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Contents

The Mediator's Mirror:
How the Johari Window
Expands Understanding and Builds Agreement

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Abstract: This paper examines the Johari Window model as a framework for enhancing self-awareness, communication, and understanding in mediation. Developed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham (1955), the model divides awareness into four quadrants—Open, Blind, Hidden, and Unknown—each representing different dimensions of how people perceive themselves and others. The study applies this model across all phases of the mediation process: in preparation, it helps mediators map shared and concealed information; in exploration and problem-solving, it facilitates disclosure and feedback to shift from positional bargaining to interest-based negotiation; and in the agreement and evaluation phases, it guides the creation of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) agreements and supports reflection on outcomes and relationships.

The paper also considers the ethical, cultural, and power-related challenges of using the Johari Window, highlighting the importance of confidentiality and voluntary disclosure. At the same time, it underscores the model's value in strengthening mediator self-awareness, reducing bias, and promoting ongoing professional learning. Overall, the Johari Window demonstrates why mediation can work where conventional negotiation fails: it turns the process into one of guided awareness, allowing empathy, openness, and genuine understanding to emerge. By helping parties see what is hidden or misunderstood—both in themselves and in each other—mediation creates the conditions for deeper insight and more durable, integrative solutions when negotiation alone cannot achieve them.

Keywords: Johari Window, mediation, conflict resolution, self-awareness, communication, interest-based negotiation, ethical mediation practice.

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Introduction

This paper provides an in-depth exploration of the Johari Window model, a psychological tool designed to enhance self-awareness and mutual understanding, specifically within the context of mediation processes. Originally developed by Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham, the model has been widely applied across fields that rely on communication, trust, and interpersonal insight. In mediation, it serves as both a diagnostic and facilitative framework, helping mediators and parties alike to navigate the complex terrain of perceptions, emotions, and hidden motivations.

The Johari Window divides awareness into four quadrants - Open, Blind, Hidden, and Unknown - each representing different configurations of what is known or unknown to oneself and others (Newstrom & Rubenfeld, 1983). By systematically applying this model, mediators can gain profound insights into parties' perceptions, unspoken agendas, and emotional states, thereby fostering more effective communication and collaborative problem-solving (Ngcobo, 2023). Its utility extends across all stages of the mediation process: from the preparatory phase, where it aids in initial assessments, through exploration and problem-solving, where it helps uncover underlying interests and relational dynamics, and finally to the formulation of durable agreements that reflect a comprehensive and sustainable resolution (Moore & Kemp, 1988).

As a conceptual framework, the Johari Window enables mediators to manage the unpredictability of interpersonal dynamics and identify potential blockages that may arise during the resolution process (Seu, 2021). Self-awareness, cultivated through this model, becomes essential for both mediators and parties, allowing them to establish healthy boundaries, explore biases, and develop the reflective capacity necessary for critical thinking and balanced decision-making in conflict resolution (South, 2006). Recognizing that each individual brings distinct personalities, values, and belief systems shaped by personal and familial experiences is crucial for mediators aiming to facilitate authentic dialogue (Warren, 2002). Such awareness moves the discussion beyond surface-level disputes, allowing mediators to address the deeper cognitive roles and communication patterns that often underpin conflict (Guerra & Elliott, 1996).

By illuminating these intricate psychological and relational layers, the Johari Window provides a structured approach for mediators to encourage introspection and foster inter-party understanding, leading to more robust and mutually satisfactory resolutions (Blair & Desplaces, 2018). Its relevance in mediation extends beyond improving communication; it serves as a framework for identifying latent issues, unpacking the emotional context of disputes, and promoting genuine reconciliation. Specifically, the model assists mediators in distinguishing between information known to oneself and others, known to others but not to oneself, known to oneself but not to others, and unknown to both, thus offering a systematic approach to conflict analysis.

This process of categorization empowers mediators to guide parties strategically toward greater self-disclosure and empathetic listening, unearthing previously unacknowledged

aspects of the dispute (Kneip, 2010). Through this, a more comprehensive understanding of the contextual factors and interpersonal dynamics emerges, enabling all parties to reconstruct the conflict more accurately (Lau, 2022). The Johari Window thus helps mediators transcend superficial disagreements and address the psychological and emotional foundations that often sustain conflict (Alam, 2024).

In practical terms, the model supports mediators in managing the emotional landscape of mediation—where intense emotions can easily derail progress—by promoting positive engagement and mutual understanding (Ngcobo, 2023). It also helps mediators recognize how parties perceive both themselves and others, an awareness crucial for transforming defensive or hostile behavior into constructive interaction (Fiester & Stites, 2023). At the same time, it encourages mediators to cultivate awareness of their own emotional and cognitive states, fostering the clarity and presence indispensable for transformative mediation practice (Benítez-Schaefer, 2014).

This comprehensive insight allows mediators to identify perceptual distortions and communication barriers, laying the groundwork for interventions that promote genuine dialogue and collaboration. By mapping what is known and unknown within each party's perspective, mediators can deliberately expand the "Open" area, enhancing transparency, reducing misunderstandings, and building the trust necessary for navigating complex conflict dynamics. This analytical approach is equally valuable in identifying and addressing power imbalances, as the Johari Window reveals how parties perceive their own and others' influence in the dispute. Understanding these dynamics enables mediators to facilitate more equitable conversations and empower less dominant voices (Riera-Adrover, 2020).

Furthermore, the model assists in identifying and articulating the underlying interests of each party, beyond their stated positions, thereby enabling the discovery of mutually beneficial solutions that might otherwise remain obscured (Mujtaba & Garner, 2024). It also illuminates the emotional and psychological complexities shaping the conflict, allowing mediators to address these dimensions and achieve more sustainable outcomes (Kelly & Kaminskienė, 2016). This deeper awareness supports mediators in designing interventions that are not only effective in resolving disputes but also capable of strengthening relationships. Ultimately, the Johari Window offers a robust methodology for dissecting the multifaceted layers of human conflict, enabling mediators to facilitate understanding, rebuild trust, and guide parties toward meaningful and lasting resolution.

The Johari Window Model

Developed by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in 1955, the Johari Window is a cognitive psychological tool designed to enhance self-awareness and mutual understanding among individuals within a group (Verklan, 2007). The model presents a four-quadrant matrix that captures different aspects of how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others (see Figure 1). Each quadrant, or "pane," offers a distinctive view

of one's personality traits, emotions, motivations, and intentions, categorized by whether they are known or unknown to the self and known or unknown to others. These four quadrants—the Open Area (or Arena), the Blind Spot, the Hidden Area (or Façade), and the Unknown Area—together form a framework that reveals the dynamics of self-perception and interpersonal awareness, providing valuable insights into communication challenges and relational development.

	Known to me	Unknown to me
Known to other(s)	Our **Open** Area (or Arena)	My **Blind Spot** (or the other Party's Hidden Area, Power or Façade)
Unknown to other(s)	My **Hidden** Area (or My Power; or My Façade) (the Other Party's Blind Spot)	Our **Unknown** Area

Figure 1. The Johari Window Model

Origins and Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical foundations of the Johari Window draw heavily from social psychology, particularly from theories of self-disclosure and feedback, which emphasize their central roles in promoting interpersonal growth and reducing relational ambiguity (Newstrom & Rubenfeld, 1983). It serves as both a conceptual and visual framework for understanding how individuals reveal themselves and how they are, in turn, perceived by others. By mapping these processes, the model helps improve communication and conflict resolution within groups. Moreover, by categorizing personal and interpersonal information into four interrelated regions, the Johari Window facilitates deeper insight into behavioral dynamics and offers a practical approach for analyzing interactions in a variety of contexts, including negotiation and mediation.

The Four Panes: Open, Blind, Hidden, and Unknown

Each of the four panes—Open, Blind, Hidden, and Unknown—represents a distinct intersection between what is known to the self and what is known to others, becoming a tool of self-awareness and communication within conflict resolution (Zucker, 2012).

The **Open Area**, often called the "Arena," includes information that both the individual and others are aware of—behaviors, attitudes, intentions, and facts that are openly expressed and mutually recognized. In mediation, this pane represents shared understanding and common ground, forming the foundation upon which trust and cooperation are built (Golubeva, 2023; Nik et al., 2021). Expanding this area is therefore a central objective,

as greater openness and transparency promote collaboration and constructive dialogue (Stonehouse, 2015).

Further, in mediation practice, the Arena is frequently outlined during the initial joint meeting, where the mediator clarifies what information is shared and understood by all sides. When mediation briefs are exchanged, their "open" sections typically contain content from the Arena, often facts, arguments, or even pieces of evidence framed to justify each party's standpoint. Occasionally, a party may authorize the mediator to share certain documents with all participants, explicitly widening the Open Area. In other cases, one party may request that the mediator obtain specific documents from the other side as a condition for engaging in mediation, demonstrating how control over what enters the Arena can shape both trust and willingness to proceed.

Throughout the process, mediators routinely test the boundaries of the Open Area by asking questions such as, "*Do you know if the other party is aware of this?*" or "*Has your partner been told about your intention to leave the partnership and use mediation to negotiate a peaceful separation?*" These inquiries guide parties in distinguishing what is already shared from what remains hidden, continually widening the Arena so that negotiations can proceed on a foundation of clarity and mutual understanding.

The **Blind Spot** contains information known to others but not to the individual, such as unrecognized habits, mannerisms, or perceptions that shape how others experience them (Ramani et al., 2017). Within a mediation process, these blind spots can contribute to misunderstandings or entrenched conflict positions without the individual's awareness (London et al., 2022). Mediators play a crucial role here by using feedback techniques and reflective summarization to gently surface these blind spots, fostering insight and reframing entrenched narratives (Masaviru, 2016).

The most important lesson parties can draw from the Blind Spot quadrant is that we should never assume we possess all the information, even if we have been "living the conflict" for weeks, months, or years. Skilled negotiators understand this intuitively: information gathering is essential, and they employ a range of strategies—from relationship-building "carrots" to assertive or fear-based "sticks"—to elicit what they need. In mediation, however, the dynamic is different.

The mediator's primary role is to build trust with each party, learning how they perceive risk, what uncertainties concern them, and what questions they hope to have answered, essentially, what information they are seeking to obtain from the other side. When mediators notice that parties are eager to explore certain topics or have specific questions for the other party, productive prompts include: "*Why would this be useful for you?*" or "*If, hypothetically, the other party shared this information, what might you be prepared to offer in return that aligns with their interests?*"

These inquiries help transform blind-spot-driven assumptions into clearer understanding and more strategic, constructive engagement, moving parties closer to shared insight and, ultimately, to agreement.

The **Hidden Area**, also known as the "Façade," consists of information an individual is aware of but chooses to withhold from others—private feelings, fears, vulnerabilities, strengths, or strategic considerations that influence their stance but remain unspoken. In mediation, this hidden information often includes anything that, if revealed, might give the other party an advantage. For example, a party may avoid discussing legal uncertainties in a joint session because acknowledging risk could weaken their position in potential litigation or arbitration if mediation fails. Likewise, parties are rarely certain about how genuine the other side is in wanting to settle; perceived intentions can range from "not at all" (a mere fishing expedition) to deeply committed. And because information is power, parties are understandably reluctant to relinquish it, especially without receiving something of comparable value in return. Even seemingly simple disclosures, such as how flexible one's demands truly are or one's bottom line, are often guarded closely.

This is precisely why the Hidden Area is so critical in mediation. As trusted neutrals, mediators can facilitate a fair and balanced exchange of information between the parties' Hidden Areas, helping transform secrecy into shared understanding. Through confidential caucuses, psychological safety, and strategic reframing, mediators can encourage voluntary self-disclosure that expands the Open Area (Lau, 2022). In doing so, they also help shrink the Blind Spots of both sides. This expansion of the Open Area is essential for value creation, improving the potential for integrative solutions and moving parties toward mutually beneficial agreements.

Finally, the **Unknown Area** encompasses aspects that are unknown to both the self and others—latent capacities, subconscious motivations, or undiscovered insights that may emerge under specific circumstances. In mediation, the Unknown Area also includes information that neither party possesses uncertainties about alternative courses of action if no agreement is reached, the behavior of third parties, or external developments beyond the disputants' direct control. This quadrant highlights the dynamic, evolving nature of self-awareness and conflict, reminding mediators that new understandings or creative solutions can surface unexpectedly through dialogue, reflection, and trust-building.

Importantly, the Unknown Area is also where shared but unrecognized common ground often resides. Mediation can produce the best results when parties identify and build upon this common ground, even when it lies in domains that neither side initially sees clearly. Consider a public crisis in which both parties are facing reputational harm and cannot control how others discuss the situation. Each side may be inclined to "throw stones" at the other publicly in an attempt to protect itself. Here, the Unknown Area is significant because the public dimension introduces factors neither party can predict or influence alone.

In such cases, mediation can help uncover a mutual interest hidden in the unknown: the need to regain control over the narrative. A mediator can facilitate the creation of a coordinated "crisis management cell," allowing parties to synchronize their public communication so they can, metaphorically, "get out alive." By collaboratively shaping messaging,

the parties gain influence over what the other says publicly, transforming uncertainty into coordinated action.

Thus, the Unknown Area is not merely a space of ambiguity; it is also a potential reservoir of shared interests, waiting to be discovered through the guided structure of mediation.

Dynamics of the Johari Window in Interpersonal Communication

The Johari Window is inherently dynamic: the size and boundaries of each pane shift continuously as individuals engage in self-disclosure and receive feedback from others. Central to effective communication and conflict resolution is the expansion of the Open Area, which occurs when people share information about themselves and incorporate new perspectives offered by others (London et al., 2022). As this area grows, the Blind, Hidden, and Unknown Areas correspondingly shrink, signaling an increase in mutual understanding, psychological safety, and trust (London et al., 2022).

This process of expansion is particularly relevant in mediation, where creating and sustaining a larger Open Area between disputing parties facilitates transparency, reduces defensiveness, and enables collaborative problem-solving. By skillfully guiding disclosure and feedback exchanges, mediators help participants not only to clarify issues but also to see themselves (and each other) more accurately, laying the foundation for meaningful and enduring resolution.

Application of the Johari Window in Mediation

Johari Window in the Preparation Phase

During the preparation phase, mediators can employ the Johari Window as a diagnostic and anticipatory tool to gain early insights into the disputants' perspectives, communication patterns, and potential areas of conflict (Munduate et al., 2022). Through careful analysis of pre-mediation interviews, background documents, and party statements, the mediator can begin mapping the four quadrants of the Johari Window for each participant, identifying what information is openly shared, what others may know about a party that remains unacknowledged, what individuals deliberately withhold, and what issues or capacities remain unexplored. This preliminary assessment allows mediators to develop targeted questions and tailored strategies aimed at expanding the Open Area for all participants once the mediation begins.

A key benefit of this analytical approach lies in its ability to surface implicit biases, perceptual distortions, and risk factors *before* they shape the mediation process (Greenberg, 2011). In this sense, the Johari Window functions much like a pre-negotiation analysis used by skilled negotiators: it enhances awareness of uncertainty, clarifies potential vulnerabilities,

and supports the development of strategic readiness prior to engagement. Mediators can use the model to critically examine their own assumptions, expectations, and blind spots in relation to the parties, thereby reducing the likelihood that unconscious bias will influence facilitation. Likewise, recognizing the biases or preconceptions that parties may hold, either toward the mediator or toward each other, allows for proactive management of perceptions, ensuring that neutrality and fairness are both maintained and perceived throughout the process.

This meticulous pre-session analysis also assists mediators in anticipating communication barriers and preparing interventions that promote transparency, balanced information flow, and symmetrical participation, conditions that are fundamental to establishing a foundation of trust between the parties (Szejda & Hubbard, 2019; Fehrenbach & Hubbard, 2014). Such foresight ensures that the mediation environment is structured to encourage open dialogue while minimizing the risk of unforeseen interpersonal or procedural obstacles. When mediators use pre-determined headings for mediation briefs or position statements, reviewing those documents through the lens of the Johari Window becomes especially valuable. This approach helps ensure that the information received touches all relevant areas - Open, Hidden, Blind, and Unknown - allowing the mediator to assess where gaps or asymmetries may arise and to prepare strategies that support a more transparent and productive exchange during the session.

By understanding the contours of each participant's Johari Window before the session, the mediator can further tailor communication strategies to facilitate self-disclosure and feedback exchanges that gradually expand the Open Area. This not only supports a more candid and productive dialogue but also prepares the mediator to address the emotional costs of conflict, which, if left unmanaged, can adversely affect both organizational efficiency and individual well-being (Munduate et al., 2022). Through this early awareness, the mediator can design processes that create psychological safety, enabling parties to engage authentically and explore constructive avenues for resolution that might otherwise remain inaccessible (Druckman & Harinck, 2022).

Ultimately, the careful application of the Johari Window during the preparation phase allows mediators to anticipate relational dynamics and design interventions that maximize transparency, empathy, and understanding from the outset. At this stage, the model is particularly useful for assessing power distribution between the parties and for understanding their strategic orientation toward the mediation—whether they are approaching it competitively (the "stick") or collaboratively (the "carrot"). These insights help mediators tailor their approach to the specific dynamics at play.

Preparation is also the moment when mediators explore each party's alternatives to settlement, guiding them through structured questions such as: "*If there is no agreement, what is your best-case scenario (BATNA)? How likely is that? What is your worst-case scenario (WATNA)? What risks come with it? What is your most-likely alternative (MLATNA)?*" This exploration naturally raises further questions: "*What information do you need to*

refine this analysis? Can any of it be obtained from the other party? What do you believe they are hiding from you? What do you know that they do not? And what remains unknown to both sides?"

By helping parties map these considerations onto the Johari Window, mediators gain deeper situational awareness and can better bridge divergent interests, offering a shared frame of reference and a common vocabulary that transforms differing institutional or personal perspectives into mutual comprehension (Holm, 2022). In this sense, the Johari Window becomes an operational guide for shaping an environment where dialogue, trust, and collaboration can emerge organically.

Johari Window in the Exploration Phase

The exploration phase is where mediators effectively become information brokers, facilitating a carefully paced and ethically managed exchange between the parties' respective Blind and Hidden Areas. It is precisely because of the mediator's neutral and trusted role that parties in mediation are able to unlock a greater potential for value creation. Mediators can receive and handle confidential information, identify points of convergence or synergy between parties' interests, and do so without disclosing sensitive details. This enables parties to make deliberate and strategic choices about what they wish to reveal directly, what they prefer to share through the mediator, and what they choose to keep confidential.

In this way, the Johari Window's application becomes central to mediation, helping parties and their advisors make informed decisions about the process, its structure, and its strategic use. By managing the flow of information in a way that respects confidentiality while encouraging insight, mediators help transform the exploration phase into a space where hidden opportunities emerge and negotiations move toward constructive, integrative outcomes.

During the exploration phase, mediators employ the Johari Window as an active facilitation framework to expand the Open Area, the shared zone of mutual understanding and transparency between parties. This expansion occurs through deliberate questioning, empathetic listening, and observation. By posing open-ended questions, mediators encourage participants to articulate their experiences, perspectives, and concerns, thereby moving information from the Hidden Area into the shared space (Rashid, 2024). At the same time, mediators remain attentive to non-verbal cues and patterns of interaction that may reveal aspects from the Blind Area, helping parties recognize how their behavior or communication style is perceived by others. This process of revealing and reflecting promotes awareness and self-reflection, reducing misinterpretations and communication barriers that often perpetuate conflict.

This deliberate enlargement of the Open Area serves as a bridge from positional bargaining to interest-based negotiation, allowing mediators and parties to identify the deeper needs

and motivations underlying stated positions (Choi & Yang, 2024). Through guided dialogue, mediators can facilitate direct communication between parties, improving their interactional dynamics and enabling each side to better observe, interpret, and respond to the other's cues (Rashid, 2024). Such engagement not only enhances the flow of information but also allows mediators to detect and de-escalate emerging tensions before they evolve into destructive confrontation, transforming conflict into constructive dialogue (Druckman & Harinck, 2022).

Through this facilitative use of the Johari Window, previously unacknowledged areas of convergence—shared goals, common values, or mutual interests—can emerge, often reshaping parties' perceptions of both the dispute and one another. This discovery of common ground lays the foundation for cooperative problem-solving and the joint construction of viable, durable solutions (Buresh, 2022).

In most civil and commercial mediations—and equally in company–community mediation—private sessions are essential for this problem-exploration work. Parties are understandably reluctant to share sensitive information in joint meetings "in the name of settling," knowing that if no agreement is reached, such disclosure could leave them vulnerable. Although the mediator typically gains insight during the preparation phase into what each party is intentionally keeping hidden and why, the exploration stage almost always brings newly revealed hidden information to the surface.

The mediator's task at this stage is to understand what additional information has emerged, why it remains concealed, and how it might be used—ethically and constructively—to facilitate strategic trade-offs between the parties. By navigating these hidden layers with care, the mediator helps transform guarded secrecy into opportunities for alignment, enabling the Johari Window to function as a catalyst for deeper insight and more integrative solutions.

Johari Window in the Problem-Solving Phase

In the problem-solving phase, the insights generated through the expansion of the Open Area become instrumental in guiding the creation of innovative and mutually acceptable solutions. Mediators encourage parties to build upon their shared understanding to brainstorm options that address underlying needs and transform previously hidden or unknown potential solutions into tangible outcomes. This collaborative approach ensures that resolutions are not merely compromises but reflect integrated and creative responses grounded in a comprehensive appreciation of the conflict (Katz & Wahlgren, 2022; Anam & Satris, 2020).

By facilitating this process, mediators help parties cultivate cooperative competencies such as clear expression, empathic listening, and joint problem-definition, skills essential for reaching mutually beneficial outcomes (Tjosvold & Vliert, 1994). The process also

counteracts the corrosive effects of distrust, which can hinder collaboration and integrative bargaining (Druckman & Harinck, 2022). Moreover, as the Johari Window helps reveal previously concealed information, it builds confidence and enhances interpersonal trust, two critical ingredients for the durability and legitimacy of mediated agreements (Landau & Landau, 1997).

The mediator's role at this stage extends beyond simply generating solutions; it involves ensuring that proposed outcomes are robust, realistic, and sustainable, capable of withstanding future pressures or contextual changes. Research on transfer effects in problem-solving workshops supports this approach, showing that structured facilitation can generate learning and cooperative habits that endure beyond the immediate dispute (Fisher, 2020). By applying the Johari Window to ensure transparency and inclusiveness, mediators can guide parties toward developing SMART agreements—those that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound—thus increasing the likelihood of successful implementation and long-term resolution (Druckman et al., 2020).

In cases where the mediation aims at a "peaceful separation," with no future relationship between the parties, the Johari model is particularly valuable in helping the mediator act as a *reality agent*. At this point in the process, the negotiation zone will ideally have narrowed: perhaps still negative, but with a significantly smaller gap than at the outset. Because opportunities for value creation are limited in such separations, compromise often becomes the best achievable outcome. Here, the Johari Window helps the mediator guide parties through risk analysis and toward an acceptable compromise, one that may make them equally unhappy, but equally protected.

Conversely, when mediation supports the creation of a future joint relationship, the landscape changes entirely. Opportunities for mutual gain increase, and the mediator's task becomes helping the parties generate options that produce value for both sides. The Johari Window is especially useful in this context, as collaboration requires moving information out of the Blind Spots and Hidden Areas and into the Open Area, where shared understanding can fuel creative option-generation. It also provides a structured way to explore and manage the uncertainties that reside in the Unknown Area, enabling parties to design agreements that anticipate future risks and support long-term cooperation.

Johari Window in the Final Arrangements Phase: Ensuring SMART Agreements

In the final phase, the Johari Window provides a systematic framework for reviewing the completeness, clarity, and feasibility of the emerging agreement. The mediator draws on the expanded Open Area to verify that all relevant information has been disclosed and incorporated into the settlement, ensuring that each component of the agreement meets SMART criteria: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. This

process requires careful evaluation of whether the proposed terms genuinely address the underlying interests identified earlier, leaving no critical issue unacknowledged or unresolved.

Through this final review, mediators help transform potential solutions, initially located in the Unknown Area, into explicit and actionable commitments by ensuring that every term is clearly articulated and mutually understood. In doing so, the mediator ensures that the commitments are both realistic and verifiable, translating general intentions into concrete actions and measurable deliverables (Tjosvold & Vliert, 1994). This attention to detail minimizes ambiguity and prevents the re-emergence of disputes based on differing interpretations, thereby enhancing the durability and enforceability of the outcome.

A SMART-oriented approach, grounded in the Johari Window, promotes integrative and sustainable agreements by aligning understanding, expectation, and accountability (Druckman et al., 2020). Moreover, mediators ensure that agreements are designed to foster ongoing cooperation, acknowledging that conflict resolution is not a static event but an evolving process of relationship management. As Hoffman and Bercovitch (2011) observe, peace is dynamic and requires continuous renegotiation and commitment from all parties. By systematically applying the Johari Window through to this final stage, mediators can ensure that agreements reflect not only consensus but also shared insight, trust, and an enduring capacity for collaboration.

Monitoring and Evaluation:
The Johari Window as a Reflective Framework

The final phase of the mediation process—monitoring and evaluation (where appliable, as in company-community mediation)—serves not only to assess the durability and implementation of agreements but also to deepen learning and reflective practice for all participants. Within this stage, the Johari Window offers a valuable framework for analyzing both process outcomes and relational transformations, ensuring that the lessons of mediation extend beyond the immediate dispute. By revisiting the four quadrants, the mediator can help parties, as well as themselves, reflect on what knowledge has become shared, what insights remain obscured, and what new understandings have emerged through dialogue and collaboration.

From a practical standpoint, mediators can use the Johari Window during post-mediation reviews to examine how effectively the Open Area expanded throughout the process. This involves assessing whether parties have achieved greater transparency, empathy, and alignment of expectations since the agreement was reached. A significant increase in the Open Area suggests that mutual trust and communication have improved, whereas lingering Hidden or Blind Areas may indicate unresolved issues or potential risks to the sustainability of the outcome (Munduate et al., 2022). Monitoring in this way helps ensure

that the resolution is not only legally or procedurally sound but also relationally stable, anchored in genuine understanding rather than mere compliance.

The Johari Window also enables mediators to conduct self-evaluation, an essential yet often overlooked component of professional mediation practice. By critically reflecting on their own Blind and Unknown Areas, mediators can identify what aspects of their facilitation were effective and where potential biases or oversights may have influenced the process (Rahman, 2012). Feedback from parties, co-mediators, or supervisors can serve as an external mirror, revealing patterns or assumptions that might otherwise remain unacknowledged. This reflective exercise strengthens professional growth and helps mediators refine their techniques for future engagements (Shaw, 1997).

In addition to its use for individual reflection, the Johari Window supports systemic evaluation of mediation programs. Aggregated insights from multiple cases can reveal recurring Blind or Hidden Areas within an organization, community, or institutional framework, patterns that may point to structural issues in communication, trust, or policy. When systematically recorded and analyzed, these insights can inform capacity-building initiatives and institutional reforms that make mediation systems more inclusive, transparent, and adaptive (Holm, 2022).

Ethically applied, this reflective use of the Johari Window also reinforces accountability and continuous improvement. Mediators can track whether the SMART principles established during the agreement phase are being met, and whether implementation is generating the intended relational and practical outcomes (Tjosvold & Vliert, 1994). When gaps emerge, the framework helps identify whether they stem from insufficient disclosure, miscommunication, or external factors beyond the parties' control, guiding appropriate follow-up interventions.

This reflective capacity is also crucial for navigating questions of negotiation ethics, particularly when parties strategically withhold information. Not all nondisclosure amounts to bad faith, but mediators must remain alert to situations where concealment crosses ethical boundaries or undermines the integrity of the process. The Johari Window offers a structured way to assess our own standing as mediators when we suspect bad-faith negotiation strategies: it helps us examine what we know, what we are allowed to know, and how parties' tactics affect our neutrality and professional responsibilities. In principle, there are ethical lines mediators should not cross, and circumstances under which continuation of the role may no longer be appropriate. By illuminating the impact of parties' strategies on the mediator's own Blind and Hidden Areas, the Johari Window provides a valuable guide for determining when—and how—to intervene, address concerns, or, if necessary, step back to preserve the fairness and legitimacy of the mediation process.

Finally, the Johari Window underscores the transformative potential of mediation as an ongoing process of awareness and relationship-building. As parties reflect on what has shifted from their Hidden or Unknown Areas into shared understanding, they often

recognize personal and interpersonal growth that extends beyond the dispute itself. This recognition can foster long-term resilience and improved conflict management capacity, turning mediation into a catalyst for cultural change and collective learning.

In this sense, the Johari Window is not simply a diagnostic or facilitative model but a long-term reflective instrument, one that supports mediators, parties, and institutions in continually refining how they understand themselves, each other, and the evolving dynamics of cooperation. When integrated into monitoring and evaluation, it ensures that mediation outcomes are not only effective in resolving disputes but also developmental in strengthening the social fabric that sustains peace.

Table 1.

Quadrant	Meaning in Mediation	Practical Use
Open Area (Known to self & others)	Shared knowledge, facts, and feelings that both parties are aware of.	Building on these shared understandings can strengthen common ground.
Blind Spot (Unknown to self, known to others)	Behaviors, habits, or impacts that one party doesn't realize but the other perceives clearly.	Mediator can surface these gently via reframing, summarizing, or reality testing.
Hidden Area (Known to self, unknown to others)	Private feelings, unspoken concerns, strategic information.	Encouraging disclosure can expand the open area and reduce suspicion.
Unknown Area (Unknown to self & others)	Latent needs, unconscious biases, structural issues neither party has articulated.	Mediator may help discover these through deep questioning, caucus, or scenario exploration.

Benefits and Challenges of Using the Johari Window in Mediation

While the Johari Window offers substantial advantages in fostering openness, empathy, and mutual understanding, its application within mediation also introduces unique complexities. Chief among these are the challenges posed by power asymmetries and the natural resistance to self-disclosure that often characterizes disputes. Mediators must navigate situations where parties hesitate to reveal sensitive or strategic information out of fear that transparency might be exploited or perceived as weakness. Such reluctance can hinder the expansion of the Open Area, limiting the potential for genuine understanding and trust-building (Munduate et al., 2022). These obstacles highlight the importance of mediator sensitivity, adaptive communication, and the careful balancing of openness with psychological safety throughout the process.

Enhancing Mediator Self-Awareness

Beyond its application as a facilitative tool with disputing parties, the Johari Window serves a vital role in enhancing the self-awareness of mediators themselves. By reflecting

on their own Blind Spots and Unknown Areas, mediators can recognize how personal biases, assumptions, or interactional tendencies may inadvertently shape the dynamics of the session (Rahman, 2012). This reflective process strengthens impartiality and supports ethical practice, ensuring that mediators remain responsive rather than reactive in moments of tension.

Structured feedback, peer consultation, and continuous professional development all help mediators use the Johari framework as a mirror for refining their own practice (Shaw, 1997). In doing so, they become better equipped to detect and mitigate subtle forms of imbalance or miscommunication that may arise during facilitation. This self-insight not only prevents the mediator from contributing, unintentionally, to communication breakdowns but also enhances their ability to model transparency and emotional intelligence within the process. Furthermore, greater self-awareness enables mediators to leverage their strengths, such as empathetic listening, strategic reframing, or analytical clarity, to guide parties toward integrative, sustainable outcomes (Dreu, 2014).

Facilitating Party Understanding and Communication

For the parties themselves, the Johari Window provides a structured means of improving communication and mutual comprehension. By encouraging each side to explore both what they disclose and what they withhold, the model helps participants better understand their own perspectives as well as those of others, reducing misinterpretations and fostering empathy. This expansion of mutual understanding is central to transforming competitive or positional dynamics into cooperative problem-solving.

The model's capacity to make visible the interplay between self-perception and others' perceptions is especially valuable in settings marked by power imbalances. By enabling quieter or less dominant voices to be heard, the Johari Window helps prevent the marginalization of weaker parties and promotes a more balanced exchange of perspectives (Munduate et al., 2022). It also mitigates attribution biases—the tendency to misjudge others' motives—by prompting reflection on personal assumptions and by inviting a more nuanced interpretation of behaviors and intentions (Ng & Ang, 1999). Through this process, the mediator helps the parties shift from blame and defensiveness toward a more constructive, interest-oriented dialogue grounded in mutual recognition.

Potential Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Despite its evident strengths, the use of the Johari Window in mediation is not without risks. Its effectiveness depends on the mediator's ethical sensitivity and their ability to manage the delicate balance between openness and protection. One ethical challenge lies in handling sensitive information that may emerge through disclosure. Encouraging self-revelation can be beneficial, but if poorly managed, it risks creating emotional discomfort,

vulnerability, or even harm (Gutman & Grant, 2018). Mediators must therefore ensure that all disclosures are voluntary, purposeful, and aligned with the overarching goal of resolution rather than inadvertently exacerbating asymmetries of power or trust.

To safeguard participants, mediators must establish clear confidentiality protocols and explain how disclosed information will be used and protected, particularly when navigating deeply personal or culturally sensitive issues. Ethical discernment is also required when deciding how to address insights from a party's Hidden Area, as premature or insensitive exposure may deepen divisions rather than bridge them. This underscores the need for mediators to combine theoretical understanding of the Johari Window with advanced interpersonal competence and ethical fortitude.

Cultural variation further complicates disclosure dynamics. Norms regarding openness, hierarchy, and privacy differ across societies, influencing what parties perceive as appropriate to share (Holm, 2022). Mediators must therefore adapt the Johari Window to local cultural contexts, ensuring that the pursuit of transparency does not violate personal or collective boundaries. When applied with cultural and emotional intelligence, the model becomes a bridge to understanding rather than a source of discomfort or resistance.

Conclusion

In summary, the Johari Window provides mediators with a powerful conceptual and practical framework for enhancing self-awareness, communication, and empathy—the three pillars of effective conflict resolution. We see Johari as especially relevant because it helps us understand and address one of the core barriers to settlement: the human tendency, when in conflict, to lose perspective and hide information. By making these dynamics visible, the model teaches both mediators and parties to analyse alternatives to a negotiated agreement, define and manage risk, and allow for disclosure and vulnerability without increasing exposure in the event that no settlement is reached.

The Johari Window also strengthens our preparation for negotiation by helping us think strategically about the "three G's" every professional negotiator must define in advance: what information we plan to Give, what we hope to Get, and what we must Guard. This clarity often leads parties to make a deliberate choice to use mediation rather than direct negotiation when sensitive issues or asymmetrical risks are involved. Once mediation begins, the same Johari principles help define an agreed information-sharing protocol: which information can be shared confidentially with the mediator, which disclosures may have their confidentiality waived (and why), and which information must remain known only to the mediator, whether provided before the mediation or revealed in private sessions.

When employed within a robust ethical framework, one that protects confidentiality while encouraging relevant and voluntary disclosure, the Johari Window transforms mediation into a space for authentic dialogue, personal growth, and collaborative problem-solving.

In this sense, it not only facilitates dispute resolution but also nurtures the relational and reflective capacities essential for lasting peace. Ultimately, the Johari model is not merely helpful; it is critical to the success of the mediation process for both parties and mediators alike.

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Türkiye:
The Impact of Türkiye's Peace-oriented Approach to the Russia–Ukraine War on the War and the Region

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Abstract: This article aims to analyze the reasons behind the war initiated by Russia against Ukraine as part of its efforts to re-establish control over its former spheres of influence after 2000 and Türkiye's initiatives in response to these developments. One of the reasons the war rapidly evolved into a Europe–Russia conflict is Russia's strong objection to Ukraine's desire to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia's stance is a cause of concern for Europe. This study discusses the historical, social, political, and economic dimensions of the Ukraine War and explains the multifaceted nature of its impact. Mediation efforts and diplomatic initiatives are crucial for resolving the ongoing war. As a NATO member capable of maintaining communication with both parties, Türkiye has intensified its efforts to end the war. Despite ongoing mediation efforts and a peaceful approach to the issue, the problem remains unresolved. This study seeks to answer what needs to be done to achieve lasting and sustainable peace in the Russia-Ukraine War and whether Türkiye's efforts will be sufficient to reach a resolution.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Türkiye, Europe, Istanbul Agreement, peace talks.

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Introduction

During the Soviet era, eastern Ukraine was designated as an industrial region, leading to the settlement of large numbers of Russians in the area and altering its demographic structure. Although Ukraine declared its independence on August 24, 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country was governed by administrations politically aligned with Russia until 2014, and its foreign policy was shaped accordingly (Acer, 2022). On February 21, 2014, Viktor Yanukovych, the last pro-Russian Ukrainian president, was removed from power (Halhallı, 2022; Candan & Halhallı, 2022). After Yanukovych fled to Russia, Ukraine began to shift toward the Western bloc and rebuilt its foreign policy accordingly. This shift in Ukraine's foreign policy led to increased tensions with Russia (Sönmez et al., 2015).

Russia aims to protect its security by eliminating the West's military presence in Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2014). In contrast, the West seeks to position Ukraine as a forward outpost against any potential Russian threat. Due to its strategic location, Ukraine has become a competitive arena since the day it gained independence. The Western bloc's "containment policy" toward Russia and Russia's "near abroad doctrine" have occasionally led to confrontations between the two sides.

The invasion of Crimea on February 27, 2014, effectively marked the beginning of the Ukraine War. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, anti-Ukrainian separatist sentiment grew stronger and sparked protests in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, where the Russian population is concentrated. Russia escalated tensions in this region, known as Donbas, and assisted the protesters. In May 2014, these provinces also held referendums to declare independence from Ukraine and join Russia. The protests manifested as demands to secede from Ukraine and join Russia, and independent republics, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, were declared. Hot conflicts began between Ukraine and the separatists, escalating the situation into an international crisis. In order to stop the conflicts and declare a ceasefire, representatives of Russia, Ukraine, and the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic came together and signed the Minsk Protocol. Although this protocol aimed to establish a ceasefire, it was unsuccessful in stopping the conflict (Candan & Halhallı, 2022).

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who came to power on April 21, 2019, made serious efforts toward Ukraine's accession to NATO. In response, Russia claimed that Ukraine's choice paved the way for an attack on itself, that it was under threat, and demanded that Ukraine end this rapprochement (Güler, 2022). When Ukraine rejected this demand, Russia first recognized the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics as independent states on February 21, 2022. The following day, it announced the termination of the Minsk Protocol, which contained ceasefire provisions (Acer, 2022). In a televised speech on February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin clearly indicated that he viewed the West's support for Ukraine as a threat to Russia (Fisher, 2022). Between 2014 and 2022, Ukraine struggled against separatist movements supported by Russia and was shaken by the Russian invasion that began on February 24, 2022 (Güneş, 2022).

Due to attacks on civilians and cities in Ukraine, these conflicts have taken on an existential nature. Concerns inherited from the Cold War era created a security dilemma, leading Russia to conclude that the West—by supporting Ukraine—intended to weaken Russia, seize its assets, exclude it from international institutions, and pursue regime change (Benjamin & Davies, 2022). Expecting an easy victory, Russia instead encountered unexpected Ukrainian resistance and suffered losses. Moreover, it was subjected to severe military, political, and economic sanctions imposed by the Western alliance led by the United States (US) and Europe, resulting in Russia's isolation from the international system of states. Although the US and European powers were not actively involved in the war, they provided Ukraine with significant military and economic assistance, helping it resist the occupation. Russia's suspension of natural gas sales to European countries triggered a serious energy crisis in Europe (Bağış, 2022). Russia failed to achieve the expected results from the war it initiated and was subjected to heavy economic sanctions in response.

However, despite the massive military assistance provided to Ukraine by Western powers, the war and occupation did not end until the end. Europe, which largely relied on NATO and US protection during the Cold War, has reached the point of depletion of its military stockpiles. Currently, European powers aim to prevent the ongoing war on the European continent from spreading to other countries within the continent, resolve the crisis caused by energy sanctions, and end the war after inflicting maximum damage on Russia (Özdemir, 2022). Ukrainian President Zelenskyy stated that Ukrainians would not cede their land to invaders. While their warfighting capabilities compete on the ground, Türkiye, pursuing a policy of balance, has maintained its relations with both Russia and Ukraine since the beginning of the war and has striven to resolve the dispute through mediation between them.

This study examines the historical perspective of Russia-Ukraine relations and addresses the factors that escalated the dispute, leading to conflict. It explains the stance of Europe and the US on the issue and focuses on Türkiye's approach and the negotiations conducted within the scope of its mediation efforts.

Historical Background

The founding of the Russian Empire is generally considered to have begun with the establishment of the first Russian principality in Kiev in 882 (Sethe, 1968). Therefore, Kiev is regarded as the center of the formation of Russian civilization and is perceived as the heart of Slavic civilization (Kondratenko, 2016). The historical tensions between Ukraine and Russia date back centuries. Because the lands east of the Dnieper River, which flows through the heart of the country, were generally dominated by Russians, while those to the west were dominated by various Western nations, the population in the eastern part of the country tends to feel closer to Russia, while those in the west feel closer to the Western nations. Based on this, Russia argues that the Dnieper River should serve as the border between Russia and Ukraine.

The root causes of these problems lie in a complex mix of cultural, economic and political factors. From the late 18th century until the 1917 Russian Revolution, Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and was subjected to significant political and cultural pressures (Kappeler, 2014). During the Soviet period, policies of Russification in Ukraine mandated Russian as the language of education, the press, and the bureaucracy, while Sovietization policies marginalized non-Russian populations. Historical, cultural, and political factors have led to disagreements between the two countries and increased the risk of conflict. Western Ukraine, which adopted Ukrainian as its language and belonged to Central European culture, confronted Eastern Ukraine, which spoke Russian and considered itself ethnically Russian. While the population in western Ukraine tended to support pro-Western policies, those in eastern Ukraine saw themselves as closer to Russia (Penkala et al., 2020).

After Ukraine declared independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was expected to develop bilateral relations with Russia as independent and equal states, influenced by their shared history and past ties. However, because Russia viewed Ukraine as part of its sphere of influence, Ukraine was perceived as part of Russia (Masters, 2023). Despite declaring independence, Ukraine did not achieve a fully stable political structure, resulting in a dilemma regarding its foreign policy orientation. Accordingly, Ukraine oscillated between opposing "pro-Western" and "pro-Russian" foreign policy perspectives (Sakwa, 2022). To balance Russia, it sought to strengthen its relations with the US and NATO. Indeed, President Clinton's foreign policy goals, which included controlling the east-west and north-south energy and trade in Eurasia, placed Ukraine in a crucial position for the US (Torbakov, 2001; European Commission, 2021).

While Russia acknowledges that things will not be the same as in the Soviet Union, it continues to pursue its ambition of rebuilding its influence (Nixey, 2012). Ukraine, with its newly acquired sovereignty, was forced to navigate a delicate balance between establishing its own identity and maintaining relations with Russia (Cui et al., 2023). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became the world's third-largest nuclear power. Russia's claim that the nuclear weapons in regional countries should be returned to it was also supported by Western countries. As a strong gesture of goodwill to improve relations with the West, particularly the US, Ukraine agreed to relinquish its nuclear warheads (Bilener, 2007). The Budapest Memorandum was signed on December 5, 1994 (Lawless, 2025). Under this agreement, Ukraine renounced the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal, inherited from the former Soviet Union, and transferred all its nuclear warheads to Russia (Büyükakıncı, 2004). The signatories of the memorandum pledged to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and the inviolability of its borders and refrain from the use or threat of military force (Budjeryn & Bunn, 2020). Ukraine's surrender of its nuclear weapons and their derivatives, relying on law and the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* to secure its sovereignty, and its subsequent withdrawal from its territory due to its defenselessness, rather than its own sovereignty, are questionable issues. Russia broke its promise not to attack or interfere with Ukraine after it received nuclear weapons.

The era of Vladimir Putin marks a period in which Russia entered a phase of recovery, significantly regained its strength, and began asserting itself on the international stage (Halidov, 2014). Russia, on the rise with Putin, began taking steps to realize its ambitions of becoming a great power, justifying itself to regain its former glory (Askeroğlu, 2020). Consequently, it viewed the growing Western influence in Ukraine as a factor that weakened its claim to global leadership. However, the West cannot be said to have remained silent in the face of Russia's moves, as NATO, just as it did during the Cold War, began implementing containment and encirclement policies against Russia.

Factors Escalating the Conflict

With its "near abroad doctrine," announced in 1993, Russia declared a vital area of interest in its regional security and economic policies, particularly encompassing the states that gained independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, adopting an Eurasianist approach (Sönmez, 2010). The Ukraine crisis, which began in 2013, triggered a clash between pro-Russian separatists and the Kiev government, leading to Russia's annexation of Crimea. The seizure of Crimea by Russia is one of the most significant causes of tensions between the two countries. Russia claims that the Ukrainian government committed genocide against people of Russian origin, thus entitling Crimea and the Donbas region to "self-determination" (Halhallı, 2022). The acceleration of pro-Russian separatist movements in the region and the ongoing conflict, fueled by humanitarian crises, further complicated Russian-Ukrainian relations and drew international attention (Marandici & Leşanu, 2021). Ukraine, however, maintains that the asserted right to self-determination applies only to peoples under colonial rule, that this right does not grant the right to secede, and that otherwise, the principle of "state integrity" would be violated (Acer, 2022). Although Moscow claims to have the right to protect Russians on Ukrainian territory, it cannot change the fact that Ukraine is an independent and sovereign state recognized by the UN.

On February 21, 2022, Russia recognized the so-called administrations of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (Korovkin & Makarin, 2023), which Russian-backed separatists established in April 2014. Following this recognition, Russian military troops entered both the regions. Russia's military intervention escalated into a protracted and multifaceted war that resulted in thousands of deaths, civilian displacement, and widespread humanitarian crises (da Silva et al., 2023). Russia's occupation and annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent large-scale military attacks it launched against Ukraine in February 2022 were not spontaneous developments. It is important to note that the tensions between Moscow and Kiev began with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent declaration of independence by the Ukrainian Parliament on August 24, 1991. With Ukraine gaining independence, tensions and rivalries between the West and Russia continued within Ukraine. In the internal political struggle between the

pro-Russian and pro-Western political tendencies that emerged, Ukraine's shift towards pro-Western policies led to the possibility of NATO membership being on the agenda.

Putin argues that Ukraine does not exist as a separate country and that Ukrainian identity is artificial and a product of external forces (Bothmann, 2022), while arguing that Ukraine comprises historical and cultural parts that rightfully belong to Russia (Sönmez et al., 2015). Ukraine is viewed as a buffer zone that provides strategic depth and defense against enemy attacks for Russia (Alcaro, 2015). Ukraine's geopolitical position is one of the key reasons behind the war. Ukraine allowed competing external powers to pursue their own interest-driven agendas, pushing the country to the brink of a violent civil war. Russia, the European Union, and the United States all actively participated in this internal competition (Liu & Shu, 2023). Therefore, the Russia-Ukraine conflict threatens the security of these two countries and significantly impacts the Black Sea Basin countries regionally.

The major move in the escalating crisis was the Trump administration's decision to sell defensive weapons to Kiev in 2017. This process raised the question of "defense against what?" from Russia's perspective (The Economist, 2022). Neither side was willing to discuss these issues. Russia's insistence on its pressure policies and Ukraine's determination to improve its relations with the West escalated the dispute. Russia's deployment of approximately 180,000 troops to the Ukrainian border in April 2021, particularly in Crimea and the Donbas region, for military exercises, and NATO's increased deployment of troops and weapons to the region due to the Ukraine crisis led to escalating tensions (BBC News Türkçe, 2021). Russia perceives NATO's military deployments and expansionist policies as threats and containment policies (Harris et al., 2022).

The United States' policy of supporting Ukraine continued under the Biden administration, further strengthening ties between the two countries. This strengthened relationship was formalized in November 2021 through the signing of the significant "US–Ukraine Strategic Partnership Charter" by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba (Gray, 2023). In December 2021, the Russian government laid out its "red lines" when it made demands of Western countries, including a legally binding guarantee that NATO would not expand further eastward (Statista, 2025). On February 21, 2022, Putin announced Russia's recognition of the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas region (BBC, 2022) and immediately sent troops into the area. This move can be interpreted as the first signal from Russia indicating the initiation of war. Acting out of concerns over Ukraine's efforts to join NATO and the alliance's eastward expansion, Russia launched an attack on Ukrainian territory on February 24, 2022. This was a continuation of the 2014 invasion of Crimea. Russia invoked the right of peoples to self-determination to legitimize its attacks within the framework of international law.

Russia regarded Ukraine's potential NATO membership as a security threat, claiming that it was pursuing a justified war. Putin issued a stern warning to Ukraine and NATO countries, stating that "If Ukraine joins NATO, a war will break out between Russia and

NATO" (Bag, 2022). The effective use of soft power diplomacy by European states and the expansion of Ukraine's multifaceted cooperation with the West have led to a redefinition of power balances. The growing security dilemma stemming from Ukraine's close ties with Western countries led Russia to invest more in its military power and adopt aggressive strategies. One of the most important reasons underlying Russia's aggressive initiatives is the West's effective use of its growing control mechanisms over the region (Cafruny et al., 2023). In a political arena where the United States, NATO, and the European Union seek to expand their spheres of influence, Ukraine's alignment with these Western power centers formed the foundation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The Ukrainian people have rejected Russia's patronage. The encouragement of Ukraine's efforts to turn westward by the EU, NATO, and the US led Russia to adopt a more aggressive policy toward Ukraine.

In his February 2022 speech, Putin set forth several conditions for ending the war. These included Ukraine abandoning its desire to join NATO, recognizing the annexation of Crimea, recognizing the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, demilitarizing Ukraine, and granting Russian the status of a second official language. However, the emergence of new problems throughout the conflict made a solution increasingly difficult. In particular, Russia's war crimes against civilians, its displacement of civilians, and its involvement in large-scale material damage, along with Ukraine's interventions in Donbass and attacks on Russian territory, are increasingly pushing both sides away from a solution (Miall, 2023).

The Stance of Europe and the US

The Russia-Ukraine conflict is not merely a regional issue but also one with global dimensions. The importance of international borders, the principle of state sovereignty, and the post-Cold War European security order are being tested by this conflict (Galeotti, 2018). Although the Russia-Ukraine war is fundamentally a geopolitical and regional conflict, it has profound economic, military, and political implications for the wider region. Although there are differences among European countries regarding the severity of their responses to Russia's invasion, there is a general consensus that Ukraine is right. The European Union views the attack on Ukraine not only as an invasion of a sovereign state and a challenge to international law and the existing order, but also as a direct security concern and a threat to democracy. Russia, unable to develop weapons technology after the Cold War, realized too late that it would be forced to fight the US, the EU, and especially the UK, due to its weakness in intelligence. Russia transformed media, food, and energy resources into tools of pressure against European countries. It also used its deterrent weapons and nuclear arsenal as instruments of threat, attempting to influence European countries' stance in the war.

On February 21, 2022, the US issued Executive Order 14065, prohibiting certain transactions with Russia and blocking the assets of certain individuals (The White House,

2022). Immediately following the invasion, US President Joe Biden stated that Russia was responsible for the ensuing destruction and pledged to take action with its allies against the Moscow government (Euronews, 2022). Most of the Biden government's sanctions were aimed at undermining Russia's ability to finance its military capabilities (Macias, 2021). Indeed, the US imposed the most sanctions, issuing 3,152 (Castellum.Al, 2023).

It is evident that Ukraine cannot fight Russia without the US's economic and military support (Oruç, 2025). Trump approached the issue during his second term with the promise of ending the war in a single day. Ukrainian President Zelensky, invited to the White House for the so-called peace agreement, refuses to sign the agreement transferring rare earths and precious metals to the US, leaving the White House feeling humiliated. Thus, it became clear that the promises to end the war in Ukraine were nothing more than rhetoric.

Since the onset of the Russia–Ukraine war, the German government has taken a clear stance, strongly condemning the attacks on Ukraine. In response to Russia's attacks, Germany and its European Union partners adopted a comprehensive sanctions package. The government pledged full support to Ukraine and approved direct arms deliveries to the country. Chancellor Olaf Scholz held Russian President Vladimir Putin directly responsible for the attack, calling it "Putin's war" (Deutschland.de, 2022).

France quickly moved away from its traditional pro-Russia stance and signed a security pact with Ukraine in February 2024 (Taskin, 2022). Macron stated that France would continue to support Ukraine with military, financial, and humanitarian aid until victory was achieved under terms acceptable to Kiev (Rahman, 2022).

Similar to Germany, the United Kingdom supported Ukraine from the outset of the war and strongly condemned Russia's actions. Furthermore, the UK sought to capitalize on Russia's failure to achieve a resolution of the conflict. Then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated that "the poor performance of Russian equipment will force countries to reassess their defense contracts and provide the UK with the opportunity to sell weapons and equipment to countries relying on Soviet-era arsenals" (Topchi et al., 2022). His successor, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, declared on November 15, 2022, that Russia had become a pariah state, isolated from the international community, and emphasized the necessity of ending this barbaric war (Elgot, 2022). The UK stated that the purpose of its sanctions against Russia was to halt its actions. While the UK does not admit it, it is believed to have played a direct role in the unconventional warfare technique employed in the destruction of the Crimean (Kerch) bridge, which Ukraine could not have achieved by itself (Adams, 2022).

In March 2021, the EU decided to finance arms shipments to Ukraine through the European Peace Fund, which it defined as off-budget (TRT Haber, 2022). EU countries unanimously agreed to a joint shipment of lethal weapons to Ukraine (Bertoncini, 2023). Europe, aiming to weaken Russia, refrained from providing Ukraine with weapons that would guarantee a decisive victory. However, in response to ongoing developments, the EU

and Ukraine signed the "EU–Ukraine Partnership Agreement," which aimed to support Ukraine (Pfeil, 2015). Additionally, in November 2022, the EU launched a mission to train 15,000 Ukrainian soldiers.

Although the EU and the US imposed sanctions against Russia in every domain, they also declared that they would not intervene directly in the war, effectively leaving the timeline for ending the conflict open. As Soviet-made weapons held by former Warsaw Pact members, now NATO allies, were transferred to Ukraine, a new market and testing ground emerged for the Western defense industry. However, the Western-sourced weapons systems provided to Ukraine failed to produce the expected results because of a lack of necessary training. For example, Ukraine was unable to achieve the desired efficiency with its Leopard tanks and F-16 fighter jets. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) made several decisions to prevent further deterioration of the situation between Russia and Ukraine, but these decisions did not go beyond the framework of the Minsk Protocol.

The EU Council declared that Ukraine's sovereignty was violated, that Russia must immediately withdraw its troops from Ukrainian territory, and that the referendum decision constituted a breach of the Ukrainian Constitution (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2025). The sanctions imposed by the EU against Russia became one of the key measures aimed at pressuring Russia to alter its behavior and respect Ukraine's sovereignty (Caprile & Delivorias, 2023). The measures taken against Russia under the new sanctions by the 28 EU member states included individual and economic sanctions, economic restrictions on the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, media restrictions, and various diplomatic measures (European Union, 2025). The EU further announced that no arms would be sold to Russia, certain technologies used in the oil and gas sectors would be restricted, and several Russian banks would be excluded from the EU's financial system. It also stated that the number of individuals in President Putin's inner circle who were subject to travel bans and asset freezes would increase (Şeker & Hacıcaferoğlu, 2025). The sanctions significantly impacted the Russian economy, particularly in the energy and finance sectors. While the primary goal of the sanctions imposed on Russia was to end the war by causing Russia's economic collapse, they were not very effective in changing Russia's policies. European states primarily approached the situation through trade and economic relations. In this context, their dependence on Russia, particularly for natural gas, ensured the continued existence of Russian regional authority.

The Impact of Türkiye's Approach on War and the Region

Since the early 2000s, Türkiye has been deepening its relations with many countries, particularly those in its immediate region, within the framework of stability diplomacy and in line with the principle of equal sovereignty. Türkiye aims to end ongoing conflicts, address disputes through solution-oriented mechanisms, and ensure the preservation of regional peace.

In the international system, the responsibility for "maintaining international peace and security" is assigned to the UN Security Council under Article 1 of the UN Charter (United Nations, 1945). However, because Russia is a permanent member of the Security Council, the council cannot make decisions that will stop Russia in Ukraine. During a period when the UN is unable to effectively fulfill its role, Türkiye's peace-oriented initiatives gain particular significance. In this regard, Türkiye aims to develop a solution plan acceptable to all parties in terms of its mediation activities.

For Türkiye, the Russia–Ukraine War has emerged as one of the most significant challenges among recent crises, as it seeks to maintain its special relationship with Russia while preserving its alignment with the Western bloc. While Türkiye has not ignored its NATO membership, it appears unwilling to abandon its interests in the region. Türkiye is a mid-sized power seeking to strengthen its independent role, enhance its prestige, and expand its role regionally and globally by establishing a balance between Ukraine and Russia (Pearson, 2022). From the outset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Türkiye adopted a stance against the war and supported Ukraine's territorial integrity. However, it has also been prudent to avoid direct conflict with Russia (Cook, 2022). Türkiye expressed its respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity and officially declared its non-recognition of the annexation. During this period, it pursued a balancing strategy that aligned with its regional security concerns and global interactions, and conducted its relations with Ukraine and Russia accordingly. Furthermore, the US, EU, Canada, and Australia did not participate in the sanctions imposed on Russia, maintaining political, economic, and military relations with both countries. While the US and Western actors exacerbated the crisis with anti-Russian rhetoric, Türkiye adopted a more moderate stance and sought to establish a constructive dialogue with both sides, aimed at ending the crisis and violence.

Türkiye's balancing policy, carefully maintained without distancing itself from either side as it seeks to contribute to resolving the Russia–Ukraine conflict, has enhanced its significance in the international arena. Türkiye's foreign policy vision is described on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website as "while protecting our country's interests in the turbulent regional and international environment we find ourselves in, our foreign policy aims to make conditions conducive to sustainable peace and development, contributing to the establishment of a zone of peace, prosperity, and stability in our region" (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Furthermore, according to President Erdoğan's assessment, "Türkiye, which plays an active role in regional and global crises with its approach that serves solutions, peace, and stability, is also making intense efforts in diplomacy to establish peace between Russia and Ukraine" (Akan, 2022).

Türkiye can draw on its cultural ties with the Crimean Tatars in Ukraine and its shared history with Russia, using these elements as instruments of soft power to promote mediation, dialogue, and mutual understanding (Isaacs & Polese, 2016). Possessing historical, cultural, and strategic links with both Russia and Ukraine, Türkiye is not a party to the conflict. Accordingly, it has pursued a neutral stance rather than an interest-driven policy and

maintained its impartiality. By balancing the needs and concerns of both parties, Türkiye aims to contribute to the emergence of a fair and sustainable resolution to this conflict.

To prevent the crisis from escalating further, Türkiye, positioning itself as a neutral arbiter with strong relations with both Russia and Ukraine, called on the parties to engage in mediation in November 2021. Before this initiative could yield concrete results, the issue of transit rights in the Black Sea came to the forefront. Türkiye assumed a crucial role in the geopolitical and geoeconomic future of the Black Sea during the Russia-Ukraine War (Demir, 2019). Geopolitically, the Black Sea serves as a vital maritime route connecting Türkiye with Russia, Ukraine, and other coastal states. With the escalation of the war, the importance of the Bosphorus and the Montreux Convention (1936) became apparent. The Montreux Convention, which restricts the presence of navies of states without coasts in the Black Sea, grants Türkiye significant control over access to the Black Sea via its straits (Kaplan, 2016). Bound by this convention, Türkiye maintains a delicate balance between its NATO commitments and obligations under the agreement. In this regard, Türkiye closed the straits to warships in February 2022, in accordance with Article 19 of the Montreux Convention (Resmî Gazete, 1936), thereby helping to prevent the further expansion of the war.

Peace negotiations between the parties began on February 28, 2022, when the Russian and Ukrainian delegations met in Belarus. In March 2022, the delegations held several additional meetings at the Belarusian border, but no progress was made. Although previous talks failed to yield positive results, Türkiye appears to have the potential to bring the parties together and offer solutions due to its neighboring position with both warring countries, its role as a third party outside the war, and its neutral foreign policy. Indeed, at the joint request of the parties, Türkiye was asked to mediate. On March 10, 2022, within the scope of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, an opportunity emerged for negotiations at the level of foreign ministers for the first time, with the aim of ending the war.

A trilateral meeting of foreign ministers from Türkiye, Russia, and Ukraine was held in Antalya on March 10, 2022. The significance of this meeting lies in the success of bringing the parties together at the same table. During this meeting, Çavuşoğlu had the opportunity to listen to both sides and observe their demands and needs (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022a). Third-party analysis of conflicts is crucial for shaping a collaborative dialogue environment for conflict resolution purposes. However, no concrete solution was reached during the Antalya meetings (BBC, 2022).

In the same month, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy requested Ankara to convey his request to Russia to hold talks in Antalya or Istanbul. The parties met in Istanbul on March 29, 2022. In this regard, Türkiye succeeded in bringing the parties together once again, first at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum and then at the Istanbul Talks (Dolmabahçe) (BBC News Türkçe, 2022). After the meeting, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu stated that "a consensus and a common understanding were reached on certain issues," adding, "Today's talks, as in the previous ones, are a sign of the trust both parties place in Türkiye. We are fully aware of this trust and our responsibilities. We will continue our efforts, in coordination

with the international community, to stop the bloodshed, establish a ceasefire, and achieve lasting peace" (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022b).

Following the negotiations in Istanbul, the Ukrainian side prepared a document containing its demands, which it initialed and conveyed to Russia. In this document, a ten-point peace plan was proposed to the Russian side, outlining principles that could form the basis of a possible future written agreement between Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine stated that, in exchange for international security guarantees, it would accept neutrality and refrain from joining any alliance. It added that it would not host foreign troops or bases and would not conduct military exercises on its territory without the consent of the guarantor powers. Ukraine also expressed its desire to see a group of guarantor powers comprising 11 countries, including Türkiye (Russia, Great Britain, China, the United States, France, Germany, Canada, Italy, Poland, and Israel). In this regard, Ukraine's wish to include Türkiye among the guarantors is significant (Meduza, 2022).

To avoid jeopardizing a potential ceasefire agreement, it was decided that certain issues would not be discussed in the initial stage of the negotiations. These issues included Crimea, the Donbas region controlled by pro-Russian separatists who had unilaterally declared independence, and the recognition of Russian as an official language in Ukraine. Ukrainian officials suggested that, should a deadlock arise over these red lines at this stage, Türkiye should step in using its personal relationships and acting as a party they could "consult." This proposal was welcomed by Russia (Göksedef, 2022). The Ukrainian side stated that a referendum emerged as a prominent option for the disputed regions, emphasizing that any vote must be conducted peacefully and without coercion. They added that the results of the talks were sufficient to pave the way for negotiations at the leaders' level (Tarihi, 2022). This laid the groundwork for a leadership-level meeting to finalize the agreement.

While hopes for stopping the war were further strengthened during the negotiations in Istanbul in April 2022, Western media sources announced the discovery of numerous civilian bodies in Bucha, northwest of Kiev, where Russian forces had withdrawn. The President of Ukraine visited the city and accused the Russian forces of genocide and war crimes. Western governments largely agreed with this assessment (Garner, 2023). In contrast, Russia claimed that the incident was a staged demonstration planned by Ukraine and that it was carried out to blame Russia (Hu & Wang, 2025). Following this event, the results achieved in the Istanbul negotiations, which produced significant progress between Russia and Ukraine, were shelved for the time being. The peace talks, which began in Istanbul in March 2022, halted in April.

Russia's refusal to allow commercial ships carrying grain to depart from Ukrainian ports has raised concerns about a potential global food crisis (United Nations, 2022). With Türkiye's initiative, the Black Sea Grain Initiative was signed in Istanbul on July 22, 2022, between Ukraine, Russia, the UN, and Türkiye. The agreement provides for the security and monitoring of shipments by a coordination center to be established in Istanbul and stipulates that the cargoes of ships using the grain corridor will be inspected at designated

points in Türkiye with Russia's participation (Deniz Haber Ajansı, 2022). Türkiye's initiatives regarding the grain agreement are crucial for preventing a global food crisis and ensuring its food security.

Türkiye's diplomatic success as a mediator in the Russia–Ukraine war was realized through the exchange of Russian and Ukrainian prisoners of war. As a result of Türkiye's ongoing dialogue with Russia and Ukraine (Kudrytski, 2022), 215 Ukrainian prisoners of war were released on September 22, 2022, through President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's mediation. More than 2,000 prisoners have been exchanged since the beginning of the Russia–Ukraine war (Altun, 2023). Figure 1 shows the timeline of the Russia–Ukraine war and peace talks.
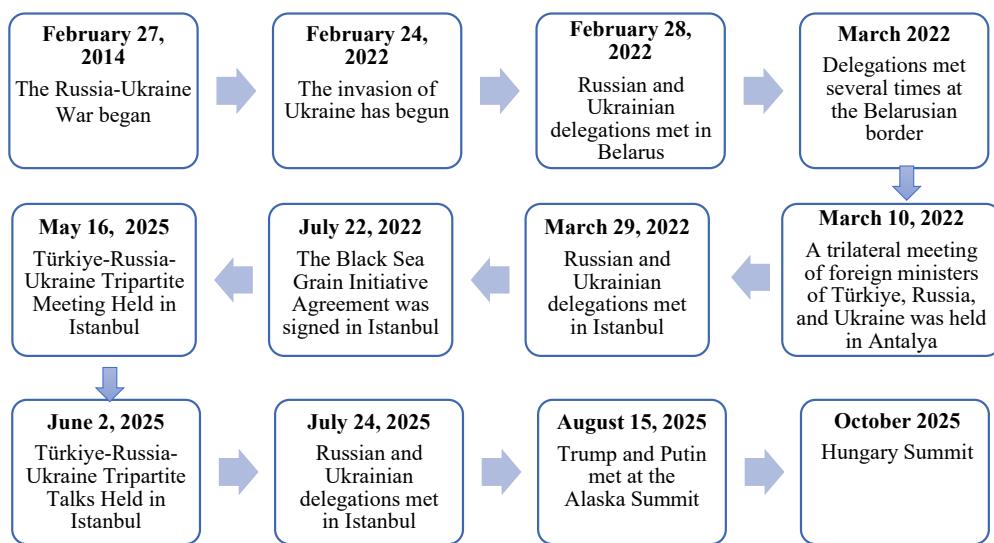
Figure 1. Russia–Ukraine War and Peace Talks Timeline

In June 2023, Ukraine launched a counteroffensive. However, Ukraine lacked the military equipment to effectively attack Russian forces. Russia's defense, on the other hand, was well-prepared and established minefields to halt Ukraine's advance (Pankhurst, 2023). Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, US President Biden, and other Western leaders declared that Ukraine would win the war and regain control over the territories annexed by Russia. Ultimately, these statements were widely recognized as largely propagandistic and diverted attention from achieving a peaceful resolution to the conflict (Katchanovski, 2025). Former US official Victoria Nuland spoke about the 2022 Istanbul peace talks in a September 2024 interview. She stated that the agreement, which was on the table in Istanbul and was about to be finalized, collapsed because the UK and Western powers advised Zelenskyy that it was not a good deal (Episkopos 2024). Similarly, former German leader Schröder stated in a 2024 interview that the US and its European allies were obstructing a peace agreement that was about to be finalized in Istanbul and that Ukraine was obligated to consult the US on all matters (Aris, 2023). President Erdoğan, meanwhile, stated that they worked sincerely

and, in a result, -oriented manner during their meetings in Istanbul but that peace was not achieved. He also noted that former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's reluctance to fully commit to peace efforts contributed to the failure to reach a resolution.

Since February 2022, Türkiye has made numerous mediation efforts to stop the war between Ukraine and Russia; however, it has faced certain challenges. Ukraine's significant successes against Russia, achieved with Bayraktar TB2 UAVs, led the Moscow administration to express discomfort over what it perceived as Türkiye's oscillation between itself and the West (Akhiyadov, 2022). Additionally, NATO's siding with Ukraine as a party in the Russia–Ukraine conflict further complicated matters for Türkiye, which is pursuing a neutral foreign policy.

According to the latest developments, Zelenskyy came to Türkiye on November 19, 2025, and requested that talks with Russia resume in Istanbul (Krychkovska et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine war marked the emergence of polarization and conflicts of interest among major powers. Russia sought to compensate for the power it lost following the dissolution of the Soviet Union by attempting to expand its territory and regain influence, aiming to re-establish itself as a superpower on the political stage. Feeling encircled, Russia sought to break this perceived encirclement by asserting its presence in Ukraine and politically balancing NATO, which had been expanding eastward in the short term. Bureaucracy and politicians appear to support Putin through the use of force. However, it is unclear how long wealthy Russian oligarchs and the Russian people, both middle- and lower-income, can withstand the economic sanctions imposed by Western countries and the isolationist policies imposed on Russia. Consequently, there is uncertainty regarding the longevity of political support in Russia. In a period when the UN system, established to resolve global disputes without war, has failed to maintain international peace and security, Türkiye's mediation efforts are particularly significant. The fact that both parties maintain good relations with Türkiye and trust it enables Türkiye to mediate in ending the war. Therefore, Türkiye is seen as a sought-after player at the peace table.

However, there are questions that need to be addressed. For example, is the US truly sincere about ending the Ukraine-Russia war? What is the anticipated course of war? Generally, the US aims to maintain the current situation in Ukraine, seeking to achieve air superiority through the provision of fighter jets and support Ukraine with tanks, with the goal of bringing the parties to the negotiating table to end the war. Russia, on the other hand, has demonstrated that while it can participate in mediation efforts to achieve a significant military victory and gain a stronger seat at the negotiating table, it may resort to delaying tactics.

Although Türkiye's mediation efforts have not yet been successful, they remain significant. Türkiye's diplomatic initiatives during the Russia–Ukraine conflict reflect its pursuit of

protecting national interests, supporting peace, and navigating the complexities of the regional geopolitics. The Ukraine crisis also has the potential to trigger other regional and global crises worldwide. The primary goal is to ensure an equitable and just resolution that prevents the resumption of hostilities once armed conflict ends. The security of all parties can only be guaranteed through such resolutions.

Given the current strategic landscape, it seems unlikely that Ukraine will achieve victory against a nuclear-armed state. Similarly, it appears improbable that Russia can fully defeat Ukraine, a country determined to resist. Among the causes of the Russia–Ukraine war, NATO's expansion and Ukraine's relations with the West are particularly significant issues. Therefore, if NATO committed to halting its expansion and Ukraine accepted neutrality, it could be assumed that the stated reason for the Russian invasion would be eliminated and Russian forces could be withdrawn from Ukraine.

As the Russia-Ukraine conflict charts its future course, Türkiye stands at a critical juncture. Strategic foresight, diplomatic acumen, and commitment to multilateralism are considered key factors in mediating efforts that will not only protect national interests but also significantly contribute to regional peace and stability. The ongoing war has effectively prompted nearly all European countries to act in coordination with the US. The importance of NATO has grown, and NATO membership has been promoted as the primary key to ensuring security. Europe has begun to rearm with weapons purchased from the US, and aid to Ukraine has served as a reminder that Europe needs protection from the US. Meanwhile, the combat capability of the Russian military has been tested and diminished. Ukraine may emerge from this process either by conceding Crimea and Donbas to Russia or by leaving all its underground resources under US control. In any scenario, Ukraine is likely to be the losing party. Therefore, Trump's promise to end the war actually means Ukraine's complete surrender. While territorial losses are not possible according to the Ukrainian Constitution, returning to the borders of February 24, 2022, is also impossible. Because ending the war under these conditions will not yield a permanent solution, especially one that satisfies Ukraine, the importance of peace negotiations is becoming increasingly clear.

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Zimbabwe:
National dialogue.
A Panacea to the Protracted Conflict?

Octavious Chido MASUNDA

Abstract: National dialogue has emerged across Africa as a contested tool for conflict resolution and governance reform. This article examines Zimbabwe's case, where cycles of electoral dispute, authoritarian resilience, and failed settlements have perpetuated crises. Based on qualitative interviews with stakeholders from politics, civil society, academia, and faith institutions, the study finds strong consensus that national dialogue must be inclusive, transformative, and nationally owned. Lessons from past initiatives—including the Internal Settlement, Lancaster House Agreement, Unity Accord, the Global Political Agreement, and POLAD—highlight that exclusion, weak enforcement, and partisan convening undermine legitimacy. Respondents envision national dialogue—led reforms in electoral governance, security sector accountability, socio-economic compacts, and social cohesion, yet warn that entrenched mistrust, power imbalances, and authoritarian adaptation remain significant barriers. The paper proposes a framework for context-sensitive national dialogue in Zimbabwe, emphasizing credible facilitation, legal entrenchment, civic education, and regional guarantorship. It concludes that national dialogue offers both promise and peril: a potential catalyst for structural transformation, but equally a risk of entrenching authoritarianism if not institutionally safeguarded—especially in the absence of a strategic hurting stalemate and a fragmented opposition.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, national dialogue, conflict transformation, authoritarianism, democratic transition, peacebuilding.

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Introduction

The main research question of this paper examines the extent to which an inclusive national dialogue process can facilitate sustainable peace and resolve longstanding political conflicts alongside ongoing authoritarian consolidation in Zimbabwe. The country's political landscape has been characterized by a continuum of violence spanning pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods, with violence serving as an entrenched tool for political control (Nyere, 2016). Following independence in 1980, Zimbabwe experienced several violent epochs that reflect deep historical and political tensions (Kufakurinani, 2021). The Gukurahundi massacres of 1981–1986 in parts of the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces marked the first major post-independence violence (Dzimiri et al., 2014; Mashingaidze, 2010). The controversial Fast Track Land Reform Programme, beginning in 1999–2000, triggered widespread violence and economic decline (Mlambo, 2014; Sachikonye, 2011). Operation Murambatsvina (Clean the Filth) in 2005 represented state violence against suspected opposition supporters (Shale, 2007). Post-2000 electoral violence became systematic, rooted in liberation war history and identity politics, with state-sponsored violence becoming institutionalized (Dzimiri et al., 2014; Kwashirai, 2023). This culture of impunity drove millions into the diaspora and undermined democratic processes (Sachikonye, 2011; Mashingaidze, 2010). These challenges, coupled with post-2017
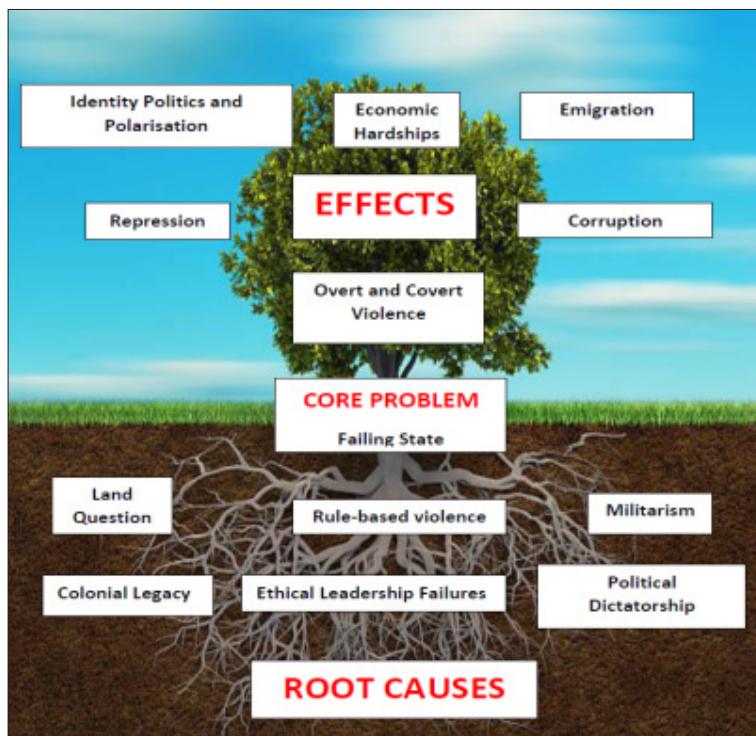

Figure 1. Conflict Tree analysis of the Zimbabwe crises

coup authoritarian consolidation, have generated wider calls for national dialogue as a pathway out of the crisis.

These calls for national dialogue from a wide array of sectors—including industry, civil society, churches, politicians, and even government—necessitate a comprehensive understanding of national dialogue as a potential mechanism for sustainable peace and democratic transition. To address the main research question, the paper focuses on three aspects. First, it provides a conceptual clarification of national dialogues in conflict transformation. Second, it presents an analysis of historical dialogue failures and successes in Zimbabwe, identifying structural components crucial for the genuine redress of grievances. The analysis further explores the specific conditions under which national dialogue can effectively challenge authoritarian structures and promote the restoration of democratic institutions, particularly given the weakened state of the opposition in Zimbabwe.

The paper adopts a qualitative approach centered on face-to-face, in-depth interviews with selected stakeholders. Recognizing that state-led dialogue efforts face challenges due to their top-down nature, this methodology seeks to capture a diverse range of perspectives. Participants were drawn from the fields of human rights, politics, gender studies, the church, civil society organizations, and academia to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in promoting inclusive national dialogues. Engaging with actors from various sectors enabled the researcher to move beyond elite-level perspectives and incorporate the voices of those directly involved in or affected by national dialogue processes.

National Dialogue

National dialogue is a politically grounded, nationally owned process designed to promote inclusive, deliberative conversation among a broad spectrum of stakeholders within a country, aimed at addressing deep political crises, conflicts, or significant political transitions. National dialogues are recognized as vital tools for resolving political conflicts, promoting state-building, and facilitating peaceful transformation (Mandikwaza, 2025). These inclusive negotiation processes involve diverse societal actors, including civil society, politicians, and experts, to address intractable conflicts and negotiate political reforms (Paffenholz & Ross, 2016). Unlike conventional negotiation mechanisms, which often involve a limited number of elite actors, national dialogues engage multiple layers of society to build consensus, manage conflict, or implement fundamental changes in state-society relations through institutional reform or constitutional change.

The concept of national dialogue has gained prominence in recent years as a flexible and potentially transformative tool for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. It has been applied across diverse contexts, from short-term crisis prevention and political deadlock resolution, as seen in Tunisia, to longer-term nation-redefining efforts seeking to establish a new social contract and governance structures, exemplified by Yemen (Elayah et al.,

2018). At its essence, a national dialogue distinguishes itself not merely by its outcomes but by its emphasis on process. The focus lies in creating an inclusive, consensus-driven forum where dialogue spans across different social groups and political actors nationwide (Saunders, 1999). It differs from mediation or ceasefire negotiations primarily through its comprehensive national organization, participatory breadth, and process orientation. External actors typically play supporting or facilitative roles, allowing the dialogue to remain nationally owned and led.

While national dialogues hold significant promise for conflict resolution through inclusive engagement, they are better positioned to strengthen existing elite agreements rather than develop initial commitment to dialogue (Papagianni, 2021). Success depends on several important factors, including political will, inclusion, transparency, credible conveners, and flexible adaptation to changing political realities (Papagianni, 2021; Getahun, 2023). Trust-building and local ownership are essential preconditions, though external involvement may be necessary (Elayah et al., 2018). Comparative analyses reveal mixed outcomes, with Tunisia's post-Arab Spring dialogue proving more successful than Yemen's in achieving social cohesion (Hamidi, 2015). Research indicates that while most dialogues reach agreements, approximately half fail to implement them effectively (Getahun, 2023).

Table 1. Typologies of national dialogue

Typology	Primary Aim	Example	Key Features
Constitutional/ Foundation	New constitution or settlement	South Africa	Broad-based, legal/structural focus
Conflict Resolution	End civil war/violence	Yemen, Kenya	Power-sharing, transitional mechanisms
Socio-economic Reform	Address economic/historic injustice	Tunisia	Economic/social inclusion, reform
Sectoral Policy	Reform specific sector	Water/sanitation dialogues	Issue-specific, stakeholder-led
Transitional Justice	Address past abuses	Truth commissions	Focus on truth, justice, reconciliation
Hybrid/ Multi-issue	Multiple combined aims	Ethiopia (planned)	Comprehensive, cross-sectoral

The typologies described above illustrate the variety of forms national dialogues can take: from constitutional negotiations and conflict resolution to sectoral and justice-oriented approaches. Their design must be tailored to the specific context to ensure meaningful, legitimate, and sustainable results (Andualem, 2022; Mbombo, 2017; Mandikwaza, 2025; Marumahoko, 2020).

Past Dialogue Initiatives in Zimbabwe: Successes and Failures

From the struggles against colonial rule to the challenges of post-independence nation-building, dialogue initiatives have played a pivotal role in shaping Zimbabwe's politics. Zimbabwe's national dialogue processes from 1978 to 2023 encompassed four major peace agreements aimed at resolving political conflicts and achieving sustainable peace. The 1978 Internal Settlement, the 1979 Lancaster House Agreement, the 1987 Unity Accord, and the 2008 Global Political Agreement each attempted to address Zimbabwe's difficult political challenges (Munemo, 2016). The Lancaster House Agreement, emerging from Anglo-American negotiations, established the framework for Zimbabwe's independence, though it maintained imperialist-dominated socio-economic structures (Sibanda, 1990; Scarnecchia, 2017). The Unity Accord pacified violent conflict between ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU parties, while the Global Political Agreement created a Government of National Unity between ZANU-PF and MDC formations following the 2008 electoral crisis (Mukuhlani, 2014; Raftopoulos, 2010). Despite providing opportunities for national healing and reconciliation, these processes faced significant challenges, with civil society organizations, including churches, marginalized in reconciliation efforts (Munemo & Nciizah, 2014; Chigora & Guzura, 2011).

The fifth attempt at dialogue, the Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD), was characterized as a "quiet conversation." Established in 2019 following Zimbabwe's disputed 2018 harmonized elections, POLAD was framed by the government as an inclusive platform for political engagement, reconciliation, and reform. It brought together leaders of smaller opposition parties and independent actors to deliberate on economic, political, and governance challenges facing the country.

The aforementioned national dialogue processes failed due to multiple interconnected factors across these major agreements. The 1978 Internal Settlement, 1979 Lancaster House Agreement, 1987 Unity Accord, and 2008 Global Political Agreement were undermined by persistent colonial legacies that produced postcolonial leadership practicing violent, repressive politics (Munemo, 2016). Wartime competition between nationalist parties continued during implementation, setting the stage for post-independence genocide and violence (Kriger, 1998). The Lancaster House Agreement failed to address underlying political tensions between rival ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU parties and their respective armed wings (Kriger, 2021). The 1987 and 2008 power-sharing arrangements served elite self-interests rather than national interests, lacking genuine popular involvement (Chinyere & Rukema, 2020; Masunda & Hlatshwayo, 2024). Structural flaws and implementation problems in the Global Political Agreement undermined democratization prospects (LeBas, 2014). Civil-military coalitions prioritized political survival over developmental goals, engaging in predatory corruption and violent suppression of opposition (Bratton & Masunungure, 2011). These hastily negotiated settlements lacked strong leadership commitments, preventing rules from taking root and inhibiting democratic progress (Bratton & Masunungure, 2011). Major opposition formations, particularly the MDC

Alliance (later CCC), rejected POLAD, arguing that it was a state-engineered process designed to legitimize President Emmerson Mnangagwa's administration rather than address Zimbabwe's deep-seated crises. While POLAD contributed to the language of political dialogue and created limited spaces for policy engagement, it ultimately proved ineffective as a genuine national dialogue platform. Its design and implementation reinforced the resilience of the ruling regime and deepened political fragmentation.

Findings

Defining national dialogue

Respondents in the study consistently viewed national dialogue as a structured, inclusive, and nationally owned process, distinct from elite pacts or post-election bargains. Their views emphasise that national dialogue should not be a closed-door negotiation among a select few, but rather a transparent and participatory process that involves a broad spectrum of stakeholders.

> *A national dialogue means a discussion on national issues, like how we elect our leadership, economic plans, and policy-making. As such, it should involve the whole nation, not just politicians* (Respondent 1, Peace scholar).

> *To me, national dialogue captures a nationally owned, broadly inclusive, time-bound process where political actors, state institutions, civil society, business, churches, youth, women, labour, traditional leaders, and the diaspora engage, facilitated by credible, impartial conveners, to negotiate reforms and shared rules of the game. In Zimbabwe, this means moving beyond elite pacts or post-election damage control to a structured forum with a mandate, an agenda, and enforcement mechanisms that address the political settlement itself (how power is won, exercised, restrained, and alternated) alongside socio-economic grievances* (Respondent 3, Transitional Justice expert).

> *National dialogue in Zimbabwe is at two levels. The first one is the general level, the second being a focussed level. The first refers to how Zimbabweans, as citizens, in their communities exchange ideas and conversations, opinions on a daily basis. The focussed level aims at resolving community/ national crises. Citizens may desire to engage in debates to look for solutions that affect them all, this can be led by institutions with an agreed agenda. Leadership from interest groups becomes important in this regard* (Respondent 10, National Democratic Working Group (NDWG)).

Based on the responses, national dialogue represents an engagement that ensures outcomes reflect the diverse interests and concerns of the population, thereby promoting greater legitimacy and ownership. The structured nature of the dialogue entails a clear framework with defined objectives, rules of engagement, and mechanisms for implementation. This

framework provides a roadmap for the process, ensuring discussions remain focused and productive, and that agreements are translated into concrete actions.

National dialogue should not only address immediate crises or specific grievances but also aim to transform the underlying relationships and attitudes that perpetuate conflict. This requires creating spaces for dialogue and interaction, fostering empathy and understanding, and cultivating a sense of shared identity and purpose.

> *Citizens of this country are concerned about the state of the nation. For the longest time, they have been demanding space to debate issues of concern, and national dialogue is one such platform where we can discuss the toxic body politic of the country, the faltering economy, and the social decay we are witnessing, for instance, drug and substance abuse* (Respondent 6, Church leader)

Respondents also perceived national dialogue as an opportunity to reset Zimbabwe's political, social, and economic contract. This view suggests that the existing social contract, which defines the rights and responsibilities of citizens and the state, is no longer adequate or legitimate. This inadequacy stems from historical injustices, systemic inequalities, and a lack of trust in government institutions. National dialogue can enable Zimbabweans to collectively redefine the terms of their social contract, creating a new framework for governance and development that is more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable.

> *The only way for national dialogue to work in Zimbabwe is if it takes a transformative approach, given that we have experienced various epochs of conflict in the country. It becomes important to deal with these conflicts as a nation in a manner wherein we all take responsibility and transform our communities so that they can become accommodative and tolerant* (Respondent 8, former National Peace and Reconciliation Commissioner (NPRC)).

The process aims to transform rather than simply manage the conflict. This transformative approach recognises that conflict is not simply a problem to be solved, but also an opportunity for growth and change. Through constructive dialogue, Zimbabweans can learn from their past experiences, identify new ways of relating to each other, and create a more just and equitable society. This transformative process requires a willingness to challenge existing power structures, question deeply held beliefs, and embrace new perspectives.

Root causes of the protracted conflict

The data revealed a common diagnosis of Zimbabwe's conflict drivers: Disputed elections, securitisation of politics, economic exclusion, and corruption. These factors have contributed to a climate of political instability, social unrest, and economic hardship, undermining the country's development prospects and exacerbating existing inequalities. Disputed elections have eroded public trust in the democratic process, leading to political polarisation and violence.

Elections have been a source of problems in this country. We get scared when it's election time, to the point where you then ask whether they serve any purpose at all. I tend to agree with my colleagues at the Council of Churches who called for an electoral Sabbath, till such a time when we are sure that we really need them (Respondent 6, Faith leader).

A captured electoral management body has ensured that electoral outcomes are not credible. For instance, serving securocrats have been appointed to this body, taking a partisan approach (Respondent 5, Gender activist).

The securitisation of politics, characterised by the excessive involvement of the military and security forces in civilian affairs, has stifled dissent and undermined human rights (Respondent 4, Human rights lawyer).

The typology of the government system in Zimbabwe presents a problem, as it involves a military government masquerading as a civilian government. These people participated in the liberation struggle, got appointed into public sector jobs in the military and have a sense of entitlement. Zimbabweans deserve a civilian government where the security sector does not interfere in civil affairs (Respondent 9, ex-Movement for Democratic Change Member of Parliament).

The constitutional and regulatory framework sets the tone for how the country should be managed, and I have a problem with the current framework, which is not people-driven and, therefore, manipulated by the powers that be. For instance, we witness the judicialisation of elections, lawfare being used as a weapon against those perceived to be against the state (Respondent 10, NDWG).

Economic exclusion, with vast disparities in wealth and opportunity, has fueled social resentment and instability. Pervasive corruption has diverted public resources, undermined government institutions, and eroded public trust.

The state has been captured, and we see national resources being plundered by connected locals as well as the Chinese. It's the ordinary people who are now impoverished and angry (Respondent 7, Civil Society activist).

It is becoming increasingly difficult to run a business in the country, given the ever-changing policy framework as well as the multiple requirements to be fully licensed. On a weekly basis, one has to bribe representatives from local government or central government, and you get to a point where you even ask yourself whether it's worth it. The corruption has become too much (Respondent 2, Small to Medium Enterprise (SME) operator).

The failure to address past atrocities and injustices has left deep scars in Zimbabwean society, increasing resentment and mistrust.

The country has gone through various epochs of violent conflict, right from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period, and these epochs remain smouldering fires to

date. As NPRC, we attempted to address some of these, and we hope that succeeding institutions mandated to do so will also act; otherwise, they perpetuate mistrust, animosity, and the effect is the polarised society we have today. There is no nation to talk about (Respondent 8, ex-NPRC Commissioner).

Polarised information ecosystems, characterised by the spread of misinformation and hate speech, have further divided society and undermined constructive dialogue.

The media in this country is captured. The state media is pro-government, with the private media being pro-opposition. What we then see is this competition to mud smear each other through propaganda and hate speech (Respondent 7, Civil society activist).

We witness a lot of hate speech in the country, with women bearing much of the brunt. At the same time, civic space is shrinking, which makes it difficult for us to express our views as we fear prosecution (Respondent 5, Gender activist).

These issues create a toxic environment that makes it difficult to build trust, nurture reconciliation, and promote peaceful coexistence. Zimbabwe's largely man-made crises are cyclical because structural sources of conflict remain unaddressed. Zimbabwe's recurrent crises are not simply isolated events, but rather symptoms of deeper structural problems that need to be addressed in order to achieve lasting peace and stability. These structural problems, as exemplified above, include political exclusion, economic inequality, social division, and weak governance institutions.

Inclusion and stakeholder legitimacy

A recurring theme was the importance of inclusivity. Respondents emphasized that without the participation of ruling and opposition parties, the security sector, independent commissions, civil society, the business community, the diaspora, and regional guarantors, dialogue would lack legitimacy. This underscores the need for a broad range of voices to be heard throughout the process. Inclusive approaches enhance both the legitimacy and sustainability of peace settlements, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment among all stakeholders.

Including diverse perspectives ensures that the dialogue addresses the needs and concerns of all segments of society. It also promotes a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing Zimbabwe and helps build consensus around solutions. The participation of regional guarantors adds credibility to the process and provides leverage to ensure that agreements are implemented, as discussed in later sections.

As l indicated in my conceptualisation of national dialogue, the process must be inclusive. Previous efforts, such as Internal Settlement during colonialism, failed exactly because of their exclusive nature. The same can be said about that pseudo

dialogue they called POLAD. That's why no one talks of it now (Respondent 1, peace and conflict scholar).

All stakeholder inclusion enhances legitimacy by ensuring negotiations speak to the entire population. Marginalised groups, civil society, traditional leaders, and opposition voices must be meaningfully included to ensure that the dialogue reflects the needs and aspirations of all Zimbabweans. The South African CODESA experience shows the positive effects of broad-based inclusion on the durability of agreements.

> *I have noticed that women are not included in these talks, and I find that problematic. At Lancaster, women were excluded. Even during the GNU talks, we were excluded. It is important to include women in dialogue processes because* women and children are the most affected by the conflicts we have seen in this country (Respondent 5, Gender activist).

> *There cannot be a national dialogue without us, yet the government is actually passing legislation to shut us out. Civil society is the space between government and the people, they need us* (Respondent 7, Civil society activist).

The active participation of civil society organisations helps to ensure that the dialogue is grounded in the realities of everyday life. It also provides a mechanism for holding political leaders accountable and for monitoring the implementation of agreements. Again, the South African experience demonstrates that civil society inclusion can lead to more durable and sustainable peace settlements.

Expected outcomes of a credible dialogue

Respondents envisioned ambitious outcomes, including electoral integrity reforms, rule of law safeguards, security sector governance, an economic governance reset, devolution, and social cohesion measures. Respondents expect national dialogue to tackle how power is contested, exercised, and alternated. This entails examining the rules, norms, and institutions that govern the distribution and exercise of power in Zimbabwe. This should involve reforming electoral laws, strengthening parliamentary oversight, promoting judicial independence, and decentralising government authority.

> *As I mentioned before, national dialogue in Zimbabwe should address the way we conduct elections. We shouldn't just go to the ballot box to fulfill a constitutional requirement, it should be a civic exercise where the voter feels their vote counts* (Respondent 7, Civil society activist).

> *This national dialogue you are talking about needs to place the safety and security of women in this country at its centre. Every time we have political violence in this country, especially during elections, women get violated, tortured, kidnapped and sometimes killed. So the process must ensure safe spaces for women* (Respondent 5, Gender activist).

> *Electoral reforms in this country are long overdue. It is my hope that national dialogue, if at all it happens, may be the best platform to address these long-standing concerns. Parliament has failed, and instead has made the terrain even more uneven. Reforms also need to extend to other areas as well, especially the security sector, which has meddled in almost all facets of government* (Respondent 4, Human rights lawyer).

National dialogue should also address socio-economic grievances alongside political settlements. This process recognises that political stability is inextricably linked to economic and social well-being. This means that the dialogue should not only focus on political reforms but also on addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, and access to education and healthcare. As such, national dialogue can create a more inclusive and equitable society that provides opportunities for all its citizens.

> *There is so much poverty and unemployment in the country, with a lot of ripple effects, and we as pastors have to deal with the resultant mental health burden. On a frequent basis, we have to counsel people who are contemplating suicide. Divorce cases are on the increase, our young people are abusing drugs, young girls falling pregnant and getting married at very young ages. We are at a point where a discussion has to be held to deal with these issues* (Respondent 6, Faith leader).

These aspirations highlight the belief that national dialogue can serve as a platform for comprehensive governance transformation, not just elite accommodation. The emphasis on socio-economic compacts stresses the inseparability of political and economic justice in the Zimbabwean peacebuilding agenda. Institutional reforms must prioritise restoring the rule of law, depoliticising state institutions, securing property rights, and ensuring fair citizenship for all.

Safeguarding sustainability

Respondents emphasized the importance of legal entrenchment, independent secretariats, external verification, localization, and civic education as critical for the sustainability of national dialogue outcomes. These elements help ensure that the agreements are durable and have a lasting impact on society, reflecting broader calls to institutionalize peace processes and safeguard them against political backsliding.

Legal entrenchment entails incorporating the agreements reached during the dialogue into national laws and policies. Independent secretariats provide ongoing support for the implementation of these agreements. External verification ensures that the agreements are being carried out effectively. Localization involves translating the agreements into concrete actions at the local level, while civic education raises awareness of the agreements and encourages citizen participation in their implementation.

> *We have seen a situation where mediated agreements, such as the Global Political Agreement, are being implemented piecemeal for the simple reason that there was*

a very weak legal formalisation of the agreement. As such, most of its otherwise important elements were negated. If agreements around security sector reform and reconciliation had been implemented as outlined in the GPA, I am sure we wouldn't be having this discussion (Respondent 1, Peace and conflict scholar).

It would be important to have an independent implementation secretariat. This may be in the form of a cross-party board, civil society seats, technical experts, and guaranteed budget authority (Respondent 3, Transitional Justice expert).

Reforms should be embedded in law, with guaranteed budgets, to ensure that they are not easily reversed. National-level agreements should be linked to local-level ownership through ward and district dialogues, ensuring that they translate into tangible changes on the ground. This creates a sense of ownership and encourages local communities to take responsibility for implementing the agreements.

Civic education and inclusion are important and should ensure sustained outreach in all languages, again in an inclusive manner, wherein women and youth can co-chair thematic clusters (Respondent 3, Transitional Justice expert).

A hands-off approach from time-bound dialogue to permanent peace architecture is important to avoid previous challenges with commissions such as OHNRI and NPRC. We need a strengthened, permanent reconciliation/peace commission with investigative powers (Respondent 10, NWDG).

The idea is to create a system of governance that is responsive to the needs of all citizens and that promotes justice and the rule of law. This requires strengthening institutions such as the judiciary, the electoral commission, and the anti-corruption agency. It also involves promoting greater citizen participation in decision-making processes and ensuring that government officials are held accountable for their actions. The reforms should be designed to address the root causes of corruption and to promote a culture of integrity within government.

Barriers to effective national dialogue in Zimbabwe

Despite optimism, respondents anticipated significant barriers. These included deep mistrust among elites, asymmetries of power, the politicisation of state institutions, shrinking civic space, dialogue-washing, and weak guarantors. These barriers can render dialogue symbolic rather than substantive, reproducing rather than resolving conflict.

Politics has become a career of choice in Zimbabwe. We have seen elected opposition members of Parliament joining the gravy train in looting public resources, and that is one indicator of how toxic our body politic has become. ZANU-PF uses money to bribe people, so in that context, an effective dialogue may not work. Look at how POLAD turned out. Once other players noted there were cars and allowances,

there was a stampede to join the platform (Respondent 9, ex-MDC Member of Parliament).

Important players in the national dialogue process, such as state institutions and traditional leadership, are presently heavily compromised. Even we, the faith-based leaders, will tell you that we are the worst. It would take a lot of back-channel discussions and compromises to have them participate from an objective stance (Respondent 6, Faith leader).

The world is facing a lot of problems at the moment. Ramaphosa, the big brother often looked up to in the region, is having trouble in his backyard. Most countries in the region are burning; therefore, it would be difficult to get regional or international guarantors. Locally, we are all compromised and polarised (Respondent 1, Peace and conflict scholar).

I am sure you have noticed that politics in the country is now characterised by apathy, especially in the urban context. People, especially youth, boycott the polls. Even calls for protests and demonstrations are met with low turnouts. Life cycle issues demand that people are engaged in looking for opportunities to make ends meet, and have less time for politics. At the same time, people are wary of the heavy-handed response of the state to any event that is deemed political. The violence and intimidation that follow such is discouraging to citizens. I am sure you can relate to what used to happen during the constitution-making consultative process between 2010 and 2013. At the same time, civic space is now legally constricted, which complicates meaningful participation (Respondent 3, Transitional Justice expert).

The unequal distribution of power between different groups within society can make it difficult to achieve consensus and to ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are represented. Elite manipulation can undermine the legitimacy of the process and prevent it from addressing the root causes of the conflict. Addressing these power asymmetries requires an approach that includes empowering marginalised groups and promoting greater citizen participation in decision-making processes.

ZANU-PF has a sense of entitlement. They will not come to the negotiating table and cede a cubit of power unless they are under intense local and international pressure, like the 2008 scenario. Presently, we are nowhere near 2008. The post-2017 coup events demonstrate their obsession with power to the point of even wanting to mutilate deliberate constitutional bottlenecks just to extend the current president's term of office. In short, national dialogue would be on ZANU's terms (Respondent 1, Peace and conflict scholar).

The post-2017 consolidation of authoritarianism under ZANU-PF undermines democratic governance and represses opposition forces, making it difficult to create a conducive environment for dialogue. This consolidation involves the centralisation of state power and militarisation of political spaces, restricting freedom of expression and assembly.

Pervasive patronage networks stifle genuine political competition, further undermining the prospects for a truly inclusive dialogue. The consolidation of authoritarianism has created a climate of fear and repression, making it difficult for civil society organisations and opposition parties to operate freely.

The role of external actors:
Balancing support and sovereignty

Respondents highlighted the important role of external actors in Zimbabwe's dialogue processes. While external support can be beneficial, it must be carefully calibrated to avoid perceptions of imposition and affirm sovereignty. Affirming sovereignty is essential for ensuring that the dialogue is nationally owned and that its outcomes reflect the needs and aspirations of Zimbabweans. The effectiveness of international engagement depends on cooperative support forms, promoting collaboration and partnership rather than imposing external agendas.

> *There is this idea of prominent citizens, who represent a reservoir of knowledge about national life, wisdom and have a first-hand experience of national problems and very often you get these as eminent persons who have seen it all from a global perspective* (Respondent 10, NWDG)

The involvement of external actors can provide valuable resources and expertise. However, it is important to ensure that their involvement is carefully managed to avoid undermining the legitimacy of the process. External actors should work in partnership with Zimbabwean stakeholders and should respect the country's sovereignty. Their support should be aligned with the needs and priorities of the Zimbabwean people.

Support from bodies like the UN or African Union is crucial at such sensitive junctures, providing mediation, technical assistance, and financial resources. Donor coordination is important for maximising the impact of external assistance, ensuring that resources are used effectively and efficiently. However, it is important to ensure that their involvement is coordinated and that their support is aligned with the needs and priorities of the Zimbabwean people.

> *The monitoring and verification of national dialogue needs to involve the region. For instance, SADC and the AU can serve as external guarantors; proffering quarterly public scorecards and serving as independent auditors of progress* (Respondent 3, Transitional Justice expert).

The involvement of international bodies as guarantors is essential for ensuring the implementation of dialogue outcomes, providing leverage and accountability. These actors play an important role in monitoring the implementation of agreements and in holding the parties accountable for their commitments. Their role is crucial for overcoming resistance to change and for ensuring that the dialogue leads to tangible results.

Discussion:
national dialogue model for Zimbabwe

The diversity of voices advocating for national dialogue highlights the complexity and scope of the challenges facing Zimbabwe, which span political, economic, and social dimensions. The involvement of industry reflects concerns about the impact of instability on the business environment and the need for a predictable, stable policy framework. Civil society organizations contribute their expertise in human rights, governance, and social justice issues. Churches, as trusted community institutions, play a crucial role in fostering reconciliation and promoting dialogue at the grassroots level. Political actors, representing diverse ideological perspectives, recognize the need for a platform to engage in constructive discussions and find common ground on key issues. Even government-related entities acknowledged the limitations of unilateral approaches and the potential benefits of a broader, more inclusive dialogue process. Table 2 below proposes a national dialogue model suitable for Zimbabwe.

Table 2. National Dialogue framework for Zimbabwe

Step	Action	Objectives
Start	Acknowledge need for National Dialogue	Recognise the necessity of a national dialogue process to address the country's challenges.
Step 1: Assessment of preconditions & stakeholder mapping	Evaluate existing landscape; Identify and map stakeholders	Determine readiness for dialogue; map relevant stakeholders; assess power dynamics and potential obstacles, such as political repression.
Step 2: Selection of facilitators & dialogue participants	Choose impartial facilitators; Ensure diverse representation	Select experienced facilitators; include diverse perspectives, such as women and youth; establish clear ground rules.
Step 3: Defining the dialogue agenda & objectives	Develop a clear agenda; Set realistic objectives	Address the root causes of conflict; promote political stability, economic recovery, and social justice; prioritise issues like disputed elections.
Step 4: Structured dialogue sessions: Addressing root causes & key issues	Organise structured sessions; Facilitate constructive discussions	Provide a safe space for sharing perspectives; discuss political reforms, economic policies, and social reconciliation; Identify common ground.
Step 5: Negotiation & agreement on reforms	Negotiate and agree on reforms	Ensure reforms align with human rights and good governance; Develop a detailed implementation plan.
Step 6: Implementation of reforms (Institutional, Legal, Policy)	Implement agreed-upon reforms	Strengthen key institutions; Restore rule of law and secure property rights.

Step	Action	Objectives
Step 7: Monitoring & Evaluation of implementation	Establish a monitoring framework; Assess the impact of reforms	Track progress of reform implementation; Ensure transparency and participation.
Step 8: Re-evaluate dialogue framework & address disagreements	Periodically re-evaluate the framework; Maintain open communication	Address disagreements and emerging issues; Adapt to changing circumstances.
Step 9: Achieving a more inclusive, just, and democratic Society	Strive for an inclusive, just, and democratic society	Promote tolerance, respect, and reconciliation; Foster national unity.
End	Sustainable peace and development	Achieve lasting peace and promote sustainable development.

The model above aims to provide a framework for developing a more inclusive, just, and democratic society in Zimbabwe. It recognises that national dialogue is not a one-size-fits-all solution and that the specific design and implementation must be adapted to the particular circumstances of each country.

Why national dialogue may not work in Zimbabwe.
The absence of a hurting or strategic stalemate

A "hurting stalemate" is defined as a situation in which no stakeholder possesses the absolute strength to decisively defeat the other, nor are they in a state of complete collapse. This creates a mutual recognition of the futility of continued conflict and generates a powerful incentive for negotiation (Zartman, 2005). The concept is central to understanding conflict transformation, as it emphasizes the importance of a balance of power or a shared sense of vulnerability in motivating parties to engage in genuine dialogue. When all parties realize that they cannot achieve their objectives through force alone, the costs of continued conflict outweigh potential benefits, making dialogue a more attractive option (Zartman, 2001).

The 2008 Zimbabwe crisis, marked by extreme violence and economic collapse, created a strategic equilibrium that compelled ZANU-PF to negotiate the Global Political Agreement (GPA), illustrating how dialogue can emerge under conditions of stalemate (Cheeseman & Tendi, 2010). The crisis generated a sense of urgency and recognition that the country was on the brink of collapse. In contrast, the absence of a similar crisis today reduces the likelihood that ZANU-PF will engage in meaningful dialogue, as the ruling party does not perceive an immediate threat to its power and therefore has little incentive to compromise.

Current conditions in Zimbabwe do not reflect a hurting stalemate. The ruling ZANU-PF party maintains a firm grip on power, while the opposition remains fragmented and weak, undermining the prospects for genuine dialogue (Chen, 2017). The party's

dominance stems from its control of state institutions, access to resources, and ability to mobilize support through extensive patronage networks. The post-2017 consolidation of authoritarianism has further weakened democratic governance and repressed opposition forces, making meaningful dialogue even less likely (Dendere & Taodzera, 2023). This consolidation involved centralizing state power, militarizing political spaces, and enacting restrictive laws that curtail civil liberties. Pervasive patronage networks stifle political competition, reward supporters, punish opponents, and create a climate of fear, all of which undermine the conditions necessary for a truly inclusive and fair national dialogue.

The weakness and fragmentation of the opposition (by elections)

The opposition in Zimbabwe is currently in a state of disarray, characterized by fragmentation, weakness, and polarization, which significantly undermines its ability to challenge the ruling party and advocate for meaningful reforms (Moyo, 2020; Mwonzora, 2022). This disarray stems from internal divisions, leadership struggles, and the repressive tactics of the ruling party.

Internal divisions prevent the opposition from presenting a united front or articulating a coherent alternative vision for the country (Mwonzora, 2022). This lack of unity allows the ruling party to employ divide-and-conquer strategies, further weakening the opposition's capacity to contest the status quo.

The weakened opposition makes it difficult to create a conducive environment for dialogue, as the ruling party has little incentive to negotiate with a fragmented and ineffective challenger. Without a strong, united opposition, ZANU-PF can pursue its agenda with minimal resistance. Since the 2023 harmonized elections, more than 30 by-elections have been conducted, yet the main opposition has failed to field strong contenders, with ZANU-PF winning all contests.

This situation has entrenched asymmetries of power between the ruling party and the opposition, as well as among different societal groups, making it difficult to achieve consensus and represent the interests of all stakeholders. The ruling party and its allies control the state apparatus, resources, and political machinery, dominating the political process. The politicization of state institutions—such as the judiciary, police, and electoral commission—further undermines impartiality and credibility, hindering the prospects for genuine dialogue (Tofa, 2020). This perceived bias erodes public trust and challenges the fairness and transparency essential for a meaningful national dialogue.

Lack of unified leadership and a clear vision

The absence of strong, unified leadership further exacerbates the opposition's weakness, as there is no single figure capable of commanding the respect and loyalty of all opposition supporters or effectively articulating a clear, compelling vision for the country's future.

This leadership vacuum undermines the opposition's ability to mobilize support and challenge the ruling party.

The paper underscores the importance of sound leadership in national dialogues, emphasizing the need for strong, visionary leaders who can guide the process and ensure it remains focused on achieving meaningful outcomes. Successful national dialogues often require leaders who can transcend partisan interests and prioritize the national good (He, 2013; Mandikwaza, 2025). Historical examples include Robert Mugabe, Morgan Tsvangirai, and Joshua Nkomo in Zimbabwe, as well as Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk in South Africa, who played pivotal roles in facilitating dialogue and political transitions. These leaders were able to inspire trust and confidence among followers while negotiating effectively with adversaries.

The current political landscape in Zimbabwe lacks such reconciliatory figures, hindering the prospects for a genuine national dialogue, as there is no individual who can command the respect and loyalty of all stakeholders or effectively steer the process toward a successful outcome.

Lukewarm internal pressure:
Low political efficacy

Zimbabwe currently faces a collective action problem. Politics in the country, particularly in urban areas, is characterized by apathy, as citizens appear to have lost faith in the political process and doubt that their participation can make a difference. This apathy stems from a combination of factors, including a history of disputed elections, a lack of accountability from political leaders, and the perception that the political system is rigged against ordinary citizens (Masunda, 2024). Citizens—especially youth, who constitute the largest demographic group—often boycott elections, and calls for protests and demonstrations see low turnouts, reflecting widespread disillusionment with the political system and skepticism about the ability of political action to bring about meaningful change (Mwonzora, 2023; Masunda, 2023). This disengagement among young people is particularly concerning, as they represent the country's future and their participation is essential for building a more democratic and prosperous society.

Life cycle and survival pressures further reduce political engagement. Many Zimbabweans are preoccupied with securing basic needs in a difficult economic environment, leaving limited time or energy for political participation. This economic hardship fosters desperation and hopelessness, discouraging active involvement in politics.

At the same time, citizens remain wary of the government's heavy-handed response to any perceived political activity. The state has a history of using violence and intimidation to suppress dissent and maintain its grip on power. Recent continual calls for protests by Blessed Geza, a veteran of the liberation struggle, have been met with general disinterest,

demonstrating widespread caution and disengagement. This repression fosters a climate of fear that inhibits free expression and political participation.

Civic space has been further constricted by legal measures such as the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA) and the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Bill, the latter imposing onerous registration requirements and granting authorities the power to suspend or deregister civil society organisations, thereby undermining their rights and operational capacity (ZimRights, 2023). This shrinking civic space coincides with pervasive human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and excessive use of force against peaceful protesters, opposition members, and human rights defenders, creating an atmosphere of fear and repression (ZimRights, 2023). Political polarization compounds the problem by systematically excluding dissenting voices from exercising freedoms of assembly and expression, privileging ruling party supporters, and further deepening national divisions and mistrust.

Compounding these challenges are entrenched weaknesses in institutional independence and accountability. Key bodies, including Chapter 12 commissions—the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission, Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission, Zimbabwe Media Commission, and Zimbabwe Gender Commission—suffer from political interference and insufficient resources, limiting their ability to fulfill constitutional mandates and deliver justice or reconciliation (ZimRights, 2023).

The combination of political apathy, lawfare, and state repression has eroded trust and confidence in political processes, creating a vicious cycle in which citizens become increasingly disengaged and disillusioned, further weakening prospects for democratic reform. This erosion of trust is a major obstacle to achieving a successful national dialogue, as it hampers consensus-building and undermines the broad acceptance and support necessary for effective outcomes.

Consequently, it becomes difficult to mobilize citizens and generate a groundswell of support for national dialogue, as many no longer believe that dialogue can bring about meaningful change or that their participation can make a difference. Without a sense of hope and belief in the possibility of progress, inspiring citizen engagement in the political process is challenging.

Moreover, without significant internal pressure, the ruling party has little incentive to engage in genuine dialogue, as it does not face substantial public demand for reform and does not perceive a serious threat to its power. This lack of internal pressure further undermines the conditions required for a successful national dialogue process.

Lack of external pressure:
Regional and international dynamics

There is a lack of regional pressure, as fellow liberation movements in South Africa, Mozambique, and Angola remain in power and act in solidarity, making it unlikely that these countries will push ZANU-PF to engage in meaningful dialogue or implement democratic reforms. For example, the ANC in South Africa publicly supported ZANU-PF following the disputed 2023 elections. In June 2025, the ANC hosted the 2025 Liberation Movements Summit, during which the declining fortunes of the six liberation movements in government were attributed entirely to external forces, with no acknowledgment of internal factors. These regional allies often prioritize solidarity, even when concerns about human rights and democratic governance arise.

These allies are unlikely to exert significant pressure on ZANU-PF, given their shared history and ideology and their reluctance to interfere in one another's domestic affairs. This lack of regional pressure undermines the prospects for creating a conducive environment for national dialogue.

On the international stage, unilateralism appears increasingly prominent, with countries acting independently and expressing growing distrust of multilateral institutions and rules-based orders (Footer, 2022). As a result, global attention to African conflicts is limited. In Zimbabwe's case, sanctions imposed by Western countries have failed to generate the economic or political pressure necessary to compel ZANU-PF to negotiate or implement meaningful reforms, unlike their impact during the liberation struggle in the 1970s or in apartheid-era South Africa (Chakawa, 2022). In practice, these sanctions have at times emboldened ZANU-PF, providing a convenient justification for entrenching its rule and deflecting criticism by blaming sanctions for the country's economic difficulties. Sanctions have also been criticized for harming ordinary citizens while failing to target those most responsible for the country's problems.

The limited effectiveness of sanctions reduces the leverage of external actors in promoting national dialogue, as the ruling party does not feel compelled to respond to international pressure and perceives little threat to its hold on power. This makes it increasingly difficult for external actors to influence Zimbabwe's political dynamics.

Conclusion

This paper examined national dialogue as a pathway out of Zimbabwe's protracted conflict. The evidence presented demonstrates that dialogue remains an attractive proposition across political, civil society, and faith-based constituencies, largely because it is perceived as the only mechanism capable of addressing the intertwined crises of electoral legitimacy, security sector politicization, corruption, and economic exclusion. Respondents articulated a vision of dialogue not as a narrow elite pact but as a transformative, inclusive, and nationally owned process capable of reconstituting Zimbabwe's fractured political settlement.

The analysis also highlights the risks and obstacles accompanying dialogue efforts. Trust deficits, entrenched power asymmetries, authoritarian resilience, and a lack of credible guarantors create conditions under which dialogue may be manipulated to consolidate, rather than dismantle, authoritarian dominance. Lessons from Zimbabwe's past dialogues—namely the Internal Settlement, Lancaster House Agreement, the Global Political Agreement (GPA), COPAC, and POLAD—demonstrate that the success of any such process depends less on the signing of agreements than on their enforcement, institutionalization, and broad-based legitimacy.

For dialogue to move beyond symbolism, it must be anchored in context-sensitive design. This includes clear legal entrenchment of outcomes, independent secretariats to guard against partisan capture, robust civic education to expand citizen ownership, and the involvement of credible regional guarantors to ensure compliance. Without such safeguards, dialogue risks degenerating into another episode of "dialogue-washing" that defers rather than resolves Zimbabwe's governance crisis.

In conclusion, national dialogue is neither a guaranteed panacea nor an exercise to be dismissed. It is a contested tool whose outcomes depend on the balance of forces, the credibility of facilitation, and the extent to which it responds to both elite and popular demands. Properly structured, it could catalyze structural reform and democratic renewal; poorly designed, it risks entrenching the very authoritarian practices it seeks to overcome.

Acknowledgements

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Pakistan:
Early Warning by Women for Conflict Prevention in the Erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Merged Districts)

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Abstract: This study examines the role of tribal women who issued warnings to elders and community members prior to the outbreak of conflicts in Kurram, Orakzai, and North and South Waziristan, located in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (now Merged Districts) of Pakistan. These early warnings demonstrate the efforts of tribal women to prevent emerging conflicts; however, their concerns were largely disregarded by tribal authorities. The article analyzes the status of women within patriarchal tribal structures that marginalized their perspectives and constrained their ability to report latent conflict drivers and early warning signs to stakeholders capable of taking preventive action. Understanding the position of women in tribal societies and their relationship to conflict informs a hypothesis grounded in feminist security theory: conflict and violence in the tribal districts could be mitigated if women were included in both informal and formal mechanisms of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Drawing on primary and secondary sources, this research evaluates the contributions of tribal women in the pre-conflict stages and highlights their potential role in strengthening early warning and prevention systems.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Early Warnings, Violence and Peace Building, Merged Districts.

Introduction

During the Cold War, an early warning system (EWS) was introduced in specialised, sensitive military installations to prevent surprise attacks and military accidents. Later, computerised satellite warnings were issued to provide timely notice of the launch of nuclear missiles by rival superpowers (Rupesinghe, 2008). Though the EWS originated against the backdrop of military conceptualisation, it was also introduced to prevent natural disasters and food shortages (Sättele et al., 2016). With increased conflict emergence around the world, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development used the EWS to predict the drivers and triggers of armed conflicts and communal violence (Nyheim, 2009). Currently, "early warning efforts do not intend to suppress conflicts but to respond to the trajectory of a conflict." The purpose of the EWS is to prevent conflict emergence from the latent phase, which constitutes conflict prevention.

Later, practitioners and policymakers developed scholarship on gender-sensitive EWS initiated by women before and amid conflict in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines (Arnado, 2012). This research reveals that tribal women warned against unseen conflict drivers and triggers. If tribal elders and the administration had paid heed to the gender-sensitive EWS approach proposed by tribal women, then it might have prevented the eruption of violent conflicts. This study provides a foundation for further research on tribal women to ensure women's inclusion and participation in peacebuilding. Women can assist in identifying changing dynamics at familial, grassroots, and community levels to alleviate tensions in tribal areas. It is observed that women were included in peace processes during the conflict transformation period in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines.

In rural and tribal areas, women keenly observe men's behaviour at home and outside, as well as changes in the community. Tribal women easily identified the conversion of local male socialisation spaces for clandestine activities. For example, studies in Kosovo (Besnik, 2004) and Sierra Leone (Gizelis, 2011) discovered that women provided valuable information on weapon depots, combatant hideouts, and the planning of attacks, but they couldn't report this information to the concerned authorities to stop violence. In these conflict areas, women suffered both as combatants and non-combatants. This research on the role of women in EWS is premised on the need to include women in different formal and informal structures for conflict prevention. Thus, the debate regarding conflict prevention in the United Nations and the lack of information about the potential role of women is now being seriously considered in light of the theme of women, peace, and security. This resulted in the passage of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in October 2000 (UN Resolution 1325).

Since 1979, the Afghan Jihad (holy war) project created militants in the form of mujahideen (holy warriors), and after the Soviet exit, different militant groups started fighting against each other for power in Afghanistan. The erstwhile FATA, comprising seven tribal districts (northwest of Pakistan), shares the longest porous border with Afghanistan. The region

is apparently peaceful, but internally, its social cohesion suffered a breakdown due to the shifting dynamics of the tribal hierarchical equilibrium with the emergence of a new rich class dealing in guns and drugs. During the Taliban rule (1994–2001) in Afghanistan, though the tribal areas did not experience any active conflict, local people (new rich traders and the clergy class) developed connections with militants for trade and ideological reasons. The interesting outcome in the global terrorism discourse is that the erstwhile FATA is debatably projected as the epicentre of militancy.

In 2001, with the start of the US-led Global War on Terror in Afghanistan, several militant groups fled into the tribal districts of Pakistan for refuge due to existing relationships (Mahsud, 2024). The existence of different militant groups such as Al-Qaida, Taliban (and its splinter factions) (Mahsud & Aman, 2018), and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Khorasan (ISIS-K) in the tribal districts transformed the armed conflict in the erstwhile FATA into a complex phenomenon. These groups promoted different agendas and used different tactics to implement ideology in each tribal agency (Mahsud, 2019). Subsequently, the nature of early warning (EW) varies in each tribal district according to the conflict.

Since 2005, tribal women in the Pak-Afghan borderland have suffered manifoldly from militancy, but this remains limitedly reported in scholarship (Naseer, 2015). Although women are adversely affected by the violence and displacement, they were never included in peace-building processes and agreements. Pertinently, women tried to alarm community elders by situational predictions and EW, but they were ignored by tribal elders and the state government in the erstwhile FATA and in the new constitutional status of the Newly Merged Tribal Districts. During the last two decades, women were neither active nor passive participants in the different conflicts in the erstwhile FATA, although some studies were conducted to examine their involvement in conflict. In isolated cases, women were targeted for hosting militants' abductees for ransom, but there is no evidence available to substantiate the argument of tribal women's participation in conflicts.

In Swat and Afghanistan, studies found that some women supported militants and therefore indirectly became part of a conflict (Naseer et al., 2020). This work attempts to discuss the role of non-combatant tribal women in conflict prevention by warning communities and the responses of local tribal men.

Literature Review

Historically, scholars focused on the impacts of war on women as disproportionate targets during and after the conflict. Several research works discussed the decisive role that women can play in peacemaking and reconstruction. However, scholarship on early warning (EW) by women emerged before the conflict. The early warning and response systems come from reports published by different charity organizations involved in conflict resolution, while scholarly literature focuses on overviews and theoretical approaches to conflict early warning and response systems.

Figure 1. Map of Erstwhile FATA

Source: RS. News (2017)

It is pertinent to mention that no scholarship has been undertaken on tribal women's role in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, or theoretical approaches to early conflict warnings. This research builds on case studies of conflict areas to understand the role of women in early warning in relation to conflict prevention and to generate a debate on tribal women warning tribes in the erstwhile FATA. Alice Ackermann's work (2020), *Early warning and conflict prevention: Responsibilities of the international community* discusses EWS in conflict prevention. Although her work is not about the role of individuals in conflict prevention, it rather provides quantitative methods to create database predictive models for assessing the risks of complex humanitarian crises. She discusses three kinds of risk assessment: first, the use of structural indicators, which helped this research to see what structures helped or hindered tribal women in communicating early warnings; second, sequential models distinguishing between background, reaction, and trigger variables, which provided an in-depth understanding of EW; and third, inductive methods that classify different variables to understand the ground realities of conflict building. However, the author also identifies several challenges posed by the warning-response gap in early warning and conflict prevention, as well as the issue of "missed opportunities" to prevent the escalation of wars (Ackermann, 2020).

Susanne Schmeidl and Eugenia Piza-Lopez (2002) discussed the critical issue of the Taliban's refusal to allow women in peace processes—a situation very similar to that of

tribal women in the erstwhile FATA. Schmeidl and Piza-Lopez established that involving women in EW processes in traditional and regressive societies would challenge conventional analytical patterns and open new possibilities for response (Schmeidl & Piza-Lopez, 2002).

Naseer (2025) argued that women provide warnings before conflicts emerge to prevent violence in FATA. The study discussed the dynamics that have prevented tribal women from participating in the peace process. The research suggested that women living on the Pak-Afghan borderland could be brought out of marginalization if they are included in the peacebuilding structure (both formal and informal in society). The study, conducted among internally displaced tribal women, found that although tribal women suffer from conflict, they are excluded from the peace process as stakeholders, indicative of a patriarchal society (Mahsud, 2024).

Hill (2003) reports in *Women's contribution to conflict prevention, early warning, and disarmament* to UNIFEM, discussing the experiences of women from Kosovo and Sierra Leone. She stressed that it is important to listen to these women in conflict situations to address gender blind spots in early warning information, compilation, and investigation, which can also contribute to conflict prevention. She shares the account of a woman from Kosovo who realized that armed conflict was building when she saw arms caches being smuggled into their area. She added that certain young men, including her nephew, went up into the hills to receive training. Similarly, in Sierra Leone, women continuously warned against the Revolutionary United Front attacking peacekeeping forces; however, they had no one to inform or communicate with (Hill, 2003). All experiences of women recorded in the report are relatable to the case of tribal women living in the erstwhile FATA.

Brigitte Rohwerder (2015) identified that accurate predictions and the persuasion of authorities, political leaders, and the public are a challenge. Therefore, civil society organizations play the dual role of warning and response, although they cannot record effectively. Unfortunately, no civil society exists in the erstwhile FATA, and charity organizations are not allowed to work in the tribal areas without permission from Pakistan's Interior Ministry and military. Rohwerder criticized early warning mechanisms for being largely gender-blind to women. In the Asia-Pacific region (Philippines, Nepal, and Australia), hardly three National Action Plans have been devised that allow the participation of women in peace and security processes. There is no mention of women's involvement in EWS at the community level or within formal government structures (Ahmed, 2013). After the merger of the erstwhile FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), under the new name of Merged Tribal Districts, tribal women were given reserved seats in the provincial assembly of KP, but these women are not included in any rehabilitation, peacebuilding processes, or prevention systems. This work aims to study warnings shared by tribal women before conflicts through interviews recorded via field notes.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed qualitative and analytical methods to examine both primary and secondary data. Given the absence of reliable statistics and the sensitivity of the research setting, an exploratory design was adopted to uncover women's lived experiences of conflict, displacement, and informal early warning systems in tribal districts.

Primary data collection

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): A total of 24 KIIs were conducted between 2018 and 2022 across four tribal districts: Kurram, Orakzai, North Waziristan, and South Waziristan.

Narrative inquiry: Primary data was collected through narrative inquiry, focusing on life stories, interviews, observations, and social interactions. Six women from each district were interviewed, deliberately selected between the ages of 40 and 60 due to their direct experiences of conflict, military operations, and displacement.

Age considerations: Age reporting was often imprecise due to the absence of accurate birth records in tribal areas. Researchers noted respondents' difficulty in recalling exact ages, relying on both self-reported estimates and observational judgment.

Social roles: Most respondents were homemakers but socially active through *gham-khadi* (participation in funerals and weddings), which provided them with community-level insights into conflict dynamics and informal warning signals.

Early warning systems and women's role

A distinctive aspect of this research was the documentation of women's roles in informal early warning systems within tribal districts. Women reported observing subtle signs of impending conflict, such as the unusual movement of armed groups, sudden restrictions on mobility, or changes in community gatherings, and relayed these warnings to male family members. These informal alerts often preceded formal announcements or visible escalations. Women's participation in social networks (funerals, weddings, health visits) enabled them to act as conduits of information, making them critical yet under-recognized actors in community-level resilience and preparedness.

Informal conversations

In addition to KIIs, informal conversations with both men and women were recorded to triangulate data. These discussions provided nuanced insights into how women's observations and warnings were perceived by their communities.

Secondary data collection

Secondary sources included books, peer-reviewed articles, reports from national and international agencies, and internet-based resources. These materials contextualised primary findings within broader discourses on conflict, gender, and tribal governance.

Ethical Considerations

All principles of feminist research and conflict sensitivity were upheld. Educated participants provided written consent, while uneducated participants gave verbal consent. Research goals were explained before interviews, and pseudonyms were used to protect identities. Ethical safeguards were prioritised to prevent psychological or physical harm.

Research setting and limitations

The study was conducted in troubled borderland tribal districts, where researchers faced challenges of security and restricted accessibility. Fieldwork was carried out in three phases between 2018 and 2022, requiring prolonged engagement to build trust and gather reliable narratives.

Limitations included the absence of formal records, reliance on oral histories, and the difficulty of accessing certain conflict-affected areas.

Table 1. Table of Interview Respondents

District	Tribe (sect)	Respondents with Code Names and Age (from researchers' field notes)
Kurram	Turi (Shia)	3 (Gulnaz-43) (Sakina-51) (Zainab-55)
	Bangash (Sunni)	3 (Ayesha-48) (Hafsa-52) (Ayat-46)
Orakzai	Mohammad Khel (Shia)	3 (Shehwar-44) (Sana-50) (Hira-35)
	Massuzai (Sunni)	3 (Shehla-40) (Palwasha-43) (Gul-28)
North Waziristan	Dawar (Sunni)	3 (Sinzela-44) (Ujala-40) (Hina-39)
	Wazir (Sunni)	3 (Dil Khushad-55) (Anwar Begum-60) (Parwari Begum-64)
South Waziristan	Mehsud (Sunni)	3 (Zarghona-59) (Musarat-43) (Farah-46)
	Wazir (Sunni)	3 (Jannat Bibi-51) (Fauzia-47) (Ruqaya-65)

Discussions during informal personal meetings

Table 2. Table of Respondent

Code Name and Age	Profession	Area of Residence
Rafiqa-44	Gynecologist	Kurram
Shahnaz-59	Home maker	Orakzai
Asma-39	Lady Health Visitor	Kurram
Shereen-42	Home maker	North Waziristan
Asifa-40	Primary Teacher	North Waziristan
Shehla-44	Home maker	Kurram
Firouza-50	Home maker	Orakzai
Nargis-66	Widow	South Waziristan
Zubaida-Around 60	Widow	South Waziristan
Gul-38 or 40	Home maker	South Waziristan
Hameeda-56	Home maker	North Waziristan
Suraya-60	Widow	North Waziristan
Tahira-55	Home maker	Kurram
Hashmat-above 60	Widow	South Waziristan
Sultana-above 55	Home maker	South Waziristan
Bilqees-above 60	Home maker	South Waziristan

Bridging Conceptual Framework to Methodology

In this research, the conceptual framework is grounded in UNSCR 1325, Galtung's Violence Triangle, and feminist human security, which directly informed the methodological choices of the study. Since the research question focuses on how tribal women identified early signs of conflict and issued forewarnings, the framework emphasized women's lived experiences as critical sources of knowledge. This necessitated a qualitative approach, privileging narratives, oral histories, and field interviews with women in Kurram, Orakzai, and North and South Waziristan.

The four pillars of UNSCR 1325 shaped the interview guides, ensuring that questions addressed protection, prevention, participation, and peacebuilding. Galtung's typology of violence provided analytical categories for coding data, enabling the identification of direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence in women's accounts. Finally, the feminist lens required that women be treated not as passive victims but as active agents of early conflict warning, guiding the decision to foreground their voices in both data collection and analysis.

Thus, the methodology operationalized the conceptual framework by placing women's perspectives at the center of the research design, ensuring that their forewarnings were systematically documented and interpreted.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by the central research question:
What were the early signs of conflict noticed by tribal women, and how did they forewarn about triggering incidents that escalated conflicts in the tribal districts of Kurram, Orakzai, North and South Waziristan?

It is also important to highlight that:
  a. In the tribal districts, protection and prevention mechanisms are largely absent, leaving women exposed to violence.
  b. Women's participation is denied, as patriarchal structures exclude them from jirgas and decision-making forums.

Therefore, to advocate for the inclusion of women in peacemaking and peacebuilding processes, the conceptual framework for this article is developed around United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the feminist approach to peacebuilding, and John Galtung's "Violence Triangle". Before advancing this debate, it is essential to recognize that early conflict warning is an integral element of peacebuilding.

John Galtung first introduced the term peacebuilding in 1969, defining it as a process of conflict prevention and management during the latent phase of a conflict by addressing its root causes. Identifying early warning signs in this latent phase and issuing alerts to prevent these causes from evolving into open conflict constitutes a core component of the peacebuilding process. This process involves all formal and informal structures within society.

Findings from our field research indicate that even when women have limited roles within formal settings, they can nonetheless play a vital and unique role in peacebuilding through informal early conflict warning mechanisms. Their observations and warnings contribute significantly to conflict prevention, underscoring the importance of their inclusion in broader peace processes.

During fieldwork, we assessed the precarious situation of women in the erstwhile FATA using the four pillars of UNSCR 1325—Protection, Prevention, Participation, and Peacebuilding and Recovery. However, mechanisms for the protection and prevention of violence against women are largely absent in these merged districts. As a result, the third pillar, *Participation*, is also fundamentally compromised. Women are consequently excluded from participating in peace processes and from contributing to conflict prevention through early warning systems. The fourth pillar, *Peacebuilding and Recovery*, emphasizes restoring societal stability after conflict. This pillar offers significant, yet largely untapped, opportunities for women in the erstwhile FATA, who constitute one of the most directly affected and vulnerable groups.

Examining the phenomenon through John Galtung's violence triangle, it is important to note that Galtung distinguishes between two forms of peace: *positive peace* and *negative*

peace. He argues that peace is not merely the absence of war—defined as negative peace—which is maintained by containing or suppressing conflict. Positive peace, by contrast, is a long-term condition sustained through economic and political stability, respect for human rights, freedom of speech and religion, and gender equality.

Tribal women in the merged districts remain highly vulnerable to violent cultural practices (*riwaj/dastoor*), including honor killings, being exchanged as compensation for the murder of a male relative, or being sold as brides. Furthermore, the state has historically ignored and marginalized them, denying them access to basic constitutional rights (Naseer, 2019).

The concept of peace cannot be understood independently from violence, which Galtung defines as comprising three interconnected forms: direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence. Direct violence refers to explicit physical or verbal harm inflicted by a perpetrator on a victim. Women in the erstwhile FATA are frequently subjected to domestic abuse, beatings, and honor killings. Structural violence arises from institutionalized injustice, socioeconomic inequality, and oppressive social practices. In the former FATA, the male-dominated *jirga*—a council of tribal elders responsible for dispute resolution—systematically denied women access to justice. Cultural violence is embedded in societal norms, beliefs, and traditions, and often remains invisible because it is legitimized through cultural or religious frameworks (Galtung, 1969).

Tribal men are repressive due to extreme patriarchy and often view women as personal property. Cultural norms and social structures have denied tribal women any role in conflict prevention, resulting in their early warnings being ignored by men, even as women directly suffered during conflicts (Ullah et al., 2021). The feminist human security perspective defines security in a multidimensional manner, allowing for the analysis of unconventional methods to observe facts, examine subjects, explore narratives, and write histories with a gendered lens on conflict and war. Feminist scholars emphasize not merely "adding women and creating a stir" but ensuring their meaningful participation in consequential processes (Khan, 2024). In the erstwhile FATA, women face tribal violence, militant religious oppression, and state neglect in education, healthcare, and other essential services, rendering them largely invisible in national and international peacebuilding and rehabilitation efforts. Even after the merger of the tribal areas with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, tribal women remain absent from local peace *jirgas*, committees, and agreements, despite these decisions profoundly affecting their lives (Naseer, 2025).

As women remain peripheral to power structures globally, feminists prioritize women's security, focusing on them as individuals or community members rather than on the state or international system. Security is inherently complex and contested, involving struggle and disagreement; it is a process rather than an ideal, in which women must act as agents in securing their own well-being. In feminist scholarship, human security has been challenged by critical questions such as: Whose security? Where are women? These inquiries open debates on gender inclusion in international relations and security studies (Krulišová & O'Sullivan, 2022).

In 1999, the UN identified several facets of human security and linked them to gender issues relevant to tribal women. These included women's human rights, such as recognizing violence against women and girls—perpetrated by cultural, state, and non-state actors—inequalities in access to resources, power, and decision-making, and the acknowledgment of women (and men) as actors, not merely victims, in conflicts. In tribal conflicts, women experienced multiple forms of violence at both domestic and tribal levels (Afridi, 2023). Rafiqa, a doctor in Kurram, noted that "tribal women suffered cultural violence, coped with militant religious oppression, and endured blatant state aggression" (10 January 2021). It is important to view tribal women as active participants in conflict and to apply feminist insights emphasizing the significance of women's participation on an equal footing with men in pre- and post-conflict processes. Noreen Naseer (2022) argues that tribal women's everyday experiences in conflicts can provide essential insights for conflict prevention if society and the government take their perspectives seriously. Before the paper advances, it is pertinent to understand the life cycle of conflict to contextualise early warning in the latent and perceived phase for conflict emergence, as evident from the image below.
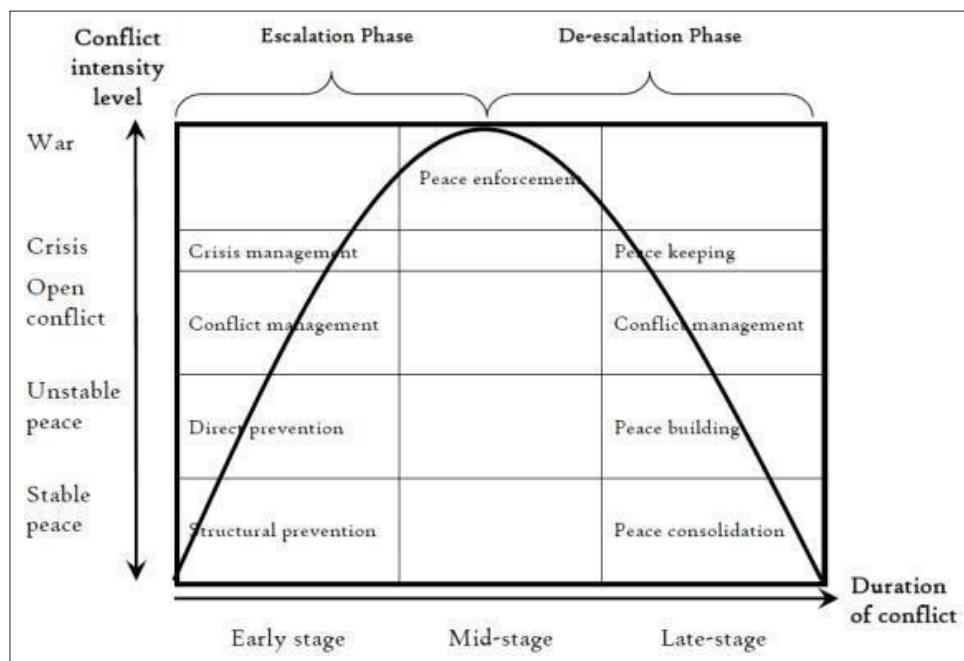

Figure 2.
Source: Swanstrom and Weissmann, 2005

Early Warnings by the Tribal Women

To conduct this study, Kurram and Orakzai districts were selected for fieldwork to examine sectarian conflict, while North and South Waziristan tribal districts were studied to analyze conflict dynamics arising from militancy.

Kurram and Orakzai Sectarian Conflict – Women's Warnings

Sakina, a religious speaker, and Zainab, a primary school teacher, noted that two pivotal events in 1979 triggered sectarian tensions in Kurram and Orakzai: the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In the post-2001 era, militant groups promoting anti-Shia agendas—such as Al-Qaida, the Islamic State Khurasan Province (headquartered in Jalalabad, Afghanistan), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), and the Taliban—vowed to purge Shia tribes from Kurram and Orakzai. This escalated into severe violence, including mass displacement, beheadings, and sexual assaults (August 18, 2018).

Local women in both districts attempted to warn tribal elders through their male relatives, but these warnings were largely ignored. Gulnaz, a Shia woman from the Turi tribe (Alizai), recounted that a seemingly minor incident at a local school in 2013 sparked a sectarian conflict. A Sunni Bangash boy initiated a fight with a Shia Turi boy, hurling sectarian slurs. The following day, all Sunni students boycotted the school. Gulnaz reported the matter to her husband, a tribal elder, suggesting resolution through a jirga (council of elders), but he dismissed it as a routine quarrel among children. Within days, two Shia Turi boys were killed in Bagzai Village, Lower Kurram, igniting a full-scale sectarian conflict (August 18, 2018).

Ayesha, a Sunni female health worker from the Bangash tribe appointed at the Basic Health Unit (BHU) in Sadda, recalled feeling uneasy when unfamiliar men sought treatment at the facility. She requested that the BHU in-charge verify their backgrounds and also informed her husband, a government employee, who advised her to remain silent. Within a month, militants raped and killed a Shia health worker, Suriya Bibi, while she was providing medical services in an ambulance. The incident was reported in the local Urdu press. In retaliation, Shia militias burned Sunni villages, causing mass displacement. Sunni female respondents Hafsa and Ayat, both from the Bangash tribe, noted that hate banners against Shias and inflammatory sermons from local mosques created panic among women, though men either ignored the signs or lacked channels to report them (December 19, 2019).

The sectarian conflict in Orakzai followed a different trajectory. Palwasha and Gul, Sunni female respondents, explained that tensions centered on the shrine of Syed Mir Anwar Shah in Kalaya, Lower Orakzai. While Shias revered the shrine, the Taliban equated shrines with idolatry and attempted their destruction, sparking deadly clashes. The shrine is now under the protection of the Pakistan Army, with restricted access. Shehla, a Sunni woman from the Massuzai tribe in Ghiljo village, Upper Orakzai, observed that armed

men frequented the village hujra (guest house), engaging with young Sunni men who later joined sectarian anti-Shia outfits before disappearing (December 18, 2019). Ghiljo, a remote and underdeveloped area with limited economic opportunities, witnessed protests by families of the disappeared youth through the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement.

In Kalaya, the central conflict zone of Orakzai, Hira, a Shia woman, recounted that Sunni neighbors began hosting strangers arriving in large trucks and refused to answer questions about their guests. She explained that in close-knit communities, such inquiries are customary. When she urged her male relatives to raise the matter with tribal elders or the administration, her elder brother dismissed her concerns as paranoia (August 15, 2019). A few months later, skirmishes erupted over the shrine, forcing Shia families to seek refuge in Hangu and Kohat districts. Shehwar and Sana, respondents from Orakzai, further reported that militants smuggled arms caches into Sunni households, which were later deployed against Shias (Zahab, 2011).

Women's Early Warnings, Normalisation of Strangers, Patterns of Youth Recruitment in North and South Waziristan

The North and South Waziristan districts have frequently been described in scholarly accounts as "the most dangerous place" due to the spillover of militant groups from Afghanistan after 2001. This influx triggered violent conflicts and counterinsurgency operations, ultimately displacing nearly one million people from both districts (Khan et al., 2023).

In North Waziristan, women respondents vividly narrated their experiences of suffering and marginalization. One respondent explained, "We warned our men, but nobody listened to us." Sinzela, a woman from the Dawar tribe in Tappy village, recalled: "We started noticing strange men in our village in double-cabin vehicles interacting with our young men and boys at *jamma* (congregation prayers) before the militants took control of our village. Our men also noticed strangers around the village, but they felt it was normal. However, for us women, the strangers' presence was not normal". Similarly, Ujala and Hina, also from the Dawar tribe, observed, "Our men started behaving cranky at home and would pick up fights in the neighborhood".

Dil-Khushad, a female respondent from the Wazir tribe in Shawa village, recounted how her son eventually joined the militants: "My son became quiet and would go missing for the whole day." Despite informing her family members and tribal elders, they rationalized his behavior as typical adolescent change, noting that "some become hyper and a few go quiet". Her concerns were echoed by two elderly female neighbors, Anwar and Parwari Begum, who lamented that men witnessed these behavioral shifts but failed to recognize that conflict was gradually building up in North Waziristan (18 December 2019).

Women's warnings in South Waziristan mirrored those from the north. Zarghona, a respondent from Wana, stated, "Our village was infested with strangers, and it became

very difficult for women to freely socialize in the community" (11 December 2021). She explained that before the conflict, elderly and married women interacted freely in public spaces. However, when she informed tribal elders about the strangers, they dismissed her concerns, assuming the men were Afghan refugees seeking work in Wana and the surrounding areas.

Collective testimonies from female Mehsud respondents in Makeen, as well as Mussarat from Ladha, highlighted similar observations of strangers in their villages. Farah recounted, "Our neighbor's young son, working with militants, would go missing for days and come back with money and gifts for his family." When questioned, the boy's mother admitted she did not know about his activities. Farah added, "Later, militants took over our village, and our neighbor's son terrorized local people as a militant".

Further testimonies from Jannat Bibi, Fauzia, and Ruqayya of the Ahmadzai Wazir tribe in Wana revealed two distinct patterns among families whose sons disappeared and later returned with money and gifts from unnamed sources. Ruqayya, an elderly woman, explained, "Either the family would show off the gifts to their poverty-stricken neighbors, while wise women from other families would worry about the legitimacy of the son's source of income" (19 October 2022).

Women's Early Warnings and Social Disconnect

Across all interviews, a recurring theme emerged: women perceived triggering incidents that men ignored, leading to conflict escalation. Tribal women, despite lacking direct access to public life, repeatedly raised alarms through male relatives, urging them to convey their concerns to tribal elders. These warnings were dismissed, reflecting an entrenched gendered disconnect in social structures. Working women, including teachers and health workers, also reported untoward incidents to competent authorities, yet their concerns were disregarded. This neglect underscores the insignificance attributed to women's opinions in the patriarchal tribal setup (Askari et al., 2023).

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) reveal that women, regardless of formal schooling, demonstrated acute sensitivity to external threats. Their discomfort with the presence of unfamiliar men—often driving expensive vehicles without women—was a clear indicator of their observational intelligence. Women's warnings about such outsiders in Orakzai and among Turi tribesmen foreshadowed sectarian clashes, suggesting that conflicts in the merged FATA districts were not entirely indigenous but influenced by external actors.

Commonality of Warnings and Situations

Women across four tribal districts consistently reported early warning signs:

1. **Youth frustration and aggression**: Women observed young men becoming petulant, disturbed, and increasingly hostile at home. Asma, Shereen, and Asifa linked this to

men's growing interactions with militants, which heightened anxiety and isolation. Shahnaz noted inappropriate language and village fights (23 October 2022).

2. **Unemployment and humiliation**: Respondents highlighted that unemployed youth, insulted by elders, were drawn into militancy for monetary benefits.

3. **Livelihood insecurity**: Women such as Shehla, Nargis, and Zubaida reported missing poultry and livestock, yet these offences were ignored.

4. **Institutional shifts**: Women noticed jirgas (councils of elders) being replaced by militants' shuras. Gul, Hameeda, Tahira, and Suraya observed restrictions on women's mobility after militants' takeover (August 2018; January 2019; December 2021–January 2022).

Women also identified rising violence against children in schools, leading to dropouts and enrolment in newly established seminaries. Mothers warned elders against these seminaries and new mosque clergies, but their concerns were dismissed. Elderly women such as Hashmat, Sultana, and Bilqees noted negative propaganda by new clergies against tribal elders (23 September 2021). These ignored warnings culminated in children being recruited for suicide bombings.

Neglect of Women's Warnings

The neglect of women's early warnings raises critical questions. Timely attention to women's concerns could have prevented minor issues from escalating into armed conflicts. For instance, addressing student violence in Kurram might have averted a sectarian war, while discouraging the ridicule of young boys in Orakzai and Waziristan could have reduced militant recruitment. This points to the broader debate on tribal women's marginalized social position in the erstwhile FATA and their exclusion from state structures (Khan et al., 2019).

Religious Militancy and Patriarchal Structures

The patrilineal family structure institutionalized male superiority, reinforced by tribalism and militant ideology (Askari, Javed & Askari, 2023). Religious segregation silenced women, enabling militants to thrive. Sectarian conflicts revealed a destructive mix of tribalism and fanaticism: Sunni tribes aligned with militants to attack Shia communities, destroy property, and commit gendered violence. Women attempted to preserve kinship-based trust, but elders ignored their warnings, allowing militants to manipulate youth.

In Pashtun tribal society, women's position is defined by Pashtunwali's triad—Zar, Zen, Zameen (gold, women, land)—which equates women with property. Practices such as bride price, denial of inheritance, and honor killings reinforce women's status as possessions (Naseer, 2019). The saying "A woman's place is either at home or in a grave" epitomizes this exclusion. Despite these constraints, women's efforts to voice concerns

were commendable acts of resistance. Militants exploited tribal values to gain acceptance while isolating women. Jacobson and Deckard's (2012) tribal index highlights how tribal structures predict religiously inspired aggression, particularly against women. Thus, women's warnings about militants were systematically disregarded.

Human Security and the Need for Inclusion

Findings reveal that human security for women in the erstwhile FATA is virtually non-existent in both pre- and post-conflict contexts. According to the 2011 census, FATA's population was 5 million, including 2.4 million women. Even today, 60% of the population lives below the poverty line, women's literacy stands at 7.8%, and half of rural healthcare facilities remain dysfunctional due to insecurity and political pressures (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these vulnerabilities.

The prevailing situation in the border districts underscores the urgency of conflict-sensitive approaches that integrate women's voices into peacebuilding. As Galtung (1969) argues, sustainable peace requires positive peace through empowerment, development, and inclusion. Tribal women's early warnings demonstrate their potential as agents of conflict prevention, yet patriarchal and militant structures silenced them. Therefore, recognizing and institutionalizing women's roles in risk assessment and peacebuilding is essential in these conflict-ridden tribal districts.

Conclusion

The study is based on a qualitative design because the subject—women's role in conflict early warning in FATA—is underexplored and requires contextual depth rather than statistical generalization. The research is situated within feminist conflict analysis, emphasizing marginalized voices (tribal women) and linking them to broader theories of early warning and peacebuilding. In this study, women's interpersonal observations of conflict precursors (e.g., men's behavioral changes, tensions in schools, presence of armed strangers) are documented to advocate for their inclusion in peacebuilding processes in these conflict-affected border districts. These observations are further triangulated with community-level events to validate women's accounts.

The findings indicate that women identified changes in tribal cohesion and community structures as signals of instability. They analyzed the conflict milieu by noting actor reactions (male dominance, disregard of women's concerns) and trigger incidents (school tensions, armed strangers). Women classified these variables (children's fights, presence of strangers) into relational patterns that indicated potential conflict escalation. The study examined how women's warnings were ignored due to patriarchal exclusion, resulting in "missed opportunities" for prevention.

Their narratives revealed that women consistently observed early signs of conflict, behavioral changes in men, school tensions, and movements of strangers. These observations were later corroborated by actual outbreaks of violence, demonstrating predictive accuracy. Documentation of women's absence from political and social spheres illustrated why their warnings were disregarded. Women's ability to classify triggers and variables provided a systematic form of risk assessment, aligning with Ackermann's theoretical models.

The empirical data show that, despite accurate warnings, patriarchal structures obstructed communication and response, confirming the existence of missed opportunities. The methodology—female-led qualitative fieldwork, ethnographic observation, and adapted risk assessment models—ensured culturally sensitive and contextually valid data collection. The women's narratives, observed variables, and evidence of structural exclusion collectively demonstrate that women are critical connectors and early warning agents in conflict settings. The identified warning-response gap is not speculative; it emerges from documented instances in which women's warnings were ignored, leading to conflict escalation.

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Sudan and South Sudan:
Two Decades Since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.
Reassessing Peace, Statehood, and Conflict

Ciprian SANDU

Abstract: This article offers a retrospective assessment of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed on January 9, 2005, between the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). Twenty years later, the initial hopes of peace, democratization, and development have largely dissipated, replaced by cycles of violence, state collapse, and humanitarian crises in both Sudan and South Sudan. Drawing from previous research and updated conflict analysis, the article explores the causes of regression, the limitations of separatism as a conflict resolution tool, and the regional implications of failing peace agreements.

Keywords: Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Sudan, South Sudan, separatism, conflict resolution, state failure, CPA+20.

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Introduction

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was hailed in 2005 as a landmark achievement, ending Africa's longest-running civil war—a two-decade conflict between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) that claimed over two million lives and displaced millions more. Negotiated with the active involvement of regional and international actors, including IGAD, the United States, and the United Nations, the CPA was envisioned not only as a ceasefire but as a comprehensive political roadmap toward a

new Sudanese state rooted in democracy, power-sharing, and self-determination (Young, 2012; Rolandsen, 2011; Dagne, 2011, Sandu, 2014a, 2014b).

The CPA was structured around six protocols and agreements: the Machakos Protocol, the Protocol on Power Sharing, the Protocol on Wealth Sharing, the Protocol on Security Arrangements, and two protocols on conflict areas (Southern Kordofan/Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile, and Abyei). At its heart, the agreement allowed for a six-year interim period of autonomous governance in Southern Sudan, culminating in a referendum on independence. It also included ambitious provisions for democratic elections, oil revenue sharing, and the integration of former adversaries into a unified national army (CPA, 2005; Johnson, 2011; Young, 2012).

Initial optimism was high. Elections in 2010 proceeded and the referendum in 2011 overwhelmingly favored secession, South Sudan becoming at that moment the world's newest country on July 9, 2011. Yet the euphoria quickly gave way to deep political instability because in the North, the Sudanese state under Omar al-Bashir became increasingly autocratic and militarized, marginalizing opposition groups and neglecting the promised democratic transformation and in the South, the SPLM transitioned poorly from a liberation movement to a governing party. Ethnic divisions, unresolved border issues, and competition over oil fields rapidly escalated into violent conflict (de Waal, 2015; Rolandsen, 2015; Johnson, 2016).

The years that followed showed just how fragile peace can be when it's built mainly on deals between political elites and formal institutions, without making sure that ordinary people are included and that justice and strong governance are in place. In Sudan, hopes for democracy faded as military leaders tightened their grip on power and long-standing grievances in Darfur, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan remained unresolved. The 2019 revolution that removed Bashir briefly raised expectations for real change, but the 2021 military coup—and later, the 2023 fighting between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—pushed the country back into turmoil.

On the other side, in South Sudan, a civil war erupted in 2013 between forces aligned with President Salva Kiir and those supporting Vice President Riek Machar. The conflict quickly split the young nation along ethnic lines and forced millions of people from their homes. Although peace agreements were signed in 2015 and again in a revised form in 2018, they have struggled to stop repeated outbreaks of violence, political infighting, and a deepening humanitarian crisis (International Crisis Group, 2014; de Waal, 2014; Jok, 2017).

Thus, while the CPA brought an official end to the North–South war and created a path for Southern Sudan's self-determination, it ultimately failed to deliver lasting peace, meaningful democratic change, or stable governance. Two decades later, both Sudan and South Sudan remain caught in internal conflict, economic decline, and severe humanitarian crises. This article revisits the CPA in light of these outcomes, examining whether it truly accomplished its goals or simply delayed deeper structural problems.

CPA's Expectations and Structural Weaknesses

The CPA was built on six protocols that covered issues such as autonomy, oil revenue, political representation, security reform, and the path toward the 2011 referendum. Among these, the Machakos Protocol and the Power- and Wealth-Sharing Agreements were especially important, as they laid the political and economic groundwork for the entire peace process. The Machakos Protocol, in particular, introduced two crucial ideas—Southern Sudan's right to self-determination and the separation of religion and state—creating the breakthrough that allowed negotiations to move forward (CPA, 2005; Tønnesson, 2008; Young, 2012).

The Power Sharing Agreement detailed the structure of the transitional governments, including the Government of National Unity (GoNU) and the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), laying out the interim balance of political authority. Meanwhile, the Wealth Sharing Agreement, centered on the division of oil revenues, was crucial to maintaining short-term trust between the parties, although it ultimately deepened mutual suspicions due to asymmetric control of infrastructure and transparency (CPA, 2005; Large & Patey, 2011; LeRiche & Arnold, 2012). These core elements aimed to institutionalize peace and cooperation, but they also entrenched an elite bargain with little grassroots legitimacy. However, despite its ambitious and multifaceted framework, the CPA suffered from critical design flaws that undermined its long-term effectiveness.

One of the most serious weaknesses was the vagueness of enforcement mechanisms. While timelines and benchmarks were outlined, such as the scheduling of elections, the withdrawal of troops, or the establishment of joint military units, there were no credible guarantees for implementation, many clauses being phrased in general or aspirational terms, allowing for varying interpretations and selective compliance. More importantly, there were no clear consequences for non-compliance, nor were there strong institutional actors empowered to enforce the agreement impartially. The CPA lacked an independent dispute resolution mechanism that could arbitrate breaches, and even the Ceasefire Political Commission was largely under-resourced and politically constrained (Pantuliano, 2010).

This legal and institutional ambiguity created fertile ground for manipulation. Both the National Congress Party (NCP) and the SPLM quickly learned to use the agreement's silences and gray areas to their advantage. Deadlines for troop redeployments were delayed under security pretexts, oil revenue-sharing was complicated by a lack of financial transparency, and the national census, crucial for elections and representation, was politicized or postponed. Furthermore, in the absence of binding international oversight or credible guarantors with enforcement authority, external actors were often relegated to issuing statements of concern rather than applying leverage. This permissive environment enabled both sides to honor the CPA in form while undermining it in practice, eroding trust and weakening the agreement's legitimacy.

Moreover, third-party accountability was weak. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and external actors like the US and the UN played essential roles

in facilitating the agreement, providing diplomatic legitimacy, technical advice, and logistical support. However, their involvement diminished substantially after the CPA was signed because these actors lacked sustained political will, financial commitment, and institutional continuity to enforce the deal's implementation, their leverage being further undermined by competing interests, inconsistent messaging, and overreliance on Khartoum's cooperation for regional counterterrorism and migration controls (Dagne, 2011; Young, 2012).

As a result, these international guarantors struggled to put forward a coordinated and effective strategy for the period after the agreement was signed. IGAD, for example, was hindered by divisions within its own membership; each member state had to juggle its relationship with Khartoum alongside its domestic political priorities, which made it difficult for the organization to apply consistent or unified pressure (Large & Golooba-Mutebi, 2016; Brosché & Höglund, 2011). The UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS), which was supposed to oversee security arrangements and help support the development of new state institutions, faced persistent challenges as well. It was chronically under-resourced and forced to respond to multiple crises at once—most notably the escalating violence in Darfur—leaving it overstretched and unable to fully concentrate on the CPA's core objectives. Western governments, meanwhile, frequently allowed immediate security priorities to overshadow concerns about human rights and democratic reform. Issues such as Sudan's cooperation on counterterrorism and the management of refugee flows often took precedence, which in practice gave Bashir's regime considerable leeway and contributed to a climate of impunity for electoral abuses and human rights violations. Moreover, the rotating nature of leadership in donor capitals meant that diplomatic engagement lacked continuity. New administrations in Washington or London recalibrated priorities, sometimes reducing funding or shifting focus to other global hotspots. Without consistent high-level advocacy, neither the NCP nor the SPLM felt compelled to honor contentious provisions - be it equitable integration of armed forces, transparent oil revenue accounting, or constitutional reforms.

In the absence of credible enforcement mechanisms, such as sanctions, structured mediation teams, or joint monitoring bodies with real authority, international actors resorted to public statements, exhortations, and ad hoc commissions. These symbolic gestures had little deterrent effect. The CPA thus devolved into a political pact between two armed elites, who perceived the agreement more as a tactical ceasefire and power-sharing mechanism than a genuine framework for societal transformation. Elite interests were secured, but deeper issues of governance, justice, and inclusion remained unaddressed, sowing the seeds for future breakdown.

The agreement's overreliance on elite-level negotiations effectively excluded civil society, traditional authorities, women's groups, youth organizations, and other marginalized populations from shaping the post-conflict order. This exclusionary approach prioritized swift consensus among armed elites but neglected the diverse social fabric of Sudan and South Sudan. As a result, key constituencies such as internally displaced persons, pastoralist

communities in borderlands, and minority ethnic groups in contested areas like Abyei and Southern Kordofan had no formal avenue to express grievances or influence institutional design. In this regard, I already stated that stated that peace agreements lacking broad-based participation often embed latent fault lines, as marginalized actors remain outside official power structures (Sandu, 2012). Without mechanisms for community-level consultation, traditional dispute resolution systems were sidelined, and women's roles in reconciliation and grassroots governance were largely ignored despite their significant contributions during wartime mediation. This top-down model also undermined the legitimacy of transitional institutions, as local stakeholders viewed them as imposed rather than reflective of shared interests.

Furthermore, the absence of quotas or consultative bodies for non-elite participants meant that legal and constitutional drafting processes were confined to a small cadre of technocrats and military representatives. Consequently, the resulting frameworks failed to incorporate customary land rights, gender-sensitive provisions, or minority language protections, exacerbating distrust. As subsequent local and state elections unfolded, low voter turnout and sporadic protests signaled that many communities felt alienated from the political project the CPA purported to launch. In essence, by sidelining civil society and other non-elite groups, the CPA entrenched a narrow elite bargain and missed the opportunity to forge a more inclusive social contract—one capable of addressing the multifaceted dimensions of identity, resource sharing, and justice necessary for durable peace.

The CPA envisioned a dual-state solution under a unity-with-choice model: the South was granted autonomy through the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), while remaining part of a federal Sudanese state during the six-year interim period (CPA, 2005; LeRiche & Arnold, 2016). In theory, this arrangement would allowed for peaceful coexistence and capacity-building before the 2011 referendum. In practice, it created overlapping and often contradictory institutions, generating confusion and rivalry between Juba and Khartoum. Instead of fostering cooperation, the interim period became a zero-sum contest over resources, legitimacy, and military power, the NCP retaining *de facto* control over oil infrastructure, while SPLM leveraged oil wealth for rapid militarization. In the same time, each side fortified its own administrative apparatus without building mechanisms for integration or reconciliation, the promised "making unity attractive" clause of the CPA being largely ignored, as neither party invested in the shared governance structures required to sustain a united Sudan.

Historically, the CPA was considered a monumental political achievement, but it was not a transformative social contract because it frizzed the conflict without dismantling its drivers: ethnic polarization, resource asymmetry, and center-periphery marginalization. In essence, the CPA was a short-term fix dressed as a long-term solution, it provided a necessary breathing space after decades of bloodshed but failed to lay the foundation for sustainable peace.

By focusing on the North-South divide and neglecting other marginalized regions, such as Darfur, Eastern Sudan, and the Nuba Mountains, the CPA reproduced the very grievances it sought to overcome.

South Sudan:
From Independence to Internal Collapse

The declaration of independence in July 2011 marked a historic moment, celebrated as the culmination of decades-long struggle for self-determination. The international community welcomed the birth of South Sudan with diplomatic recognition, generous aid pledges, and strong support for peacebuilding but the euphoria masked deep structural vulnerabilities inherited from a protracted civil war: militarized politics, underdeveloped institutions, and profound ethnic fragmentation.

Within just two years, internal political rivalries erupted into full-scale civil war. The December 2013 power struggle between President Salva Kiir, of the Dinka ethnic group, and Vice President Riek Machar, a prominent Nuer leader, quickly morphed into ethnically driven massacres, particularly in Juba, Bor, Bentiu, and Malakal. These atrocities were not merely spontaneous outbreaks of violence, but manifestations of long-simmering ethnic grievances, historical power imbalances, and deep-seated mistrust between communities. Since the SPLA's early formation during the Second Civil War, tensions between the Dinka and Nuer factions had been managed rather than resolved, often suppressed under the military hierarchy of the liberation movement. The SPLM's post-independence political structure failed to address these cleavages, instead reinforcing them through ethicized appointments, exclusive patronage networks, and uneven development (Horowitz, 1985; Roethke, 2011).

When the 2013 political rift occurred, these unresolved tensions were easily mobilized into violence. In Juba, the massacre of hundreds of Nuer civilians by elements of the presidential guard was carried out with coordination and planning, according to reports by the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan (2014). Similarly, reprisal attacks by Nuer militias in Bentiu and Bor involved the targeting of Dinka civilians and foreign nationals, including within churches, hospitals, and UN compounds, all actions that went beyond spontaneous violence and suggested political orchestration aimed at terrorizing and destabilizing opponents.

The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the African Union Commission of Inquiry (2015) concluded that both government and opposition forces engaged in systematic acts that may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, including widespread killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement. These findings underscore that the conflict blurred the line between civil war and ethnic cleansing, as violence was often pursued not just to defeat adversaries militarily, but to remove entire communities

from contested areas. In this context, ethnic identity became a proxy for political allegiance, and civilians bore the brunt of militarized factionalism rooted in the failures of nation-building and inclusive governance.

According to UN estimates, the conflict claimed more than 400,000 lives between 2013 and 2018, displacing over 2 million internally and forcing another 2.3 million into exile across Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sudan. The scale of violence, particularly its civilian toll, underscored the complete breakdown of state authority and the failure of the SPLM-led government to provide security or uphold basic norms of governance.

Beyond elite rivalries, the root causes of collapse lay in the SPLM's failure to evolve from a liberation movement into a functional governing party. The party's internal hierarchy remained largely shaped by wartime command structures, where loyalty to former commanders often superseded institutional norms or meritocratic advancement (de Waal, 2014). This entrenched a system of militarized patronage in which political authority was fused with military rank, eroding the distinction between civil service and command chains. The SPLM's internal elections were manipulated to consolidate power, Salva Kiir's 2013 changes to delegate selection rules marginalized dissenting voices and entrenched his control over party machinery (International Crisis Group, 2014). State institutions were hollowed out by patronage networks, dominated by generals and ethnic allies, especially from Kiir's Dinka community. Governance was militarized, with key ministries and agencies staffed based on wartime loyalties. These dynamics fed massive corruption. For example, the 2007 Auditor-General's report identified over $114 million in oil revenue unaccounted for, enough, it noted, to import 3.800 tractors (Patey, 2017). In the notorious dura saga of 2008, over $2 billion was allocated to bogus grain storage contracts, but most of the infrastructure was never built (The Sudd Institute, 2014).

Related to the above, public finance lacked transparency, and military payrolls were inflated with ghost soldiers, a common strategy for diverting salaries to political patrons (de Waal, 2014). The resulting economic dysfunction disproportionately affected oil-producing regions, where public services remained absent despite billions in extractive revenue flowing through Juba (Johnson, 2016). According to UNDP and the World Bank, over 75% of oil revenue was absorbed by security spending between 2011 and 2015, while rural infrastructure and health services were left to international NGOs (World Bank, 2017).

This structural fragility was compounded by a political culture of exclusion, where dissent was treated not merely as opposition but as treasonous defiance. Internal critics of government policy, particularly those outside the Dinka elite or SPLM mainstream, were harassed, arrested, or marginalized from political discourse. Public discourse was tightly controlled; media outlets faced censorship, while journalists and activists were routinely detained without charge or disappeared (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Local governance, instead of being an arena for participatory decision-making, was often co-opted by former military officers or warlords who used local offices as platforms to sustain patronage, extort resources, or mobilize armed youth. This elite capture of

subnational administration disrupted traditional authority structures and curtailed the role of chiefs and elders in conflict mediation, roles which had been vital during the civil war era (Leonardi et al., 2010). Due to this context, civil society organizations and independent media operated under constant threat. NGOs were subjected to bureaucratic obstruction and surveillance and their staff were threatened for exposing corruption or human rights abuses. This created a chilling effect that silenced local civic engagement and disconnected peacebuilding initiatives from grassroots constituencies.

These dynamics significantly exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions. Exclusion and repression fueled perceptions among marginalized groups that political change could only come through violence. For example, many Nuer youth joined armed opposition groups not merely in allegiance to Riek Machar, but in reaction to systemic exclusion and targeted violence against their communities. The result was the collapse of any social contract between the state and its citizens. Trust in state institutions plummeted, especially among non-Dinka populations, who came to view the government not as a neutral arbiter, but as a partisan actor. This legitimacy crisis was compounded by the absence of basic services, as state presence in many rural areas was associated solely with security crackdowns or elite resource extraction.

Unfortunately, South Sudan's descent into war was a foreseeable outcome of a political system constructed on exclusion, militarism, and unaccountable leadership. Without mechanisms for inclusive governance, accountability, and civic participation, violence became the default language of political expression.

Even the peace agreements, namely the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) and its 2018 Revitalized version were shaped by regional and international mediators largely on dividing power among elites rather than addressing grievances of war-affected communities. Provisions such as the unification of armed forces, transitional justice, and federal restructuring were poorly implemented or indefinitely delayed.

By 2025, the peace process has deteriorated further. Riek Machar was arrested in early 2025, accused of conspiring against the unity government, armed groups splintered, and violence has surged in Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity States. Government control in many regions is nominal at best, with humanitarian actors often the only visible authority.

The humanitarian crisis is severe, with more than 9.4 million people, over 75% of the population, requiring assistance. Food insecurity affects 7 million South Sudanese, with multiple regions being on the edge of famine. In addition, over 800,000 Sudanese refugees have entered South Sudan since 2023, fleeing the northern war, their presence intensifying he pressure on resources and inflaming intercommunal tensions in host communities.

Sudan:
Civil War and State Fragmentation Post-2011

The secession of South Sudan in 2011 was both a diplomatic triumph and a critical rupture in Sudan's political economy. It deprived Sudan of nearly 75% of its oil revenue (Patey, 2017), destabilizing the foundation on which the Khartoum regime had long sustained its patronage networks. In the immediate aftermath, the Sudanese government, under President Omar al-Bashir, turned increasingly inward, consolidating control through repression rather than reform. The promised democratic transitions under the post-Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) roadmap were shelved, while the National Congress Party (NCP) deepened its militarized governance model.

This post-secession fragility laid the groundwork for Sudan's current crisis. The military institutions that underpinned the Bashir regime, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), grew into rival centers of power. Originally formed from the Janjaweed militias implicated in the Darfur genocide, the RSF was institutionalized to suppress peripheral dissent but evolved into an autonomous actor with its own foreign sponsors, economic interests, and political ambitions (Tubiana, 2017). The SAF, by contrast, retained formal national legitimacy but struggled to reform its command structures or secure the loyalty of non-Arab regions.

The collapse of the transitional government in 2021, followed by full-scale war between SAF and RSF in 2023, was, as in the case of South Sudan, the culmination of decades of exclusionary politics, uneven development, and security-sector fragmentation (International Crisis Group, 2023).

By 2025, as Sudan entered its third year of war, the country had descended into a profound humanitarian disaster and a near-total political collapse. UN officials now describe the situation as the "*largest and most devastating humanitarian crisis*" in the world with around 25 million people, more than half of Sudan's population, requiring urgent assistance, and well over 150.000 people being killed (Vision of Humanity, 2025). Khartoum, the capital, along with El Fasher, has been transformed into a largely deserted battlefield. The state itself has crumbled, ministries no longer function, courts stand empty, and national archives are abandoned or destroyed. In reality, the authority of the central government has been replaced by competing armed groups. Experts describe this moment as a slow and painful unravelling of the Sudanese state, a process in which basic functions like tax collection, public services, or even security are no longer provided by any national institutions but by militias, informal networks, and local strongmen. Analysts emphasize that this isn't a temporary breakdown but a deeper structural shift in how power operates across the country. As one Sudanese observer remarked, the capital was now "ruled by the power of arms", with new centers of authority emerging in the vacuum. RSF commanders, former rebel leaders, tribal sheikhs, and other local figures have stepped in to govern where the state once stood (Sudan Media Forum, 2025).

The current war emerged from a power struggle that had been simmering within Sudan's former ruling system for years. After the 2019 revolution removed President Omar al-Bashir from power, the country entered a fragile transition shared between civilian leaders and the military. That arrangement collapsed in 2021 when the army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) joined together to stage a coup. But the alliance was short-lived, by April 2023, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF, commanded by General Hemedti, turning their weapons on each other. This split did not come out of nowhere but it was rooted in Sudan's long history of unequal power. Since independence, governments dominated by Nile-valley elites repeatedly sidelined the country's peripheral regions. As Horner (2025) explains, the secession of South Sudan in 2011, taking with it roughly 85% of Sudan's oil wealth, left the Sudanese state financially drained and increasingly dependent on coercive force. Earlier conflicts in Darfur had already weakened national authority, and Bashir's strategy of empowering the RSF was meant to counterbalance his own army so when the transitional political deal fell apart, these two armed factions, each with its own foreign backers, economic networks, and ambitions, quickly moved from political rivalry to open war, dragging the entire country into the conflict.

Sudan is now, in practice, carved into rival territories controlled by competing forces. In the early months of the war, the RSF seized most of Khartoum, pushing the national army south and east. By the end of 2023, the RSF had expanded its control across almost all of Darfur and parts of Kordofan and Blue Nile (Fenton-Harvey, 2025). It later announced its own "Government of Peace and Unity" to run these areas, collecting "protection" fees, appointing local administrators, and functioning in ways that resemble the governance structures seen in failed states like Somalia (Aljazeera, 2025).

The SAF, though significantly weakened, has maintained its grip on the east and northeast. It recaptured the strategic city of Wad Madani in Gezira State in January 2025 and has fortified its presence around Port Sudan on the Red Sea. Port Sudan now serves as a de facto capital for the army-backed government, where national ministries operate in exile.

Other groups have also carved out their own spheres of influence. Splinter factions from former rebel movements, some of which signed the Juba Peace Agreement, still control sections of Darfur and Kordofan. In other areas, tribal leaders have revived traditional authorities to fill the vacuum left by collapsing state institutions.

Taken together, these overlapping zones of control mean that Sudan effectively no longer has a single functioning government. Instead, a patchwork of armed groups and local authorities govern different parts of the country, each exercising de facto power in their own territories.

Humanitarian Impact and Service Collapse

The human cost of the war is overwhelming. By mid-2025, an estimated 12–14 million people had been displaced, roughly one in every four Sudanese. Millions have crossed borders into Chad, Egypt, South Sudan, and other neighboring countries, placing enormous pressure on already fragile systems. Inside Sudan, the destruction of basic services has been catastrophic. UN and NGO assessments indicate that 70–80% of hospitals in active conflict zones are no longer functioning. In Khartoum and other besieged cities, targeted attacks on clinics, including a deadly drone strike on Daman Hospital, and the rapid spread of cholera highlight the total collapse of public health infrastructure (Hudson & Strucke, 2024; Washington Centre, 2025).

Food insecurity has reached devastating levels. With major supply routes cut off and local production disrupted, farms and markets have ground to a halt. By late 2024, around 8.5 million people, most of them living in RSF-held areas, were facing emergency levels of hunger. Humanitarian agencies report that famine-like conditions are already affecting hundreds of thousands of children. Overall, nearly half of Sudan's 50 million people now require life-saving assistance (Hudson & Strucke, 2024). In essence, the war has wiped out decades of development gains. Water and sanitation systems have fallen apart, markets are empty or destroyed, schools have closed, and courts and other public institutions have stopped functioning. Everyday life for millions has been reduced to a struggle for survival.

This devastating situation reflects much deeper dynamics than a simple power struggle. The SAF frames the war as a fight to defend the "Nile Valley" order, portraying themselves as the guardians of Sudan's historical center against what they see as rebellious peripheries. In contrast, the RSF casts itself as a champion of marginalized regions, arguing that decades of neglect and exclusion have left the peripheries with no choice but to assert themselves. Both sides are haunted by fear of retribution if the other emerges victorious, a fear that has played out in the widespread looting of Khartoum by RSF-aligned militias, often interpreted as settling long-standing scores (Horner, 2025).

Yet the RSF's ambitions extend beyond short-term battlefield gains. Its Nairobi charter, unveiled in February 2025, lays out a vision for a new, decentralized, secular and inclusive Sudan. Observers remain skeptical, however, seeing the RSF's so-called "Government of Peace and Unity" largely as a strategy to legitimize a *de facto* partition of the country. Sudan today increasingly resembles a patchwork of semi-autonomous zones: Darfur under RSF control, the Nile states dominated by the army, and pockets of "liberated" territory managed by local militias or tribal elders. In this sense, the crisis has far outgrown its original trigger in 2023—the question of integrating the RSF into the national army—and now points to a broader pattern of state failure. Analysts warn that Sudan is not collapsing overnight but slowly fragmenting, as central authority erodes and localized powers fill the vacuum.

Regional and International Dimensions

Sudan's fragmentation has set off alarm bells across the region and among global powers. The war has spilled over its borders, with over a million people fleeing to Chad, Egypt, and other neighboring countries, creating severe humanitarian and political pressures. There are also fears that militias could carry the conflict across frontiers, raising tensions throughout the region. In response, the African Union and United Nations have repeatedly condemned any attempt to break up Sudan, emphasizing the importance of maintaining its territorial unity. Diplomatic relations are tense and often fraught with friction. Kenya, for example, faced criticism from Sudan's army-backed government after hosting RSF leaders for the announcement of their parallel government charter, while the United States and European Union have continuously pushed for a return to civilian-led governance (Okello, 2025).

Foreign involvement on both sides has only deepened the stalemate. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, concerned about Nile water rights and Islamist influence, have supplied military support to the SAF (Vision of Humanity, 2025). The RSF, in turn, is believed to receive backing from external factors such as Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar and the UAE, who provide funding and logistical support (Fenton-Harvey, 2025). Even larger powers like Turkey, China, and Russia are reportedly involved, selling drones and other weapons to whichever faction aligns with their strategic goals. In this way, Sudan has become not only a domestic conflict but also a proxy battlefield for broader regional and international ambitions.

This fractured reality makes any path to peace extremely difficult. While most external actors agree that a settlement must avoid partition, the warring factions themselves now openly discuss separate zones of control or dual governance. In April 2025, UN officials warned that the RSF's parallel administration could entrench divisions even further. Meanwhile, the civilian political scene is in disarray: the opposition coalition has split into pro- and anti-RSF factions, undermining a unified front for negotiation. With massive stockpiles of weapons spread across multiple actors and mutual distrust running deep, many analysts doubt that either side can achieve a decisive military victory.

Based on the above analysis, Sudan and South Sudan share several key features of state fragility:

1. Militarization of governance: In both places, political authority was fused with armed command. In Juba, the SPLM's wartime hierarchy persisted in government; in Khartoum, competing military factions assumed political primacy, undermining civilian oversight (de Waal, 2014; Johnson, 2016).
2. Elite-driven peace processes: The CPA (2005), the ARCSS (2015), and the Juba Peace Agreement (2020) prioritized deals among armed actors over inclusive societal participation. This elite-centric approach excluded women's groups, youth, and peripheral communities from shaping governance futures, creating legitimacy deficits (Sandu, 2012).

3. Patronage and resource capture: In both cases, oil revenues became instruments of elite consolidation. Sudan's loss of southern oil exposed the fragility of its fiscal structure; South Sudan's control over oil after independence led to massive corruption and inequitable distribution (Patey, 2017; World Bank, 2017).

4. Erosion of civil society: Repressive laws, arbitrary detention, and securitized development spaces marginalized civil society in both countries. Journalists, human rights defenders, and traditional leaders faced persecution or co-optation, weakening nonviolent channels of accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Leonardi et al., 2010).

Yet, the trajectories also diverge in significant ways. South Sudan's collapse occurred in the context of new state formation, where institutions were still embryonic, and national identity was contested. Its political elites, although nominally united under the SPLM, were divided along deeply entrenched ethnic and regional lines, with limited experience in bureaucratic governance. Sudan, in contrast, inherited a relatively developed bureaucratic state apparatus with a longer history of civilian governance, albeit one frequently overridden by military coups. Its fragmentation, therefore, reflects a de-institutionalization process where once-centralized authority is now diffused among warlords, tribal leaders, and foreign proxies.

Moreover, Sudan's geopolitical positioning, bordering Libya, Egypt, the Red Sea, and the Sahel, has rendered its collapse more internationalized. External actors, such as Egypt, the UAE, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, have taken sides in the SAF-RSF conflict, transforming Sudan into a regional proxy battlefield. By contrast, South Sudan's conflict, though regionally significant, has remained more insulated, with Uganda as the primary external military actor (Small Arms Survey, 2016).

The Failure of Separatism as Sustainable Resolution

Despite Sudan's 2011 split into two countries, the hoped-for peace has proved elusive. Two decades after the 2005 CPA and South Sudan's 2011 independence, violence and instability continue on both sides of the former border (Jok, 2015; Center for Preventive Action, 2025). In Sudan's case, the breakup merely shifted conflict, Darfur, Blue Nile and Kordofan insurgencies erupted and, in 2023, a new civil war erupted among competing generals. In South Sudan, the nascent state quickly plunged into ethnic warfare. Scholars note that the CPA's "winlose" terms excluded vast swaths of society, so the settlement "neither saved the unity of the country nor produced peace" (Jok, 2015). In short, separation alone did not resolve the underlying drivers of conflict; instead, old grievances and new fractures were left unaddressed.

Enduring ethnic polarization and communal conflict

Separatism did not erase ethnic divisions; if anything, it cemented them into two weak states. South Sudan's post-independence politics became polarized along tribal lines. In December 2013 fighting erupted almost immediately between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir (from the Dinka ethnic group) and those aligned with Riek Machar (predominantly Nuer), fighting over control of oil-rich Upper Nile. Ordinary civilians were targeted "along ethnic lines," spreading violence into Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile states. Meanwhile Sudan's own marginalized regions (Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, etc.) remained restive after 2011. In both new countries, elites (and "ethnopreneurs") exploited cleavages: Jok (2015) observes that when a sense of nationhood is ignored, it "becomes much easier for 'ethnopreneurs' to divide communities, making a return to open conflict more likely". In short, separation froze in place the very communal grievances and competition over resources (land, oil, identity) that sparked war in the first place.

Fragile institutions and militarized politics

Neither Sudan nor South Sudan succeeded in building strong, lasting institutions after their split. In practice, both governments remained highly personalized and patrimonial, dominated by networks of loyalty rather than formal state structures. In South Sudan, the old SPLM/A leadership simply carried over into the new state, often placing generals and close allies into key civilian positions. Analysts from BTI (2024) note that while the SPLM initially claimed to be transforming into a democratic party, in reality "the leadership of the SPLM remained largely composed of generals," with the military exercising control over nearly all branches of government. During the 2013–2016 crises, President Kiir's government replaced dozens of officials with ethnic Dinka loyalists, further blurring "the lines between the executive, legislative, and military." The result was a military-dominated state where commanders used their positions to benefit their own factions rather than the broader population.

Sudan's institutions fared only marginally better. After Bashir's fall in 2019, the Transitional Government struggled to reform the security forces, and successive agreements repeatedly failed to address the root causes of grievances (Yaw Tchie & Zabala, 2024). In both countries, the rule of law remained weak: courts were easily captured by political interests, elections were postponed again and again, and public order was enforced by patronage-driven armies rather than impartial institutions. As Jok (2015) puts it, post-war rebel leaders who became rulers treated the state as a prize of victory, entitled to its national army, top jobs, contracts, and resources, rather than as a neutral bureaucracy to serve the population.

This deep institutional fragility, combined with the constant threat of coups or factional violence, meant that neither Sudan nor South Sudan was able to achieve the stable governance necessary for lasting peace.

Resource extraction, patronage and exclusion

Both Sudan and South Sudan quickly became what some scholars call "booty states," where oil and other natural resources were used to finance patronage networks rather than national development. South Sudan, for a brief moment after independence in 2011, appeared to be prosperous as oil revenues poured into the treasury. Yet scholars note that this wealth largely became "a slush fund for patronage politics and personal enrichment that the elite squabbled over," with very little reaching ordinary citizens (Chen, McCrone, & Mozersky, 2023). The new government used its oil income to co-opt rivals and strengthen security forces, rather than diversifying the economy or funding essential public services. Hladik (n.d.) sums up South Sudan's post-independence challenges bluntly: "poor governance... tribal and ethnic tensions, [and] a power structure of nepotism and clientelism".

Sudan followed a similar path. After losing most of its oil to the south, Khartoum turned to other extractive resources, including gold mining and large-scale land acquisitions in peripheral regions. In both countries, elites neglected state-building in favor of extraction. Schools, roads, and healthcare systems remained underfunded or abandoned. Easy access to resource rents fueled winner-take-all politics in both capitals, and patronage networks were often built along ethnic lines, entrenching certain groups in the army while others dominated civilian bureaucracy, which only deepened national divides. By 2013–2015, analysts were warning that local communities in both Sudans felt largely excluded from the benefits of independence, as wealth remained concentrated in the hands of a small ruling elite.

Elite-centric peacebuilding and the unfulfilled promise of peace

Finally, the peace mechanisms created by the CPA and later agreements never evolved into genuine, society-wide peacebuilding efforts. They were, at their core, bargains struck among political and military elites. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 is often celebrated for ending Africa's longest civil war, but its architecture revolved almost entirely around the SPLM and the Khartoum government dividing power, posts, and revenue. Ordinary people's demands, like justice for atrocities, truth-telling, reconciliation between communities shattered by decades of violence, barely made it into the text.

As Jok (2015) puts it, many African peace deals "rely too heavily on political agreements between politico-military elites", reducing peace to an exchange of "power and resource-sharing arrangements". Sudan's experience reflected this pattern almost perfectly. The CPA included a commitment to wider inclusivity, but this ambition was overshadowed by the urgency of managing elite rivalries. Local grievances, whether about land, displacement, or militia abuses, were never addressed in a sustained way. The result was a peace that looked solid on paper but hollow in practice.

South Sudan followed a similar trajectory after independence. The 2015 and 2018 revitalized agreements promised unity governments and power-sharing formulas, but these

arrangements repeatedly collapsed. Ceasefires were signed only to be broken within weeks. Key reforms like security sector unification, constitutional drafting, or land restitution were endlessly delayed or selectively implemented. For many citizens, these deals felt like political theater: elite factions reshuffling ministerial seats while life in towns and villages remained insecure, impoverished, and traumatized.

People quickly learned that peace agreements did not guarantee safety. When communities feel that justice is absent, when perpetrators keep their positions, and when promised reforms never materialize, public trust erodes and when this happens, even a single spark (an assassination, a disputed appointment, a local clash) can drag the country back into violence.

In both Sudans, the institutions created after the CPA (transitional parliaments, joint commissions, interim constitutions) failed to become guardians of the peace. Instead of embedding predictable rules or building a sense of shared national belonging, they became arenas for elite contestation. The promise of the CPA, that peace could be institutionalized and made resilient, never took root.

Today, both Sudan and South Sudan remain trapped in cycles of elite bargaining, where deals are struck at the top but fail to transform life at the bottom. Secession and renewed agreements were supposed to deliver reconciliation and development. Instead, they produced fragile arrangements unable to withstand the realities of mistrust, militarization, and unresolved historical grievances.

In sum, two decades after Sudan's partition, it is clear that separating the country was never a guarantee of lasting peace. Independence ended the North–South war but it did not uproot the deeper forces that had driven conflict for generations. Ethnic polarization remained sharp, political power stayed in the hands of narrow elites, and governance continued to rely on military dominance and patronage rather than inclusive institutions. In this sense, the warnings of scholars like Burton (1984) and Saideman (2001) were right: redrawing borders can stop one war, but it cannot resolve the underlying grievances that sparked it.

What unfolded after 2011 was not the creation of two new, modern states, but the rebranding of old systems. Leaders in both Khartoum and Juba simply carried forward the logics of control, favoritism, and resource extraction that had defined their wartime movements. Oil wealth, gold revenues, and political offices became tools to reward loyalists and consolidate power, not to build national unity or invest in people's lives.

The CPA had envisioned a pathway to peace, new institutions, shared governance, and transitional arrangements meant to cool tensions. But without serious reforms to ensure justice, broaden participation, and enforce accountability, those structures gradually eroded. As Englebert (2003) warned about many African transitions, the *promise of peace* must be rooted in functioning institutions. In Sudan and South Sudan, that promise was never fully anchored.

Ultimately, the experience of the two Sudans demonstrates that sustainable conflict resolution requires far more than drawing new borders. Peace demands a transformation of the social and political systems operating within those borders: institutions that protect rights, distribute resources fairly, and include citizens in shaping their own future. Without that deeper transformation, the cycle of violence is merely paused, not broken.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

Twenty years after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, its legacy is both historic and tragic. The CPA marked a major diplomatic and political achievement, ending Africa's longest civil war and facilitating South Sudan's independence. Yet, the promise of peace and its transformation into a lasting institutional framework remains unfulfilled. As this article has shown, both Sudan and South Sudan descended into renewed violence, state collapse, and humanitarian catastrophe. Their trajectories reveal the limitations of peace agreements rooted in elite bargains and underscore the structural fragilities that persisted long after the ink had dried.

Several core lessons emerge from the CPA's legacy. First, elite-level agreements are not sustainable unless they are embedded in inclusive political processes. The CPA was a pact between armed movements, not a social contract forged with citizens. As Boyle and Englebert (2008) argue, peace agreements that exclude civil society, women, youth, and traditional leaders fail to generate legitimacy and resilience. This exclusion allowed underlying communal tensions, unresolved justice claims, and institutional voids to resurface violently.

Second, the CPA illustrates the danger of mistaking separatism for structural resolution. While independence ended the North-South war, it did not dismantle the drivers of conflict—resource capture, ethnic polarization, militarized governance, and institutional weakness. Both Sudans inherited and reproduced these dysfunctions, turning post-conflict states into fragmented battlegrounds. Rather than addressing grievances through inclusive reform, elites entrenched themselves through patronage, often along ethnic lines.

Third, the CPA's collapse also stems from the premature withdrawal of international actors. The international community invested heavily in negotiating the CPA and overseeing the 2011 referendum, but failed to maintain long-term engagement afterward. As Dagne (2011) noted, international support must extend beyond symbolic moments into the difficult work of institution-building, mediation, and reform enforcement. In both countries, the absence of sustained external pressure allowed elites to delay or ignore critical benchmarks.

Fourth, the neglect of security sector reform was a fatal oversight. Both countries maintained parallel armed groups and failed to professionalize or integrate their militaries. As Laitin (2001) emphasizes, unreformed militaries not only undermine governance but often become engines of renewed violence. In Sudan, the power struggle between the SAF

and RSF erupted into full-scale civil war; in South Sudan, factionalized armed groups turned independence into an interethnic warzone.

In the end, the CPA must be remembered as both a necessary breakthrough and a cautionary tale. It ended one war but failed to institutionalize peace. It created sovereignty but did not construct legitimacy. It drew new borders but left old wounds open. If future peace efforts in Sudan, South Sudan, or comparable contexts are to succeed, they must move beyond elite-centric designs toward inclusive governance, durable institutions, and holistic approaches that address both historical injustices and contemporary grievances.

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