigid ideology, indiscriminate violence, little local support, dispersed ideology	Very low	Typically excluded or reject participation	ISIS/Daesh, AQAP (Yemen), JNIM splinters (Sahel), ISIS-GS (Sahel)

9 Note that this is a descriptive typology that treats core traits as the primary analytical dimension from which both integration prospects and participation in peace talks are derived. Core traits are relatively stable characteristics of armed groups that condition their potential for integration into political structures. Groups may engage in negotiations without necessarily possessing high integration prospects and vice versa.

Recommendations to support the political integration of armed groups

...whether an armed group enters politics through a negotiated settlement, outright military victory, or a hybrid pathway, its prospects for sustainable political transformation are heavily shaped by its wartime characteristics, organisational capacity, and legitimacy among prospective constituents.

The political integration of armed groups remains one of the most complex yet decisive elements in how post-war political orders are shaped. As this discussion paper has demonstrated, whether an armed group enters politics through a negotiated settlement, outright military victory, or a hybrid pathway, its prospects for sustainable political transformation are heavily shaped by its wartime characteristics, organisational capacity, and legitimacy among prospective constituents. As research has highlighted, achieving enduring stability requires armed actors to transform wartime authority into inclusive political legitimacy. The experience of groups ranging from the ANC in South Africa to the RPF in Rwanda underscores both the opportunities and perils of such transformations: while some cases demonstrate that rebel movements can become stable state-builders, others reveal how authoritarian legacies or weak institutionalisation can entrench or renew conflict.

Contemporary conflict environments complicate these processes further. The fragmentation of armed movements, internationalisation of wars, and decline of prospects for mediated peace processes weaken the traditional frameworks for political integration. In contexts such as Myanmar and the Sahel, the coexistence of multiple armed actors and external patrons generates fluid and unstable political orders in which integration is less about formal settlements and more about ongoing negotiation, accommodation, or exclusion. This marks a departure from the liberal peace paradigm that dominated much of the post-Cold War era and calls for a recalibration of scholarly and policy approaches alike. It also highlights that while wartime victories may provide an armed group with immediate political authority, the sustainability of its rule depends on its capacity to manage coalitions, accommodate rivals, and engage with wider populations.

Ultimately, despite the unravelling of familiar frameworks, it is still possible to discern specific mechanisms that can revitalise opportunities for peace. As is well documented, armed groups' successful pathways towards peace will not emerge from one-size-fits-all prescriptions but rather from carefully tailored strategies that account for their ideological, organisational, and relational characteristics, as well as the broader (geo)political environment in which they operate. Supporting transitions from armed struggle to political participation requires balancing pragmatism with principles – engaging even difficult actors, when necessary, while simultaneously upholding norms of inclusivity, accountability, and human rights.

Syria is a highly relevant case in point: the HTS takeover illustrates both the risks and opportunities of rebel victory. While the HTS's governance capacity and consolidation of power may enable a functioning post-war political order, it will be its ability to adapt ideological orientation, secure popular and broad-based political legitimacy, and engage with rival actors – some of whom remain armed – that will determine whether Syria moves towards peace or prolonged instability. In this regard, several lessons can be learned from previous historical cases of victors' peace, especially those in which the armed groups sustained political victories. Importantly, it is unrealistic to expect a group such as the HTS to transform immediately into a pluralist political actor. What we know from comparative research on armed groups' political integration over time, is that support for incremental reform can be an important avenue. In cases of rebel victories, this could include expanding civilian representation in local governance, introducing gradual security sector reforms, and enabling limited political competition at municipal levels. In conclusion, deducting from the typology and discussion,

the following policy recommendations can help both international and local peacebuilding practitioners to support the political integration of armed groups:

1. **Differentiate engagement strategies by group type**
    - Develop policy responses tailored to the type of armed group (reformist, proto-state, ideological, opportunistic). For instance, reformist groups may benefit from institutional inclusion and electoral support, while proto-state actors may require negotiated autonomy or federal arrangements. Radical ideological groups may demand containment, while opportunistic militias may be co-opted through local security or economic incentives.

2. **Encourage and facilitate broad-based movements and coalition-building**
    - Encourage political settlements and governance structures that are inclusive of multiple actors, including the armed groups themselves.
    - Work with armed groups to identify bridge-builders, i.e. those actors likely to seek to build coalitions and alliances and engage with competing factions.

3. **Identify and address specific wartime governance legacies of the armed groups**
    - Recognise and engage with wartime governance practices of armed groups rather than attempting to erase them. Where feasible, integrate existing administrative structures into formal institutions, especially at sub-regional levels, to avoid governance vacuums.

4. **Differentiate between agendas of international actors and the armed groups themselves**
    - As international involvement can be temporary, lay the groundwork for longer-term engagement through connecting with armed actors on the ground.

5. **Strengthen local peace infrastructure, including those of armed groups**
    - Build capacity for local mediation, reconciliation, and community-based governance initiatives to complement national-level political integration and prevent relapse into conflict.
    - Recognise capacity within armed groups to lead peace efforts – such as political offices, allied social and political groups, and diplomatic fronts – and support these actors' initiatives.

6. **Adopt a long-term, sequenced approach**
    - Recognise that political integration is a gradual process. Support incremental measures – such as local ceasefires, joint governance arrangements, and phased demobilisation – before expecting full party institutionalisation. Support armed groups' political integration as part of general demobilisation efforts.

Abbreviations

AA – Arakan Army (Myanmar)

ANC – African National Congress

AQAP – Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

DDR – disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration

DRC – Democratic Republic of Congo

EPRDF – Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democracy Front

ERO – ethnic resistance organisation (Myanmar)

FARC – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

FMLN – Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (El Salvador)

Fretilin – Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Timor Leste)

HTS – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

IRA – Irish Republican Army

ISIS – Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

ISIS GS – Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

JNIM – Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin

KIA – Kachin Independence Army (Myanmar)

KLA – Kosovo Liberation Army (Kosovo)

MILF – Moro Islamic Liberation Front

MNLA – National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Tuareg – Sahel)

NUG – National Unity Government (Myanmar)

PYD – Party of Democratic Union (Rojava, Syria)

SPLM-N – Sudan People's Liberation Movement – North

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Confronting the dilemmas of humanitarian borderwork: NGO engagements with Australian offshore detention

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Abstract

This paper explores the ethical and strategic challenges that measures intended to deter unauthorised migration present to humanitarian organisations, focusing on the use of offshore detention. The case study of Australian offshore detention in the Pacific allows consideration of two specific operational experiences: one in which Save the Children worked inside detention centres as a government contractor, and another in which Médecins Sans Frontières worked outside of and independent from the detention apparatus, although in the same context. The paper argues that dynamics inherent to the context of offshore detention make sustained humanitarian operations untenable and poses questions about the implications for organisations wishing to contribute to reducing the harms caused by deterrence measures.

Introduction

There is a broad consensus in practitioner and scholarly literature that the roles of humanitarian organisations in contexts of displacement and confinement pose ethical challenges. This understanding has been built by several generations of aid analysts and scholars working in different displacement contexts; it includes research on conventional top-down assistance (Chambers 1983; Harrell-Bond 1986), the politics of large-scale encampment (Terry 2002, Zolberg, Suhrke & Aguayo 1989); the functioning of asylum bureaucracies (Fassin 2011; Ticktin 2011), and the roles of grassroots groups (Sandri & Bugoni 2018). Such research has shown that – in the words of anthropologist Michel Agier (2011: 33) – humanitarian action is, 'if not systematically "trapped", at least included a priori in the control strategies of migratory flows of all kinds'. That such a large proportion of aid funding originates from governments that espouse these controls, whether or not particular grants reflect that intent, has implications for the independence of the formal international aid system.

Recently, a growing body of work has examined how ideas and practices associated with humaneness have become part of the management of the border itself, as a material or legal space that states seek to control. The concept of the 'humanitarian border' recognises that notions of compassion, humaneness, and protection coexist and interact with the securitisation and militarisation of the border – as borders have hardened, they have also been 'humanitarianised' (Walters, 2010; see also Little & Vaughan-Williams 2017; Williams 2015). The politics of maritime search and rescue, for example, reflect conflictual but nonetheless entangled agendas, such as protection of borders, rejection of people smuggling, prevention of deaths at sea, and respect for international law (Del Valle 2016; Pallister-Wilkins 2018; Healy & Russell 2021). Polly Pallister-Wilkins (2022: 52) has drawn attention to the role of non-state actors in what she termed 'humanitarian borderwork', understood as 'the work of saving lives in border spaces'.

Over several decades, governments in wealthy Western countries have developed a suite of policies and practices, from militarised infrastructure to administrative controls, with the goal of deterring unauthorised movement.

Today, practices of humanitarian borderwork are often to be found where measures intended to deter unauthorised movement make themselves felt upon the bodies of those whose mobility is being targeted. Over several decades, governments in wealthy Western countries have developed a suite of policies and practices, from militarised infrastructure to administrative controls, with the goal of deterring unauthorised movement. Some rely on the 'externalisation' of immigration control – the extension of border security measures beyond a country's territory. Others make border environments more inhospitable and conditions on arrival more harsh. This trend has produced several 'zones of exclusion' associated with states

'consciously asserting a Western identity' (Grewcock 2009: 57): the European Union, the United Kingdom, North America, and Australia.

People constrained to approach these zones without authorisation (e.g. without a visa) face numerous and severe dangers. They often undertake multiple journeys over years, journeys that are fraught with dangers due to their having been pushed towards clandestinity and the most difficult routes. Indeed, over 72,000 people are known to have died during such journeys from 2014 to 2024 (Missing Migrants Project 2025) and this is significantly less than the real number. Survivors are often physically weakened by their journeys, frequently lacking food and water, unable to access health care sometimes for years on end, and face the risk of beatings, extortion, and (especially for women) rape and sexual exploitation. They also run the risk of being pulled into a territorial and extraterritorial 'enforcement archipelago' (Mountz 2011) – the spatial infrastructures resulting from states' efforts to contain and control mobility. The enforcement archipelago is made up of sites including detention centres, assessment or processing facilities, transit centres, and deportation infrastructures (noting that these functions are not always clearly delineated or upheld). In these sites, physical and social isolation serves to inhibit access to legal assistance, community support, welfare services, education, employment, and sometimes even needs as basic as food and healthcare.

For humanitarian organisations, whose self-defined mandate – at its largest – is to save lives, alleviate suffering, and uphold human dignity, this situation presents difficult challenges. In the 'enforcement archipelago', working as an official contractor is one way to ensure access, but this contravenes the humanitarian principle of independence and raises questions of active complicity. Acting independently in these environments, however, is not free of the risk of compromise. Both scenarios give rise to the possibility that humanitarian agencies find themselves in the position of being 'the nosegays which disguise the stench of reality' – as one observer described the role of children's charity Barnardo's in British onshore detention (Webber 17 March 2011). That is, while potentially facilitating care or assistance in the immediate term, the presence of such organisations may help to create a false impression of respect for international norms, soften the image of deterrence measures, or reduce public scrutiny of them – thereby potentially facilitating their continuation.

This paper examines the challenges that the expansion of deterrence measures – and specifically the practice of offshoring – presents to humanitarian organisations. It uses the case study of Australian offshore detention in the Pacific, the history and context of which is summarised in the next section. The focus then turns to the distinct experiences of two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) during two contained periods within the longer – and ongoing – history of Australian offshore detention: Save the Children Australia (SCA), which worked as a government service provider inside offshore detention, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which ran an independent project shaped by that environment.[1]

A deliberate choice has been made not to address analysis in this paper towards political decision-makers and public servants involved in the definition and implementation of migration policies, particularly those who may be engaged in establishing or managing offshore centres or other forms of immigration detention. This is in recognition of the extensive advisory material that already indicates the ways in which such detention causes harm and violates international obligations (e.g., for the Australian case, Amnesty International Australia 2013; Amnesty International 2016; Australian Human Rights Commission 2014; Bem et al 2007; Human Rights

1 These national sections are part of larger international movements. Unless otherwise indicated, references in this paper are to the Australian sections.

and Equal Opportunity Commission 2004; Gleeson & Yacoub 2021; Mendez 2015). Instead, it prioritises NGOs, specifically humanitarian organisations, with the potential to undertake operations in these settings.

The paper treats humanitarian organisations as policy actors, exploring how the decline of norms in the international arena presents ethical and operational challenges to which aid organisations must react. Scholars have recognised the advocacy role of NGOs as co-producers of the norms to which states have committed (Keck & Sikkink 1998). This paper provides an empirically grounded investigation into what can happen when states abandon those commitments, even as they retain their links with NGOs as preferred partners. Although these challenges are not new, they are acute. International law seeking to regulate the use of violence has been subject to flagrant violations and its exclusionary tendancies have been instrumentalised (Kattan and Fuhrmann 2024), to the profound harm of the people whose protection it is claimed to serve. At the same time, a sharp downturn in development aid and humanitarian assistance has cut off funds vital to NGOs, driving debate about a shift 'from peak aid to a post-aid world' (Gulrajani 2026) – a possibility welcomed by some and lamented by others. In this turbulent context, NGOs are confronted with a multifaceted hardening of conditions that accentuates pressure on ambiguities inherent in their positions and roles.

Deterrence and offshoring

Arguments about forced displacement are at the centre of 21st-century political life. While Western countries host only a small proportion of the global total of people who have been forcibly displaced, populist politicians have elevated asylum to a core election issue. Leaders of other countries that do host large groups of displaced persons – such as Syrians in Lebanon or Rohingya in Bangladesh – have come under domestic pressure to withdraw hospitality and assistance. Climate change has raised the stakes, with some commentators envisaging the future displacement of a billion people or more (Frouws & Bonfiglio 15 October 2024; Vince 2022). The political importance thus attached to the issue of asylum has weakened rather than strengthened its fundamental tenets.

Although deterrence policies have proved both expensive and ineffective, these measures have consistently spread. Already in the 1980s, a review of responses to forced displacement argued that restrictive measures 'often do not work, they are based on false assumptions, and they violate humanitarian norms' (Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues 1986: 41). Forty years later, they continue to proliferate, degrading the fabric of international norms on asylum and protection to an extent that may spell their 'death' (FitzGerald 2019; Hargrave & Pantuliano 2016; Mountz 2020). These policies entail significant expenditure for governments and lucrative opportunities for contractors, with the global 'border security' market predicted to grow to an annual turnover of US$81 billion by 2030 (Akkerman 2023).

Along with the US, the UK, and Canada, Australia has been integral to the emergence of an 'Anglo model' of immigration detention, characterised by the use of mandatory and/or indefinite detention, private security actors, and 'creative legal geographies' (Mainwaring & Cook 2018). Approaches have been explicitly shared between these actors and others, with Australians playing a proactive role. For example, Australian governments have facilitated foreign government delegation visits to detention sites, and key architects of its immigration policies have served as advisors to British governments (e.g. Home Office et al 2022), part of an active process of 'policy transfer' (Matera, Tubakovic & Murray 2023).

The expansion of aggressive forms of offshoring has drawn attention to the use of external geographies in efforts to deter unwanted migration, which has a much longer history. After the upsurge of unauthorised migration to Europe in the mid-2010s, the EU struck a deal with Turkey for the management of unwanted migrants. Subsequently, several states in the region, including the UK, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands, have held discussions of various kinds to establish extraterritorial detention in Rwanda, while the Italian government struck a deal with Albania, promoting offshore approaches as 'an extraordinary tool of deterrence' (Tondo 11 October 2024). US President Donald Trump has supercharged the long-standing practice of interdiction of migrants and offshoring of their reception and/or processing (first applied to Cubans in the 1980s, then Haitians in the 1990s), reportedly approaching dozens of countries with proposals to deport migrants from US soil, including countries with active conflicts. In so doing, according to one displacement expert, his administration has entered new terrain by 'explicitly using these vulnerable populations as bargaining chips in a wider strategy of diplomatic and geopolitical deal making' (Crisp 23 July 2025).

If the Trump administration appears as an extreme case, all offshoring arrangements are transactional, relying on agreements in which the deporting state offers enticements to the receiving state, whether direct payments, increased aid, preferential trade or visa arrangements, diplomatic support, and so on. Although they contradict international legal obligations, it is important to recognise that these arrangements are 'neither unusual nor exceptional malfunctions of the system, but rather regular, routine and longstanding features of it' (Adamson & Greenhill 2023: 710). Indeed, contemporary practices have precursors in the early and mid-20th century, such as forced transfers and population exchanges, with the application of spurious 'humanitarian' language representing a continuity between these schemes and those of the present day (ibid).

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Australian immigration and asylum history

Distinctive for the extreme and sustained nature of its offshore detention, an Australian 'model' has been identified by other governments, by commentators on migration policy, and by scholars analysing the spread of deterrence frameworks (Matera, Tubakovic & Murray 2023). It thus exemplifies central features of the offshoring trend and of the externalisation of immigration control more generally. At the same time, it reflects histories of colonisation, immigration, and nation-building particular to the country and region.

An emphasis on strict control has been a defining feature of modern Australia's migration frameworks, expressive of the anxieties of a white-led settler society established far from its imperial metropole and among countries cast as invasion threats (Hage 2000; Jupp 2007; Mares 2002). After federation in 1901, the first substantive legislation passed by the national parliament was the Immigration Restriction Act. A pillar of what became known as the 'White Australia policy', the act restricted entry to those who could pass (when required) a dictation test that could be administered in any European language. Across different periods, certain political figures and groups in Australia have chosen to cultivate and amplify xenophobic anxieties through narratives of threat and protection. Integral to this has been an 'insular imagination' of an island nation, physically and metaphorically, and a racialised hierarchy that rationalised the dispossession of the First Nations who were its original custodians (Nethery 2012; Perera 2009).

For decades after federation, Australia did not have a separate policy for people who had been forcibly displaced. Instead, they were considered within the general migration framework and according to its logics – culturally, in terms of a perceived ability to assimilate to settler

colonial society, and economically, in terms of their potential value. Most arrived from Europe through resettlement programs (Neumann 2015). This changed in the 1970s: White Australia policy was officially ended in 1973, and from 1975 onwards the Southeast Asian refugee crisis saw the first major cohort of non-European people to be granted entry to Australia, primarily Vietnamese resettled as refugees. Asylum claim systems were established as boats began reaching Australian shores. This period also saw the adoption in certain public discourses of a distinction between 'genuine' refugees and economic migrants considered to be 'jumping the queue' of conventional immigration routes (Stevens 2012). Such distinctions would be significant in public support for increasingly rigid deterrence measures.

The management of asylum hardened progressively from the 1990s onwards. Mandatory detention was introduced for all people who arrived without a valid visa, including those claiming asylum, intended as a deterrent. Several new detention centres were established in remote onshore locations. Their management was privatised in 1996, a decision that opened the way for non-state actors' central roles in immigration detention. Since 2001, military operations in the seas north of Australia have intercepted boats and turned them back towards their point of departure (usually Indonesia). Australian territories have also been progressively 'excised' from its immigration zone.

Offshore detention in the Pacific

Offshore detention is a treatment reserved specifically for people who arrive in Australia (or attempt to) without a visa via boat; it does not apply to those who arrive by plane. Its first, hasty iteration was in August 2001, following a standoff over the fate of 433 asylum seekers rescued in international waters near Australia by the Norwegian ship MV Tampa. A bilateral government agreement provided for those rescued by the Tampa to be sent for 'processing' to the Pacific Island nation of Nauru, where they would be held in closed detention. All costs would be paid by Australia. Within a month, the Australian government concluded a second agreement with the government of Papua New Guinea (PNG), for a detention site within a naval base on Manus Island.

Since that time, the policy framework of offshore detention has evolved through improvisation and consolidation in two main periods. The first ran from 2001 to 2008, under the conservative government of John Howard, when it was dubbed the 'Pacific Solution' (Metcalfe 2010; Nazari 2024). The second began in 2012, evolving under governments from both sides of the aisle, and continues today (Gleeson 2016). As of July 2013, governments have ruled out the possibility of permanent settlement in Australia for anyone who has arrived via boat without a valid visa – including those whose protection claims have been upheld – resulting in a drastic increase in the average length of detention.

The colonial echoes of these arrangements (Nauru and PNG were both previously administered by Australia), as well as the racialised exclusion measures described above, are indicative of the historical continuities in Australian immigration and asylum controls. In the words of Behrouz Boochani (20 September 2020), the celebrated Kurdish writer detained on Manus Island: 'the xenophobic legacy of the White Australia policy had a significant impact on the trajectory of my life and choked the lives of thousands of asylum-seekers and migrants who were held by Australia in offshore detention centers.'

Conditions of detention under this policy, though, have varied over time. While it has been several years since fully closed detention centres constituted the main form of offshore accommodation, it is important to recognise that the islands themselves represent a form of detention for people sent against their will (Amnesty International 2016: 5). This has

many profound impacts on individuals, as well as their families and friends elsewhere, and is an important element when considering potential arguments for the role of humanitarian organisations.

Humanitarianism in the context of offshore detention

Among a large ecosystem of mostly for-profit providers in Australian immigration detention (Evershed 25 August 2014), a small number of not-for-profit organisations have worked as contractors in offshore detention. This discussion focuses on two organisations that intervened in different ways to offer support to people in offshore detention.

The first example deals with government-contracted programmes run by the Australian section of Save the Children inside the offshore camps. Save the Children began as an activist fund, founded by British feminists and pacifists in the wake of the First World War, and expanded by popularising the idea of child rights and running aid programmes (Baughan 2022). From October 2012 to October 2015, its staff provided education and tried to support the interests and welfare of children, families, and (eventually) adults without children, first on Manus Island and then on Nauru.

The second example looks at a Médecins Sans Frontières project offering mental healthcare on Nauru outside the framework of government contracting. MSF (also known as Doctors Without Borders) is a specialist medical emergency organisation founded in France in 1971. Its practice of speaking out (often referred to as 'témoignage') and rejection of government funding have resulted in a highly independent and outspoken organisational culture (Redfield 2013). MSF provided free mental health services on Nauru from November 2017 until October 2018, acting independently but with the assent of the Nauruan ministry of health.

Working as a government contractor: Save the Children

Save the Children Australia's role in offshore detention came about as the policy was being restored in 2012. It evolved greatly over time, expanding from a small team with a handful of members to a large cohort of staff numbering in the hundreds.

Save the Children's offshore work began on Manus Island. The organisation signed an initial 'letter of intent' with the Australian government in October 2012. The core of Save the Children's offshore role was its responsibility for the welfare and support of children detained without parents or other family members to act as legal guardians; children in family groups; and these children's family members. Its staff had duties related to child protection and case management and acted as 'independent observers' during meetings with officials. Teachers held classes, and the recreation team ran games and – eventually – outside excursions.

This work ended in mid-2013 when the Australian government decided to remove all children and their families from detention, ending the rationale for Save the Children's presence. However, the pause was brief as a new cohort of families was almost immediately deported to offshore detention – this time on Nauru. Save the Children was again approached by the Australian government to provide services, and again it accepted. While the number of children on Manus Island stayed below 40, the number of children sent to Nauru peaked at well over 200.

From June 2015, the group also included infants, despite Save the Children having warned of 'potentially catastrophic' consequences for babies in offshore detention (Farrell 24 June 2015).

Negotiations over contract terms were protracted, including over cost-saving demands that Save the Children eventually considered would place people's safety at risk and over the retention of the organisation's independent voice (Ronalds 2016). In total, Save the Children's offshore contracts amounted on paper to AU$160 million, though by late 2016 (a year after its contracts finished) it had received a total of AU$76 million, according to the national auditor (Auditor-General 2016: 23).

In addition to increasing in scale, the scope of Save the Children's role also grew. In February 2014, when the Australian government chose not to renew a contract held by the Salvation Army, Save the Children took on welfare services for everyone except single adult males. From May of that year, it added roles outside the detention centre, as people began to be 'resettled' following positive refugee status determinations. It reported supporting roughly 1,100 people in total, with particular success in the camp 'school', which had a claimed average attendance rate of 90 per cent (SCA 2015: 38).

A dramatic public confrontation with the Australian government dominated the organisation's final year on Nauru. On 2 October 2014, nine Save the Children staff on Nauru received notices of removal; a tenth person targeted had already left the island. The following day, the Sydney-based tabloid newspaper The Daily Telegraph reported that they had been accused of 'fabricating' abuse and encouraging self-harm among people in detention, to 'manufacture' protest. Leaders of Save the Children Australia came out strongly in defence of their personnel, declaring that 'we want the rest of the world to see the truth behind what is happening on Nauru too' (Ronalds 8 October 2014). Two official inquiries conducted by government-appointed investigators found that the allegations were groundless and recommended redress for the organisation and its employees (Moss 2015; Doogan 2015).

Save the Children's contract for work on Nauru lapsed at the end of October 2015. Welfare and resettlement services became the responsibility of for-profit providers. Offshore tender rules were changed, effectively barring NGOs from bidding as direct contractors. Save the Children sought to renew its work as a subcontractor in a tender by a commercial company, but the bid was not successful.

Providing independent services: Médecins Sans Frontières

Médecins Sans Frontières's work on Nauru was undertaken independently through its own financing. Nonetheless, MSF still had to confront the tight control exerted in the environment of offshore detention.

According to its reports, MSF began considering the possibility of a project on Nauru in 2016, some two years before it opened the project. A memorandum of understanding was signed between the Nauruan ministry of health and MSF in June 2017. The parties agreed that MSF would offer a 'one equal door service for psychosocial and mental health' open to everyone – Nauruan residents, refugees, asylum seekers, and foreign workers.

The project started at the beginning of November 2017. The team included a mental health manager, a psychologist, two psychiatrists, a health promoter (to lead outreach), and two cultural mediators (to interpret and support communication). In 11 months, they provided 2,132 consultations to 285 patients, of whom 68 per cent were refugees, 5 per cent were asylum seekers, and 22 per cent were Nauruan nationals (MSF 2018: 15). The service was accessible in the island's public health clinic and through other points of contact.

MSF's clinic filled gaps in healthcare on the island. For Nauruans, stigma around mental illness and limited existing services meant that treatment for Nauruan nationals had been limited. For people sent to Nauru by the Australian government, the option to access a medical service independent of authorities addressed a different kind of gap. Whistle-blowers have spoken about how resourcing, political, and attitude problems affected the level of care provided by International Health and Medical Services (IHMS), long the main provider of healthcare in Australian immigration detention (Farrell 21 July 2015). MSF reported that people had difficulty trusting IHMS staff because of high turnover and perceptions of complicity (MSF 2018: 26-27).

On 5 October 2018, the Nauruan government abruptly ordered MSF to stop work within 24 hours. Leaders of the organisation and members of the project team spoke publicly about the situation they had witnessed on the island and the implications of this decision for individuals who had been receiving treatment. A press release explained that 'no therapeutic solution can be considered possible for people indefinitely held on Nauru' (MSF 11 October 2018). The Nauruan government lashed out in response, complaining that 'the statement made by MSF representatives referring to our sovereign nation, which is our beloved home, as an "open air prison"' revealed MSF's status as 'political activists' who had 'conspired against us' (Government of the Republic of Nauru, 12 October 2018).

Subsequent analysis of clinical data revealed that Nauruan patients responded more positively to treatment than refugee and asylum seeker patients (MSF 2018). Seeking to mitigate the impacts of the withdrawal of treatment, MSF put in place a remote consultation service for patients on Nauru starting in early February 2019. This also ended within less than a month when the government of Nauru passed new legislation banning telemedicine.

Case comparison and recommendations for organisations

The two NGOs' experiences in the Pacific offshore detention environment suggest that any role for humanitarian organisations in offshore settings will be short-lived. Both organisations experienced tensions escalating to outright conflict with authorities, ultimately making their position untenable. Discussing these two examples together, however, should not minimise the differences between them – above all, the different relationships they had with the machinery of offshore detention, influenced by the different pathways that brought them to their respective positions.

Both organisations are leaders in their respective fields and among the largest, most prominent international humanitarian organisations worldwide. Over time they have cultivated different cultures, which shape decision-making in interaction with other contextual factors. Briefly (and generalising), the Save the Children movement has prioritised the 'pursuit of financial resources and access to power' in the name of its humanist goals (Owen 2021: 53). Its most influential sections have generally been more likely to embrace action that brings them closer to government than to refuse engagement, even when this entails compromises. While MSF has also pursued growth, it has done so according to a narrative of exceptionalism, seeking to distance itself not only from donor governments but sometimes also from structures and initiatives intended to help improve the quality of humanitarian responses (Terry 2000). In both cases, however, their status as fundraising organisations that seek support from individuals and from other kinds of organisation (such as businesses) means that, in addition to endogenous factors, they have an interest in protecting external perceptions of their integrity.

If Save the Children's choice to take on an offshore contract was not inevitable, they were probably among few humanitarian organisations that would consider it. Paul Ronalds (2016: 9), who became CEO in time to make the call about Nauru, has given a public account of their reasoning (no equivalent account is available for the PNG phase). It included: a perception that preventing offshore detention was impossible; a belief that a humanitarian organisation would prioritise the best interests of people detained more than for-profit companies; and commitment to certain forms of expertise and standards as essential to supporting children and families, particularly in spheres of social work, child protection, and education.

In the very early stages of the return of offshore detention, it may have been possible to base such a decision on the potential for constructive engagement – the belief that Canberra would be 'open to our advice on ways to ameliorate the impact of their policies' (Ronalds 2016: 9). The subsequent decline of the relationships with successive governments, which accompanied the hardening conditions and increasing human toll, suggests this optimism was ultimately misplaced. Friction created by behind-closed-doors advocacy was a factor in deteriorating relationships, as Save the Children employees and managers raised concerns with representatives of other service providers, the Australian department of immigration, and political leadership (Miller & Coleman 2015; Ronalds 2016). The organisation's leaders also offered public testimony about conditions in offshore detention (e.g. Tinkler 4 April 2014). Outside of official channels, a series of leaks and public statements by whistle-blowers was also an important factor, albeit beyond Save the Children's power to prevent (Davey 2021).

A downturn in government relations also occurred during MSF's project. It reported that staff 'experienced numerous cases of deliberate obstruction of their medical duties by Nauruan officials on spurious grounds' and described difficulties coordinating with some IHMS personnel, including potential patients being told they had to choose between being treated by either IHMS or MSF (MSF 2019: 9). Paul McPhun, the organisation's executive director, suggested that the project's ability to reveal the depth of the crisis may have motivated the decision to force its closure, so that 'we were not in a position to be able to expose this fundamental reality' (Hansard 2019: 63). Psychiatrist Patricia Schmid (2019: 630), who worked for MSF on Nauru, referenced care for people with 'suicidal intent' – a marker of the difficulties on the island – as particularly important in creating tension. Some patients used MSF-generated medical records as part of legal actions seeking evacuations, a pattern that was unlikely to please authorities that were reportedly opposing and obstructing transfers (Davidson 10 October 2018). Ultimately, due to the political implications of caring for people detained offshore, there is evidence that both organisations were seen by the governments involved as creating rather than responding to problems, serving to some extent as scapegoats for the impacts of policy developments in Australia and incidents on the islands (e.g. Chalmers 13 March 2015).

While advocating or speaking out increases the risk of conflict with authorities, accepting an imposed silence regarding intolerable conditions would be a violation of humanitarian ethics. According to Ronalds (2016: 10), for Save the Children, ethical action was only possible if the organisation 'clearly retained our right to publicly advocate on a policy that we viewed as a direct breach of the Convention on the Rights of the Child'. According to Schmid (2009: 633), for MSF, 'the ethical-clinical dilemma to be faced was the choice between maintaining a strict clinical performance or leaving Nauru for denunciation purposes, leaving the patients without assistance, since any public action, in a given political context, would mean the end of MSF's mission in Nauru'. Events overtook them, but experience in other settings suggests that confrontation with these dilemmas would have become unavoidable (e.g. Chkam 2016). Both organisations undertook further advocacy after their work ended, including submissions

to parliamentary inquiries, research reports, and public campaigning. leaving the patients without assistance, since any public action, in a given political context, would mean the end of MSF's mission in Nauru'. Events overtook them, but experience in other settings suggests that confrontation with these dilemmas would have become unavoidable (e.g. Chkam 2016). Both organisations undertook further advocacy after their work ended, including submissions to parliamentary inquiries, research reports, and public campaigning.

Several considerations arise from review of these experiences. While they may serve as recommendations for organisations already working in the context of offshore immigration detention, or open to this idea, they ultimately constitute a caution against such operations.

- **Programming choices based on a scenario of worsening health over time:** The toll on people in indefinite detention is known to increase over time and to be difficult (not to say impossible) to treat while detention continues, so programming projections should assume escalating psychosocial and physical health impacts over time. Improvements that may be achieved in the detention environment or aspects of case management, for example, can have value but do not change this.
- **Contingency planning for the degradation of relationships:** While conflictual dynamics are hardly unique to these settings, the transactional nature of offshore detention may increase their likelihood, as the presence of NGOs may become implicated in the relationship between governments, as well as in the complex interconnections between people in detention, their supporters and advocates, other social groups, and their respective governments.
- **Advocacy and documentation:** Silencing of the voices of people in detention, denial of their rights, and gagging of their advocates heighten the importance of information of various kinds and related politics. While mitigating risks, organisations must consider and consult affected people about the implications of their position as witnesses and how to responsibly gather, share, and preserve information in contexts where being perceived as a defender of rights is likely to increase antagonism.
- **Identification and review of acceptable conditions for operation**: Any decision that it is possible to work in immigration detention environments must give rise to ongoing analysis and challenge. Due to the above considerations, the initial decision and continuing reflection should assume a downwards trajectory, with a planning mentality ready for 'when' any red lines are crossed, not 'if'.
- **Preparation of multiple exit strategies:** Practical measures for different departure scenarios should be examined from the outset. For example, forced or voluntary departures, with longer or shorter notice periods, in which communication with people in detention is restricted, or where association with the organisation may create risks for staff and/or former staff.

Wider implications and the politics of humanitarian aid

Since October 2023, Israeli atrocities in Gaza and the responses of Western states have laid bare the selective application of supposedly universal international norms, drawing humanitarian action into the quagmire in complex ways (Fassin 2024). The powerlessness

The powerlessness of aid agencies has been made clear, in terms of both their operational autonomy and their ability to influence the conduct of governments.

of aid agencies has been made clear, in terms of both their operational autonomy and their ability to influence the conduct of governments. At the same time, the potential for instrumentalisation of 'humanitarian' gestures is seen in the turn to militarised and commercialised projects purported to provide relief but which rapidly resulted in hundreds of deaths and almost no assistance (Amnesty International 3 July 2025; MSF 2025). In the midst of this moral and ethical crisis, abrupt and drastic cuts to international aid funding in early 2025 by the Trump administration plunged the aid world into a financial emergency that had already been brewing for several years. The turmoil further illustrated the perils of the humanitarian sector's dependency on a small handful of donors, exposing anew and in dramatic fashion its vulnerability to their political agendas.

The demonisation and exclusion of migrants have been part of the drum beat of anti-humanist politics for decades. As major aid donor countries have sought to curb unauthorised movements, NGOs have become caught between the wish to offer support or services to people targeted by hostile systems and the risk of becoming complicit. Experience in Pacific detention sites suggests that attempts to maintain an ethical position while working in the context of offshore detention, through the use of public and private advocacy, will bring about conflict and ultimately the end of the work. There therefore no longer seems to be a convincing argument that detention work can be sustainable without significant compromise – compromise that would ultimately make the work ethically untenable.

In these highly politicised arenas, characterised by precarity and sustained denial of rights, the avoidance of politics is impossible and threats to ethical action are continual. This in itself is not unique – humanitarian action takes place in 'very non-ideal circumstances in which longer-range political goals or downright unethical objectives are being given greater priority by those in power' (Slim 2015: 115). It is incumbent upon humanitarian organisations to practice an 'ethics of struggle': a constant obligation to anticipate, evaluate, and mitigate the wide variety of harms that might arise from their actions (Slim 2015: 111; Rubenstein 2016). They must be open to the possibility that their presence may do more harm than good or, through conditions placed upon it, violate their own values and principles.

Beyond the immediate operational challenges, however, experiences of aid agencies within the 'humanitarian border' raise questions about whether they should be adopting more activist positions explicitly against 'the injustice of borders' and about how all concerned might build 'an affective politics that moves beyond a state of emergency' (Scott-Smith 2016: 10; Ticktin 2017: 268). Deterrence policies deploy the prospect of death and suffering in an attempt to dissuade unauthorised movement. Actions by humanitarian organisations to reduce the risk or severity of harm caused by deterrence policies imply confrontation with the makers of those policies. More full-throated advocacy is vulnerable to being cast as 'activism', a label used with the goal of delegitimisation. This discursive battleground is further complicated by the existence of arguments that seek to justify deterrence policies by invoking 'humanitarian' goals (for instance about saving lives or preventing human trafficking). The era of deterrence – and of rising anti-humanism more generally – thus demands recognition of humanitarian action's inherently political nature and the ambiguity and openness to instrumentalisation of discourses attached to it. It calls for the development of other ways of resisting and opposing the human impacts of exclusionary policies.

What these could look like will depend on many factors, such as the possibilities for action in various settings, the appetite and ability of different groups to activate them, and the likely reactions of authorities of different kinds. Humanitarian organisations, like other organisations and communities, are host to people with varying ways of seeing and doing, and certain

constituencies may come to the fore, with consequences for organisational approaches. Increased attention to the voices of people affected by deterrence measures may – should – also shape strategies, though they are not a homogenous group either. Different coalitions and alliances may open up, while the move to undo existing financial dependencies may well mean downsizing – a development that would go against decades of expansion in the number and size of Western humanitarian organisations. How many organisations will create pathways in this direction, and how to ethically do so without reneging on practical solidarity with others in need, remains to be seen. Nonetheless, with increasing attention given to exclusionary patterns within the Western aid world's practices, impacts, and worldview, pressure may build enough to encourage more to try.

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Politically resilient humanitarianism: rethinking principles, power, and partnership in a fragmenting world order

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Abstract

The humanitarian system is entering a period of systemic fragility. Across multiple conflict and crisis settings, aid is increasingly contested as a political tool, while donor governments are reducing funding commitments (Elnakib et al., 2024). These pressures reflect not just operational strain but a deeper fragmentation of the international order, marked by geopolitical rivalries, institutional paralysis, contested norms, and a widening funding gap. For policymakers, the stakes extend far beyond unmet humanitarian need. Weakened humanitarianism risks destabilising fragile states, fuelling mistrust between local and international actors, and undermining global capacity to prevent escalation and manage crises (Cusack 2025; Institute for Economics and Peace 2024). In response, this paper introduces politically resilient humanitarianism – a conceptual lens and an operational strategy to adapt aid systems to fragmentation while safeguarding core principles, sustaining access, and maintaining legitimacy. Drawing on conceptual analysis and practitioner experience, it argues for approaches that blend principled action with political awareness (The New Humanitarian 2024; Stoddard 2020). The paper offers concrete lessons for sustaining humanitarian relevance and effectiveness in an era of instability.

Introduction

The world's humanitarian architecture is faltering. In contexts such as Gaza, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Ukraine, the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence are increasingly contested (Elnakib et al., 2024; Taleb 2025). Humanitarian actors – donor governments, UN agencies, international NGOs, and local civil society organisations – must navigate humanitarian access negotiations with authorities who treat aid as a political instrument rather than a protected activity under international law (Elnakib et al., 2024; Slim 2020). At the same time, the system is facing a deepening financial crisis, with major donors scaling back commitments and treating aid as discretionary rather than a global obligation (AFP 2025; Oxfam America 2025; UK Parliament 2025). These political and fiscal pressures raise urgent questions about humanitarianism's relevance and capacity to respond in a world where its traditional foundations of legitimacy are under threat.

Beyond unmet need, this crisis is also carrying wider systemic consequences. These include the weakening of fragile states, increased mistrust between communities and international actors, and an undermining of the international system's capacity to prevent escalation and manage future crises (Cusack 2025; Institute for Economics and Peace 2024). These questions are not abstract; they matter to policymakers shaping aid and security strategies, to practitioners negotiating access on the ground, to local actors and affected communities whose survival often depends on the system's credibility, and to academics advancing debates on humanitarian reform and global order.

What makes this moment distinctive from past crises is that the pressures now facing humanitarianism are not simply the result of new emergencies but may reflect a deeper crisis within the system itself. Earlier shocks – whether famine, displacement, or conflict – tested capacity but did not fundamentally undermine the international consensus that aid should be protected, principles upheld, and donor commitments sustained. Today, by contrast, protracted wars, climate volatility, authoritarian resurgence, and weakening multilateralism are converging to erode those very foundations (Slim 2024). This amounts to a fragmentation

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of the global order that is reshaping humanitarianism on multiple levels: geopolitical, through intensifying rivalries; institutional, through paralysis in multilateral bodies such as the United Nations; operational, through increasingly divided delivery lines; and normative, as humanitarian principles are contested rather than assumed. The result is not only greater difficulty responding to humanitarian crises but also a systemic challenge to the funding, legitimacy, and political sustainability of humanitarian action itself.

In response, this paper introduces politically resilient humanitarianism: a conceptual lens and operational strategy designed to help the sector adapt to fragmentation. Informed by thinkers in the fields of humanitarian and development studies – such as Hugo Slim, Mary B. Anderson, Alex de Waal, and Fiona Terry – as well as by practitioner experience, it is defined as an approach that upholds core principles anchored in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) while engaging purposefully with the political systems that shape protection outcomes. Crucially, it rejects a siloed humanitarianism. Independence is treated as operational autonomy within interdependence, and selective, evidence-led engagement with surrounding policy frameworks is encouraged when it enables humanitarian access and better protects civilians.

This paper develops its argument across four dimensions of fragmentation. It begins with the normative level, interrogating the core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. It argues how norms must retain their anchorage in IHL but have their operationalisation re-owned by a broader set of stakeholders, recentring protection outcomes. The paper then turns to the institutional level, examining the funding crisis and how to address the consequences of a funding base dependent on a narrow set of donors that is easily impacted by shifting political priorities. The next section critiques the dominant charity-based model at the operational level, calling for a shift toward partnership that centres local agency to reestablish humanitarian legitimacy. Drawing on experience in Afghanistan, Syria, and Myanmar, the paper then explores how politically resilient approaches have been applied in fragmented settings in practice and what we can learn from these examples at the system level. The conclusion situates these insights within wider humanitarian reform debates and global security trends, arguing that humanitarianism cannot remain marginal to security and peace deliberations or political processes (Anderson 1999), and that politically resilient humanitarianism represents a timely and necessary evolution in an era of fragmentation.

As crises intensify and the global order continues to fragment, humanitarianism's future will depend on whether it can hold to its principles while engaging the architectures that condition life-and-death choices. Politically resilient humanitarianism is one pathway. It will not resolve conflict or close funding gaps, but it recentres humanitarian purpose on protection outcomes, shares power more equitably with actors who have proximity and legitimacy, and builds partnerships better calibrated to contested settings. In the absence of this shift, humanitarianism will be marginalised precisely when it is needed most, becoming both a symptom and potential accelerant of a fragmenting world order.

Humanitarian principles under pressure: a call for new ownership

At the heart of humanitarian identity lies a set of foundational principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Codified in the Geneva Conventions and subsequent instruments of IHL, these principles are intended to guarantee civilian access, protect humanitarian personnel, and ensure assistance is delivered solely based on need (Chatham

House 2016; 2023; ICRC 1999; UNGA 1991). Yet in today's multipolar, conflict-affected landscape, pressure now reaches those normative foundations. Shared meanings and consent are fragmenting across parties and jurisdictions; humanitarian exemptions are uneven and slow to operationalise (ICRC 2023a;2025); deconfliction processes have lost credibility (Human Rights Watch 2019; 2024); and counter-terrorism and sanctions frameworks are collapsing the distinction between engagement with, and endorsement of, non-internationally recognised authorities, narrowing the practical space for impartial humanitarian action (Chatham House 2023; ICRC 2023a). Further, interpretive ownership remains top-heavy – centred in headquarters, donor capitals, and multilateral forums – fuelling a legitimacy deficit and contestation over who holds authority to interpret the principles (Chatham House 2023; ICRC 2025).

The consequence is erosion of the presumption of good faith. This is reflected in allocation decisions that favour lower-risk environments over higher-need contexts, the narrowing and/or slow operationalisation of lawful humanitarian access mechanisms, and the displacement of legal and reputational risk from states onto humanitarian actors, encouraging risk-averse delivery and self-censorship rather than principled engagement (Amnesty International 2024; Human Rights Watch 2019; 2024, ICRC 2023a).

In some contexts, the challenge goes even deeper. It is no longer the contested interpretation of the principles which impacts delivery, but the deliberate denial and assault of the legal right to humanitarian action itself. Blockade, siege-style restriction of supplies, and administrative obstruction are paired with attacks on medical facilities, aid convoys, and humanitarian personnel, as well as on civilians attempting to reach assistance (Amnesty International 2024; Human Rights Watch 2019; 2024). In these contexts, aid becomes a lever for population control, bargaining, punishment, or forced movement. The expanding use of commercial intermediaries, private logistics, security contractors, and outsourced service provision is further blurring humanitarian lines of responsibility and complicating principled risk management, particularly where parties to a conflict seek to control who is permitted to operate and on what terms.

Against this backdrop, the task therefore is not to restate the principles, but to re-establish their practical authority in environments where consent, shared interpretation, and good faith can no longer be presumed. A politically resilient approach addresses this gap by clarifying the purpose of humanitarian action in contested settings, making explicit the trade-offs involved in access and delivery decisions, and relocating interpretive responsibility closer to the points at which operational judgments are made. It also requires brief, auditable reasoning for high-risk or contentious decisions to help sustain consent, manage risk transparently, and distinguish principled compromise from erosion of standards. This approach does not seek to replace international humanitarian law, but to support its application under conditions of fragmentation, where universality remains the legal baseline but can no longer be relied upon as an operational assumption.

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Re-operationalising the principles: humanity first

In a fragmenting world, where shared interpretations of law, political consent, and trust in humanitarian actors are increasingly contested, humanity is the principle most capable of sustaining humanitarian action. Unlike neutrality or independence, which rely on reciprocal recognition by parties to conflict, humanity asserts a prior and non-derogable claim: the protection of life and dignity as a legitimate purpose even where consent is withheld or access is deliberately denied (Chatham House 2023; UNGA 1991; ICRC 1999).

In recent humanitarian contexts, humanitarian practice has arguably shifted to a reliance on compliance – rather than humanitarian outcomes - for legitimacy (Chatham House 2023; Slim 2020). The impact of this shift has weakened our shared understanding of the value and purpose of humanitarian action. Whilst reporting, compliance obligations, sanctions licences, operating approvals, and negotiated access arrangements will always remain essential mechanisms for securing reach and protection; when they are primarily justified through legal and political risk considerations rather than demonstrated humanitarian gain, their authority is less persuasive to affected populations, local partners, and parties to the conflict (Chatham House 2023). By contrast, a humanity-first approach reorients incentives by tying humanitarian presence and engagement to observable protection outcomes, increasing the political and reputational cost of restricting access or instrumentalising aid, even where stakeholders are otherwise indifferent to humanitarian norms.

Practically, this requires articulating at the outset the expected humanitarian gain of major access and delivery decisions; declining modalities that predictably entrench abuse or increase net harm; and revisiting decisions against observed effects rather than relying on procedural compliance alone (ICRC 1999; UNGA 1991). It also entails rebuilding legitimacy through explicit and reviewable reasoning, including documenting decisions that render trade-offs, designing and implementing explicit safeguards in contexts of humanitarian denial, and ensuring residual risks are transparent and auditable. By anchoring decisions in anticipated and observed humanitarian effects, a humanity-first approach also shifts interpretive authority closer to field leadership, where contextual judgments about harm, protection, and consent are made and can be tested in practice whilst remaining subject to organisational oversight. This approach is consistent with scholarship demonstrating that transparency of reasoning enhances credibility and fairness without derogating from legal obligations (ICRC 2025; Slim 2020, 2024). Humanity, in this sense, functions as a documented yardstick, disciplining choice, sustaining consent, and enabling course correction in contested operational environments.

Neutrality requires careful reinterpretation in fragmented environments. It is contested today because counter-terrorism and sanctions regimes, securitised donor conditionalities, disinformation, and proxy warfare often reframe impartial engagement as partisanship and turn routine humanitarian actor contact with stakeholders into alleged alignment (Chatham House 2023; Humanitarian Outcomes 2022; ICRC 2023a). A politically resilient reading would address this challenge by making neutrality evidenced rather than asserted. It would explicitly specify who is engaged, for what operational purpose, and on what terms, rebalancing how neutrality is judged. This approach would require clearly documented 'no contribution' safeguards in Humanitarian contexts showing how financial, logistical, information, or symbolic support does not materially advantage hostilities; and it would require clearly documented and evidenced analysis showing how assistance targeting was separated from political conditionality. Where risk allows, it would place commitments and the reasoning behind contentious access calls on the record and pair them with accessible complaint channels, so that neutrality is legible where it is lived. This meaning, defined as principled negotiation (and not retreat) engages political actors while refusing to advance any party's war aims, bringing operational relevance to neutrality's definition in IHL (Geneva Convention I, Art. 9; Additional Protocol I, Art. 70; Slim 2020).

Impartiality must be operationalised as negotiated fairness in allocation (Additional Protocol I, Art. 70). In recent years, donor preferences, access constraints, and security considerations have, in practice, often pulled resources along military or state control lines rather than independent assessments (DI 2024; European Commission 2024; OCHA 2023). A resilient reading of impartiality[A2.1] would require co-produced needs assessments safeguarded

against elite capture, pre-stated prioritisation rules – covering equal worth, severity, urgency, proportionality – designed on a context-by-context basis and made reviewable, diversified financing to reduce single-stakeholder distortion, and joint multi stakeholder monitoring capable of triggering corrective reallocations. In this framing, impartiality is evaluated through observable allocation choices and their effects, rather than inferred from donor intent or aggregate funding patterns. Impartiality thus becomes a testable practice that is auditable at field level, redistributing interpretive authority beyond donor tables.

Independence should not be read as isolationism; it should instead be read as ethical agency within interdependence. Total detachment is neither realistic nor desirable; the aim is operational autonomy while engaging surrounding policy frameworks (Chatham House 2023; ICRC 2023a; UNGA 1991). However, for humanitarianism to ensure humanity comes first, this implies a minimal set of non-negotiables: no participation in, justification of, or material contribution to IHL violations; no conditionalities that predetermine aid recipients contrary to need; and clear definition of humanitarian aims within the end goals of political actors in messaging and partnerships. Independence, in this sense, is sustained through locally exercised boundary-setting in operational choices and public positioning, where humanitarian actors navigate political and security pressures in real time rather than through formal separation alone. As de Waal cautions, humanitarianism risks absorption into security politics unless its purpose and limits are continuously made explicit and defended (de Waal 2015). Independence, so construed, is not isolation but disciplined engagement that protects agency.

Institutional change

Taken together, this politically resilient reading aims to strengthen the principles and their operationalisation by specifying how they guide action under constraint and by shifting interpretive ownership toward those who bear the consequences most. The objective is to move away from narratives that the principles are unrealistic and to make their protection practical and provable in the places where they matter most. However, shifting interpretations will require, first, a process whereby there can be negotiated agreement within and among the humanitarian system and its interlocutors; and second, subsequent monitored and auditable institutional change. Thus, two central considerations must follow in reform discussions addressing the normative foundations of humanitarianism: (1) the principles must remain a baseline, not bargaining chips; and (2) compromises should be reasoned in public, to the extent that safety allows, so that interpretive authority is shared and auditable (Slim 2015, 2020).

The funding crisis: a catalyst for rebalancing humanitarian governance

Today's funding crisis does not merely threaten delivery; it has eroded the system's ability to uphold its core values and sustain legitimate access.

If the reinterpretation of humanitarian principles provides the normative anchor for politically resilient humanitarianism, financing is its institutional backbone. Without funding arrangements that actively protect neutrality, impartiality, and independence, principles remain declaratory. Today's funding crisis does not merely threaten delivery; it has eroded the system's ability to uphold its core values and sustain legitimate access. In 2025, the US administration cut foreign assistance at an unprecedented scale; reports indicate that over 90 per cent of USAID foreign assistance awards were terminated or suspended (Oxfam America 2025). The UK likewise announced a phased reduction of its overseas aid budget (ODA) from 0.5 per cent

to 0.3 per cent of GNI by 2027 (UK Parliament 2025). By late June 2025, the UN appeal was reported as below 13 per cent funded despite record requirements (OCHA/FTS 2025; Reuters 2025). These shocks landed in a financial system already marked by donor concentration risk and discretionary politics, where a small cohort of state donors has disproportionately determined the tempo and direction of humanitarian response for decades (DI 2024; The New Humanitarian 2024). Seen through the lens of fragmentation, this was not an episodic shortfall but a structural vulnerability (Terry 2022), showing how a few capitals hold de facto veto power over system continuity and how discretionary retrenchment in those budgets cascades into systemwide contraction. Other well-documented consequences of this donor concentration have included skewing incentives toward procedural risk avoidance, as well as upward compliance, privileging process metrics over protection outcomes (ICVA 2025a). Breaking this fragmentation–finance feedback loop thus requires rebalancing who decides, how they decide, and the information on which those decisions rest.

Diversify contributors, decentralise decision rights

A practical route to rebalancing the economy of aid is to move from bespoke bilateral earmarks to neutral pooled windows. These are formal allocation windows within a multilateral trust vehicle that prioritise plurality, transparency, and local majority governance. Existing pooled funds demonstrate some of the mechanics of how to do this; the next iteration should go further and re-emphasise features too often treated as optional. These would include single donor caps to limit dominance, proportionate match funding rules to crowd in additional contributors, and open meetings with published decision records and public oversight that allow scrutiny and course correction (EDI 2024; Elnakib et al.2024). Dedicated subwindows could enable diaspora, faithbased, philanthropic, and corporate contributions under common eligibility and audit standards that minimise ex ante earmarking while preserving visibility through open data (IATI 2024; ICVA 2025a).

Beyond pluralising funding sources, decentralising decision rights would also reconfigure where and how allocation judgments are made (ICVA 2025a). This matters because decisions taken closer to affected populations are better able to respond to shifting needs, access constraints, and protection risks as they evolve (ICVA 2025a). In highly fragmented environments, centralised allocation based on incomplete or delayed information tends to reinforce risk-averse programming and political bias. By contrast, context-proximate governance enables faster course correction and supports more credible claims to impartiality.

Make finance predictable and risk shared

However, neutral pooled funds will not resolve volatility alone. Financing must also become more predictable and riskshared so that political withdrawals do not immediately translate into operational retrenchment and/or collapse (ICVA 2025a). To do this, funding instruments should be given the power to mitigate early donor exits through commitment fees, as well as the ability to enable countercyclical top-ups triggered by preagreed indicators. Predictability also depends on where discretion sits. When all allocation authority is held upstream, political shocks translate directly into operational disruption, whereas distributed decision-making allows systems to absorb funding fluctuations without immediate collapse.

To incentivise donors to agree to these conditions, and so donors can defend budgets at home, performance credibility should also shift from broad value for money claims to publish what you buy practice (ICVA 2025a). While much reporting already exists, it is often fragmented, technical, and inward-facing, making it hard for political leaders to show - simply and credibly -

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what funding has achieved. What is missing is not data, but clarity that stands up under political scrutiny. This requires information that is limited in scope, comparable across providers, easy to explain to non-specialist audiences, and explicit about both results and trade-offs, including where access was denied or outcomes fell short. The aim is to stabilise humanitarian financing under political pressure by making allocations comparable, oversight transparent, and performance legible, so funding decisions reward demonstrable outcomes rather than procedural box-ticking.

Address the predictable objections

Objections to change will be familiar. Many of the strongest concerns are likely to come from those that currently hold disproportionate influence over humanitarian financing; whom, perversely, are also a main reason for fragmentation when funding contracts. These concerns will extend beyond the decentralisation of decision rights, to include perceived loss of control over allocations, increased exposure to financial and reputational risk, and reduced ability to demonstrate compliance and value for money. Some will also argue that local majority governance weakens international donor state policy coherence; others will worry that diversified funding pools, shared risk mechanisms, and locally informed allocation compromise independence or invite capture (ICVA 2025a).

These concerns are best addressed through clear rules that apply to everyone, rather than through one-off decisions or special exemptions. Counter arguments need to demonstrate how this approach does not remove donor influence but shifts it from direct control to shared oversight which can have benefits for donor states interests as well. Donor caps and pooled funding may limit how much influence any single donor carries, but they also limit individual risk, while still allowing donors to see where their money goes. Conflict-of-interest rules and open contracting would show how allocation decisions are made and help prevent capture. Proportionate, risk-based monitoring would concentrate scrutiny where financial or reputational risks are highest, instead of slowing all programmes equally. Humanitarian exemptions and formal de-risking measures would set the minimum legal standard; locally rooted governance, pooled finance, and open, standardised reporting would strengthen accountability beyond that minimum.

Pilot, evaluate, enforce

Adoption of new financing models could proceed through time limited pilots in two or three priority contexts, with evaluation plans agreed at the outset and renewal or scaleup only if results warrant it. Participation in pilots (pooled windows or any parallel cofinancing) would require open publication of spending and contracting information in standardised formats, alongside proportionate monitoring and evaluation. Rules would set donor caps, along with requirements for match funding, decisions would be made public, and local majority boards would be made mandatory - with clear consequences for breaches. Regulators would be engaged from the start to align humanitarian exemptions and anti–money laundering/counter-terrorism financing rules, so lawful payment channels remain open.

What financing reform can and cannot do

These measures will not, on their own, resolve the funding crisis or compel political support where it is actively withheld. However, what they can do is change incentives and expectations within the system. By making funding decisions more rule-based, transparent, and comparable, rebalancing humanitarian financial governance reduces the scope for abrupt or opaque

withdrawals to be treated as cost-free and increases the political and reputational visibility of disengagement. In contexts where humanitarian action is restricted or denied, such arrangements would help distinguish principled constraint from political obstruction, preserve a record of unmet need and foregone protection, and create a clearer basis for re-engagement when conditions shift. In this sense, governance and financing reform cannot substitute for political will, but it can shape behaviour at the margins and limit the damage caused when that will is absent.

From charity to partnership: reframing the humanitarian compact

By concentrating authority far from the contexts in which legitimacy is negotiated, these arrangements render humanitarian action vulnerable when consent is contested, conditional, or withdrawn.

If fragmented financing exposes how humanitarian action is governed, it also lays bare the political relationships on which the system depends and the asymmetries they reproduce. Donor-concentrated funding and compliance-driven accountability do not merely shape how aid is financed; they structure who sets priorities, who bears risk, and whose consent ultimately sustains access. By concentrating authority far from the contexts in which legitimacy is negotiated, these arrangements render humanitarian action vulnerable when consent is contested, conditional, or withdrawn. In such environments, a charity-based model of assistance that is defined by externally determined priorities, centralised programme design, and the downward transfer of operational risk without corresponding decision-making power, proves not only inequitable but politically fragile.

Under this charity-based model, three structural problems have become increasingly visible. First, local organisations with the greatest contextual knowledge are systematically excluded from strategic decision-making, constraining the relevance, credibility, and adaptability of humanitarian responses. Second, in situations of conflict, engagement with parties to that conflict (including states) and armed actors is often treated as a residual or technical task rather than a core political function, resulting either in avoidance that restricts access or in informal compromises that erode humanitarian boundaries. Third, accountability remains overwhelmingly one-directional. Authority and compliance flow upward to donors and regulators, while operational, reputational, and political risk is transferred downward to communities and local partners without meaningful recourse or shared responsibility (Barbelet et al. 2021; Roepstorff 2020). Together, these dynamics weaken trust, undermine access negotiations, and reduce the system's capacity to sustain impartial action in contested environments (Howe et al. 2019).

Building on the institutional conditions set out in the previous section - local majority governance, transparent decision-making, and proportionate controls - politically resilient humanitarianism requires a shift away from top-down charity towards a partnership compact that redistributes authority as well as responsibility. Addressing these power asymmetries is not only an ethical imperative but a strategic one. International actors cannot credibly sustain claims to neutrality or impartiality unless operations are rooted in locally grounded leadership and shared political ownership (Barbelet et al. 2021; Howe et al. 2019). Reform efforts that support a new partnership compact would therefore help rebuild trust, decentralise authority, and strengthen the resilience of humanitarian action in a fragmenting and increasingly contested global order.

The partnership compact: co-decision, co-risk, co-accountability

Recognising local actors as equal decision-makers would be the first operational pivot. Under the charity model, local actors - community organisations, local NGOs, or local governance structures - are often treated as passive recipients while international organisations decide what aid is needed and how it should be delivered (Barbelet et al. 2021). Partnership instead positions local actors as decision-makers whose embeddedness improves access, cultural fit, and legitimacy. Evidence shows that local leadership yields more sustainable, context-appropriate responses and helps insulate operations from external political agendas (Barbelet et al. 2021; Hillhorst et al. 2025; NRC 2024; ICVA 2025b). In Syria, where assistance has mirrored political and military control lines, elevating local leadership has been essential to restoring credibility (Khoury et al. 2024). Practically, this means direct eligibility to lead and co-lead programmes, shared roles in needs analysis and targeting, joint staffing and secondments, common security/context analysis, agreed adaptive programme management triggers, transparent procurement, and routine publication of decisions.

A second pivot would be strengthening principled engagement between humanitarian actors with states and armed groups. In many humanitarian contexts, access is controlled by political or military actors, and reaching people requires structured negotiation (Geneva Call 2023). Drawing on Hugo Slim's concept of humanitarian diplomacy (2019), politically resilient humanitarianism proposes that engagement is treated as upholding, not diluting, international humanitarian law. Core practice would include clearly laid out prohibitions (e.g. no material support to parties to conflict), explicit IHL expectations for counterparts, documented decisions for access talks, separation of assistance targeting from political conditionality, context-specific liaison protocols and security assurances, independent third-party monitoring, and community feedback channels that can trigger operational adjustments (Barbelet et al. 2021; Hillhorst et al. 2025; ICVA 2025b, 2023b).

A third pivot would require reconfiguring accountability. The charity model places formal responsibility with international organisations but shifts compliance burdens onto local actors who lack design power, entrenching hierarchical dynamics and procedural accountability with donors, rather than accountability with communities or other local actors (Barbelet et al. 2021; Stoddard et al. 2017). A partnership compact would make accountability shared among donors, UN agencies, international NGOs, local organisations, and political authorities (Hilhorst et al. 2025; ICVA 2025b; NRC 2024). Standards would be co-designed and oversight reciprocal, with accountability to affected people by default – complaints handling, participation in targeting, and public reasoning for trade-offs – paired with proportionate assurance. Joint monitoring by mixed teams and community oversight committees, alongside public dashboards on access, delivery times, leakage, and protection outcomes, would operationalise this shift (DI 2024).

Recognising the barriers

A common objection to a new compact is that humanitarian country teams (HCTs) have already attempted these shifts through previous humanitarian localisation and reform initiatives and have not succeeded (Howe et al. 2019;). Yet what many within the system would argue is that what has largely been tried are charity language reforms – pledges, guidance, toolkits – layered onto unchanged decision rights and incentives (Hillhorst et al. 2025). The partnership compact switches the unit of change from projects and onto governance and enforceable practice.

Public reasoning would reduce opaque gatekeeping; locally co-led negotiation structures would align engagement; and pre-agreed adaptive triggers would authorise rapid pivots in geographic targeting, modality, or partner choice to improve humanitarian effectiveness.

By committing to a new compact, authority would be transferred through local majority co-chairing of strategies and clusters and with voting rules requiring local concurrence for major targeting frameworks and reprogramming. Accountability would become reciprocal so that internationals are answerable for timeliness and predictability as much as local actors for compliance. Public reasoning would reduce opaque gatekeeping; locally co-led negotiation structures would align engagement; and pre-agreed adaptive triggers would authorise rapid pivots in geographic targeting, modality, or partner choice to improve humanitarian effectiveness. These levers move HCTs beyond 'we tried' into observable practical change. Taken together, these actions translate principles into day-to-day practice, replacing a charity logic ill-suited to contemporary conflict with a partnership compact that is ethically grounded and operationally robust, capable of sustaining impartial access and credible protection outcomes in contested settings.

Operationalising politically resilient humanitarianism: insights from practice

Building on the conceptual framework of politically resilient humanitarianism, this section turns next to recent practitioner experience in Afghanistan, Syria, and Myanmar. In each context, humanitarian actors have operated in politicised, fragmented environments by engaging de facto authorities and/or developing localised alternatives where recognised governance and clear system-wide guidance were absent. These cases show that negotiated access, decentralised delivery, and locally led decision-making can preserve humanitarian space where traditional models falter. They are not anomalies but early prototypes of politically resilient humanitarianism. Crucially, none of these approaches resolved the full scale or complexity of needs in their contexts; impacts were partial, uneven, and bounded by hard political constraints. However, the core lesson, while modest, is that these need not be treated as anomalies; elements that have worked could be expanded and tested more widely, allowing field practice in fragmented settings to inform system-level adaptations as fragmentation becomes more common.

Afghanistan: pragmatic access and locally anchored delivery

Following the Taliban's return in 2021, development aid was largely suspended and formal recognition withheld, with severe consequences for services and livelihoods. Yet humanitarian actors sustained presence by engaging de facto authorities at subnational levels and prioritising localised delivery, community negotiation, and context-specific access arrangements (Humanitarian Outcomes 2023). Mechanisms such as the Afghan Humanitarian Fund (AHF) offered one of the few viable channels to keep programmes moving without conferring political endorsement. While imperfect (compliance burdens were high and access to the fund for national organisations was uneven) the combination of subnational engagement, funds awarded to women-led and community-based organisations, and flexible operational choices helped sustain essential services (Gossman & Abbasi 2024, Humanitarian Outcomes 2023). These adaptations did not reverse the collapse of public services, end movement restrictions on women, or ensure coverage across contested areas; however, they mitigated harm without fixing systemic deterioration. The practical takeaway is that consistent,

documented engagement at the level where authority is exercised – paired with locally led delivery – can protect some humanitarian space when full-scale disengagement would have worsened protection outcomes.

Syria: navigating fragmentation through adaptive delivery

Syria's governance fragmentation produced a deeply politicised humanitarian operating environment. In response, international NGOs and local civil society developed decentralised field systems that mixed cross-line access agreements with local partnerships and context-appropriate modalities, such as multi-purpose cash. Innovations in humanitarian analysis – for example the Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team (later Crisis Analytics) and COAR (Centre for Operational Analysis and Research) – enabled real-time situational awareness and agile reallocation, supporting a pattern of adaptive delivery under pressure (Abo Rass et al. 2024, Humanitarian Outcomes 2022, Stoddard 2020). These approaches helped maintain services through offensives and shifting front lines by aligning decisions to granular access conditions rather than to static plans (IAHE 2025). Even so, access remained inconsistent, siege tactics and bureaucratic impediments continued to distort targeting, and some populations were chronically underserved; adaptive delivery improved reach but did not depoliticise the operating environment. The broader implication was that normalising flexible crossline operations – with clear engagement criteria and published decision records where safe – had strong protection benefits for Syrians in need of life saving humanitarian assistance.

Myanmar: dual-track humanitarianism and the cost of disengagement

Post-coup Myanmar forced agencies to choose between withdrawal and politically risky engagement. Politically resilient actors adopted dual-track approaches: negotiating access in areas under military junta control, while bolstering community-based providers and ethnic civil society through cross-border support (Holiday et al. 2025, Kaur 2024). During the 2025 earthquake, these locally grounded networks proved more capable of delivering aid than international partners operating under the restrictions of the military junta because they combined proximity, contextual legitimacy, and operational agility (HADRI 2025). The Myanmar experience underlines that principled engagement – documented interactions, clear behavioural expectations, separation of assistance targeting from political conditionality – can preserve some humanitarian function.

What worked – and what didn't: trade-offs and limits

Across all three settings, common strengths and constraints are visible. On the plus side, decisions followed context (taken where power actually operated); engagement was structured (shared criteria, documented decisions made public); operations were adaptive (pre-agreed triggers for shifts in modality, or partners; accountability was reciprocal (community feedback with response timelines, internationals answerable for timeliness and predictability); and analysis was embedded (local partners and access/analysis teams informing real-time choices). Limits were also equally clear: structural restrictions on movement and association (especially for women); continuing coercion and bureaucratic obstruction; uneven coverage across control lines; high residual protection risks; and compliance demands that local actors struggled to meet without sustained accompaniment. These approaches mitigated political constraints; they did not remove them.

From ad hoc successes to system norms

To carry politically resilient humanitarianism beyond isolated pilots, the features outlined above should be embedded as standard operating practice – written into mandates, budgets, partner compacts, and oversight. Institutionalising what worked in Afghanistan, Syria, and Myanmar (and other humanitarian contexts in fragile settings) will not neutralise the structural drivers of crisis or deliver universal coverage. It will, however, raise the floor, making impartial access more durable, protection outcomes more credible, and decision-making more transparent and auditable in contested settings. The objective is a shift from discretionary wins to repeatable, principled operations – institutionalised, resourced, and externally reviewable, with feedback loops that allow adaptation over time. In short, we normalise what has proven to work, while remaining candid about constraints and trade-offs.

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Politically resilient humanitarianism and the future global security architecture

Having outlined the core features and field-level applications of politically resilient humanitarianism, this final section now considers its strategic relevance for global crisis management and the future of international cooperation.

The international security system – designed to stabilise inter-state relations after 1945 – struggles with today's crisis ecology. The proliferation of non-state actors, weakening multilateral consensus, and recurrent state erosion in fragile contexts reveal a growing mismatch between existing frameworks and geopolitical realities (UN 2023). Humanitarian action, though grounded in international law, remains marginal to security deliberations and often siloed from political and peace processes, which blunts its effectiveness and deprives security actors of grounded situational awareness (De Lauri & Turunen 2022, Stoddard 2020).

Politically resilient humanitarianism does not resolve these systemic deficits, but by institutionalising practices already visible in Afghanistan, Syria, and Myanmar it offers a pragmatic interface between humanitarian action and security governance – one that protects principles while improving collective management of risk. It works on the assumption that humanitarianism's future cannot be secured in isolation from the security architecture that shapes the global order around it (Anderson 1999). For security actors, this approach could provide early warning insights, diplomatic footholds, and legitimacy in contexts where traditional instruments of statecraft are ineffective or absent.

In practice

A first implication is analytical. Political analysis should be systematically embedded within humanitarian strategies and programmes – not to align with political agendas, but to map power, anticipate constraints, and guide principled engagement with non-recognised authorities. At present there is no global UN template for such engagement, leaving practice ad hoc and politically vulnerable. Standardising decision records for access negotiations, maintaining the separation of assistance targeting from political conditionality, and documenting how community feedback alters operational choices would also need to be adopted to make humanitarian reasoning legible to political and security counterparts without

subordinating humanitarian aims (De Lauri & Turunen 2022; Geneva Call 2023; Slim 2019)

A second implication is institutional. Coordination across humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development spheres must move from rhetoric to design. Joint planning cycles anchored in a small set of shared indicators – access, protection outcomes, delivery timeliness, and complaint resolution – can clarify complementary roles. Predictable liaison between HCTs and regional security organisations, along with routine channels for humanitarian perspectives to be heard before sanctions are adopted or mandates renewed, would reduce avoidable harm while preserving coercive intent where required. Standing humanitarian briefings to the UN Security Council and sanctions committees, including assessments of likely humanitarian impact and mitigation options, would make these interfaces more reliable (De Lauri & Turunen 2022).

A third implication concerns capability. Purpose-built humanitarian diplomacy units, at headquarters and country level, can professionalise principled engagement with de facto authorities, consolidate documentation of talks, and preserve organisational memory across staff rotations (Slim 2019). In parallel, access and analysis teams that include local organisations should be normalised so that real-time insight informs both humanitarian adaptation and the security system's situational awareness. Data governance must follow humanitarian ethics – data minimisation, role-based access to data, and data protection protocols (between assistance information and coercive instruments) must become the norm, to avoid exposing communities or staff.

Whether these interfaces require new architecture remains contested. One view holds that recalibrated mandates and coordination mechanisms within existing institutions – the Security Council, regional organisations, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the cluster system – are sufficient if consistently applied (de Waal 2015). Another argues that fragmentation is so deep now that new platforms are needed where humanitarian, peacebuilding, and security actors can engage as equal interlocutors (Myint-U 2025). Politically resilient humanitarianism is compatible with either route. In a recalibration track, reforms would re-enforce locally co-chaired strategies, standardise engagement criteria and decision-making processes, and embed humanitarian briefings in sanctions and mandate processes. In an innovation track, regional pilots of new architectures could test co-equal governance around shared indicators and escalation protocols, with rigorous evaluation and clear safeguards for humanitarian independence.

In either track the responsibility to implement would be shared. Donor governments would incentivise cross-pillar design by supporting joint planning requirements and proportionate assurance that values access and protection outcomes alongside fiduciary control (DI 2024). UN entities and HCTs would institutionalise locally co-chaired strategies, establish predictable liaisons with security actors, and publish decision making for major access and targeting choices. International NGOs and local organisations would consolidate partnership models that share risk, context analysis, and operational control; document engagement consistently; and maintain community oversight mechanisms that trigger course correction. Security actors, for their part, would formalise pre-decision humanitarian consultations, integrate humanitarian impact assessment into sanctions and operations planning, and respect operational firewalls that protect humanitarian data and decision autonomy.

Expectations, however, should be realistic. Politically resilient humanitarianism will not resolve conflicts, rebuild state capacity, or eliminate coercive practices. Its promise is more modest (and more attainable): it aims to change how the international system manages the interface between humanitarian action and security policy so that impartial access and protection are more likely to be sustained under stress. If humanitarian institutions embed

political analysis without politicisation, redistribute operational authority towards actors with proximity and legitimacy, and engage security institutions as peers rather than afterthoughts, humanitarianism can act as both stabiliser and bellwether within a fragmenting order.

Humanitarianism: restoring trust, sustaining relevance and effectiveness

Humanitarianism today stands at a critical juncture, in need not just of reform but of recalibration, to reflect the fractured political realities in which it operates. This paper has offered politically resilient humanitarianism as one pathway – as an approach that neither abandons core principles nor pretends that politics can be ignored. Instead, it recognises that sustained access, legitimacy, and effectiveness increasingly depend on engaging with complex political landscapes in principled, informed, and context-sensitive ways. For policymakers, this requires rethinking how humanitarian support is financed and governed, ensuring flexibility, enabling local leadership, and embedding political analysis into operational design. For those on the front lines, especially local actors navigating shrinking space and increasing risk, it affirms what many have long known: that principled humanitarian action is possible, but only when grounded in the realities of power, adapted to context, and shared in responsibility. Restoring trust in humanitarianism – and reaffirming its relevance to global peace and security – begins with acknowledging where it falters and listening to those closest to the consequences. By taking this path, the system can perhaps be remade: principled in purpose, resilient in politics, and accountable to those it serves.

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