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Turkey: Offense-Defense Asymmetry and the Construction of Defense-Political Dependence. A Study on Drone Diplomacy

Pengpeng CAO

Abstract: The proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has democratized precision-strike capabilities, enabling middle powers to project asymmetric influence. While existing scholarship often attributes Turkey's burgeoning drone diplomacy to Neo-Ottoman ambitions or opportunistic export promotion, these frameworks primarily address strategic motivations rather than the underlying mechanisms of geopolitical success. This article argues that Turkey leverages the offense-defense asymmetry (ODA) inherent in its combat-proven drones to translate transient tactical battlefield victories into structured defense-political dependence. Employing process tracing and cross-case comparison, the study analyzes three distinct regional arenas. It demonstrates how Turkey's asymmetric interventions systematically generated an alliance-building network in the Caucasus, a resource-exchange network in Africa, and a conflict-mitigation network in the Middle East. Ultimately, this article concludes that, rather than broadly reconfiguring the macro-level regional order, Turkey has astutely exploited a technological window to alter localized balances of coercion and patterns of defense-market dependence. However, the sustainability of these diplomatic networks remains inherently constrained by significant macroeconomic vulnerabilities and normative limitations.

Keywords: Turkey, middle power, offense-defense asymmetry (ODA), drone diplomacy, structured dependence, process tracing.

Introduction

The proliferation of intelligent military technologies has profoundly recalibrated regional security dynamics and the character of contemporary warfare. Among these innovations, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)

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have emerged as a disruptive force, fundamentally altering the traditional offense–defense balance (Biddle, 2021; Horowitz & Pindyck, 2023). Empirical evidence from recent local conflicts suggests a structural shift: constructing robust defense architectures has become disproportionately complex and resource-intensive compared to acquiring offensive strike capabilities (Glaser & Kaufmann, 1998; Lieber, 2019). Consequently, the mastery and operational integration of advanced UAVs have become essential instruments for states — particularly middle powers — seeking to overcome traditional capability deficits and project asymmetric power (Gilli & Gilli, 2019; Singer, 2009).

Despite lacking the defense-industrial base of a traditional great power, Turkey has adeptly capitalized on this technological window. Through the deployment of its Bayraktar TB2 drones in active conflict zones, Ankara has demonstrated how a middle power can leverage technological innovation to achieve outsized geopolitical influence (Rossiter & Cannon, 2022). However, rather than relying on the ambiguous and overly broad concept of regional order reconfiguration, this article advances a more precise and empirically testable argument: Turkey leverages the offense-defense asymmetry (ODA) inherent in its combat-proven drones to translate transient tactical battlefield successes into structured defense-political dependence across distinct regional arenas.

This raises a central research question: How exactly does a middle power convert tactical military advantages into enduring structural influence? Existing literature frequently attributes Turkey’s assertive posture to Neo-Ottoman ambitions, the pursuit of strategic autonomy, or opportunistic defense export promotion (Kasapoğlu & Özkaraşahin, 2022; Rossiter & Cannon, 2022). While these alternative frameworks elucidate Ankara’s motivations, they fail to explain the underlying mechanisms that enable a resource-constrained middle power to achieve such outcomes. To address this gap, this study employs ODA theory and process tracing to investigate the causal dynamics driving this transformation. In this context, structured defense-political dependence is operationalized as a target state’s institutionalized reliance on Turkey for tactical strike capabilities, military training, equipment maintenance, and geopolitical backing — a reliance typically formalized through exclusive bilateral treaties or strategic resource concessions.

To substantiate this argument, the article proceeds in four parts. First, it establishes the theoretical framework of offense-defense asymmetry, demonstrating why ODA provides a superior explanatory model for Turkey’s network formation compared to alternative theories. Second, employing process tracing, it examines three distinct regional arenas — the Caucasus (Nagorno-Karabakh), Africa (Libya and Somalia), and the Middle East (the Gulf) — to illustrate how Turkey’s asymmetric interventions systematically generated three typologies of dependence: alliance-building, resource-exchange, and conflict-mitigation networks. Third, a systematic cross-case comparison is conducted to validate this causal mechanism. Finally, the article addresses the strategic vulnerabilities, security dilemmas, and paradoxes inherent in Turkey’s drone-centered diplomacy, offering a nuanced assessment of middle-power technological agency.

Theoretical Framework:

Offense-Defense Asymmetry and Middle Power Empowerment

UAVs and the shift in offense-defense asymmetry

The offense-defense balance (ODB) constitutes a foundational pillar of neorealist security studies. Originally articulated by Robert Jervis and further refined by Glaser and Kaufmann, the theory posits that the likelihood of conflict and the intensity of the security dilemma are largely contingent upon whether prevailing military technology and geography favor the attacker or the defender (Glaser & Kaufmann, 1998; Jervis, 1978). The core metric of this asymmetry is the relative cost-exchange ratio: when it is significantly cheaper to destroy an adversary's forces or seize territory than to defend against such actions, the offense holds the advantage. Historically, achieving air superiority and conducting precision strikes required prohibitive investments in manned fighter jets, advanced training, and complex logistical support, thereby inherently favoring the defense for states lacking great-power resources. However, the proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has catalyzed a structural shift in the offense-defense asymmetry (ODA), democratizing offensive airpower and disproportionately empowering middle powers (Scharre, 2018).

The Turkish Bayraktar TB2 exemplifies this offensive shift by operationalizing three critical asymmetric advantages: low cost, low observability, and integrated intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), and strike capabilities. First, the TB2 fundamentally inverts the traditional cost-exchange ratio. With a unit cost that is only a fraction of that of conventional manned aircraft or advanced surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, the loss of a drone is tactically and politically acceptable for the attacker (Kasapoğlu & Özkaraşahin, 2022). Conversely, for the defender, utilizing multimillion-dollar interceptor missiles to shoot down inexpensive drones constitutes an unsustainable form of economic attrition.

Second, the TB2 exploits the vulnerabilities of legacy air defense networks through its low observability. Characterized by a small radar cross-section (RCS), composite materials, and a slow flight speed, the TB2 is frequently filtered out by traditional Doppler radars, which are optimized to detect fast-moving, high-altitude fighter jets (Bronk & Cranny-Evans, 2020). This stealth-like characteristic grants the UAV persistent loitering capabilities over the battlefield, allowing it to operate largely undetected until the moment of engagement.

Finally, the TB2's integrated ISR-strike functionality (often termed a "hunter-killer" capability) drastically compresses the sensor-to-shooter kill chain. By combining real-time, high-definition optical targeting with precision-guided micro-munitions (such as the MAM-L), the TB2 eliminates the latency traditionally required to relay coordinates from a reconnaissance asset to a separate strike platform (Kasapoğlu & Özkaraşahin, 2022).

Consequently, traditional ground-based air defense (GBAD) systems — such as the Russian-made Pantsir-S1 and S-300 — face an insurmountable "defender's dilemma". Designed to intercept high-value, fast-moving targets, these defensive architectures are ill-equipped to counter persistent, low-observable drone operations (Bronk, 2020). Defenders are forced

to keep their radars active to detect drones, which immediately exposes their positions to anti-radiation strikes or direct UAV targeting. Thus, the TB2 not only drastically lowers the threshold and cost of offensive operations but also imposes substantial financial burdens and high operational failure rates on traditional defensive systems, firmly tilting the tactical asymmetry in favor of the attacker.

Competing theories and the explanatory superiority of ODA

Existing scholarship offers several theoretical lenses through which to interpret Turkey's assertive regional posture and its burgeoning drone exports. Prominent among these are Neo-Ottomanism, which emphasizes Ankara's ideational and historical drive to reclaim influence in former imperial territories; strategic autonomy and defense-industrial policy, which focus on Turkey's domestic imperative to reduce reliance on Western arms suppliers; and opportunistic export promotion, which views drone sales primarily as commercial transactions driven by economic pragmatism (Martins et al., 2023; Rossiter & Cannon, 2022).

While these frameworks effectively elucidate Ankara's strategic intentions and domestic drivers, they suffer from a critical explanatory deficit regarding the mechanisms through which these objectives are realized. Specifically, they fail to explain how Turkey — a middle power constrained by limited financial and conventional military resources — has succeeded in disrupting entrenched regional hierarchies often backed by great powers, such as Russia in Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus. Furthermore, theories such as opportunistic export promotion cannot account for the deep, institutionalized nature of the resulting relationships, which extend far beyond mere commercial transactions into the realm of exclusive defense pacts and geopolitical alignment.

Offense-defense asymmetry (ODA) theory provides the missing causal link between Turkey's strategic intent and its structural geopolitical outcomes. ODA is superior in explaining the formation of these networks for two fundamental reasons.

First, ODA explains the catalyst for intervention. Neo-Ottoman ambitions alone cannot alter a battlefield; rather, it was the specific asymmetric offensive advantage of the TB2 that enabled Turkey to intervene in high-intensity conflicts at a politically and economically sustainable cost (Kasapoğlu & Özkaraşahin, 2022). By neutralizing defenders' costly anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems, the UAVs provided the material capability necessary to break military stalemates.

Second, and most importantly, ODA explains the lock-in effect that generates structured defense-political dependence. Unlike the procurement of conventional firearms or unguided munitions, the integration of an advanced UAV strike complex requires a holistic ecosystem. When a target state (e.g., Azerbaijan, Libya's GNA, or Somalia) utilizes this asymmetric offensive advantage to secure its survival or achieve territorial gains, it inadvertently

becomes subject to profound path dependence (Gilli & Gilli, 2019). The continuous operation of these drones relies heavily on Turkish data links, satellite communications, proprietary munitions, software updates, and specialized operator training. Consequently, the recipient state cannot simply “buy and detach”. To maintain the asymmetric advantage that guarantees its security, the recipient is structurally compelled to align politically with Ankara by granting basing rights, resource concessions, or diplomatic backing. Thus, ODA effectively captures how a tactical technological advantage can translate into a structured, long-term political-military hierarchy.

Constructing the Causal Mechanism

Building upon the Offense-Defense Asymmetry (ODA) framework, this article constructs a four-stage causal mechanism to explain how Turkey translates transient tactical advantages into enduring geopolitical influence. This mechanism serves as the analytical template for the subsequent process-tracing case studies.

Stage 1: The Initial Condition

The process begins when a target state or faction faces an acute security crisis, an entrenched military stalemate, or an unsustainable defensive burden against a conventionally equipped adversary. In this phase, the target state lacks the indigenous capability or financial resources to overcome the adversary’s anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems or conventional ground forces.

Stage 2: Asymmetric Intervention

Turkey introduces its UAV strike complex (primarily the Bayraktar TB2) into the theater. By exploiting the low-cost, low-observability, and precision-strike attributes of the drones, the intervention abruptly shifts the local offense-defense balance. The UAVs systematically dismantle the adversary’s expensive, legacy defensive networks, enabling the target state to achieve rapid, disproportionate offensive gains with minimal casualties.

Stage 3: Operational Tethering

Following the initial battlefield success, the target state’s military apparatus undergoes a profound transformation. Having experienced the decisive efficacy of drone-enabled warfare, the recipient’s armed forces become structurally tethered to the Turkish techno-military ecosystem. Because the continuous operation of these advanced systems requires uninterrupted access to Turkish satellite data links, proprietary smart munitions, software upgrades, and specialized operator training, the recipient develops an irreversible tactical path dependence.

Stage 4: Institutionalization – Structured Defense-Political Dependence

To permanently secure this vital asymmetric advantage and guarantee continuous Turkish support, the target state is compelled to institutionalize the relationship, elevating it from a tactical procurement to a strategic alignment. Depending on the geopolitical context and the specific needs of the recipient, this structured dependence manifests in three distinct typologies:

- Alliance-Building Dependence (The Caucasus): Formalized through mutual defense pacts and deep military integration.
- Resource-Exchange Dependence (Africa): Traded for sovereign resource concessions, maritime rights, and overseas basing access.
- Conflict-Mitigation Dependence (The Middle East): Exchanged for massive capital influxes, defense co-production, and diplomatic normalization.

By tracing this four-stage causal pathway across different regional arenas, the following sections will empirically demonstrate how ODA serves as the fundamental driver of Turkey's expanding defense-diplomacy networks.

Case Studies and Process Tracing:

Constructing Dependence in Three Regional Arenas

To empirically validate the causal mechanism outlined above, this section employs process tracing across three distinct regional theaters. Each case demonstrates how Turkey utilized the offense-defense asymmetry (ODA) of its UAVs to break local stalemates, tether recipient militaries to its technological ecosystem, and ultimately institutionalize these tactical gains into structured defense-political dependence. To empirically substantiate the scale and institutionalization of these defense-political networks, Table 1 aggregates hard data from the Turkish Exporters Assembly (TIM), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI] Arms Transfers Database, and authoritative defense media, illustrating the exponential surge in Turkey's drone exports across the three regional arenas.

The Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh and “Alliance-Building” Dependence

Stage 1: The Initial Condition

Prior to the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia was characterized by a protracted, decades-long strategic stalemate. Armenian forces held a distinct “defender's advantage,” occupying heavily fortified, mountainous terrain protected by a layered, Russian-supplied air defense network comprising S-300, Osa, and Strela surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems (Shaikh & Rumbaugh, 2020). For Azerbaijan, launching a conventional mechanized ground offensive against these

Table 1: Empirical Indicators of Turkey's Defense Export Surges and Major UAV Contracts (2020–2023)

Regional Arena (Recipient)	Timeframe / Key Event	Export Volume / Contract Value	Key Platforms Transferred	Primary Sources
The Caucasus (Azerbaijan)	2019 vs. 2020 (Pre-Karabakh War)	Surged from 261 million (2020). (Note: \$77 million recorded in Sept 2020 alone).	Bayraktar TB2, MAM-L precision-guided munitions	Turkish Exporters Assembly (TIM); SIPRI Arms Transfers Database
Africa (Aggregate & Key States)	2020 vs. 2021 (Post-Libya Intervention)	Total exports to Africa skyrocketed from 460.6 million (2021). (Includes Morocco: \$70M for 13 TB2s; Ethiopia: \$51M surge).	Bayraktar TB2	Turkish Exporters Assembly (TIM); Defense News (Bekdil, 2023)
The Middle East (UAE)	2022	Estimated \$2 billion contract for 120 drones.	Bayraktar TB2	Coskun (2022)
The Middle East (Saudi Arabia)	July 2023	Estimated >\$3 billion. (Described as the largest single defense export contract in Turkish history).	Akinci UCAV (Heavy Combat Drone)	Uppal & Saba (2023)

entrenched positions would have entailed prohibitive casualty rates and massive attrition of armor, rendering the cost of an offensive operation politically and militarily unsustainable.

Stage 2: Asymmetric Intervention

The introduction of Turkish Bayraktar TB2s into the Azerbaijani arsenal fundamentally inverted this offense-defense balance. During the 44-day conflict in late 2020, the TB2s exploited their low radar cross-section to operate above and around the engagement envelopes of Armenia's legacy SAMs. In a textbook application of ODA, the drones first executed a systematic Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD) campaign, neutralizing the expensive S-300 batteries and early-warning radars with cheap, precision-guided MAM-L micro-munitions (Hwang & Song, 2022). Once the airspace was uncontested, the TB2s systematically dismantled Armenian armored columns, artillery positions, and logistical supply lines. The asymmetric cost-exchange ratio was stark: inexpensive Turkish drones decimated hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of heavy conventional military hardware, enabling rapid Azerbaijani territorial advances with minimal ground casualties.

Stage 3: Operational Tethering

Azerbaijan's decisive victory catalyzed a paradigm shift in its military doctrine, transitioning from a Soviet-legacy mechanized force to a network-centric, drone-enabled military. However, this newly acquired regional dominance was not self-sustaining. The operational

efficacy of the TB2 fleet required continuous integration with Turkish military intelligence, satellite data links, proprietary munitions resupply, and ongoing tactical guidance from embedded Turkish military advisors (Rossiter & Cannon, 2022). Consequently, the Azerbaijani Armed Forces became structurally tethered to the Turkish defense-industrial ecosystem. Baku realized that maintaining its deterrence against potential Armenian revanchism or Russian coercion necessitated permanent access to Turkey's asymmetric technological support.

Stage 4: Structured Defense-Political Dependence

To lock in this vital technological and tactical advantage, Azerbaijan moved to institutionalize its reliance on Ankara, elevating the relationship from a transactional arms-buyer dynamic to a formal geopolitical alliance. This structured dependence culminated in the signing of the Shusha Declaration in June 2021. The treaty explicitly established a mutual defense pact, mandated the deep integration of their respective defense industries, and synchronized their military command structures through joint training and interoperability protocols (Cornell, 2025). Through the Shusha Declaration, Turkey successfully translated the transient tactical asymmetry provided by the TB2 into an enduring, "alliance-building" defense-political dependence, thereby permanently projecting its strategic influence into the South Caucasus and securing a vital corridor to Central Asia.

Africa: Libya and Somalia as Cases of "Resource-Exchange" Dependence

Stage 1: The Initial Condition (Strategic Vulnerability)

In the African theater, Turkey's drone diplomacy has primarily engaged state actors grappling with severe internal fragmentation and protracted insurgencies. By 2019, Libya's UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) was besieged in Tripoli by the Libyan National Army (LNA). The LNA maintained a distinct tactical advantage, supported by foreign-supplied combat drones and Russian Pantsir-S1 air defense systems, which rendered the GNA's conventional defensive operations highly costly and increasingly untenable (Coşkun, 2024). Similarly, in the Horn of Africa, the Somali Federal Government faced a persistent threat from Al-Shabaab. Mogadishu struggled to project state authority beyond urban centers, as conventional ground offensives in hostile, expansive terrain incurred substantial logistical burdens and high casualty rates (Hwang & Song, 2022).

Stage 2: Asymmetric Intervention (Altering the Cost-Exchange Ratio)

The introduction of Turkish UAVs provided these fragile governments with a comparatively accessible means to alter the local cost-exchange ratio. In Libya, the deployment of Bayraktar TB2s — often operating in conjunction with electronic warfare systems — managed to

degrade the LNA's Pantsir-S1 batteries. By neutralizing the adversary's localized air cover, the UAVs significantly alleviated the siege of Tripoli and shifted the tactical momentum in favor of the GNA (Bronk, 2020). In Somalia, the integration of Turkish drones afforded federal forces persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) alongside precision strike capabilities. This technological infusion lowered the threshold for counter-insurgency operations, allowing Somali forces to target militant strongholds with reduced reliance on vulnerable ground convoys (Coşkun, 2024).

Stage 3: Operational Tethering (Sustaining the Advantage)

While UAVs provided immediate tactical relief, they also generated a structural reliance. Neither the GNA nor the Somali federal forces possessed the indigenous defense-industrial base required to maintain, repair, or independently operate these advanced systems over the long term. Sustaining this newly acquired offensive capability necessitated continuous technical support, munitions supply, and operational training from Ankara. For instance, Turkey's establishment of Camp TURKSOM in Mogadishu served not only as a training facility but also as a logistical hub that deeply embedded Turkish military standards within the Somali armed forces (Hwang & Song, 2022). Consequently, what began as short-term military assistance gradually evolved into a medium-to-long-term operational dependency.

Stage 4: Resource-Exchange Dependence (Resource-Exchange Dependence)

To secure uninterrupted access to this vital security provision, these governments were incentivized to formalize their alignment with Ankara through strategic concessions, thereby institutionalizing a "resource-exchange" dependence. In Libya, the urgent need for Turkish military support catalyzed the signing of the November 2019 security and maritime boundary memorandums of understanding (MoUs). These agreements not only formalized defense cooperation but also controversially expanded Turkey's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claims in the Eastern Mediterranean (Coşkun, 2024). A similar dynamic unfolded in Somalia, culminating in the 2024 Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement. Under this framework, Turkey committed to rebuilding the Somali navy and securing its coastline; in exchange, Ankara reportedly gained significant maritime access and a prospective share in the exploitation of Somalia's offshore hydrocarbon resources (Hamit, 2024). Through these mechanisms, Turkey effectively translated the tactical utility of its UAVs into tangible geopolitical and economic footholds on the African continent (Bekdil, 2023).

This resource-exchange model was a structural necessity rather than a diplomatic choice. Lacking the financial liquidity of the Gulf states or the institutional capacity of Azerbaijan, fragile regimes in Tripoli and Mogadishu had no alternative currency but to trade sovereign territorial and maritime concessions in exchange for regime survival.

The Middle East: Gulf States and “Conflict-Mitigation” Dependence

Stage 1: The Initial Condition (The Defender’s Economic Dilemma)

Unlike the fragile states in Africa or the conventional military stalemate in the Caucasus, the wealthy Gulf monarchies — particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — faced a distinct manifestation of the offense-defense asymmetry. Despite possessing some of the world’s most heavily funded militaries equipped with advanced Western Ground-Based Air Defense (GBAD) systems (such as the Patriot and THAAD), these states found themselves acutely vulnerable to asymmetric aerial threats. The 2019 attacks on Saudi Aramco’s Abqaiq and Khurais facilities by low-flying, low-cost loitering munitions and UAVs starkly illustrated this vulnerability (Jones et al., 2021). The Gulf states were trapped in an extreme “defender’s economic dilemma”: utilizing multi-million-dollar interceptor missiles to neutralize cheap, Iranian-backed asymmetric threats was financially unsustainable and tactically inefficient, eroding their regional deterrence.

Stage 2: Asymmetric Capability Transfer (Restoring Deterrence)

Recognizing the limitations of legacy defensive architectures, Gulf states sought to acquire their own advanced UAV strike complexes to implement a “cost-imposition” strategy against regional adversaries. Turkey’s demonstration of drone efficacy in Syria, Libya, and Karabakh served as a powerful catalyst. Rather than direct military intervention, Turkey’s role in the Middle East theater manifested as the transfer of asymmetric offensive capabilities. By offering advanced platforms like the Bayraktar TB2 and the heavier, high-altitude Akinci Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV), Ankara provided Riyadh and Abu Dhabi with the means to conduct persistent ISR and precision preemptive strikes. This capability allowed the Gulf states to project power and mitigate asymmetric threats at a fraction of the cost of utilizing their conventional manned air forces, thereby recalibrating the local cost-exchange ratio in their favor (Hwang & Song, 2022).

Stage 3: Operational Tethering (The Illusion of Autonomy)

A critical distinction in the Gulf network is the recipients’ demand for strategic autonomy through technology transfer and local co-production. However, the nature of modern drone warfare ensures that operational tethering persists even with localized manufacturing. While the 2023 agreements included provisions for joint production, the core architecture of the Turkish UAV ecosystem — comprising proprietary source codes, encrypted satellite data links, advanced avionics, and specialized smart munitions (such as those manufactured by Roketsan) — remains firmly under Ankara’s control. Consequently, the Gulf states’ newly acquired asymmetric deterrent capacity is structurally bound to Turkey’s defense-industrial base. This technological lock-in ensures that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi cannot easily decouple their drone operations from Turkish strategic consent, creating a profound, albeit sophisticated, path dependence.

Stage 4: Institutionalization (Conflict-Mitigation Dependence)

To secure these critical defense technologies, the Gulf states were compelled to institutionalize their relationship with Turkey. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's multi-billion-dollar acquisition of Turkish UAVs is not merely an opportunistic commercial procurement; rather, it is a strategic imperative designed to compensate for the inherent vulnerabilities of Western air defense systems against asymmetric threats. Furthermore, this dynamic must be contextualized within the Gulf states' broader hedging strategy. Amid perceived U.S. retrenchment from the Middle East, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi utilize this "dependence" on Ankara as a calculated mechanism for strategic diversification, deliberately reducing their singular reliance on Washington for security guarantees (Altunışık, 2008). This dynamic catalyzed a broader geopolitical realignment, transforming the post-2017 regional rivalry into a pragmatic "conflict-mitigation" dependence. In July 2023, Saudi Arabia signed a historic contract for Akinci UCAVs, estimated at over \$3 billion. In exchange for providing this asymmetric security umbrella, Turkey secured massive economic lifelines — including billions in currency swaps and direct foreign investments — which were vital for stabilizing its fragile economy (Saudi Bayraktar Akinci, 2024). Thus, the tactical utility of Turkish drones was successfully institutionalized into a reciprocal geopolitical alignment, binding the security hedging needs of the Gulf to the economic imperatives of Ankara.

Cross-Case Comparison and Strategic Constraints

Cross-Case Comparison of Causal Mechanisms

The preceding process-tracing analysis demonstrates that Turkey's drone diplomacy is not a monolithic strategy, but rather a highly adaptable mechanism conditioned by the specific strategic environments of the recipient states. While the independent variable — the Offense-Defense Asymmetry (ODA) provided by Turkish UAVs — remains constant, the resulting dependent variable (the typology of structured dependence) varies systematically based on the target state's initial vulnerabilities and resource endowments.

A comparative synthesis reveals distinct causal pathways. In the Caucasus, Azerbaijan possessed sufficient financial resources but faced a conventional military stalemate against entrenched Armenian defenses. Consequently, the ODA intervention catalyzed a direct military victory, which was subsequently institutionalized into an "alliance-building" dependence, characterized by formal mutual defense pacts (the Shusha Declaration) and deep doctrinal integration.

It is crucial to note that these three typologies are not the product of a pre-determined, rigid grand strategy by Ankara. Rather, they are emergent properties shaped by the varying initial vulnerabilities and resource endowments of the recipient states. Conversely, in Africa, fragile governments in Libya and Somalia lacked both military capacity and financial liquidity, facing existential threats from non-state armed groups or rival factions.

Here, Turkish UAVs provided critical regime survival capabilities. Unable to pay for this security umbrella with capital, these states institutionalized their dependence through sovereign “resource-exchange”, granting Ankara maritime jurisdiction (EEZ agreements) and overseas basing rights.

Finally, in the Middle East, wealthy Gulf monarchies faced an entirely different dilemma: extreme vulnerability to cheap, asymmetric aerial threats despite possessing advanced Western air defenses. Turkey’s intervention in this theater involved the transfer of asymmetric capabilities to restore local deterrence. In exchange, the Gulf states utilized their vast financial reserves to institutionalize a “conflict-mitigation” dependence, providing Turkey with vital macroeconomic lifelines (currency swaps and investments) while securing technology transfers. As summarized in Table 2, the comparative synthesis reveals distinct causal pathways.

Table 2: Cross-Case Comparison of Turkey’s Drone Diplomacy and the Construction of Structured Dependence

Regional Arena (Case)	Stage 1: Initial Condition (Strategic Vulnerability)	Stage 2: Intervention Type (Applying ODA)	Stage 3: Tethering Mechanism (Operational Lock-in)
The Caucasus (<i>Nagorno-Karabakh</i>)	Conventional Stalemate: Entrenched Armenian defenses (S-300, heavy armor); prohibitive costs for conventional ground offensives.	Direct Asymmetric Intervention: Systematic SEAD campaigns and rapid destruction of legacy defensive networks via TB2s.	Doctrinal Shift: Transition to drone-centric warfare; absolute reliance on Turkish data links, munitions, and embedded advisors.
Africa (<i>Libya & Somalia</i>)	Regime Fragility: Internally fragmented governments facing existential threats from insurgents; lack of financial liquidity.	Tactical Relief: Neutralizing localized hostile air cover (Pantsir-S1) and providing persistent ISR to break sieges.	Logistical Dependency: Lack of indigenous defense base necessitates reliance on Turkish training (Camp TURKSOM) and maintenance.
The Middle East (<i>Gulf States</i>)	Defender’s Economic Dilemma: Wealthy states with advanced Western GBAD remain highly vulnerable to cheap, asymmetric aerial threats.	Capability Transfer: Sale of advanced UCAVs (Akinci, TB2) to implement a cost-imposition strategy and restore local deterrence.	Illusion of Autonomy: Despite local co-production, structural reliance persists on Turkish proprietary source codes, encrypted links, and smart munitions.

Strategic Constraints on the Sustainability of Defense-Political Dependence

While Turkey has successfully leveraged Offense-Defense Asymmetry (ODA) to construct localized defense-political networks, the durability of these structured dependencies should not be overstated. A rigorous assessment must acknowledge the formidable strategic, normative, and domestic constraints that expose the inherent vulnerabilities of Ankara’s technological agency and threaten the long-term sustainability of these networks (Rossiter & Cannon, 2022). The fragility of this dependence stems from four primary sources.

First, the proliferation of UAVs inherently exacerbates the regional security dilemma, prompting rapid technological counter-balancing by rival powers. The initial shock value of the Bayraktar TB2 relied heavily on the unpreparedness of legacy air defense systems. However, adversaries are actively adapting (Calcara et al., 2022). In Syria and Libya, Russia has continuously upgraded its electronic warfare (EW) and counter-UAS (C-UAS) capabilities. Similarly, in Iraq, Iran-backed militias have retaliated against Turkish drone bases using their own asymmetric loitering munitions (Dalay, 2021). As counter-drone technologies mature and proliferate, the tactical ODA currently enjoyed by Turkey will inevitably narrow, directly eroding the foundational military leverage that sustains its diplomatic networks (Reuters, 2021).

Second, Turkey's drone diplomacy faces significant normative friction and supply-chain vulnerabilities. The deployment of lethal autonomous or semi-autonomous systems in highly complex conflict zones has drawn intense scrutiny from international human rights organizations and Western allies (Bode & Huelss, 2018). Accusations of civilian casualties and violations of international arms embargoes have provoked tangible diplomatic backlash. A prominent example occurred in 2020, when Canada suspended the export of critical Wescam optical sensors used in the TB2, citing their deployment in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Although Turkey accelerated its indigenous sensor development in response, such embargoes highlight the fragility of its defense-industrial base when subjected to Western normative pressure (Kurç, 2017).

Third, the structural depth of these defense-political networks is inherently bounded by the strategic agency and hedging strategies of the recipient states — most notably the wealthy Gulf monarchies. While this article characterizes the Gulf-Turkey relationship as a “conflict-mitigation dependence”, it is crucial to recognize that for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, this engagement is a deliberate exercise in strategic diversification designed to dilute their historical over-reliance on the United States (Roberts, 2020). By simultaneously procuring advanced systems from Turkey, China, and traditional Western partners, these states maintain profound strategic autonomy. Consequently, Turkey is not unilaterally “binding” these nations in a traditional hegemonic sense; rather, Ankara is operating as a highly effective, yet ultimately replaceable, node within the Gulf's broader multipolar hedging architectures (Kamrava, 2018).

Finally, the sustainability of these networks is fundamentally constrained by Turkey's own macroeconomic vulnerabilities. The “conflict-mitigation” network in the Gulf, for instance, exposes a paradox of mutual dependence: while Riyadh and Abu Dhabi rely on Turkish defense technology, Ankara is acutely dependent on Gulf capital to stabilize its inflation-ridden domestic economy (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021). This economic fragility restricts Turkey's capacity to sustain prolonged, high-intensity military deployments or offer the massive financial subsidies typically required to maintain deep, long-term geopolitical alignments (Öniş, 2019).

In conclusion, the structured defense-political dependence cultivated by Turkey is neither absolute nor permanent. While Ankara has astutely exploited a specific technological window to alter localized balances of coercion and defense market dependencies, the sustainability of these networks remains highly contingent (Uppal & Saba, 2023). They are perpetually tested by adversary technological adaptations, supply-chain fragilities, recipient states' hedging strategies, and Turkey's own macroeconomic limitations.

Conclusion

The proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has democratized precision strike capabilities, fundamentally altering the traditional offense-defense balance. This article has argued that Turkey's drone diplomacy should not be broadly and ambiguously characterized as a sweeping "reconfiguration of regional order". Instead, it represents a highly targeted, mechanism-driven process wherein transient tactical asymmetry is translated into structured defense-political dependence (Horowitz, 2020). By employing Offense-Defense Asymmetry (ODA) theory, this study bridges the critical explanatory gap between Ankara's strategic motivations and its actual mechanisms of geopolitical success.

Through rigorous process tracing across three distinct regional arenas, the analysis demonstrated how this dependence systematically materializes. In the Caucasus, direct asymmetric intervention broke a conventional military stalemate, forging an "alliance-building" network formalized by mutual defense pacts. In Africa, providing tactical relief to fragile regimes was institutionalized into a "resource-exchange" network, trading security for sovereign maritime and basing concessions. In the Middle East, the transfer of asymmetric capabilities to wealthy yet vulnerable states generated a "conflict-mitigation" network, securing vital macroeconomic lifelines for Ankara. These typologies confirm that Turkey's diplomatic networks are not arbitrary constructs, but rather systematic institutional responses to the operational tethering inherent in modern drone warfare.

Nevertheless, a rigorous assessment must acknowledge that the sustainability of these networks is inherently constrained. The rapid adaptation of adversaries through counter-UAS technologies, the normative backlash and supply-chain vulnerabilities exposed by Western embargoes, and Turkey's own macroeconomic fragility collectively delimit the boundaries of its technological agency. Ankara has not displaced the structural primacy of traditional great powers; rather, it has astutely exploited a specific technological window to alter local balances of coercion and defense market dependencies.

Ultimately, the Turkish case offers a nuanced paradigm for understanding middle-power behavior in the twenty-first century. While technological empowerment allows middle powers to disrupt established hierarchies and project asymmetric influence at a relatively low cost, enduring strategic gains require the institutionalization of tactical victories. As the drone revolution matures, the true measure of middle-power influence will depend not merely on the deployment of advanced platforms, but on the capacity to sustain

the complex defense-political ecosystems that bind recipient states to their technological patrons.

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Nagorno-Karabakh: The Transformation of the Over Thirty-Year-Long Armenia–Azerbaijan Conflict

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Abstract: The end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union marked a fundamental transformation in international politics. The South Caucasus, vacated by the Soviets, became one of the centers of international competition. Influenced by the diaspora, Armenia unilaterally declared the annexation of the Karabakh region, legally recognized as Azerbaijani territory, and altered the demographic structure of the region. A long period of violent conflict began in the region. Although ceasefires were established between the two countries, Armenia, supported by the West, sometimes violated these ceasefires. During this period, when the peoples of the world were becoming increasingly economically and socially interdependent and the importance of transnational organizations and institutions was growing, the conflict affected states in different ways. Armenia's limited economic resources and the increasing cost of continuing the struggle led to the deterioration of the country's economy and increased Russian influence. This stance resulted in

Armenia's exclusion from the East-West economic corridor. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War began in the early 2020s when Armenia, claiming the right to use force, conducted operations in Azerbaijani territories outside Karabakh. Ultimately, the war ended in favor of Azerbaijan, and Armenia responded favorably to Azerbaijan's ceasefire proposal, paving the way for a ceasefire agreement. This study evaluates the steps taken and the outcomes achieved in transforming the issue constructively toward peace after a long and destructive conflict. The importance of post-conflict transformation and its collaborative implementation is also examined.

Keywords: Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, Azerbaijan, ceasefire, conflict transformation.

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Introduction

Throughout history, the Caucasus, with its geopolitical importance, has been a battleground for regional powers. The region hosts important trade routes. These tensions have been further exacerbated by Armenians, who, with the support of Russia, have become a source of instability in the region. The occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia has been a major factor shaping regional security in the South Caucasus since the 1990s. The conflict, which escalated into armed clashes after the collapse of the Soviet Union, made the Nagorno-Karabakh issue a significant element of global politics. The Karabakh problem evolved into a conflict affecting not only Azerbaijan and Armenia but the entire region. In this context, Armenia, due to its geopolitical position in the South Caucasus, became a battleground between Russia and Western powers. However, military, economic, and political shortcomings prevented Armenia from acting as an independent state. The country appears to have tied its future to assistance expected from the diaspora and Europe.

For many years, the Minsk Group was regarded as the sole platform for resolving the conflict, yet negotiations failed to yield results. From 1994 to 2020, intermittent clashes occurred between the parties. The consequences of these conflicts were multidimensional. Due to the Karabakh issue, Armenia became isolated in the South Caucasus. Two of its neighbors, Türkiye and Azerbaijan, suspended commercial and diplomatic ties. Armenia's policies led to embargoes and border closures by its neighbors. Its already struggling economy, further damaged by the occupation of Karabakh, led the country to fall under Russian economic, political, and military influence in exchange for loans received from Russia.

Armenia's attacks on Terter on September 27, 2020, constituted a serious violation of the ceasefire agreement, and Azerbaijan's response demonstrated that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue would now be resolved on the ground. The Pashinyan administration anticipated that Azerbaijan would not retaliate against Armenian attacks. However, this expectation was not met; Russia's focus shifted westward due to the war in Ukraine, and Armenia's rapprochement with the West created favorable conditions for Azerbaijan. Following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia's acceptance of defeat and the liberation of a significant portion of the occupied territories marked the beginning of a new era between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The handshake between Aliyev and Pashinyan during the signing of the agreement strengthened their governments' and peoples' commitment to the agreements. It thus became possible to speak of a transformation of the conflict.

Conflict transformation is a reality that has existed throughout human history; however, as a field of practice, it emerged in the early 1990s. It focuses on large-scale, long-lasting, destructive conflicts and on how they can be transformed constructively (Kriesberg, 2011). Conflict transformation recognizes conflict as a normal and ongoing dynamic of human relations and seeks to expand opportunities for more peaceful and sustainable relationships between parties (Reimer & Thiessen, 2018). Many conditions can contribute to the transformation of a conflict. Even the seemingly intractable Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which lasted for nearly 30 years, can undergo

transformation. In the post-war period, the parties aim to reduce the underlying causes of the conflict and establish a lasting peaceful relationship. Third parties play an active role by helping to build bridges of understanding and facilitate dialogue. This process is not a unilateral imposition but a joint effort. The transformation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is likely to increase mutual interdependence and cooperation. In particular, the inclusion of Armenia in energy corridors and the expansion of commercial activities could make the peace environment sustainable. In this way, a period of development beneficial to both sides may emerge.

This study aims to address the Karabakh issue from past to present within a comprehensive historical framework. It examines whether the primary source of the problem lies solely with the aforementioned parties and explores the role of other possible actors that may have triggered or influenced the conflict. The study also seeks to explain how the issue evolved over the years from a bilateral dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia into a regional problem that has occupied the global agenda. Following the introduction, the study examines the causes of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the emergence of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. It then discusses the internationalization of the problem and the reasons for its prolonged unresolved status. After the section on the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the withdrawal from Karabakh, and the permanent ceasefire agreement, the study analyzes the transformation process of the conflict, the steps taken by the parties toward peace, and their impact on the region, as well as their potential benefits. The conclusion provides a general evaluation of the conflict transformation process.

The Causes of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict and the Emergence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Issue

The causes of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict have deep historical roots. The two-century-long dispute between the parties is essentially an artificial problem made in the early 18th century in line with Russia's policies regarding the region. The Armenians were actively used to implement Russia's policy of reaching warm seas, which began during the reign of Peter the Great. The demographic structure of the region was disrupted, making it problematic (Dedeyev, 2008).

Following the Iran–Russia (1826–1828) war, the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) divided Azerbaijan into two, with one part remaining in Iran and the Khanates of Yerevan and Nakhchivan being ceded to Russia. Tsarist Russia adopted a policy of settling Christian populations, particularly Armenians, from neighboring countries in the region in order to strengthen its control over Karabakh (Vaserman & Ginat, 1994; Aliyev, 2009).

The Armenian region within the Russian Tsardom became nominally independent for a short period following the collapse of the Tsarist regime. However, it was soon occupied by the Red Army. Similarly, Azerbaijan, which gained independence in June 1918 following the fall of the Tsardom, was occupied by the Red Army in 1920. In Azerbaijan, Armenians

were appointed to high-level administrative positions (Arif, 2004). Through Armenians, the Russians aimed to maintain the advantages gained during the Tsarist era in their South Caucasus policy (Jane, 2020).

Karabakh, which has been part of Azerbaijan's cultural and political unity throughout history, is the name given to the mountainous region between the Kura and Aras rivers and Lake Goycha, as well as the plains connected to this region. Its geographical location allows it to control both Armenia and Iran (Aslanlı, 2001; Yalçinkaya, 2006). Armenians, in order to realize their dream of a "Greater Armenia", sought the displacement of the local Turkic-Muslim population in Karabakh, Yerevan, Nakhchivan, and other Azerbaijani territories (Cömert, 2020). It is reported that between 1928 and 1930, 40,000 Armenians were migrated from Iran and 84,000 from Türkiye to the Caucasus. The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was officially established within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1923. The fact that the Karabakh Autonomous Region was part of the Azerbaijan SSR was confirmed in Article 24 of the 1936 Soviet Constitution (Yalçinkaya, 2006). However, in Soviet Azerbaijan, which was under Moscow's control in the 1930s, most administrative positions, especially in intelligence and security, were held by Armenians. Armenians subsequently increased in population in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region and began the Armenization of Turkic place names (Piriyev, 2002).

As it became evident that the Soviet Union was collapsing, Armenians aimed to put pressure on Azerbaijan by altering the demographic structure and took action to gain control of Nagorno-Karabakh, an autonomous region within Azerbaijan (Uçarol, 2006). In 1987, claiming that they constituted the majority of the population in Karabakh, they requested from Moscow that Karabakh be annexed to Soviet Armenia. On February 20, 1988, the Nagorno-Karabakh Local Council (without the participation of Azerbaijani members) approved the region's secession from the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic and its annexation to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (Kurbanov, 1996). Due to tensions, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR rejected the decision to separate Karabakh from Azerbaijan and annex it to Armenia (Vaserman & Ginat, 1994; Yalçinkaya, 2006). However, citing ongoing conflicts in Karabakh as justification, the Soviet administration placed the region under direct Moscow control on January 12, 1989 (İşyar, 2004). On September 23, 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR decided to return Karabakh to Azerbaijan, which had declared its independence. The Supreme Soviet of Armenia did not accept this decision and unilaterally decided to annex Karabakh to Armenia on December 1, 1989. As a result, Azerbaijanis living in Karabakh were forced to migrate.

Russia pursued policies showing support for Armenians during these events, and in response to Azerbaijan's protests, Moscow sent military units to Baku in 1990 (Aydın, 2013). Unwilling to lose control over Baku's oil fields, Russia occupied Baku in 1991, and its pressure policy forced Azerbaijan to join the Commonwealth of Independent States, regarded as the successor structure to the Soviet Union, in 1993 (Demir, 1999). The conflict took on a new dimension in 1992 when Armenia took up arms against Azerbaijan,

leading to armed conflict in the region (Yilmaz, 2010). Thanks to Moscow's tolerance, Armenia was able to establish a regular army, while Azerbaijan was unable to develop a national army (Gasimov, 1996). As a result of these events, the Karabakh issue emerged as a problem stemming from borders established in line with geopolitical objectives and artificial demographics. Because Russia did not want it to be resolved, it sometimes escalated into open conflict and at other times remained frozen.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus became open to intervention by regional and global powers. Rather than resolving the conflict, this situation contributed to greater polarization and instability in the region (Gürbüz, 2008). Due to the fact that most Armenian leaders were of Karabakh origin and because of pressure from the diaspora, the goal of annexing the Karabakh region became a central issue in the country's politics after 1990.

However, since the Armenian economy was planned according to the needs of the Soviet Union and shaped in line with Russia's requirements (Mirzakhanyan, 2005), the country was unable to develop according to its own national priorities. Russia, in order to maintain its influence in the Caucasus, retained Armenia as a strategic instrument and supported the continuation of its isolation (Minassian, 2008). Türkiye's closure of its border with Armenia due to its conflict with Azerbaijan caused the country to become further isolated in the region. Furthermore, the international embargo on Iran made Georgia Armenia's only gateway to the world. However, the South Ossetia issue between Georgia and Russia jeopardized Armenia's trade with the outside world, as 80% of its foreign trade was conducted through Georgia (Özdemir Albayrak, 2015). In short, Armenia attempted to gain an advantage in Nagorno-Karabakh by aligning its positions with the regional interests of global powers. The international community, however, did not undertake the necessary political initiative to resolve the problem. Therefore, the United States and EU countries began to exert influence over Armenia, aiming to weaken Russia's influence in the region and ensure a secure energy supply from the Caspian basin to the West.

Internationalization of the Conflict

The collapse of the Soviet Union made the Caucasus vulnerable to intervention by regional and global powers (Gürbüz, 2008). Following the independence of Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1991, the Karabakh problem emerged not as a conflict between two independent states but rather as an Azerbaijani–Russian issue. The membership of Azerbaijan and Armenia in the United Nations (UN) after independence brought the issue to international platforms. Rather than facilitating a resolution, this situation contributed to increased polarization and instability in the region. The discovery of oil and natural gas on the Caspian coast of Azerbaijan made the country's political and social stability a matter of concern for Western countries (Leckie, 2005). The administration of Mutallibov, the Azerbaijani president after independence, was forced to appeal to Western institutions to stop Armenian advances. Western institutions closely monitoring

the region considered this request, and the UN and the then-named Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) initiated efforts.

First, the UN formed and sent an investigative team to Karabakh to assess the situation. The CSCE, which sent a representative to the UN investigative team, sought to play a more active role in resolving the issue. In this context, the issue was raised at the CSCE Foreign Ministers' meeting in Helsinki on March 24, 1992, and a decision was made to hold a conference in Minsk to address the problem. The Karabakh problem, previously largely unknown to the international public, was suddenly brought to the attention of the UN and, consequently, the world. In 1992, the Minsk Group was established within the CSCE. Leading European states also became involved in the issue within the framework of the CSCE.

The fact that the countries holding co-chair status in the Minsk Group (the United States, France, and Russia) approached the Karabakh issue in line with their own national interests both left the problem unresolved and led to the passivity of the Minsk Group (Abay, 2020). However, the active involvement of Western countries in the Karabakh issue disturbed Russia, prompting a new reconciliation initiative supported by Russia and proposed by Kazakhstan. However, when diplomatic talks among the parties failed to yield concrete results, Russia brought the sides together in Sochi on September 19, 1992. At this meeting, a document was signed regarding the establishment of a temporary ceasefire and the sending of observers to the region. However, Yerevan's renewed attacks on Karabakh and Nakhchivan rendered the talks inconclusive. Subsequently, a declaration was signed at the Bush–Yeltsin meeting, leaving the Karabakh issue to the initiative of the Minsk Group (Yilmaz, 2010).

The war spread to regions surrounding Karabakh as Armenians violated the ceasefire and attempted further advances. Azerbaijan brought the active participation of Russian troops in Armenian attacks to the attention of the UN (Goltz, 1993). Azerbaijan presented evidence to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) that Russian military technology was used during the occupation. The UN Security Council condemned the occupation in Resolution 822 and demanded that it be ended (UN Digital Library, Resolution 822, 1993). On July 31, 1993, the UNSC adopted Resolution 853 on the Karabakh issue. This resolution stated that Karabakh belonged to Azerbaijan and that Armenian forces should immediately withdraw from the occupied territories. Although international pressure was exerted through Resolutions 874 and 884, Yerevan did not back down. These decisions remained declaratory, and no sanctions were imposed to enforce them.

During the period between 1988 and 1994, known as the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia occupied 20% of Azerbaijani territory (Abdullahzade, 2014). In 1994, ceasefire negotiations began through the initiatives of the Inter-Parliamentary Council of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Azerbaijan and Armenia reached an agreement through the Bishkek Protocol, agreeing on a ceasefire. This protocol stipulated that the parties would mutually observe the ceasefire and act in accordance

with the decisions of the Minsk Group and the UN Security Council (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994). During the signing of the protocol, the inclusion of an Armenian representative from Nagorno-Karabakh as a party was raised, but an Azerbaijani official objected and refused to sign the text. Later, through Russian intervention, it was decided that the protocol would be between Azerbaijan and Armenia, with representatives from Nagorno-Karabakh participating only as relevant parties, and the text was signed (Rasizade, 2011). The ceasefire between the two countries was intermittently violated. International efforts to resolve the issue peacefully yielded no results, and both the UN and the Minsk Group proved ineffective.

With the energy agreement signed in September 1994, major countries operating in this sector began to take a direct interest in the Karabakh problem. International companies investing in the region sought resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue to ensure regional stability. These countries, which were patrons of the relevant oil companies, began to take a closer interest in the Karabakh problem (Askerov, 2009). During this period, the US administration began issuing statements supporting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

At the CSCE summit held in Lisbon in 1996, a document addressing the Azerbaijan–Armenia issue included clauses demanding that Armenia recognize Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, ensure the security of the Nagorno-Karabakh population, and grant the region the right to “self-governance”. However, this document, accepted by all member states, was not accepted by Armenia. Furthermore, the UN resolution of March 14, 2008, concerning the status of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, and European Parliament Resolution 2216 of May 1, 2010, regarding the need to develop a strategy for the South Caucasus for the European Union (Yilmaz, 2010), were not effectively implemented. In 2016, the most intense clashes since 1994 were witnessed, and after four days of fighting, the parties announced a new ceasefire. In 2017, the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan met in Geneva under the auspices of the Minsk Group to begin a series of talks on a possible solution to the conflict. However, these talks again failed to yield concrete results.

Reasons for the Intractability of the Issue

Due to the pro-Armenian stance of Russia and the United States, which were influential in regional politics, and the Minsk Group's mediation efforts, which were far from a solution, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue has remained unresolved for many years. Although there were multiple reasons why the established mechanisms failed to produce results, the most significant factor was undoubtedly Russia's political approach. By freezing the issue, Russia continued to keep both Armenia and Azerbaijan under its influence, and its support for Armenia led to frequent small-scale clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The basis of Russian policy toward the Caucasus, which it considers a problematic region, was to leave the problems unresolved. On the other hand, internal political conflicts in Armenia also hindered a solution.

Russia legitimized its military presence in the region by supporting Armenians in the Azerbaijan-Armenia war (Brzezinski, 2005). However, Western states, the United States, and Azerbaijan opposed the deployment of Russian forces as peacekeepers in the region. The problem could not be resolved through diplomatic means due to Armenia's policies of intransigence. Ceasefire agreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan were repeatedly violated by Armenia. Russia's support for Armenia in the Karabakh conflict emboldened Armenian actions.

During this period, low-intensity clashes between the Armenian and Azerbaijani armies continued. From 2012 onward, the use of mortars escalated to longer-range and more destructive artillery, and eventually tanks became more prevalent (International Crisis Group, 2016). During this period, numerous civilians and soldiers lost their lives due to frequent ceasefire violations by Armenia. Although the effectiveness of the ceasefire was frequently questioned, it continued until September 2020. Politicians of Karabakh origin, who dominated Armenian political life, consistently kept the policy of annexing the Karabakh region—which they occupied with the military and political support of Russia—on the national agenda (Mouradian, 2012).

In summary, while appearing neutral, Russia controlled the conflicts by manipulating disagreements among the peoples of the region. Subsequently, by intervening in the events, it aimed to present itself as the only force capable of establishing peace in the region. On the other hand, Western states lacked lasting solutions to this problem. Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Bayramov stated on this matter: "They did not put any pressure on Armenia to end the occupation. They gave the same message to both the occupier and the victim of the occupation" (Rehimov & Kesinkılıç, 2025).

Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: Armenia's Forced Withdrawal from Karabakh and the Permanent Ceasefire Agreement

Despite the ceasefire between 1994 and 2020, intermittent conflicts demonstrated the constant risk of a renewed outbreak (International Crisis Group, 2022). During this period, a significant shift occurred in Ilham Aliyev's Karabakh policy. Aliyev began to emphasize the inevitability of war if the Karabakh problem dragged on, if the lack of a solution began to be perceived as a solution, and if the problem could not be resolved peacefully (Mammadyarov, 2009). He rapidly increased Azerbaijan's military capacity. These developments indicated that Azerbaijan had lost hope in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh problem through peaceful means and began to turn toward a military solution.

Although transformations often appear sudden, according to Robert Axelrod's analysis of reciprocal retaliation strategies, responding to one party's coercive stance with a similarly coercive response can generate further escalation (Kriesberg, 1999). In other words, conflict can be understood as both a factor and a result of change (Francis, 2002). Armenia's targeting of energy transit routes — specifically the Tovuz attack on pipelines

targeting the Azerbaijani economy between July 12 and July 17, 2020 — foreshadowed the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Energy pipelines passing through Azerbaijan to Türkiye (Habertürk, 2020), such as the Baku–Supsa, Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan, and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum natural gas pipelines, as well as the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project, are not only regional geostrategic developments but also projects that affect the global energy market. However, in the early hours of September 27, 2020, Armenia seriously violated the Ceasefire Agreement by launching attacks on Terter in Azerbaijan, crossing the border from the Karabakh region it had occupied for years. In response to these attacks, the Azerbaijani army retaliated, and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War began on September 27, 2020. The President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, emphasized that negotiations were not possible under these circumstances, drawing attention to the confrontational stance of Armenia’s Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan (TRT Haber, 2020).

Seeking to maintain its presence in the region by keeping tensions between the conflicting parties at a certain level, Russia began to lose ground with the war in Ukraine, which led to a decline in its influence in the region. On the other hand, due to Armenia’s policy of distancing itself from Russia and aligning with the West, Russia’s past military support for Armenia was absent during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (de Waal, 2021). It soon became evident that the sustainability of the Karabakh occupation depended on Russian support.



Figure 1: Anadolu Agency, 2020

During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Russia did not provide the expected support to the Armenians, as Armenia’s policies of distancing itself from Russia and aligning with

the West were not well received. Under the Collective Security Treaty, Armenia attempted to involve Russia in the process; however, Russia declared that the conflict was not taking place on Armenian territory, signaling its withdrawal from the process. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that developments in Ukraine and Georgia influenced Russia's stance (Popescu, n.d.).

During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia used phosphorus bombs and carried out mining operations in many areas, targeting hospitals, schools, commercial areas, and administrative buildings. Numerous civilians, homes, and agricultural lands suffered significant damage. In the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Armenian army, equipped by the Soviets in the 20th century, was defeated within 44 days by the Azerbaijani army, trained and equipped by Türkiye in the 21st century (Mehdiyev, 2020). From the first day of the conflict, Türkiye declared its support for Azerbaijan, demonstrating its involvement both in the war and in the resolution process. The Azerbaijani side repeatedly stated that Türkiye should be at the negotiating table. Ultimately, Armenia, having tested the possibility of changing political borders through military force, was forced to respect Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a result, the war had a heavy toll, with Armenia suffering approximately \$4 billion worth of weapons losses. These heavy losses soon forced Armenia to surrender (Mehdiyev, 2020).

Russia took the initiative at this stage, mediating between the two sides. A ceasefire agreement was signed between the parties on November 9, 2020, at an international meeting held via video conference. With this agreement, all military activities in Karabakh ceased, and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War ended (Institute of Strategic Thinking, 2020). Thus, with the victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, the status quo imposed in the Caucasus underwent a transformation that would not easily be reversed (Pirinççi, 2021). The ceasefire text of November 9, 2020, reflects the written consent of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025).

Although the ceasefire process was jeopardized in its first weeks due to actions by certain Armenian forces, Azerbaijan did not opt to terminate the ceasefire. On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan completely cleared the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Armenian armed groups through an anti-terrorism operation, resolving the problems caused by these elements. As a result, the vast majority of Armenians living in the region migrated to Armenia. Despite these developments, the ceasefire agreement of November 9, 2020, remained in effect. Article 2 of the ceasefire agreement stipulated that Armenia would vacate the occupied territories, and Article 9 provided for the return of displaced civilians and refugees to Nagorno-Karabakh and neighboring areas under the supervision of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Türkiye İnsan Hakları ve Eşitlik Kurumu [TIHEK], 2021). These conditions were largely met.

Armenia's withdrawal from the occupied territories is a significant step toward lasting peace. For Azerbaijan, the acceptance of the return of Azerbaijani refugees to their homes is an important development in resolving the issue. However, the anti-personnel and

anti-tank mines laid by Armenia along the 300 km contact line between Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as in areas occupied during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War that have not yet been opened for settlement, constitute a major obstacle to the return of Azerbaijani refugees (TIHEK, 2021). To resolve this issue, Armenia must provide all minefield maps and clear the mines.

In summary, the signed ceasefire agreement paved the way for lasting peace. Azerbaijan and Armenia, which had been in conflict in the South Caucasus for over 30 years, came closer to peace than ever before. For a climate of trust to be established, both sides must accept each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Pashinyan administration, which seeks to advance integration with the Western world, realized that continuing the war with Azerbaijan leaves Armenia dependent on Russia. Through this war, the Armenian government effectively showed its people that they cannot succeed in a war against Azerbaijan and that their presence in the region is threatened without lasting peace. Azerbaijan's ending of the occupation through war made Armenians understand that their claims regarding Karabakh are unrealistic (İsmayilov, 2024). After the war, Armenia's orientation began to change. Having suffered defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh and believing that Russia had failed to fulfill its security commitments, Armenia began to distance itself politically and economically from Russia. The EU and the United States, viewed as alternatives, responded positively to Armenia's initiatives for closer security and economic relations. Thus, the United States was able to expand and deepen its contacts with Armenia (Avetisyan, 2024). The ceasefire agreement signed after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War includes the opening of the Zangezur corridor. This corridor will connect the western regions of Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan (Institute of Strategic Thinking, 2020). Another important aspect of Zangezur is that it will connect Central Asia to Europe via Türkiye.

The Transformation Process of Conflict: Contacts for Peacebuilding Between the Parties

Conflict transformation can be achieved if the parties establish a new, acceptable relationship in which they will not resort to violence again (Kriesberg, 2011). The agreement that ended the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War began to reshape the geopolitics of the region (The Guardian, 2020). The process initiated toward the normalization of post-war relations was not a unilateral imposition but a joint process (Kriesberg, 1999). The aim was to end the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with a final peace agreement. However, despite both leaders' repeated declarations of commitment to peace, significant challenges remain to be overcome.

In protracted conflicts, reconciliation between parties tends to develop through a gradual transition and transformation, marked by agreements on specific contentious issues. Open agreements are useful in resolving certain contentious issues, fostering mutual understanding, commitment, and trust, and reducing fear and hostility among constituents

on both sides. Agreements aimed at providing assurances that one side will not undertake a surprise military action against the other are particularly important (Kriesberg, 1999). In the case of Karabakh, the foreign ministers of both countries pledged on several occasions that they would not resort to war.

In 2021, Azerbaijan proposed closing the chapter of hostility with Armenia and presented five fundamental principles for a peace agreement (Rehimov & Keskinliç, 2025). On the Armenian side, the public's desire for peace was demonstrated by Pashinyan's victory in the 2021 elections (BBC News Turkish, 2021). In April 2022, Pashinyan stated, "Today, the international community clearly tells us that being the only country in the world that does not recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, an ally of Türkiye, poses a great danger for Armenia. Therefore, opening a period of peaceful development for our country and region has been adopted as a state strategy. We need new ways of thinking. And we must steer our ship to a safe harbor in this turbulent geopolitical ocean" (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2022).

One of the fundamental elements in the transformation of a prolonged and destructive conflict is mutual recognition and assurance, which often requires multiple steps. Mediation efforts or direct talks at the personal level between leaders of opposing sides who begin to see each other as human beings are crucial (Kriesberg, 1999). Despite long-standing prejudices, Armenia's Minister of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport, Zhanna Andreasyan, stated in 2023 that approximately 400 schools in Armenia were interested in teaching Turkish and Azerbaijani languages. The minister noted that schools showed the greatest interest in Turkish, but also mentioned the difficulty of finding teachers (Arka News Agency, 2023). Although Turkish has begun to be taught as an elective language in Armenia, the words "Turkish" and "Turk" represent openness to the world for some Armenians, while for others they remain a source of hostility.

The opening of the Zangezur Corridor, which will provide a land connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, is of significant importance. While this project will provide economic benefits to Armenia, pro-Russian elements in Armenia oppose it on the grounds that it will harm sovereignty (Ismayilov, 2024). However, negotiations continued, and representatives from both sides participated in the Antalya Diplomacy Forum 2024 held in Türkiye. At the session on Peace, Development, and Connectivity in the South Caucasus, the parties discussed recent developments in the region and once again emphasized the necessity of opening borders, establishing diplomatic relations, and increasing contacts between the two societies (Deveci Bozkuş, 2024).

Sustaining the transformation process requires the thoughtful and determined efforts of many actors. Subjectively, emotions and beliefs also tend to change. Thus, enemies become more accepting of each other and may even develop mutual respect (Kriesberg, 1999). In this regard, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated repeatedly at a press conference on July 16, 2025, that Armenia is determined to establish peace and that every effort is being made to ensure long-term stability. On August 8, 2025, the leaders of

Azerbaijan and Armenia, Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan, signed a peace declaration in Washington through the mediation of U.S. President Donald Trump. In his statement after the agreement, Aliyev noted that they had only “initialed” the agreement and were ready to sign a peace treaty at any time if Armenia amended its constitution. This is because the Armenian constitution includes provisions regarding a “Greater Armenia,” which includes parts of Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Ankara and Baku rightfully demand that Yerevan first accept the UN-recognized borders of the state. The agreement is poised to alter not only the Caucasus but also the political and economic balance in Central Asia and the Middle East. In particular, the two sides’ pledge of a ceasefire and their simultaneous withdrawal from the Minsk Group, which has stalled an agreement for years, demonstrates their commitment to resolving the issue politically between themselves. The Zangezur Corridor, or the Trump International Peace and Prosperity Route as it was named after the declaration signed in the United States, connecting mainland Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan, is a road and rail project under U.S. guarantee. Trump stated that this route would end the conflict between the two countries, initiate trade and diplomatic relations, and lift sanctions against Azerbaijan. Aliyev stated that territorial claims against Azerbaijan in the Armenian constitution prevent the signing of a peace agreement, but that once the necessary amendments are made, the treaty could be signed at any time (BBC News Turkish, 2025).

These two neighboring countries are taking steps to improve relations after years of conflict. Azerbaijan announced in October 2025 that it would lift restrictions on the transit of goods from its territory to Armenia (News.Az, 22 October 2025). At the annual World Economic Forum held in Davos in January 2026, Aliyev stated that following the establishment of peace, Azerbaijan initiated economic cooperation and exports with Armenia. Azerbaijan announced that it had lifted all restrictions on cargo transportation from Kazakhstan and Russia to Armenia, stating that transportation currently passes through Georgia but may one day pass through Armenia (Teslova & Eruygur, 2026). Pashinyan also emphasized that progress would not be rapid, as narratives shaped by years of conflict continue to influence public discourse in both countries (Aydin & Demir, 2026). The key point is that economic interdependence can soften public attitudes over time and reduce resistance to political compromise. A successful normalization process depends on a longer-term societal roadmap, including potential reforms in education and public discourse. In this context, future agreements may need to address textbooks, joint commissions, and other cultural instruments that shape generational narratives (Kilic, 2025). The parties’ efforts were also recognized internationally. Aliyev and Pashinyan were presented with the 2026 Zayed Award for Human Fraternity on February 4, 2026, in Abu Dhabi for their contributions to the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Aliyev stated that peace is possible even after a long conflict and that peace with Armenia is vital for the entire region. Pashinyan, in turn, remarked that the true recipients of the award were the citizens of both countries, emphasizing that the past should remain behind them and that peace is necessary for everyone.

Although progress was made in negotiations following the ceasefire agreement, peace has not yet been achieved. For Armenia to achieve peace, it needs to amend the articles in its constitution that contain territorial claims. This is because the Armenian constitution includes a declaration of independence that calls for the unification of the Karabakh region with Armenia. While Azerbaijan demands a change to this article, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has signaled willingness to respond positively and indicated that a referendum will be held. It should be understood that normalization between Azerbaijan and Armenia is impossible if the Karabakh claim remains in the Armenian constitution (Kucera, 2024). In this regard, Armenian Minister of Justice Grigor Minasian stated that a possible referendum on a new Armenian constitution would take place in 2027 (Azatutyun, 2024). However, Armenian opposition leaders argue that Azerbaijan has no intention of making peace without obtaining more comprehensive concessions from Armenia (Galstian, 2024). It should be noted that conflict transformation does not occur smoothly or at the same pace for all parties. One side may move more easily than the other. While some groups on both sides may be hesitant and insecure, waiting for a better arrangement, other groups may be willing to move toward mutual compromise. Therefore, conflict transformation is always multifaceted and occurs to varying degrees among all relevant groups (Kriesberg, 2011). The transformation in the Karabakh issue also confirms this.

Benefits of Conflict Transformation for the Parties and the Region

With the ceasefire reached between the parties, significant changes began in the dynamics and balance of the region. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 strengthened Azerbaijan's geostrategic position in the region. In addition, both the support of relevant states, primarily Türkiye, in resolving this issue, and the new status of Nagorno-Karabakh will accelerate the development of economic relations among the countries of the region.

Aliyev and Pashinyan held talks in Abu Dhabi, UAE. Accordingly, they agreed on opportunities to expand bilateral trade and economic cooperation (Erurygur, 2026). In fact, Nikol Pashinyan is a politician who argues that his country cannot move forward by clinging to historical complexes and that Armenians should focus on developing "real Armenia" within its current internationally recognized borders (Yetkin, 2025). This is because the most significant obstacle to the development of the Armenian economy stems from the country's geopolitical location and economic isolation. Due to this political isolation, Armenia has been excluded from regional energy projects. Pashinyan emphasizes that reconciliation is essential for achieving genuine development.

In an interview with state television on February 10, 2026, Pashinyan stated that the United States would implement an investment program in Armenia lasting at least 99 years, demonstrating that Armenia would remain a peaceful, independent, and sovereign state for 99 years, with a normal investment environment. Regarding border demarcation with Azerbaijan, he explained that the process would be lengthy and would not disrupt peace.

He stated that where there is peace, there is prosperity, freedom, and happiness, and that while Armenia cannot become a center by distancing the periphery from the center, it can become a global center through regional integration (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2026).

In line with this, U.S. interest in the region appears to be increasing. U.S. Vice President JD Vance's visit to Armenia and Azerbaijan demonstrates U.S. efforts to promote trade, investment, and infrastructure in the region through the Trump International Route for Peace and Prosperity. The initiative aims to facilitate trade, energy transit, logistics, and digital connectivity, with the potential to open a new East-West route between Central Asia and Europe. These new transportation routes could diversify European supply chains and increase access to emerging markets (EuroNews, 2026a). This route is a project that could bypass Russia and Iran at a time when the West is seeking to diversify energy and trade routes due to the Ukraine war (EuroNews, 2026b).

Pashinyan confirmed that Armenia is ready to provide unimpeded transportation links between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan within the agreed framework and stated that there is clear political will to move forward (Aydın & Demir, 2026). However, the Russia factor should not be overlooked. A 30-year concession agreement was signed in 2008, providing for the transfer of the Armenian railway system to the South Caucasus Railway company established by Russian Railways. In an interview on this subject, Pashinyan stated that Armenia could take back control of its railways from Russia to maintain its competitive advantages and establish an international route through the country (Agos, 2026).

Conclusion

Karabakh, the central point of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border dispute, has been a long-standing problem. Although Russia appeared to oppose Armenia's annexation ambitions regarding Karabakh, its implicit support for Armenia's position contributed to the prolongation of the issue into the twenty-first century. Whenever high-level negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia came onto the agenda, ceasefire violations tended to intensify. While Armenia regarded the ceasefire as an opportunity to legitimize its gains, Azerbaijan interpreted the situation as a chance to build up its military capacity and wait for an opportune moment.

With Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Russia's policy toward Armenia, seen as a tool for controlling the Caucasus, became ineffective. This defeat revealed Armenia's inadequate economic, political, and military capacity. Armenia needs to assess, in a rational and objective manner, how its inability to improve economic conditions has affected demographic trends. The impact of population dynamics on meeting Armenia's labor force needs, particularly its demand for trained military personnel, requires more comprehensive analysis. Developing peaceful relations with its neighbors will support Armenia's development policies. An Armenia that has resolved its conflicts

will not be excluded from targeted economic projects in the region and will benefit from international trade routes. Armenia's adoption of realistic and constructive policies will provide mutual benefits to itself and its neighbors. Azerbaijan's victory caused a shift in the region's geopolitics and in the strategies of world powers toward the South Caucasus. If the ceasefire agreement between the two countries is transformed into a peace treaty and signed, it will have profound implications for the South Caucasus, Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and Europe.

It appears that the two societies have now ceased ignoring each other. It is important for Armenia to focus on its internal affairs instead of making demands on its neighbors — Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. It should begin pursuing more peaceful policies to improve the living standards of its people and address its economic problems. The dissolution of the Minsk Group is a significant development in that it demonstrates the parties' decision to resolve their problems themselves. In an era where states can use hard power to pursue their interests and international norms are often disregarded, it is important that the parties are taking decisive steps toward achieving lasting peace. However, political tendencies influenced by diaspora interests may emerge as a significant obstacle to peace.

The Zangezur Corridor, which significantly shortens routes within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, enables global trade to be conducted more efficiently in terms of both time and cost. It is clear that the region will gain greater strategic importance with the completion of transportation networks along the Zangezur Corridor. This corridor is also likely to create new opportunities for energy supply to global markets. It is anticipated that new energy lines will provide alternative natural gas supply routes from Russia and Iran.

In conclusion, as a natural consequence of its geopolitical position, Armenia must also develop its relations with Türkiye, which advocates dialogue in resolving regional problems. The Armenia-Azerbaijan tension directly affects Türkiye-Armenia relations. An Armenia that approaches problems with a solution-oriented perspective, taking into account its own realities and capacities, will also benefit regional peace and development. In this way, it will be able to secure its borders. The most effective way to ensure the inviolability of borders depends on achieving economic development. The most important method for achieving this is ensuring integration in the South Caucasus. Thus, the South Caucasus will transform into a common economic area, and political cooperation will be strengthened to overcome existing conflicts and differences of opinion.

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Gabon: Monolithic Authoritarianism and the Resurgence of Military Rule

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Abstract: This article examines the transition from civilian authoritarian rule to military governance in Gabon, focusing on the factors that precipitated the 2023 military coup in a country characterized by a long-standing deficit of democratic governance. The study addresses the following question: How did entrenched authoritarianism contribute to the emergence and popular acceptance of military rule in Gabon? Drawing on theories of political transition and governance, the research adopts a qualitative case study approach based on secondary data and employs thematic analysis to explore the interplay among political disenchantment, corruption, and socio-economic challenges in shaping public perceptions of political authority. The findings reveal that widespread dissatisfaction with civilian rule — characterized by corruption, ineffective governance, and weak democratic accountability — created favorable conditions for military intervention. The study further demonstrates that authoritarian leadership fostered public frustration, socio-economic inequalities, political repression, and patronage networks, thereby generating an environment conducive to the coup, which was largely welcomed by segments of the Gabonese population. At the same time, the findings highlight the ambivalence of public attitudes toward military governance, raising questions about the prospects for a sustainable return to civilian democratic rule. The article contributes to governance and po-

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litical transition scholarship by illuminating the complex dynamics between civilian and military regimes in an African context. It also offers policy recommendations aimed at strengthening democratic institutions, promoting equitable resource distribution, and enhancing democratic resilience to address citizens' grievances and reduce the appeal of military rule.

Keywords: Monolithic authoritarianism, civil-military relations, Gabon, military coups, democratisation, governance.

Introduction

The resurgence of military regimes in Africa has attracted scholarly interest in the context of ongoing debates on the nature of authoritarian rule on the continent. Africa has persistently experienced military involvement in political affairs through military rule. Some scholars consider it a political anomaly, as it continues to undermine democratic practice in Africa (Badie et al., 2011). Some post-independence African countries witnessed the replacement of Western models of democratic institutions with authoritarian regimes, some of which resulted from military coups (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). Africa has recorded 106 successful military coups out of 206 attempts since 1950. In recent years, several coups have occurred across the continent, leading to the establishment of military governments, with a notable surge in 2020. Recent cases of coups and military regimes have been recorded in West and Central Africa, particularly in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Gabon. Monolithic authoritarianism, characterized by the concentration of political power in a single leader or political party, has historically marked many African states. This perspective is crucial for understanding the political landscape in Gabon, where over half a century of governance by the Bongo Ondimba family has entrenched a culture of patronage and repression.

In recent years, several Central and West African countries have witnessed a troubling resurgence of military coups, a trend that has reignited debates about the sustainability of democratic rule on the continent. This development is particularly significant, as military interventions often disrupt fragile political systems, exacerbate socio-economic inequalities, and lead to serious human rights violations. The case of Gabon, particularly in the aftermath of the August 2023 military coup, reflects a striking example of how deep-rooted autocratic practices can culminate in abrupt regime change. This development underscores the urgency of understanding the key factors that enable monolithic authoritarianism to persist despite widespread public discontent (Hoinathy & Mooloo, 2023).

Current research on authoritarianism in Africa has largely focused on authoritarian rule and accountability (Fombad, 2020), revolution and authoritarianism (Volpi, 2017), aid and authoritarianism (Hagmann & Reyntjens, 2016), political succession (Battera, 2023), competitive authoritarianism (Bogaards & Elischer, 2016), hybrid regimes, democratic

backsliding, and the role of civil society movements (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Nevertheless, the specific dynamics of monolithic authoritarianism and its relationship with military coups remain underexplored, especially in the case of Gabon. This research gap calls for an in-depth investigation into how authoritarian regimes maintain power, what triggers military intervention within such systems, and the socio-political drivers of renewed military coups.

A dominant assumption in post-Cold War African politics is that democratization represents an inevitable trajectory. This assumption fails to account for the resilience of authoritarian regimes that adapt and persist despite societal demands for reform (Carothers, 2002). Moreover, existing studies often fail to adequately examine the connection between authoritarian governance and military coups, particularly in countries such as Gabon, where a single family has monopolized political power for decades. This paper addresses this gap by asking: How did monolithic authoritarianism in Gabon trigger the emergence of a military coup? What prospects does the military regime hold for correcting the shortcomings of civilian authoritarian rule in advancing democratic governance, and what implications does this have for the broader African context? To address these questions, it is essential to examine the interplay of political discontent, socio-economic challenges, and historical legacies that shape public perceptions of authority in Gabon. In doing so, this study challenges the assumption that democratic governance is the only viable path for African countries and instead emphasizes the complexities that allow authoritarian regimes to consolidate power.

This study explores the factors through which monolithic authoritarianism in Gabon facilitated military intervention. A key feature of this paper is its emphasis on Gabon's political history and the socio-economic conditions under autocratic rule that contributed to the military coup. Empirical evidence from African cases demonstrates how entrenched authoritarian governance can culminate in military interventions, thereby undermining existing political structures, with a particular focus on Gabon. The findings suggest that the Bongo administration's reliance on patronage, combined with widespread economic grievances and limited political representation, created an unstable environment conducive to military intervention.

The paper is structured into several sections. Following this introduction, the literature review situates the study within the existing scholarly discourse on authoritarianism and military coups in Africa, followed by the theoretical framework. The methodology section outlines the approach used to investigate and analyze Gabon's political transition, followed by a brief contextual analysis of Gabon's political landscape. A presentation of the findings follows, along with a discussion of their implications. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the results and provides recommendations for future research and policy considerations.

Literature review

The recent resurrection of military coups in Africa has attracted urgent concerns, particularly in authoritarian governance milieus that exemplify many African states. This literature review section revisits the scholarly debate on authoritarian rule and military coups in Africa. The analysis unfolds thematically, focusing on the historical background of authoritarianism, civil-military relations, socio-economic factors, external influences, and the resurgence of recent military coups.

Historical Context of Authoritarianism

The historical foundations of authoritarian regimes in Africa are rooted in colonial rule, which established centralized governance institutions that often disregarded local political systems. Nugent (2012) suggests that colonial systems disrupted traditional institutions, resulting in a legacy of authoritarian leadership that persisted after independence. This distortion created a divide between the state and the population, fostering environments in which authoritarianism could flourish (Cheeseman & Fisher, 2019). Amanda Robinson (2019) contends that colonial authorities prioritized resource extraction over the development of strong political institutions, resulting in weak state structures ill-equipped to sustain democratic governance after independence. Colonial rule thus established a governance context characterized by paternalism and a lack of democratic structures, which postcolonial states inherited. In his analysis of Tanzania, Zambia, and Côte d'Ivoire, Hartmann (2022) demonstrates how authoritarian systems rooted in colonialism continue to influence contemporary political behavior. This historical context has nurtured a political ethos in which authoritarian rule thrives, as leaders often resort to coercive measures to maintain control in the absence of legitimate institutional frameworks (Cheeseman & Fisher, 2019). Furthermore, the colonial legacy of "Big Man" politics, in which leaders exercise significant power without accountability, has persisted in many African states, weakening democratic practices and fostering conditions conducive to electoral fraud and corruption (Cheeseman & Fisher, 2019).

The persistence of authoritarian regimes is evident in the political trajectories of various African states. Sylla (2024) argues that, amid growing pressure for decolonization, France opted for conditional independence by signing cooperation agreements that enabled it to maintain influence over its former colonies in areas such as monetary policy, military bases, diplomacy, raw materials, and external trade. The author further notes that these agreements were concluded with political elites whom France had supported to assume leadership positions in their countries, often through electoral manipulation or the suppression of dissenting political voices. Scholars such as Woldense and Kroeger (2024) and Hartmann (2022) provide a nuanced understanding of how the legacies of authoritarian systems continue to shape Africa's political landscape, particularly through the circumvention of presidential term limits. According to these authors, evasion of term limits has significant

implications, including increased political instability and public dissatisfaction, which may result in social unrest and weakened political legitimacy. Ngcayisa (2021) describes a transition from traditional authoritarian systems in Africa, characterized by personalist autocrats, to what he terms developmental authoritarianism, which prioritizes economic growth while maintaining strict political control. Citing cases such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda, the author argues that these systems emphasize economic development at the expense of civil liberties and political accountability.

Socioeconomic challenges faced by African states further complicate the relationship between colonial legacies and contemporary authoritarian governance. Colonial economic structures were designed to serve colonial interests, leaving newly independent states with limited resources and insufficient infrastructure for sustainable development (Ngcayisa, 2021). Consequently, many African leaders have adopted authoritarian practices to manage dissent and maintain stability, often invoking national unity as justification for suppressing opposition (Cheeseman & Fisher, 2019). The persistence of authoritarian regimes reflects a broader struggle for political control and economic sovereignty, as evidenced by recent military coups that challenge narratives of democratic consolidation and highlight ongoing concerns about neo-colonialism and economic stagnation (Sally, 2024). Addressing the legacies of colonialism is essential for promoting democratic governance and political accountability in Africa. However, whether military coups represent a viable solution remains an ongoing debate.

Civil-Military Relations in Africa

Civil-military relations in Africa have attracted significant scholarly and political attention, highlighting a complex interaction between military power and civilian rule. The colonial legacy has meaningfully shaped these dynamics, often resulting in strong and politically engaged militaries. Funnell and Walker (2020) note that the military has historically played a key role in governance, influencing policymaking processes. According to Gutteridge (1975), many African states inherited weak governance institutions from colonial rule, which allowed military interference to become a common instrument of political change. The military often positions itself as a guarantor of national stability, thereby weakening civilian authority and democratic practices (Adeyeye & Adeyeye, 2024). This tendency is evident in countries such as Egypt and Sudan, where the military has repeatedly intervened during political crises, highlighting its role as a stabilizing force while constraining democratic development (Bassil, 2015; White, 2017).

Recent studies emphasize the evolving nature of civil-military relations within processes of democratic transition and socio-economic challenges. Scholars such as Houngnikpo (2016) argue that military involvement in politics is not solely a reflection of coercive authority but also a response to public demands for security and stability in the face of terrorism and civil unrest. This perspective suggests that civil-military relations can be both

collaborative and confrontational, depending on the context (Musa, 2024). Moreover, the growing influence of civil society in promoting military accountability and transparency has contributed to the restructuring of these relationships (Croissant & Kühn, 2017). These developments indicate a gradual shift toward more democratic civil-military relations, despite a continuing environment marked by challenges associated with authoritarianism and governance.

Economic Disparities and Governance Legitimacy

Economic inequalities in African states have significant implications for governance legitimacy, particularly within a monolithic authoritarianism framework. Political legitimacy refers to the extent to which the population supports a political regime based on its responsiveness to their basic needs (Bogaards & Elischer, 2016), thereby shaping the quality of governance (Arif & Dutta, 2024). Arif and Dutta (2024) further contend that increased legitimacy strengthens a government's capacity to design and implement policies that enhance governance outcomes. Robert and Eche (2020) argue that many political regimes in sub-Saharan Africa lack legitimacy due to ineffective governance and stagnant economic growth caused by undemocratic practices. Mismanagement of resources and the prevalence of corruption contribute to the erosion of citizens' trust in governance (Ngcayisa, 2021). Many African nations exhibit substantial income inequality and poverty, which further undermines the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes (Robert & Eche, 2020).

The concentration of economic power among a small segment of elites aligned with ruling authorities leaves the majority of citizens disenfranchised and marginalized. Countries rich in natural resources often allocate wealth to sustain patronage networks among political elites, reinforcing inequality and providing fertile ground for authoritarian systems (Omeje, 2017). This exclusion can generate widespread discontent and lead to questioning of regime legitimacy, as the population may perceive the government as incapable of addressing their fundamental needs and aspirations (Woldense & Kroeger, 2024). Woldense and Kroeger (2024) argue that the stability of authoritarian regimes is closely linked to the formation and management of elite coalitions. The inability of governments to address socioeconomic challenges creates favorable conditions for military intervention, as segments of the population may view the military as a credible alternative to ineffective civilian governance. Arif and Dutta (2021) contend that the perception of a social contract that benefits all citizens enhances the legitimacy of government policies. Conversely, the absence of equitable economic growth fosters grievances that may manifest as political instability and, in some cases, military coups, as alternative power structures emerge to challenge the status quo.

Moreover, the relationship between economic performance and governance legitimacy is further complicated by the concept of the rentier state, which is central to understanding the political economy of many African countries (Omeje, 2017). The author contributes

to the resource curse debate, arguing that colonial legacies have significantly shaped contemporary rentier politics in states characterized by authoritarianism, weak governance structures, and conflict (Omeje, 2017). Governments in many African states rely heavily on external revenues from oil and mineral exports rather than domestic taxation, thereby limiting the development of a robust private sector (Yates, 2020). This reliance can create a divide between the state and its citizens, as governments often prioritize the interests of foreign stakeholders and domestic elites over those of the broader population (Omeje, 2017). Consequently, the absence of a social contract based on shared accountability erodes trust in government institutions, fostering perceptions that the state is unresponsive to citizens' needs (Arif & Dutta, 2024). As economic disparities widen and governance legitimacy declines, the likelihood of military intervention increases, as the military may exploit governance vacuums and social instability to position itself as a stabilizing force amid escalating unrest (Akinola & Makombe, 2024).

The Resurgence of Military Coups in Africa

Africa has been a hotspot for military coups worldwide over the past sixty years (Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023). Of the 492 abortive and successful coups between 1950 and 2023 globally, 221 occurred in Africa, with 109 being successful (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). Duzor and Williamson (2023) reveal that at least 45 of the 54 African states have experienced at least one coup attempt since 1950. The continent witnessed nine successful coups between 2020 and 2023, along with a similar number of failed attempts, particularly in Francophone countries such as Mali, Chad, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon (Vines, 2024). Sudan has recorded 17 coups since 1950, the highest in Africa, while Burundi (11), Ghana, and Sierra Leone (10 each) have experienced the highest number of unsuccessful coup attempts (Fleck, 2023).

Bihina and Ayata (2024) identify three phases of African military coups. The first phase, from 1960 to 1970, was triggered by post-independence African leaders who adopted single-party systems, authoritarian rule, and political positions that diverged sharply from those of their former colonizers. The second phase, between 1980 and 1990, occurred during a global economic crisis, during which African leaders were accused of corruption and of failing to address economic hardship. The military often intervened as a self-proclaimed liberator of the population, justifying its actions as necessary to restore order and political stability. While the period from 2000 to 2019 witnessed relative stability in Africa, the years 2020 to 2023 recorded a surge in military coups in Francophone Africa, particularly in West Africa, with most affected countries classified as Least Developed Countries, except for Gabon (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). These coups “occurred within vacuums, young regimes and long-entrenched ones, countries moving both toward and away from democracy, those with ongoing insurgencies, and those in relative peace” (Adeyeye & Adeyeye, 2024, p. 168). This resurgence underscores the need to examine the literature on their causes.

According to recent scholarship, military coups in Africa are driven by the legacy of colonialism, weak state institutions, ethnic and political tensions, socio-economic factors, poor governance, external influence, and political instability (Bihina & Ayata, 2024; Sylla, 2024). Colonialism introduced foreign governance systems and arbitrary boundaries that served colonial interests, resulting in weak political institutions and entrenched ethnic divisions after independence. Sylla (2024) contends that colonialism did not aim to create favorable conditions for democratic governance, but rather reinforced ethnic and group identities in ways that sustained colonial hegemony. With inherited weak political structures, many African countries have struggled to maintain governance and stability, making them vulnerable to military takeovers after independence.

Furthermore, ethnic and political tensions have also contributed to military coups in Africa. According to Harkness (2016), ethnic conflicts under military regimes have significantly contributed to coup dynamics, as observed in Ghana (1956–1966), Nigeria (1960–1967), and Sierra Leone (1968). This is compounded by the politicization of ethnic identities and their mobilization for political purposes, which has fueled hostility in many African societies (Harkness, 2018; Ndiyun, 2022). Additionally, Akinola and Makombe (2024) note that the March 2021 attempted coup in Niger resulted from political tensions following the February 2021 presidential elections, in which the incumbent Mohamed Bazoum's predecessor, Mahamane Ousmane, refused to accept defeat.

Moreover, economic factors and political instability also contribute to the resurgence of military coups in Africa. Conditions such as high poverty rates, systemic corruption, and ineffective economic policies fuel public discontent. Duzor and Williamson (2023) argue that military coups are more frequent in economically vulnerable countries, citing cases such as Gabon, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Chad, and Mali. Similarly, political factors such as civil unrest, electoral fraud, and insecurity create unstable environments conducive to coups. While electoral malpractice is widespread in Africa, Duzor and Williamson (2023) suggest that Sahel countries continue to exhibit many of the conditions that trigger coups. The authors note that coup plotters in Niger and Burkina Faso justified their actions by citing the failure of governments to address the escalating Islamist insurgency in the Sahel.

Theoretical Framework

The renaissance of military coups in Africa, particularly the first experience in Gabon, can be examined through three theoretical lenses that illuminate the dynamics of authoritarian rule and its link with military coups. This section analyses three principal frameworks: the theory of competitive authoritarianism, the concept of elite coalitions, and historical institutionalism.

Competitive authoritarianism, a notion introduced by Levitsky and Way (2010) to explain how governments present a façade of democratic rule while practising authoritarianism, refers to regimes that, while ostensibly democratic, engage in significant state subversion

and manipulation of political processes. Such regimes exhibit formal characteristics of democracy — constitutionalism, human rights and freedoms, rule of law, and electoral structures — but fail to adhere to its minimum standards (Cameron, 2018). This theory has been used to examine how Robert Mugabe consolidated power amid opposition in Zimbabwe, and how Yoweri Museveni weakened opposition to maintain power in Uganda (Bogaards & Elischer, 2016). The recent military coup in Gabon can be viewed through this lens, as the civilian government displayed democratic features but was authoritarian in practice, thereby weakening democratic foundations and processes in the country. The military's intervention can be seen as a response to the apparent inability of the civilian regime to fulfil democratic promises and respond to public grievances, thus creating a void that the military sought to fill (Diamond, 2002).

Another relevant framework for understanding the consolidation of authoritarian rule in Gabon is the concept of elite coalitions. This concept suggests that the strength of authoritarian governments often depends on leaders' ability to maintain support from key elites (Brownlee, 2007). According to the author, elites are “national-level agenda setters” and “insiders with privileged access to rulers and the state” (Brownlee, 2007, p. 12). In his study of authoritarian rule in Malaysia, Dan Slater (2003) also argues that, to consolidate authority in institutionalised authoritarian contexts, rulers employ strategies of packing, rigging, and evasion. Austin Matthews and Lúcia Sá (2024) applied the elite coalition lens to examine the resilience of authoritarianism in Equatorial Guinea between 1979 and 2023, highlighting President Obiang's preference for forming coalitions with regional elites. The historical pattern of political coalitions established during Omar Bongo's long tenure demonstrates how elite arrangements can sustain authoritarian governance. The military coup in Gabon can thus be interpreted as a shift in the elite coalition, where dissatisfaction with civilian rule prompted military actors to reassert their influence. This framework also suggests that elite realignment, triggered by geopolitical shifts after the Cold War, is essential for understanding how African authoritarian systems adapted and maintained power in complex political contexts (Woldense & Kroeger, 2024).

Finally, historical institutionalism offers a framework for examining the long-standing impact of historical legacies on contemporary political behaviour. This perspective highlights that past political arrangements and institutional structures significantly shape governance outcomes and public attitudes (Thelen, 1999). In Gabon, the legacy of authoritarian governance has created a complex political environment in which historical grievances and experiences influence public perceptions of authority. The 2023 military coup can be interpreted as a culmination of past governance patterns, where segments of the population, disillusioned by ineffective civilian leadership, viewed military rule as a viable alternative (Cheeseman, 2015).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the dynamics of authoritarian governance and military coups in Gabon. The qualitative methodology is particularly appropriate for this research as it permits a detailed understanding of complex social phenomena, such as political power dynamics and military intervention, which are often difficult to measure.

The study's data were obtained from secondary sources, including academic publications, government documents, news reports, and civil society publications. This approach is suitable as it offers an in-depth synthesis of the existing literature and contextualizes the prevailing political environment in Gabon. Using multiple secondary data sources facilitates the triangulation of information, enhancing the trustworthiness and reliability of the results (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Key databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL) were used to collect relevant literature. Furthermore, reports and publications from civil society and international organizations were used to assess the broader implications of authoritarian governance and military intervention in Gabon. These varied sources ensured a holistic perspective on authoritarianism and the military coup.

The collected data were analyzed thematically in accordance with the principles outlined by Clarke and Braun (2017). Thematic analysis offers flexibility and allows researchers to identify, code, analyze, and report relevant patterns (themes) in qualitative data, guided by the research questions. This method was selected for its potential to provide a rich, comprehensive, and detailed account of the data, which is crucial for understanding the dynamics of Gabon's political situation. The analysis procedure comprised several stages. First, the data were sorted through repeated reading and note-taking. Second, preliminary codes were generated, focusing on key features of the data relevant to the research questions. Third, the generated codes were organized into potential themes, which were then reviewed and refined to ensure accuracy and proper representation of the data. Lastly, the themes were defined and named, resulting in a coherent account that responds to the research objectives.

Background

Gabon's political path has been characterised by an intricate evolution from colonial rule to civilian authoritarianism, featuring the interplay of various socio-political elements and historical occurrences. This section investigates the major indicators that have shaped Gabon's governance scene, emphasising the consequences of colonial legacies, the development of a national identity, and the institution of authoritarian rule.

Colonial Rule and Its Legacy

Gabon's political edifice can be situated within its colonial history. The arrival of European explorers in the 15th century introduced an era of exploitation and transformation for local populations. Gabon was colonized by France in the late 19th century, with colonial rule disrupting existing traditional leadership structures and social systems (Yates, 2020). The French pursued the assimilation of indigenous populations into their culture, which resulted in the emergence of a new elite class trained in French institutions. This assimilated elite would subsequently play a central role in the political arena of post-independence Gabon (Yates, 2020).

A sense of "Gabonese" identity developed among the various communities, although a subdued one due to French assimilation policies (Yates, 2020). Although the struggle against colonial rule led to independence in 1960, it was nevertheless followed by the continuation of neocolonial relationships, with Gabon and France concluding cooperation treaties that preserved French influence over political and economic policies (Gaulme, 2023). This legacy of dependency, characterized by repression and political singularism, has had a lasting impact on Gabon's governance, contributing to prolonged authoritarian rule.

Emergence of Authoritarian Regimes

In the wake of independence, Gabon was led by Léon Mba, whose leadership was marked by dictatorial policies that established a precedent for subsequent leaders. Mba experienced a military coup on 17 February 1964 led by young officers of the Gabonese defense forces, who accused the president of establishing a police regime, just a week before legislative elections organized under disputed conditions (Gaulme, 2023). After Mba's death, Omar Bongo came to power in 1967, instituted a one-party system in 1968, and governed for forty-two years, establishing a system of succession-based governance that depended on patronage and control over the country's resources (BertelsmannStiftung, 2026). Bongo's leadership was characterized by authoritarian rule, political subjugation, and self-serving economic management, primarily through the misuse of the country's oil resources to maintain power (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The oil boom of the 1970s generated substantial revenues, which Bongo used to secure elite loyalty and suppress the opposition.

Bongo's rule was notable for its ability to adapt to changing political environments, particularly during the end of the Cold War and the global push for democratic governance. Despite introducing a multi-party system through the constitutional reforms of 1991, Bongo's PDG maintained its hold on political power through manipulation and electoral malpractice (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The political regime remained predominantly authoritarian, with Bongo relying on his control over state institutions to suppress dissenting voices (BertelsmannStiftung, 2026).

The Transition to Ali Bongo

Following Omar Bongo's death in 2009, his son Ali Bongo Ondimba rose to the country's highest office, continuing hereditary leadership. Ali Bongo's government faced significant setbacks, including public skepticism regarding corruption and incompetence, as well as calls for political reform. His leadership followed the same authoritarian pattern established by his father, focusing on the consolidation of power through patronage networks and control over the military (BertelsmannStiftung, 2026). Gabon's political arena remained fragile, as demonstrated by the political turmoil following Ali Bongo's stroke in 2018, which raised questions about his leadership legitimacy and the future of the Bongo dynasty. The accumulated grievances of the population and disputes over the results of the 2023 presidential elections led the military to overthrow Ali Bongo in a coup described by some sources as peaceful (Bihina & Ayata, 2024).

The historical background of Gabon's governance highlights a trajectory shaped by colonial legacies, the rise of authoritarian rule, and the challenges of transitioning to democratic governance. The interaction of these factors created a political context in which military intervention was perceived as a possible response to public disillusionment and political instability. This historical background provides the foundation for understanding current political trends of authoritarian rule in Gabon and the factors contributing to the 2023 coup.

Findings

This section presents the key factors of the military coup in Gabon and examines the public perception of military governance as opposed to civilian authoritarianism in the country.

Gabonese Political Governance Structures Prior To the Coup

Before the 30 August 2023 coup, the 1991 Constitution of Gabon structured the main state institutions around the authoritarian and dynastic leadership of the Bongo family, which had been established at independence. The President of the Republic headed a highly centralised executive branch, alongside the ruling PDG party, which had been in power since 1968. Omar Bongo, upon gaining power in 1967, established one-party authoritarian rule under the PDG, which lasted until the 1991 constitutional revision introduced a multi-party system; however, the country continued to experience a de facto single-party regime through patronage and repression (BertelsmannStiftung, 2026). Gabon has a bicameral legislature composed of the National Assembly and the Senate, both dominated by the ruling PDG. The country's decentralisation system operates through regional and municipal councils, which are also dominated by the PDG, thereby reinforcing the party's control over both central and local governance (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The independence of the judiciary in the country is undermined by pressure and influence from the executive.

During his rule, Ali Bongo was accused of buying off opponents to secure elite coalitions, engaging in pervasive corruption, misappropriating the country's resources, and appointing family members to key positions (Hoinathy & Mooloo, 2023). His disregard for democratic principles and the rule of law fueled the rise of opposition movements seeking change, intensified popular discontent, and created momentum for political upheaval. With a GDP per capita of US\$17,440, 43.5% of the population lived below the poverty line by 2019, alongside an unemployment rate of 40% in 2020 (Hoinathy & Mooloo, 2023). The authors further argue that Gabon's political situation prior to the coup was similar to that of many Central African states characterized by poor economic governance and decades of uninterrupted autocratic rule, conditions that are conducive to social unrest and unconstitutional changes of government.

Factors Accounting for the 2023 Military Coup in Gabon

The August 2023 bloodless military coup in Gabon can be attributed to multiple interconnected factors that collectively created an unstable political environment. The immediate trigger of the coup was electoral fraud and manipulation (Sylla, 2024). The coup was primarily occasioned by tensions associated with the presidential elections, in which Ali Bongo was declared the winner amid serious allegations of electoral fraud, the absence of international observers and journalists, and the suspension of internet access (Henry & Murray, 2024). Many Gabonese viewed the elections as manipulated, resulting in public outrage and protests against the legitimacy of Ali Bongo's government (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The military justified its intervention, stating that the presidential elections, in which Ali Bongo was declared the winner with 64% of the vote, did not meet the expectations of the Gabonese people, who demanded transparent, credible, and inclusive elections.

Moreover, corruption and bad governance played a crucial role in the military takeover. The Bongo regime has been criticised for widespread corruption, nepotism, and ineffective management of the country's resources, which eroded its legitimacy and fuelled public disillusionment (Hoinathy & Mooloo, 2023). Many Gabonese perceived the government as incapable of addressing growing socioeconomic challenges, including inequality, unemployment, and poverty, which have persisted despite the country's rich natural resources (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). This dissatisfaction contributed to popular support for the military intervention, as the military positioned itself as a defender of national interest against a corrupt regime.

Furthermore, Gabon's historical governance background was also instrumental in the coup. For over half a century, the Bongo family maintained political dominance in Gabon, fostering a political landscape characterised by centralised governance, nepotism, favouritism, and authoritarianism (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). This dynastic rule was often criticised for failing to respond to the needs and aspirations of the Gabonese people,

resulting in widespread feelings of disenchantment and frustration among citizens (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The governance model, marked by restricted political freedoms and repression of the opposition, further alienated the population, paving the way for military intervention as a means of restoring public order.

Additionally, the military's role was crucial in the coup. The military's perception of itself as a stabilising force was central to justifying the intervention, which was framed as a necessary action to restore political stability and good governance amid contested presidential election results in Gabon (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). This perception aligns with many Gabonese citizens who welcomed the military intervention, hoping it could lead to a change in a political status quo characterised by monolithic authoritarianism for over five decades. The success of military coups in other African countries also influenced the Gabonese military, as recent experiences suggested that successful coups were not only possible but, in some contexts, tolerated (Yates, 2023). Some Gabonese remain sceptical about the actual motives behind the military intervention, given that each of Ali Bongo's presidential election victories (2009, 2016, and 2023) was contested by the opposition, often accompanied by military deployment to suppress post-electoral protests (Quenum & Amadou, 2023).

Public Perception of Military Governance

Public sentiment significantly contributed to the success of the military coup. Many Gabonese citizens supported the military's overthrow of the authoritarian regime, viewing the coup as a liberation from over half a century of autocratic rule (Quenum & Amadou, 2023). This popular support granted the military a degree of legitimacy to execute the coup, highlighting a broader desire for political change among citizens. The Gabonese people considered the coup a rupture with a political regime that manipulated electoral processes and constitutional term limits to extend its stay in power (Melly, 2023). While most Gabonese support democracy, some argue that elections do not always enable voters to remove leaders who fail to meet their expectations (Henry & Murray, 2024).

To demonstrate their support for the coup, crowds flooded the streets of Libreville, celebrating the military intervention (Yates, 2023), although experts suggest that the ruling elite remain deeply entrenched in the country's political system (Gbadamosi, 2023). The same military had been involved in repressing opposition groups and post-electoral uprisings under Ali Bongo, particularly in 2009 and 2016 (Civicus, 2023). The military's dual role as both a force for restoring order and a disruptor of political governance in Gabon demonstrates the complexity of civil–military relations in Africa.

To gain widespread support from the population, Oligui Nguema chose to describe the event as a “coup de libération” rather than a “coup d'état,” presenting himself as the liberator of Gabon from a monolithic dictatorship (Quenum & Amadou, 2023). Immediately after the coup, Gabonese citizens in Libreville and other towns took to the streets shouting

“c’est la libération” and “Bongo dehors” (“this is liberation” and “Bongo out”) (Quenum & Amadou, 2023). While the transitional government initially included opposition members, it has since sidelined much of the opposition, giving Oligui Nguema a relatively unobstructed path to implementing his planned institutional reforms in Gabon (Loppy, 2024). The coup leaders also leveraged citizens’ frustration to mobilize popular support and gain legitimacy, despite fears that the military junta may continue to appropriate the country’s resources, as previous regimes did, at the expense of the population (Henry & Murray, 2024).

International Reactions to the Coup

Immediately after the military junta declared the coup, many countries and international institutions condemned the act. The United Nations Secretary-General condemned the military takeover “as a means of resolving the post-electoral crisis” (Al Jazeera, 2023). The African Union (AU) Commission Chairperson, Moussa Faki, described the coup as an infringement of AU rules on elections, democracy, and governance, calling on the junta to ensure a return to constitutional order. The AU Peace and Security Council suspended Gabon from the organization with immediate effect (Tribune de Genève, 2023).

China, Russia, Germany, France, the United States, and the European Union also condemned the coup, calling for a prompt stabilization of the situation, while Nigeria’s Bola Tinubu expressed deep concern about an authoritarian contagion spreading across the continent (Henry & Murray, 2023). The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), of which Gabon is a member, suspended Gabon from the organization until the reestablishment of constitutional order in the country. This suspension lasted only six months, as the same institution decided on 9 March 2024 to lift the suspension, noting significant progress in the return to constitutional order, public acceptance of the coup, and a proposed 24-month transition timeline (Le Figaro, 2024).

Governance Innovations Introduced by the Military Junta

Following the military coup in Gabon, a transitional council was announced, with Oligui installed as transitional president on 4 September 2023, alongside the suspension of the constitution and the dissolution of all state institutions. Oligui appointed loyalists to two-thirds of the parliament and all nine members of the Constitutional Court. Due to pressure from the international community, the transitional government organised a closely managed national dialogue in mid-2024, in which the military played a leading role. A key outcome of the dialogue was the revision of the country’s constitution to permit military members to contest elective positions, abolish the post of Prime Minister, extend the presidential mandate to seven years renewable once, and remove the two-round electoral system (Siegle & Wahila, 2025). The dialogue also recommended the indefinite suspension

of approximately 200 political parties, restricting members of the ousted President's PDG from participating in elections for three years, and enacting a law to curb the proliferation of political parties for self-serving purposes (Moki, 2024).

Discussion

This research focused on the persistence of monolithic authoritarian rule and the 2023 military coup in Gabon. The study aimed to answer the questions: How did monolithic authoritarianism in Gabon trigger the upsurge of a military coup? What prospects does the military regime hold for addressing the shortcomings of civilian authoritarian regimes in democratic governance? And what implications does this have for the broader African context? Through a qualitative research design, the study employed thematic analysis to present the major findings. The results highlighted multiple factors accounting for the persistence of dynastic authoritarian rule in Gabon, including the impact of colonial history and external influence, particularly from France. The findings also emphasized how authoritarian leadership promoted widespread public dissatisfaction, socioeconomic inequalities, repression, and patronage, creating a suitable context for a military coup, which was widely welcomed by the Gabonese people. A key finding demonstrates inconsistency in public perception of the military coup and governance, which obscures prospects for a civilian government. Amid skepticism, some Gabonese consider the military a stabilizing institution, which presents challenges for those advocating democratic governance alternatives (Civicus, 2023).

These findings resonate with previous research on authoritarian regimes and their role in military coups. For instance, the results on the link between colonial legacies and monolithic authoritarian rule in Gabon align with Woldense and Kroegeer (2024) and Hartmann (2022), who suggest that colonial rule established legacies of authoritarian governance that continue to impact the contemporary political landscape in Africa, such as the circumvention of presidential term limits. The 1991 Gabonese constitution introduced a seven-year presidential term renewable once, but this restriction was lifted by Omar Bongo in 2003, a trend that has been adopted by the military junta in the 2024 constitution (Bihina & Ayata, 2024). The findings also highlight sociopolitical tensions resulting from contested presidential election results as the main trigger of the military coup in Gabon. This echoes Akinola and Makombe's (2024) argument that electoral tensions triggered the March 2021 coup in Niger.

Furthermore, the study's results on inequalities and socioeconomic hardship among the Gabonese population — reflected in a 43.5% poverty rate and a 40% unemployment rate — align with Duzor and Williamson's (2023) contention that most African military coups occur in poor countries. Akinola and Makombe (2024) also support this argument, positing that economic stagnation significantly contributes to public dissatisfaction and attracts military intervention. Economic hardship in Gabon is further exacerbated by the

rentier state phenomenon, resulting in overdependence on oil revenues and neglect of the private sector. This aligns with Robinson, who traces resource extraction practices to the colonial era, and Cheeseman and Fisher (2019), who suggest that reliance on external rents such as oil and mineral resources can distort political incentives, reduce accountability, and weaken responsiveness to citizens' demands.

Moreover, Gabon's case study can be viewed from an elite coalition perspective. This perspective holds that authoritarian leaders employ various tactics to obtain and sustain support from key elites through packing, rigging, and evading strategies (Brownlee, 2007), including preferential treatment and coalition-building with elites from the ruler's region (Austin Matthews & Lúcia Sá, 2024). The study results indicate that the Bongo dynasty established an elite coalition in Gabon to perpetuate authoritarian rule. Elite coalitions under the Bongo dynasty were maintained through patronage, co-optation of opposition figures, and appointment of family members to strategic positions in the country (Hoinathy & Mooloo, 2023). This coalition enabled the Bongo family to sustain power and control resources in Gabon for over half a century, thereby marginalizing citizens' welfare. The findings emphasize that the Gabonese military has been part of the alliance that served the interests of the Bongo regime, repressing dissent and cracking down on sociopolitical protests.

Historical institutionalism offers a lens through which to understand the impact of historical legacies on the persistence of authoritarian governance in Gabon. The findings demonstrate how historical heritage, particularly colonial governance patterns and institutions, has influenced contemporary political realities and institutions in Gabon. This perspective underscores the relevance of historical context in understanding the resilience of authoritarian governments and the challenges of democratic transition (Thelen, 1999).

One unexpected finding of this study was the level of popular support and acclamation for the military coup and governance in Gabon. This support likely originates from entrenched frustration with 56 years of kleptocratic rule, leading some Gabonese to view the military as a necessary alternative to ineffective and repressive monolithic civilian governance. This tendency, also observed in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, suggests a possible shift in public perception that could have significant implications for future regimes in Gabon. The significance of this finding lies in its potential to reshape the political landscape, as the military regime may leverage popular support to extend its rule in Gabon.

An alternative interpretation of the findings views Oligui as a continuation of the Bongo dynasty rather than a popular liberator from Bongo-era repression. Oligui is the ousted president's cousin and former aide-de-camp to his father until 2009, as well as head of the Presidential Guard from 2020 under Ali Bongo. While his extraconstitutional seizure of power highlights the risks of a politicized and loyal military deeply involved in sustaining an autocratic regime for decades, it also suggests that the barriers to military overthrow of civilian rule are increasingly weakening.

Oligui's actions to retain power under civilian rule resemble those of General Mahamat Déby, who bypassed the constitutional succession procedure after the death of his father, Idriss Déby Itno, to assume power in April 2021. He assumed leadership of the military transition, organized a staged national dialogue, and conducted a flawed constitutional referendum that allowed him to participate in and win the May 2024 presidential elections. The constitutional reforms introduced by Oligui and adopted in a controlled referendum in November 2024 further concentrate power within Gabon's already highly centralized executive branch. With constitutional permission to run in the anticipated August 2025 presidential elections, Oligui hopes to benefit from the lowered threshold for electoral victory through the abolition of the two-round electoral system, thereby transitioning from military to civilian rule. While this aligns with Powell and Hammou (2024), who contend that in most successful coups in Africa between 2021 and 2023 the military retained power, it contradicts the initial promise of the Oligui transition government to return power to civilian rule.

The research outcomes are essential for understanding the intricate dynamics of dynastic authoritarianism and military coups in Gabon. They emphasize the relationship between colonial history, socioeconomic factors, and external influences shaping the political landscape. By elucidating these issues, the paper contributes to a broader understanding of the challenges of democratic processes in postcolonial Africa. The insights from this study also inform policymakers, governance actors, and civil society organizations advocating for democratic governance and political accountability in Gabon and beyond.

Conclusion

This paper explored the military coup in Gabon within the context of monolithic authoritarianism. In particular, it aimed to understand the historical sources of contemporary authoritarian rule, the military's influence on governance and citizens' perceptions, and the socioeconomic factors that facilitated military intervention. The findings address the research question by identifying multiple factors that contributed to the persistence of monolithic authoritarian rule under the Bongo dynasty from 1967 to 2019, and how exploitative governance practices triggered military intervention, a move welcomed by a disenchanting Gabonese population.

The research outcomes both support and diverge from previous studies in significant ways. While scholars have previously acknowledged the historical endurance of authoritarianism in Gabon, this study highlights the military's role as an active political stakeholder and the public's ambivalent perception of military rule. Elite coalition dynamics further enhance understanding of how military and political elites interact to maintain authoritarian governance, a nuance that previous studies have often overlooked. This paper also emphasizes socioeconomic inequalities that aggravate public discontent and create conditions conducive to military intervention, resonating with existing theories while offering new insights into the dynamics of public perception.

The analysis of Gabon's case reveals that preventing political instability and coups in Africa depends on identifying and addressing warning signs promptly and effectively. It also underscores the need for Gabon's transition to be used proactively to enhance political and economic freedoms and respond to fundamental popular grievances. Using political transition as a means of coup prevention provides long-term prospects for stability and reconciliation. To achieve this, the political transition should be designed with coup prevention in mind. Such a strategy — comprising diplomatic, political, and security measures — is essential for ECCAS. While stakeholders in Gabon prioritize democratic principles alongside political stability, it is crucial to integrate civil society into political discourse to promote accountability and transparency.

However, this research's reliance on secondary data may limit the depth of understanding of Gabonese citizens' lived experiences and perceptions, representing a key limitation. Further research should consider primary data sources to obtain a more nuanced understanding of public sentiment and civil-military relations in Gabon. Additionally, investigating the impact of regional dynamics and external factors on Gabon's political landscape could provide further insight into the complexities of authoritarian governance.

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Transnistria: Formats for Negotiating the Conflict. Premises, Institutional Architecture, Successes, and Failures

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Abstract: Our research aims to clarify the historical context in which the negotiation formats for the Transnistrian conflict were established, the founding documents, their evolution over time as a succession of productive stages and contested interruptions, their successes and failures and the reasons behind them, as well as possible options for correcting past shortcomings or eventually replacing the current formats with more effective ones. In this regard, we examine the “5+2” format, the “1+1” format, and the sectoral working groups. Currently, the first format is no longer functioning, having been suspended since 2022. The other two operate irregularly and have not produced mutually agreed-upon results. Instead, they merely highlight the divergences in the approaches adopted by Chisinau and Tiraspol regarding the main issues on their agenda: Romanian-language schools on the eastern bank of the Dniester; ensuring freedom of movement across the demarcation line; advancing the recognition by Chisinau of school diplomas issued in Tiraspol; implementing a system of license plates for vehicles in Transnistria approved by the government of the Republic of Moldova; and taxing businesses in Transnistria in accordance with the legislation of the Republic of Moldova. The hypotheses we test are as follows: first, that the presence of the Russian Federation in the conflict has been counterproductive, both as a party to the conflict and as a mediator; second, that the Russian-Ukrainian partnership, which until 2022 was systematically manifested to the detriment of the interests of the Republic of Moldova, cannot be resumed under current circumstances; and third, that the existing negotiation formats require reconsideration, whether through maintaining them unchanged, reforming them, or abandoning them altogether.

Keywords: Transnistrian conflict, negotiation formats, the “5+2” format, the “1+1” format, the sectoral working groups.

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Introduction

After prolonged political dissensions and conflicts throughout 1990–1992 related to the identity of the new state emerging from the ruins of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, the prospect of an armed resolution became increasingly likely at the beginning of 1992. On one side were the centralizing forces mobilized by Chisinau, consisting of police units and civilian formations in the absence of a still-unorganized national army. On the other side were the forces under the command of the secessionist authorities in Tiraspol, comprising their own civilian formations, Cossack detachments arriving from the Russian Federation and Ukraine, and local units of the 14th Army commanded from Moscow.

The military phase of the conflict began on the night of March 1–2, 1992, when secessionist forces attacked and occupied the Dubasari Regional Police Station, which was subordinate to Chisinau. Within a few days, fighting spread to the localities of Cosnita, Cocieri, Pohrebea, Dorotcaia, Speia, Tocmagiu, and Malaiesti. The decisive moment in the conflict came during the battles fought on June 19, 1992, in Tighina (Bender), when armored units of the 14th Army intervened on the side of the secessionists. Subsequently, the secessionist forces, strongly supported by Cossack detachments, launched artillery attacks against the positions of the forces coordinated from Chisinau on the plateaus of Cocieri, Cosnita, and Chitcani, including areas located on the right bank of the Dniester (Străuțiu et al., 2023).

In a situation of mutual exhaustion and fragile balance on the battlefield, negotiations were organized between the political leaders of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Moldova, which ended with the *Agreement on the Principles of Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Dniester Zone of the Republic of Moldova*, signed on 21 July 1992. The first article stipulates:

1.1. From the moment of signing the Agreement, the parties to the conflict undertake to take all necessary measures for the total cessation of fire, as well as any armed actions, against each other; 1.2. With the ceasefire, the parties to the conflict proceed to withdraw their armed forces units and other formations, combat equipment, and weaponry, to complete this process within seven days. The purpose of such disengagement is to create a security zone between the conflicting parties (...).

The start of systematic negotiations is stipulated in the art. 5.2, in the following formula:

The parties to the conflict will immediately proceed to negotiations to resolve the issues related to the return of refugees to their places of origin, the provision of assistance to the population of the affected districts, and the reconstruction of economic facilities and housing. The Russian Federation will provide the necessary support in this regard (Gvidiani, 2020a, p. 71).

Over time, the negotiations came to encompass increasingly diverse and specialized issues, requiring a more elaborate institutional framework. In chronological order, the principal

negotiation platforms have been the following:

1. **The “1+1” format**, involving the President of the Republic of Moldova and the leader of the self-proclaimed secessionist republic, the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. Subsequently, negotiating authority was also delegated to the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration of the Republic of Moldova and to the so-called “Minister of Foreign Affairs” in Tiraspol.
2. **The sectoral working groups**, whose mandate and institutional structure were established through negotiations conducted within the “1+1” format.
3. **The “5+2” format**, which evolved from the earlier “3+2” format and represents the internationalization of the negotiation process through the inclusion of additional international actors as mediators and observers.

We would like to point out that the names of the mentioned formats, except for the “5+2” format, were not used at that time and are the innovation of analysts, following the wide acceptance of the “5+2” format (which, officially, is called the “Permanent Conference on Political Issues within the Negotiation Process for the Transnistrian Settlement”).

A superficial reading of the texts that provide the institutional framework for the negotiations can produce false impressions about the real atmosphere of the negotiations before, during, and in the subsequent interpretation and application of the agreed understandings. We will witness a permanent adversarial positioning, setting traps, raising the tone, using violent expressions, and systematic accusations. These have also been transferred, in part, to the level of analysts, whether they are journalists or professional researchers. As G. Bianov observed (2009, p. 8),

The political, ideological, and expert-level battles between the two sides are difficult and usually boil down to the fact that neither side, under any circumstances, gives up even the smallest part of its position. This rather destructive model of communication has taken root in the consciousness of the elites. It prevails over the public consciousness and is very widespread in the expert community. Based on this model, self-sufficient ideological stereotypes have been formed, which are currently able to subjectively demonstrate to us the insufficient desire of the parties to make progress in the negotiation process. (Bianov 2009, p. 8)

It is a challenge that we make every effort to resist in our research, by systematically and comparatively consulting all relevant points of view (political and analytical) and formulating assessments with maximum objectivity.

Literature Review

Fortunately for our interest in documenting the negotiation process, we have at our disposal several bibliographic collections published in volumes, which, at the level of the year in which they were offered to the public, list the most important scientific contributions to the Transnistrian issue.

The first project of this kind belongs to the researcher from Chisinau, Lidia Prisac, and was printed in 2005. The second edition, completed and updated, appeared on the market in 2021 (Prisac, 2021). Meanwhile, as a project of the Laboratory for the Analysis of the Transnistrian Conflict at the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Eugen Străuțiu offered a *Transnistrian Bibliography* (2019), which inventories 88 volumes, 71 chapters in volumes, 222 articles in scientific journals, 173 studies and reports, 19 scientific journals, and 23 volumes of memoirs (Străuțiu, 2019). Finally, three decades after the military operations on the Nistru River, the Agency for History and Military Science and the “Andrei Lupan” Scientific Library (Institute) offer the volume *The Armed Conflict on the Nistru River. Bibliography*, which, in an economy of 308 pages, systematizes official documents, collections of documents and normative acts, monographs, articles, and master’s/doctorate theses (Manolache, 2022).

Unfortunately for our research, a systematic investigation of the general literature yields very few works specifically dedicated to negotiation formats in the Transnistrian conflict. Analytical approaches to negotiations on the Transnistrian issue are most often framed under the concepts of “*Transnistrian settlement*” or the “*settlement process*”. Under these labels, the activities conducted within the negotiation platforms between Chisinau and Tiraspol are often overshadowed by broader analyses focusing on the various settlement scenarios proposed by international actors, such as the *Yushchenko Plan* and the *Kozak Plan*. Among the negotiation platforms, scholars from Chisinau and abroad tend to focus disproportionately on the “5+2” format, which is generally examined from a chronological perspective and only rarely subjected to deeper analytical scrutiny.

Under these circumstances, our research relies primarily on a thorough examination of documentary collections — most notably the collection compiled by Alin Gvidiani, published in 2020 by Technomedia Publishing House in Sibiu — as well as on general works such as that of Eugen Străuțiu (2017), which discusses the principal dimensions of the Transnistrian conflict, including a chapter of several pages devoted to the negotiation platforms.

Of real use is the last of the three volumes printed in 2009 in Chisinau, under the title *Moldova–Transnistria: Eforturi comune pentru un viitor prosper. Procesul de negocieri*, even if the last chapters analyze rather general aspects of the conflict (Matveev et al., 2009). Among the articles in scientific journals, even if each one offers a small number of pages, the contributions of Aurelian Lavric (2012) on the state of negotiations in the “5+2” format (2012) and Marius Șpechea on the latest developments in the activity of sectoral working groups (2017, 2018) are especially useful.

Regarding our possibility of relying on a theoretical framework regarding the negotiation and mediation of frozen conflicts, we are surprised by the very small number of contributions. Most of the time, frozen conflicts are listed separately, through the contribution of different authors in dedicated chapters. Even if information regarding negotiation formats can be extracted (not easily), the comparative perspective is lacking, as is the case with the

volume coordinated by Michael Emerson, printed in Brussels and London. (2020). The same thing happens with thematic issues of publications, such as the collection of texts *Resolving Frozen Conflicts. The Challenges of Reconciliation*, put under the aegis of “Per Concordiam. Journal of European Security and Defense Issue”, offered by the George Marshall European Center for Security Studies (2020). In the same category (from the perspective of our interest in negotiation formats) are also single-author volumes, from which we can select information and short analyses (Albulescu, 2022, pp. 111–112, 150–151).

Instead, we have substantial contributions on the mediatory behavior of international actors in the cases of Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. The role of the OSCE in the protracted conflicts is discussed in the volume edited by Klaudia Báňaiova & Samuel Goda (2018); the role (or lack thereof) of the European Union in the Transnistrian conflict and those in the Caucasus is discussed by Hans Martin Sieg (2012); the patterns of involvement of the Russian Federation in this conflict are analyzed by Andrew Sprague (2016).

An almost unique case through the breadth and depth of comparative analysis, the report provided by Stefan Wolff (2021) under the aegis of the Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies, comparatively analyzes the mechanisms for resolving conflicts and their negotiation formats in the post-Soviet space. We will analyze some of his conclusions below.

The Main Negotiation Formats: Institutional Organization, Chronological Evolution, And Negotiated Content

Negotiation platforms, as a whole, “represent institutional organizations that bring the parties in conflict to the dialogue table, in mutually agreed formulas, for the resolution of fundamental files or technical files that are the subject of different points of view” (Străuțiu, 2017, p. 196). The system of negotiation platforms was established over time, as the issues to be resolved became more numerous and more complicated. The general trend, as new files were included in the negotiation platforms, was that of the ever-increasing technicalization of the institutional framework and the rules of negotiation.

The “1+1” format

This negotiation platform emerged naturally through direct talks between the highest-ranking representatives of Chisinau and Tiraspol. Initially, in the tense atmosphere that followed the military operations, the Republic of Moldova was represented by its president or prime minister, while Tiraspol was represented by the “*Transnistrian leader*” (the term commonly used in Chisinau), who in Tiraspol is referred to as the “*President of the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic*”. Later, working meetings were also organized between the political representatives responsible for the Transnistrian settlement process

in Chisinau and Tiraspol. Typically, these representatives are the Minister (later Deputy Prime Minister) for Reintegration from the Government of the Republic of Moldova and the “*Minister of Foreign Affairs*” from Tiraspol.

In practice, coordinating the negotiation teams constitutes the primary responsibility of the Tiraspol representative, since the so-called “*Ministry of Foreign Affairs*” cannot officially operate in international relations due to the unrecognized status of the self-proclaimed republic. This “*ministry*” neither negotiates treaties nor oversees embassies and consulates, and its representatives are not received in official international meetings. Consequently, the negotiation expertise of the Tiraspol representative is exercised almost exclusively within negotiation formats with Chisinau, whereas the representatives of Chisinau benefit from considerably broader experience acquired through managing the international relations of the Republic of Moldova.

Discussions were held in 2016 regarding the possible expansion of this format to include the leadership of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova and the “*Supreme Soviet*” in Tiraspol; however, these proposals did not materialize (Străuțiu, 2017, p. 200).

The first consistent result of the bilateral negotiations at the summit (in contemporary language, the term of English origin would be “summit”) was marked on 8 May 1997, in Moscow, where Petru Lucinschi and Igor Smirnov signed the *Memorandum on the Basis of Normalization of Relations Between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria*. Representatives of the OSCE, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine were present. The document stipulates that the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria are equal parties in the process of building a common state, a principle that will lay the foundation for later categorically contradictory positions of both parties. Chisinau will position the negotiation process under the sign of the supreme goal of state reintegration, while Tiraspol will consider that its status as an equal to Chisinau refers to its political independence. In the same context, Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kuchma also signed a joint declaration, in which they considered the memorandum an important step towards a fair and comprehensive settlement of the Transnistrian dispute. Its provisions cannot contradict generally accepted norms of international law and cannot be interpreted or applied in contradiction with existing international treaties.

As a logical consequence, on 24 May 1997, the political leaders in Chisinau and Tiraspol decided to establish several commissions to coordinate and ensure the negotiation process. These commissions met regularly for three months (a total of six meetings), after which the negotiation process was effectively blocked.

A relative return to normality occurred at the beginning of 1998. On 17 February, in the presence of delegates from Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE, Lucinschi and Smirnov signed a protocol on the preparation of draft documents related to customs insurance, foreign trade, education, combating crime, the mechanism for Ukraine’s participation in the peacekeeping operation, and the commissioning of the Dubăsari road bridge (Boțan, 2009, p. 20).

The series of bilateral negotiations continued in July 1999, when Lucinschi and Smirnov signed a package of documents on social and economic cooperation. A few days later, at another meeting, the two leaders (this time together with representatives of the three mediators) adopted a joint declaration on building relations between the parties based on the principle of a “common border, economic and social space, defense, and law”.

After the election of Vladimir Voronin as President of the Republic of Moldova, the “1+1” format continued under the previous terms. On 9 April 2001, Voronin met with Smirnov to discuss the state and evolution of the negotiation process, the reactivation of expert groups, the validity of previously signed documents, accession to the Russia–Belarus Union, granting Russian the status of state language, mutual recognition of documents issued by the relevant institutions of both parties, the free activity of the mass media in both Moldova and Transnistria, and the broadcasting of television programs (Boțan, 2009).

The “1+1” format continued to be the main negotiation platform in the following years. For example, during 2003, protocols were signed regarding the permanent establishment of joint meetings on political issues starting from February 2003; planning of future activities and consultations and exchanges of opinions were held on the text of the statement of the President of the Republic of Moldova of 10 February 2003; joint approach with the OSCE to the issue of the functioning of Moldovan schools in the Transnistrian region and organization of a meeting of representatives of statistical structures; proposals for candidacies in the composition of the Joint Constitutional Commission; railway issues on the left bank of the Nistru River; the situation of schools with teaching in Romanian (Gvidiani, 2020a, p. 30).

The “1+1” format continued to be the main negotiating platform in the following years. But in 2005–2006, bilateral meetings were overshadowed by negotiations in the newly established “5+2” format, which took over the negotiating agenda of previous years. After the suspension of the recent format, meetings between Voronin and Smirnov were resumed, including during the first visit of the president of the Republic of Moldova to Tiraspol, on 24 December 2008 (Stănescu et al., 2012).

Given that pro-Western President Nicolae Timofti (2012–2016) adopted a political line hostile to the Tiraspol regime and avoided bilateral negotiations, the context for relaunching the summit format was created only after the election of Igor Dodon as head of the Moldovan state. Between 2017 and 2020, several meetings were organized, one of which was held at the state residence in Condrîța (28 July 2020). From the official press release of the Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, we find that the topics discussed refer to the preparations for the educational process in the new school year, the movement of students and teachers, the promotion of the topic of telecommunications, criminal cases, and banking issues, and the opening, as soon as possible, of a Bender-Varnița trolleybus line. At the same time, “The parties reiterated the importance of the peacekeeping operation on the Dniester as a guarantor of peace and security for citizens and agreed to take joint steps to prevent the situation in the Security Zone from worsening” (Presedinte, 2020).

During Maia Sandu's presidential term, starting in 2020, summit meetings were refused, with the responsibility for technical negotiations being transferred to the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration. The completely unfavorable atmosphere for negotiations, which arose due to the Russian-Ukrainian war and the different positions of Chisinau and Tiraspol towards the two belligerents, led to a small number of contacts and very few results. Meetings between Oleg Serebrian and Valeriu Chiveri, respectively Vitaly Ignatiev, took place every year, but in the general atmosphere that Deputy Prime Minister Serebrian already signaled after the February 2022 meeting: "Unfortunately, although there were so many topics, the dialogue did not lead anywhere, that is, for the moment we have blockages in all directions. It was rather an exchange of positions on several topics that concern us" (Valentina Ursu, 2022).

An interesting chapter of the "1+1" format, which is already the subject of articles published in scientific journals, is labeled "football diplomacy". On August 24, 2010, Moldovan Prime Minister Vlad Filat traveled to Tiraspol to attend the football match between Sheriff Tiraspol and Basel. In this informal context, the Prime Minister met with Igor Smirnov to discuss issues on the bilateral political agenda. At the end of September, Filat was again present in Tiraspol, for a Sheriff's match with Dinamo Kyiv; the trip was presented by Smirnov as a result of his official invitation (Popov, 2021, p. 26). Beyond the novel aspect of the semi-official format, easily interpretable as official or unofficial depending on political interest, there remains no consistent evidence of concrete results of this type of "negotiations".

Looking back on the negotiating style and agendas of the two sides in the "1+1" format, we conclude that the pro-Russian presidents (primarily Igor Dodon, but also Petru Lucinschi and Vladimir Voronin) were more open to accepting the institutional framework of bilateral meetings with the leaders in Tiraspol, and manifested itself more favorably towards the agenda of the Tiraspol regime — including by consolidating the status of Russian troops on the left bank of the Dniester. In contrast, the pro-Western presidents Nicolae Timofti and Maia Sandu disregarded this format, delegating to the government officials responsible for the reintegration issue the negotiation of the stringent technical aspects, based on clear political positions regarding the obligation of the state to reintegration. The conciliatory policy of the first three mentioned here did not yield better results than the hard line of the others; on the contrary, it was an opportunity for Tiraspol to score points towards independence. The agendas of the two parties remained permanently contradictory. Chisinau was interested in resolving the normalization of the activity of schools with teaching in the Latin script, the cessation of pressure on all territorial subdivisions of Moldovan institutions (police, penitentiaries, forestry enterprises, etc.), ensuring free movement, the cessation of unilateral actions in the Security Zone and intimidation of human rights activists, unblocking farmers' access to land located along the Tiraspol–Camenca route, the regulation of international mandatory auto insurance certificates "Green Card" in the Transnistrian region, the reduction of utility tariffs for consumers under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Moldova, etc. During this time,

Tiraspol focused on formulas for obtaining recognition of diplomas issued by its own education system and car license plates in local format, evading payment of tax obligations in Chisinau for Transnistrian economic agents, obtaining freedom to market production internationally, canceling criminal prosecutions carried out for crimes related to secession by the authorities in Chisinau, etc. (Străuțiu, 2017, p. 201).

The sectoral working groups

The idea of institutionalizing groups of experts working in administrative positions in Chisinau and Tiraspol, who would work together to identify solutions to disputes in their areas of competence, was born during the “1+1” meetings in 1997. These were initially understood more as a tool for strengthening trust, with the mission

to complement the political dialogue with technical activity formats within which the expertise of specialists in specific fields is mobilized, to develop and formulate models of reasoned and informed solutions, so that they can subsequently be submitted for approval to decision-makers. Thus, maintaining an interaction between professionals from different specialized fields without the need for interpretative collaboration with structures not empowered by law on the other side (Șpechea, 2018, p. 115).

This is how the *Agreement on the Foundations of Organizing Socio-Economic Interaction* (10 November 1997) was signed, with a content of 12 articles, which provide for the creation of a Unified Commission on socio-economic interaction, whose numerical and nominal composition are decided by the parties. This structure is intended to generate mechanisms for solving existing problems, with meetings taking place in rotation in Chisinau and Tiraspol. The decisions are of a recommendatory nature. Under these conditions, 20 permanent working groups have been established (Gvidiani, 2020a, p. 22). These were specialized for forecast the socio-economic development of the Parties; commercial-economic and technical-scientific cooperation in the industrial and agro-industrial complex; cooperation in the energy field and for ensuring mutual payments for the consumption of energy resources; transport cooperation; cooperation in the field of construction and in the communal household; cooperation in promoting economic reforms, privatization and public property management; cooperation in the field of informatics, post and communications; improvement of the economic legislation and the control over its observance; standards, metrology and technical surveillance; geological exploration and mineral resources; cooperation in financial-currency, budgetary-fiscal and banking systems; cooperation in customs matters; use of natural resources and the protection of the environment; use of labor resources and social protection of the population; statistics and information assurance; development of the healthcare sphere; development of education, the training of scientists and scientific and pedagogical staff; development of culture; measures to ensure public order; actions in foreign trade activity meetings (Șpechea, 2017, pp. 150–151).

A milestone in the institutional evolution and the attributions of sectoral groups was marked in 2007, when Government Decision No. 1178 of 31 October 2007 approved the list of working groups and their composition (obviously, from the Moldovan side), deciding that “The working groups will involve in their activity, if necessary, representatives of other public administration authorities and civil society”. The Government places the activity of these sectoral groups under the coordination of the Minister of Economy and Trade, and the Minister of Reintegration. The annex lists seven working groups, each dedicated to the institutions that will delegate their representatives there. Today, this is the only legal document presented by the Bureau for Reintegration Policies (the specialized structure within the State Chancellery of the Republic of Moldova, which coordinates and technically ensures the entire negotiation process) on its official website (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2007).

On 9 September 2011, it was agreed by political representatives in the city of Bad Reichenhall, the *Joint Regulation of Expert Groups (Work) for Strengthening Confidence-Building Measures and Developing Interaction*. The eleven points stipulate that the activity of the working groups is coordinated by political representatives; they are in charge of developing proposals and solutions to sectoral problems and are composed of specialists in the field; their leaders are responsible for maintaining contacts and forming the agenda, informing each other no later than one week before the convening of the next meeting; meetings take place at least once every two months; the meetings are chaired consecutively, and the decisions received are formalized in minutes drawn up by the party that led the meeting within three days of the day it was held; after signing, the minutes are submitted to the leadership of the parties for approval of the necessary decisions; representatives of mediators and observers may participate in the expert meetings, being informed in advance (Gvidiani, 2020a, p. 23).

Within this regulatory framework, the structure of the working groups has undergone several changes. In 2017, for example, there were 13 active sectoral working groups and two sectoral subgroups, as follows: economy + working subgroup on banking issues; environmental protection; education; agriculture and sanitary-veterinary issues; road transport and infrastructure development; rail transport and communications; telecommunications and postal services; civil status documents and population documentation + working subgroup for human rights; customs issues; social issues and humanitarian aid; health protection; combating crime and emergency situations; and demilitarization and strengthening security (Șpechea, 2017, p. 152).

Three working groups whose activity is missing or insignificant are also noted: combating crime; civil status documents and population documentation; and demilitarization and strengthening security (the latter being completely non-functional) (Șpechea, 2017, p. 154).

Today, the number of working groups listed on the website of the Reintegration Policy Office is 15. Six of them had no activity at all between 2024 and 2026, and two others had only one meeting during the same three-year period (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2007).

In attempting an overall assessment of the efficiency of the negotiation process within the system of sectoral working groups, it is important to note that compromise solutions were identified on important areas of disagreement, which were subsequently implemented. These include issues related to Romanian-language schools on the left bank of the Nistru River, the activity of Moldovan farmers on their lands across the Nistru River, the acceptance of an officially recognized vehicle registration plate format on the right bank of the Dniester River, and the apostille of graduation diplomas in education coordinated by Tiraspol by the Government of the Republic of Moldova, among others.

The dialogue on these issues, which have direct implications for the interests and way of life of residents on both banks of the Dniester River, has been systematically accompanied by political connotations, and the discussions have been lengthy.

On the other hand, it seems obvious that the inactivity or insignificant activity of the three working groups listed above, with reference to 2017, also has political explanations. The lack of meetings in the format of the “demilitarization and strengthening of the security” group is favorable to the Tiraspol regime, which avoided concessions on essential points for its independence program. The fight against crime requires collaboration between law enforcement and judicial bodies in Chisinau and Tiraspol — this would have represented a form of recognition of official structures of the secessionist republic by the Government of the Republic of Moldova, and the political price is too high. A similar problem arises in the case of civil status acts and population documentation, which can only be implemented in partnership (i.e., recognition and acceptance of an equal status) with civil status structures on the left bank of the Dniester River.

The large number of working groups that have not met or have not produced any results in the last three years indicates a general crisis of this format, explainable by the general atmosphere of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the suspension of the “5+2” format, and the very poor results in the “1+1” format.

Finally, we must recognize the important, but still limited, potential of the sectoral groups format to advance the settlement of the Transnistrian issue.

The “5+2” format

The internationalization of the negotiation process of the Transnistrian conflict has been a reality and a necessity since the moment of signing the *Agreement on the Principles of Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Dniester Zone of the Republic of Moldova*. The two sides equally wanted to attract international actors favorable to their interests in reintegration and independence to the negotiations. At the same time, rejecting actors with global or regional capacity represented a risky option for both Chisinau and Tiraspol, even if it could be unfavorable to them, because the great powers had instruments to sanction the two parties, both in the “soft-power” and “hard-power” formulas.

Thus, already from the first years of the “1+1” format, we notice the presence of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe around the bilateral negotiations, which provide press statements and even position papers on the meaning and results of the negotiations between Chisinau and Tiraspol. Some authors even consider that, starting in 2002, a “3+2” format was institutionalized, which included the OSCE, Russia, and Ukraine as mediators (Rosa, 2021, p. 5).

In this perspective, the founding document of the new negotiation format is the *Protocol of the Meeting of Mediators in the Transnistrian Settlement From the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the OSCE*, signed in Bratislava, including by the parties, on 20 February 2002. There, within a Protocol and a Regulation, the creation of the “Permanent Conference for Political Issues Within the Framework of the Negotiation Process for the Transnistrian Settlement”, in a pentilateral format (Chisinau and Tiraspol — parties, OSCE, Russian Federation, and Ukraine — mediators) was registered. The main objective of this platform is to develop, coordinate, and resolve written agreements useful for the final report to be approved by the political leadership of the parties to the comprehensive settlement of the Transnistrian issue. The Conference meetings will take place, as a rule, no less than once every 2 months in Chisinau, Tiraspol, Moscow, Kyiv, Vienna, or other locations previously agreed upon by the members.

The first round of negotiations took place in Kyiv in July 2002. After which, a protocol was drafted and signed in Chisinau (August 22). Protocols followed, signed in Chisinau, Tiraspol, or Moscow, in total 21, between 29 July 2002 and 27 September 2005, which are listed in the collection of documents provided by Alin Gvidiani (2020a).

The “3+2” format was expanded based on consultations between representatives of the parties to the conflict and mediators from the OSCE, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine, held on 27–28 September 2005 in Odesa. There, the European Union and the United States of America were invited to participate in the negotiation process as observers. The observer status was formally specified based on an OSCE protocol on the rights and obligations of observers in the negotiation process: they have the right to participate in official meetings and to speak during them, but cannot intervene with questions, sign the adopted documents, or participate in decision-making. The new negotiated format was called “5+2”, and its first meeting was scheduled for 27–28 October 2005, in Chisinau and Odesa.

In Odesa, the parties also discussed the issue of monitoring the Moldovan-Ukrainian border, that of international monitoring of the military-industrial complex of Transnistria, as well as the prospects for organizing democratic elections in Transnistria. Also, there, the Russian representative handed the participants a document with the proposals of the state he represents on the Transnistrian issue (Boțan, 2009, p. 41).

Additional details regarding the rights and obligations of observers in the negotiation process were agreed upon through a separate protocol, which formulated in 12 points that observers have the following rights: to participate in official working sessions at all levels of

the negotiation process; to vote and intervene with positions; to ask and answer questions; to make comments; to propose the convening of meetings within the negotiation process, but not to convene them; to hold separate consultations with the parties and mediators; and to propose the organization of meetings and seminars that may facilitate the resolution of issues on the negotiation agenda. The parties may ask observers questions during meetings and request their expertise; however, observers do not sign documents in the negotiation process, do not participate in decision-making, and do not chair meetings (Gvidiani, 2020a, pp. 22–23).

The newly established format met on 15–16 December 2005 in Chisinau and Tiraspol. The participants adopted a final protocol, according to which, by the next round of negotiations, the OSCE was to prepare a draft mandate for an international mission to assess the situation in Transnistria with a view to holding democratic elections in the region. The Transnistrian side was to provide complete information on the troops and weapons it possessed, in accordance with the package of draft confidence- and security-building measures presented to the OSCE in July 2005. The participants addressed the OSCE Chairperson with a request to send a mission to Transnistria to monitor the military-industrial complex in the region and discussed the situation in the security zone, on which the OSCE issued a series of recommendations to the parties (Boțan, 2009).

On 26–27 January 2006, a new round of negotiations took place in Tiraspol and Chisinau. Here, the limitations of the “5+2” format became evident. The round ended with the signing of a joint protocol. However, William Hill, head of the OSCE Mission to the Republic of Moldova, expressed reservations about the results: “The discussions are proceeding with difficulty. On each issue, each side has its own point of view, which is radically different from the position of the opposing side”. Similarly, Chisinau’s representative in the negotiations, Moldovan Minister of Reintegration Vasile Șova, expressed dissatisfaction, noting that even in the third round of negotiations, “no decision has been reached” and that “all issues are being postponed, while committees and working groups are being formed that do not produce results”. By contrast, the representative of Tiraspol — foreign minister’ Valeri Litkai — expressed satisfaction with the negotiations, particularly with the Ukrainian side’s decision to suspend the application of unified Moldovan–Ukrainian customs procedures (Boțan, 2009). These statements clearly indicate that the negotiations in the current format tend to address the interests of Tiraspol rather than Chisinau and, in general, do not sufficiently serve the needs of conflict resolution.

Predictably, on 27 February 2006, when a new round of negotiations began, it was not finalized. The following day, the Moldovan delegation abandoned the talks, issuing a press release expressing concern about the lack of progress, particularly regarding the free movement of citizens and goods in the security zone in view of the upcoming spring agricultural works. On the same day, separatist leader Igor Smirnov issued a decree on the use of agricultural land in the Dubăsari district, which exacerbated tensions. Residents and businesses in villages under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Moldova would have access

only based on certificates of “special preferential registration of rights to use agricultural land,” granted on the basis of lease contracts concluded with the Transnistrian authorities, while the transportation of goods was conditioned on taxes paid in accordance with “Transnistrian legislation” (Boțan, 2009, p. 61).

Leaving the “5+2” format, the Moldovan side continued separate negotiations with the Russian Federation, without the participation and information of the other mediators and observers, which created concern among its Western partners. They received information about the content of the negotiations and the new “package” approach strategy of the Government of the Republic of Moldova only in June 2007, from the presidency. In a press conference (29 June, 2007), he briefly explained to the press the concept of a “package approach” that would include determining the status of Transnistria, guarantees for the population, confidence-building measures, demilitarization mechanisms, Moldova’s preservation of neutrality, and issues related to the recognition of Transnistrian property.

Therefore, the “5+2” format did not meet again until the end of 2011, even though there were informal discussions during 2010-2011.

The first official round, after the resumption, took place from 30 November to 1 December 2011 in Vilnius, and was dedicated to the procedural principles and the common acceptance of the new organizational framework of the negotiation process. The discussions focused on technical aspects, resulting in the signing of documents (Străuțiu, 2017, p. 197).

The most important results in terms of specifying the negotiating framework were produced by the Vienna round of negotiations on 18 April 2012, which organized the negotiation topics into three thematic baskets:

1. Socio-economic issues, which include aspects related to ensuring free movement, customs procedures, telecommunications, the financial-banking and fiscal system, property, transport and road infrastructure, education, culture, agriculture, environmental protection, health care, etc.
2. General legal, humanitarian, and human rights aspects, which include respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms, stimulation of dialogue at all social levels (including civil society activity and interpersonal contacts), media freedom, general legal issues (including in relation to previously assumed commitments), etc.
3. Comprehensive regulation, including institutional, political, and security issues (Gvidiani, 2020b, p. 17).

Continuing the negotiations for the functional consolidation of the format, the Protocol of 13 July 2012, signed in Vienna, officially approves the agenda of official meetings and the principles and procedures for conducting negotiations. Five working principles were established within the “5+2” format:

1. Participants will refrain from submitting preconditions.
2. The parties will demonstrate goodwill and will conduct a consecutive and constructive dialogue.

3. Participants will conduct negotiations from positions of equality at the dialogue table and will demonstrate mutual respect, benefiting from the right to submit any proposals or to discuss any topic considered to be important for the negotiation process.
4. The principle “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” shall apply to the negotiation of any document.
5. The parties will implement the agreed-upon agreements in good faith.

Among the procedural aspects, those referring to the organization of the work in the format of the Permanent Conference six times a year and the fact that the implementation mechanisms must be established in the content of each agreement (Gvidiani, 2020b, p. 17).

Under the auspices of the Ukrainian OSCE Chairmanship, another five official meetings of the “5+2” format took place during 2013 (Lviv: 18–19 February, Odesa: 23–24 May, Vienna: 16–17 July, Brussels: 3 October, Kyiv: 25–26 November) to establish the implementation mechanisms (Gvidiani, 2020b, p. 17).

From the Vilnius meeting until 6 June 2014 (the last official round in 2014), the “5+2” format produced 13 meetings, the discussions being focused on consultations on technical aspects, with the signing of relevant documents in this regard. In 2014, three rounds of negotiations already planned were postponed due to Tiraspol’s refusal to participate. In the assessment of officials from Chisinau, “Tiraspol’s logic was clear, open measures of protest were being exercised against the rise of the European integration processes from both the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and conditionalities were being drawn up aimed at diverting the Chisinau authorities from the course of association with the European Union”. In 2015, only one special consultation meeting in the “5+2” format was managed in Vienna, on 21 April (Gvidiani, 2020b, p. 16).

The revitalization of the analyzed format occurred at the Berlin meeting, on 2–3 June 2016. The meeting was the first after a two-year break, and it listed eight negotiation topics:

1. Gura Bicului Bridge: Reopening the bridge connecting Gura Bicului and Bicioc.
2. Diploma Apostille: Recognition and apostille of diplomas issued in Transnistria by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova.
3. Telecommunications: Ensuring and restoring fixed and mobile telephone connections between the two banks.
4. License Plates: Introducing a mechanism for neutral license plates for vehicles in the Transnistrian region.
5. Agricultural Land: Unhindered access of farmers from the Dubasari district to agricultural land beyond the Tiraspol–Camenca route.
6. Schools with Latin script: Ensuring the proper functioning of Moldovan schools on the left bank of the Dniester River.
7. Freedom of Movement: Eliminating barriers to the movement of citizens.
8. Criminal cases: Resolving criminal cases opened against officials and citizens on both sides.

During 2017 and 2018, two more rounds of negotiations took place in the “5+2” format, in Vienna and Rome. Both events reconfirmed the concentration of efforts of the parties in the selective implementation of the “Berlin Plus Package” and the avoidance of discussions on other political or security issues (such as the installation of joint checkpoints on the Moldovan–Ukrainian border or the exercises to force the Dniester River by Transnistrian troops with the participation of the Russian contingent in Tiraspol). Under these conditions, the meetings served as a platform for updating the action plan agreed in Berlin and less to ensure the coordination of “small steps” within all three negotiating baskets (Mogîldea, 2019, p. 2).

Ultimately, the special conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war put the entire negotiation format — which anyway seemed exhausted from the point of view of resolving the political interests of the two sides — on hold. Part of the agenda was transferred to the “1+1” format and sectoral working groups, but even there, the results are not significant.

It is obvious that the functioning of the “5+2” format has created conditions for solving technical, administrative, and everyday life problems of the communities affected by the conflict, but not by itself; the successes have been shared with the other two formats, “5+2” offering a broader political framework and more solid international guarantees. Moreover, this platform has solved the need of international partners to be involved and to expose their own interests and positions. The criticisms are nevertheless justified, especially those referring to the inefficiency of the “small steps” policy and the exclusion of political and security issues from the agenda (Țugui, 2012), according to the third negotiating basket.

Conclusions

The main factor influencing successes and failures in the negotiation process remains the special positioning of the Russian Federation within the conflict, which is equally a party (signatory of the 1992 Agreement), mediator, and military involved (through the Technical Operational Group it maintains in Tiraspol, which is under the command of the Western District of the Ministry of National Defense in Moscow). These different and contradictory roles provide a special ability to influence the settlement process. Most of the time, the negotiating agendas of Moscow and Tiraspol within the “5+2” format are identical or complementary.

Moscow’s “original sin”, accused as such by many Moldovan and Western politicians and analysts, is its positioning during the military phase of the conflict. Today, in Chisinau but also in many Western circles, the prevailing view is that the conclusion of military operations through the *Agreement* signed by Moscow and Chisinau in 1992 shows that we are witnessing an inter-state conflict, and not an inter-ethnic conflict. This war took place between two “abruptly asymmetric states”, with Tiraspol being built as a “proxy for Moscow” (Popescu, 2013, p. 121).

In the following years, the Russian Federation assumed a patron-client relationship with the secessionist republic, which it protects from political, economic, and security points of view (Devyatkov, 2017, p. 18). On several occasions, international bodies such as the European Court of Human Rights confirmed (Saca et al., 2006, p. 99). In its judgments in 2016, the ECHR found 31 violations of the European Convention on Human Rights. These relate in particular to two articles — violation of the right to a fair trial and ill-treatment or use of excessive force by state agents (Rotaru, 2025, p. 289).

Several nuances regarding the position of the Russian Federation should be noted. First, it has not offered international recognition to the secessionist republic (unlike other cases, such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Donetsk, or Luhansk), remaining firm in formally recognizing the independence and integrity of the Republic of Moldova. On the other hand, the different Russian power centers behave differently. Strong support for Transnistria's independence initiatives comes from the State Duma, where numerous members have contacts with Tiraspol and visit Tiraspol. Deputies addressed interpellations to the executive, requested hearings, and delivered speeches favorable to the Transnistrian regime. In 1995, the State Duma refused to ratify the Moldovan-Russian agreement on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Moldova and recommended that President Yeltsin consider recognizing Transnistria's independence.

Under these circumstances, Aurel Lavric's reasoning seems irreproachable:

Therefore, the first confusion of the authorities in Chisinau is related to the misunderstanding, as is also evident in the "5+2" format (of quasi-non-existent negotiations, agreed upon by the Moldovan authorities) of the actors involved in the conflict in the east of the Republic of Moldova. Although the Memorandum on the settlement of the conflict (which was, in fact, a ceasefire agreement) of 21 July 1992, was signed exclusively by the Presidents of Moldova M. Snegur and Russia B. Yeltsin (thus, these are the two parties in the conflict, since the troops of the regular Russian army and paramilitary formations of Russian Cossacks fought against the Moldovan state police), today Russia appears in the above-mentioned format as a mediator (what kind of "neutral mediator" can it be?) between the Republic of Moldova and a part of it where there is a Russian military occupation regime, led by Russian citizens (2012, p. 29).

In essence, the negotiations conducted between Chisinau and Tiraspol for three and a half decades show a continuous struggle to score points on issues of limited importance, of a technical nature, each positioning and signed document being understood by the parties as an advance towards the reintegration of the Republic of Moldova (from Chisinau's perspective), respectively towards the formal and definitive achievement of independence (from Tiraspol's perspective).

Under these conditions, negotiations were a real chance to prevent the conflict from re-entering a "hot" phase, but they inevitably led relations between the two parties towards a "frozen conflict" (synonyms with "unresolved conflict", "postponed conflict", or

“protracted conflict”). It is obvious that the indefinite extension of the negotiations suits, from a tactical point of view, Tiraspol and its ally, the Russian Federation, which is buying time for the institutional consolidation, in small steps, of the secessionist republic.

In detail, several other issues should be noted that prevent real developments towards resolving the most important issue of the negotiations, the political one.

First of all, Tiraspol’s systematic refusal to address the political issue (in terms of the “5+2” format: the third package of negotiations) cannot be countered in the current organization of the negotiations. Sanctions for lack of activity in certain negotiation chapters are not provided through protocols and regulations. Only certain negotiation strategies and tactics can solve the problem. A valid strategic option for Chisinau remains the “package” solution of key issues of a political, economic, social, humanitarian, and security nature (Străuțiu, 2017, p. 199). By contrast, the Transnistrian side tried to dissociate the first two “baskets” of problems from the third, even going so far as to establish a “5+2 Social-Humanitarian Format” as an instrument for ensuring equitable basic elements from a humanitarian, social, economic, civil, and legal point of view for the vital activity of the population on the right and left bank of the Dniester. Within this format, a special program for the socio-economic and humanitarian rehabilitation of the region would have been implemented, which includes the application of a package of socio-economic transformations and the involvement of the parties in projects with social, legal, economic, informational, and infrastructure purposes (Ignatiev, 2009, p. 38). Of course, this proposal had no chance.

Secondly, decision-making by consensus offers the parties the opportunity to block initiatives that are inconvenient in terms of their goals of reintegration/total secession. Even so, there is no solution; there is no other solution than negotiation until consensus, and the three formats analyzed by us remain the main options for resolving everyday problems between Chisinau and Tiraspol.

Thirdly, the “small steps” strategy that worked in favor of Tiraspol, in all negotiation formats, is no longer relevant. The international context no longer offers time for maneuver for minor issues, when the region and the entire world are restructuring as a hierarchy of power, including through new borders. In the absence of the “5+2” format, neither of the other two formats has offered any political progress or any solution to everyday problems after 2022. The pace of the negotiation sessions, the conflictive atmosphere around the few discussions, clearly indicate that decisive solutions in the Transnistrian conflict can no longer be postponed, without serious consequences. In a rational version, these should occur peacefully. It is no coincidence that several recent statements by the leadership in Chisinau evoke the possibility of reuniting the Republic of Moldova with Romania. In terms of negotiation, this is the “exit tactic”: from now on, you will negotiate with Romania, that is, with NATO and the European Union.

Finally, the issue of the Russian Federation’s positioning in the conflict and in the negotiation process remains of utmost importance. Of course, including as a negotiating tool, the Moldovan side will always have to denounce the incompatibility of Russia’s roles

as a party to the conflict, mediator, and ally of one side. But, in a realistic assessment, solid and long-term solutions cannot be decided in contradiction to the interests of the Russian Federation. The alternative of returning to military operations will appear immediately, especially in the context in which Russia needs Transnistria as a strategic base in the war with Ukraine and its possible further developments. A chance to close the conflict could arise outside the current negotiation formats, at the level of negotiations (formal or informal) that will take place to close the war in Ukraine. The Western partners of the Republic of Moldova could adopt the same “package” strategy, from which the Republic of Moldova would either remain reintegrated or part of Romania.

Positioning ourselves above the separate evaluations of each actor in the negotiation process (who may consider a loss suffered by one of the partners a success) as an independent evaluator of the functionality and results of the sum of the three formats analyzed, we list a new set of assessments and conclusions.

1. From a procedural point of view, the three formats offer sufficient, coherent regulations that promise maximum chances for a continuous, results-oriented operation. In fact, too much of the content of the negotiations referred precisely to the formulation of principles and regulations, and too few successful problem completions were scored.
2. The different or divergent interests of the actors caused discontinuities and failures. They often abusively extended or deliberately misinterpreted previous commitments, leading the negotiation process to deadlock. For example, the unanimously accepted principle of ensuring free movement in the Security Zone is translated by the Moldovan side as an obligation to lift the checkpoints organized by the Tiraspol regime as a “border” and free access for Moldovan farmers to work their agricultural lands across the Dniester. Meanwhile, the Tiraspol authorities demand the free movement of its “officials” in the Republic of Moldova and from there to foreign countries, even if they are prosecuted for acts related to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova, but also the free movement of cars registered in Tiraspol, according to internationally unrecognized procedures.
3. In terms of results related to the main objectives, the balance sheet seems positive, but in a nuanced manner. The essential goal of preventing the re-emergence of war has been achieved — at least up to this point. The other essential goal, to which all recognized international actors subscribed — the reintegration of the Republic of Moldova, by granting a special status to Transnistria — was not resolved. On the contrary, the negotiations on this package have been systematically boycotted by the Transnistrian side, without any solution being identified within the current negotiation formats. However, as a general trend, the Transnistrian case seems to be the most successful, compared to the others in the Soviet space. If we take a look at the Nagorno Karabakh case, there are not even the principles of negotiation that could ever be established, the parties stubbornly refusing, one after another, the “Package Plan”, the “Step-by-Step” approach, the “Common State” plan, the “Land Swap” proposal, or the “Madrid Principles” (Wolff, 2021, p. 6).

4. In terms of the prospects of the negotiations leading to a definitive solution to the conflict, the results look very bad, not for reasons inherent to the negotiation formats, but because of the international context, which puts two major actors (the Russian Federation and Ukraine) at war and positions the two parties in contradictory conflict towards this war.

Even without this major external factor having occurred, we must note, together with Stefen Wolff (2021, pp. 8, 11, 13), that the comparative analysis of the success of negotiation formats in cases of “frozen conflicts” in the post-Soviet space leads to three major findings: agreement on non-political issues is possible; success on non-political issues does not automatically spill over into political issue area and does not necessarily prevent a resurgence of violence; for settlements to be sustainable, they need to be negotiated by the conflict parties.

It does not sound encouraging and does not seem enough to continue to believe in the chances of success of negotiations on frozen conflicts, because

Decades of lack of progress have created entrenched interests of all sides in the non-settlement of the protracted conflicts and/or in settlements that are neither feasible nor viable. In this sense, the existing negotiation formats, by merely simulating conflict settlement negotiations, have lost their sense of purpose and their sense of what an actual settlement of any of the protracted conflicts would look like (Wolff, 2021, p. 15).

For the Transnistrian case, the conclusion is perfectly valid. Ideas can be formulated to improve the framework of negotiations by attaching the expertise of non-governmental organizations, professional organizations of lawyers, and other interested actors (Romania, first of all, as an actor separate from the European Union and the OSCE, just as the Russian Federation and Ukraine are separate actors and OSCE members at the same time). However, with so many substantial changes, we will talk about other negotiation formats, and these will depend mainly on the power relations at the end of the Russian–Ukrainian war, which risks expanding at any time and fundamentally transforming the current aspect of the Transnistrian conflict.

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Cameroon: Traditional and Formal Perspectives of Conflict Resolution in the Balikumbat and Ndop Subdivisions

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Abstract: This paper examines traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. Numerous historical, political, economic, and social differences ignited bloody conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring ethnic groups, with adverse effects on the population. This explains why the use of both traditional and modern mechanisms in resolving these conflicts became imperative, as all available avenues had to be explored. At different periods and before various formal and traditional actors and institutions, diverse mechanisms were employed to resolve inter-village differences, each revealing strengths and weaknesses that had a significant impact on the processes and outcomes. Using a qualitative case study research design, the study selected a sample of 25 people who had been affected by the conflicts or had actively or passively participated in their resolution. Data were collected with the aid of interview guides. Our findings revealed that, while formal approaches, by virtue of their punitive nature, imposed solutions without promoting reconciliation, restorative traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, which were deeply embedded in the customs and ways of life of the people, continued to demonstrate their capacity to offer sustainable solutions to violent disagreements. This research therefore underscores the need to integrate modern and traditional approaches to conflict resolution in a functional juxtaposition that will enrich the actors, institutions, and processes involved and help achieve sustainable outcomes.

Keywords: Traditional, formal, perspectives, conflict, conflict resolution, integrating.

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Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable component of human interaction (Akhogbai, 2026). Two people, ethnic groups, or countries with divergent political, economic, and social views cannot be expected to agree on everything at all times. This can be explained by the fact that different individuals, groups, and countries work tirelessly to meet their needs. In doing so, they engage in struggles over limited resources and opportunities, thereby creating fertile ground for conflict (Aboh et al., 2023). However, in order to succeed in pursuing these needs, appropriate mechanisms for addressing conflicts must be adopted and effectively employed. Throughout history, societies have developed diverse mechanisms to address grievances and restore social equilibrium. The chiefdoms of the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions are endowed with a multitude of institutions that embody longstanding traditions of conflict resolution. The uniqueness of these institutions, by virtue of their reliance on local actors and their capacity to produce restorative outcomes, collectively enables them to resist or, at times, even subvert the authority of the state (Mutisi, 2012). However, despite being deeply rooted in the culture and history of the people, these institutions continue to be significantly influenced by the state, NGOs, and other external organizations. The activities of the state, NGOs, private organizations, and traditional institutions have also led to the adoption of diverse methods for resolving conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions.

Objectives of the Study

- a. To critically examine and compare the structural, procedural, and philosophical differences between indigenous traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and formal dispute resolution systems.
- b. To evaluate and compare the relative effectiveness of traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms by identifying their respective strengths and weaknesses in achieving sustainable peace in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions.
- c. To examine how indigenous consensus-building mechanisms and state-sponsored judicial frameworks can be integrated with the objective of developing a scalable, hybrid model of conflict resolution that enhances community cohesion and local governance in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon.

Significance of the Study

The Balikumbat subdivision, located in Cameroon's North West Region, has experienced a prolonged, decades-long rivalry rooted in historical, economic, and political differences. These tensions have had adverse effects on the population, including the loss of life, the displacement of people, and the destruction of property. Research on traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms is therefore crucial to breaking this cycle of violence.

Entrenched interethnic conflicts have far-reaching implications for development, including a significant decline in agricultural output as conflicts prevent the use of land in disputed areas within the Balikumbat subdivision. Implementing effective traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms could substantially restore agricultural productivity and promote economic stability.

Conventional, state-sponsored legal systems and modern litigation are often adversarial, costly, and sometimes leave lingering bitterness. This research demonstrates how the formal justice system alone has historically failed to provide lasting resolutions to indigenous land tenure disputes and political conflicts. It therefore evaluates the effectiveness of indigenous institutions, such as mediation by community elders, secret societies, and councils of elders. The study highlights how these approaches prioritize restorative justice, community harmony, and forgiveness over punitive sanctions.

Rather than treating traditional and modern systems as mutually exclusive, this research provides a valuable blueprint for integrating indigenous cultural heritage with formal democratic governance. It helps policymakers understand how these approaches can be combined to resolve conflicts more effectively while addressing contemporary challenges, such as human rights and gender inclusion.

Literature Review

Several studies have explored the significance of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in various African societies. Endogenous dispute resolution systems, such as village elders, the mediation of conflicts by traditional rulers, and traditional court systems, continue to demonstrate their relevance alongside formal institutions managed by the state. However, the significant challenges faced by these traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in the modern state cannot be overlooked (Akhogbai, 2026).

Adopting a similar position, ACCORD (2019) posits that prior to colonization and the slave trade, institutional mechanisms and cultural practices existed in Africa that upheld the values of peace, tolerance, solidarity, and reciprocal respect. Consequently, family alliances among different families ensured that decisions aimed at resolving conflicts were respected.

In line with ACCORD, Fidelis et al. (2023) assert that the changes brought about by Westernization and globalization have come close to eroding African cultures, leaving behind foreign cultural influences in the domain of conflict resolution that often contradict the ethical and cultural values unique to Africa. Using the case of Nigeria, the authors confirm the existence of valuable traditions that are intertwined with the people's belief in the capacity of gods of justice to intervene and guarantee justice and moral uprightness.

Complementing this view, Olaniran and Arigu (2013) examine the invaluable contributions of Nigerian traditional rulers to pre-colonial Nigerian societies and show how the limited participation of these traditional rulers in present-day governance helps explain the

persistence of social conflicts in contemporary socioeconomic and political life. They advocate for the synchronization of traditional norms and values with modern approaches to governance, arguing that such an approach would go a long way toward reducing, if not completely eliminating, many of the problems plaguing the modern state, particularly with regard to access to justice and conflict resolution.

This view is supported by Ben-Mensah (2004), who examines the different methods used in conflict resolution in pre-colonial Africa and compares them with contemporary approaches on the continent. He reiterates that there is an apparent dichotomy, or “disconnect”, between modern and traditional conflict resolution perspectives and practices. Furthermore, he argues that the limited success of attempts to resolve conflicts at the national level has contributed to the widespread involvement of regional organizations, private military companies, NGOs, and the United Nations, albeit with limited success. He then posits that the prospects for the peaceful resolution of Africa’s conflicts can be significantly improved if the continent’s indigenous principles, skills, and methods of conflict resolution are better understood and effectively integrated with those of the modern state.

According to Jeong (2010), there are different ways of addressing the range of problems arising from competitive relationships within and between societies. The author argues that the principal mission of conflict resolution is to prevent the re-emergence of harmful conflict by fundamentally transforming hostile dynamics, since win-win solutions often result from addressing structural inequalities and unjust socioeconomic systems, which constitute the primary sources of friction. He further maintains that force is not the best method of conflict resolution because it often leaves the parties dissatisfied.

Ramsbotham, Miall, and Woodhouse (2011) pay particular attention to conflict and conflict resolution. Emphasizing the importance of reconciliation, they explain how conflicts emerge and discuss the various mechanisms established for their resolution. According to these authors, the role of a third party is to facilitate the transition from hostile and unstable interactions to nonviolent and adaptable ones. This is only possible when parties to a conflict acknowledge their responsibilities, thereby facilitating the search for solutions to their differences.

Consistent with previous findings, Bukari (2013) reveals how the creation and use of committees of inquiry, law courts, the police, NGOs, decrees, and peace enforcement measures, mainly by the government, have led to the application of methods such as mediation, reconciliation, peacekeeping, and arbitration in the resolution of conflicts in the Bawku area of Ghana. He argues that these methods have not been particularly successful, as they have only managed conflicts and prevented them from escalating to uncontrollable levels, while failing to provide lasting solutions.

Research Methodology

Research design

The qualitative case study research design enabled the researcher to gather information on traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. Multiple data sources, such as interviews, archival documents, observations, and secondary sources, facilitated the collection of rich data and informed perspectives on the different approaches to handling violent disagreements in the area. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the philosophies underlying traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon and how these have continued to shape inter-village relations and social interaction.

Sources

Relevant information on traditional and formal approaches to conflict resolution was obtained through interviews, observations, archival documents, and the analysis of multiple published works. One-on-one interviews were conducted with traditional authorities such as chairpersons of traditional councils, members of secret societies, village elders, and members of village development associations in the chiefdoms of Balikumbat, Bafanji, and Bambalang. Members of cultural and development associations, as well as staff of the Divisional Delegation of Social Affairs (DDSA) for the Ngoketunjia Division, were also sampled, and relevant data were obtained.

Direct and indirect observations also provided valuable data for this study. During fieldwork in the study area, the researcher had the opportunity to observe how people in the conflict-affected communities, separated by many years of armed conflict, interacted with one another. These observations enabled the researcher to evaluate the avoidance-based conflict management strategy that had come to characterize the relationship between Balikumbat and neighboring ethnic groups.

Archival information was obtained from the National Archives in Buea and the Regional Archives in Bamenda, located in the Southwest and Northwest regions of Cameroon, respectively. Documents such as police reports, court rulings, records of official meetings, and formal complaints related to various land conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions provided primary data for this study.

Secondary sources, such as published journal articles on conflict and conflict resolution mechanisms, provided valuable insights that facilitated a comprehensive analysis of traditional and formal dispute resolution strategies in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. Doctoral and master's theses focusing on the study area also provided useful data for this research.

Sampling

Using the non-probability sampling technique, 25 respondents were purposively selected because of their ranks and roles in the resolution of conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions. Specific interview guides with unstructured, semi-structured, and open-ended questions were prepared in advance, based on the uniqueness of each of the villages visited to gather data for the paper. In the Balikumbat and Bafanji chiefdoms, group interviews with respondents allowed the researcher to understand group dynamics and perceptions about traditional and formal conflict resolution mechanisms in the subdivisions under study. The sampling of staff from the divisional offices of Plan International Cameroon and the DDSA Ngoketunjia, using specific interview guides, enabled the researcher to obtain vital information on modern conflict resolution mechanisms.

Data obtained from the various villages were compared to identify points of convergence and divergence and to provide an inclusive analysis of conflict resolution mechanisms in the area. Information from interviews was also compared with archival data to ensure accuracy and objectivity.

Discussions of Findings and Results

A comparative analysis of traditional versus formal paradigms in conflict resolution

The differences between traditional and modern methods of conflict resolution lie at the level of the institutions and actors. It is for this reason that Ben-Mensah (2004) is of the opinion that there is an apparent gap or “divide” between formal and homegrown conflict resolution philosophies and practices. However, the cultural context must be taken into consideration for an effective use of either traditional or modern methods in the resolution of conflicts.

Traditional Versus Modern Actors

Indigenous resolution mechanisms use local actors in finding solutions to conflicts. At the forefront of the process are community leaders such as native chiefs, kings, priests, healers, elders and community dignitaries and often with vested authority to perform rituals in the presence of the whole community (Bukari, 2013). These local actors generally address conflicts using local beliefs, values, attitudes as well as local contexts, procedures and practices (Bukari, 2013), which are generally accepted by the community or communities. As such, they are better placed to handle the problems of the people. According to the Economic Commission for Africa (2007),

Unlike government-appointed administrators, lower-level chiefs and village leaders live in conditions largely similar to those of their communities. They share common interest and think like the people. As a result, they are better equipped to represent

the interests of their communities than are government-appointed administrators who are accountable only to the political elite (p. 23).

These traditional authorities often acted as mediators and negotiators, thereby facilitating the process of conflict resolution (Boege, 2011). For instance, most traditional authorities in Balikumbat and neighboring villages were born and raised in their village settings and consequently possess a deep knowledge of the customs and traditions of the people (personal communication, August 18, 2014). Such traditional elders therefore have extensive experience and strong skills in conflict regulation and in interpreting signs of reconciliation (Bukari, 2013). In the Balikumbat subdivision, these authorities included fons, members of traditional councils and regulatory societies, village kingmakers, as well as quarter heads.

In effect, whenever there is a point of discord, the chief invites village elders to settle the thorny issue. This often yields positive results because discussions are frank and open, and anyone found guilty is asked to pay a token fine as a symbol of admission of wrongdoing (Ngwane, 1996). Local mediation and negotiation are equally undertaken by traditional actors in the resolution of conflicts. For example, in efforts to resolve the Balikumbat–Bafanji conflict and to ensure that lasting peace was restored between the two villages, the chairman of the Balikumbat Traditional Council and his Bafanji counterpart worked relentlessly to find solutions to the problems that were creating hostilities between their chiefdoms. In this regard, the Balikumbat Traditional Council chairman personally met his counterpart in Bafanji on two separate occasions, during which they discussed how to resolve conflicts between their villages (personal communication, August 13, 2014). The Fon of Bagam, as well as the North West Fons Association (NOWEFA), also acted as mediators in conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring chiefdoms.

In contrast to these traditional actors, modern or Westphalian methods of conflict resolution involve diverse actors such as administrative officials, workers within international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and law enforcement officers who know very little about the beliefs and culture of the people. Efforts by these modern actors, especially INGOs, do not often lead to genuine conflict resolution at the local level. This failure can be explained by the fact that most of these INGOs do not understand the local realities of these conflicts and are therefore not in a position to propose effective solutions for their resolution (Bukari, 2013).

In fact, Land Ordinances No. 74-1, 74-2, and 74-3 of 6 July 1974, by which Cameroonian law stripped the customary legal system of any role in the legal control and administration of land, paved the way for the adoption of the 1976 ordinance (Sobseh, 2011). Following this ordinance, a Land Consultative Board was established with competence to handle land-related disputes in each division or subdivision. This board was dominated by administrative authorities, including the Divisional Officer (DO) as Chair (Ministry of Territorial Administration), the Divisional Chief of Land Affairs as Secretary (Ministry of State Property, Lands and Surveys), and the Divisional Chief of Surveys as a member

(Ministry of State Property, Lands and Surveys). The village traditional chief and two councilors were only allowed to serve as members of the board, with limited ability to influence decisions (Official Gazette, 1996).

It is important to note that these administrative authorities, appointed to serve in areas where they knew very little or nothing about the customs and traditions of the people, faced significant challenges in the resolution of local conflicts. As a result, many failed to permanently demarcate boundary areas, which were a major source of tension, and this continued to fuel hostilities between Balikumbat and neighboring ethnic groups in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions.

Traditional versus modern institutions

Religious brotherhoods, ethno-linguistic groups, and local institutions remain significant in the conflict resolution process in Africa (Sobseh, 2011). These African traditional institutions have continued to play a pivotal role in conflict resolution despite their increasing domination and manipulation by governments. In the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon, traditional institutions involved in conflict resolution are varied. Prominent among them are the traditional council of elders, the Fon (traditional head of the village), Fon associations, secret societies, noble societies, and women's development and cultural organizations. Decisions taken by these institutions enjoy a high degree of acceptance and legitimacy among the people, as judgments are often based on local realities.

In the villages of Balikumbat, Bafanji, and Bambalang, for instance, the traditional council of elders plays a preponderant role in the day-to-day administration of the villages. They sometimes act as customary courts, resolving cases brought before them for judgment. This does not end at this level, as representatives from these institutions also negotiate and mediate conflicts on behalf of the village (personal communication, December 28, 2014).

This stands in contrast to the use of the court system and foreign NGOs in conflict resolution. The government, courts of law, and NGOs have become actively involved in seeking solutions to violent disagreements. The government, for example, through the enactment of ordinances, the creation of land boundary tribunals, and the establishment of committees of inquiry, has been at the forefront of addressing violent disputes in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions (National Archives Buea, 1971).

However, general skepticism toward these institutions and their decisions, which are often rejected by conflicting parties, has frequently led to further problems, culminating in violent confrontations. These shortcomings increasingly highlight the importance of traditional methods of conflict resolution today. The Gacaca courts set up to promote accountability in Rwanda must be emulated by African states and chiefdoms. These courts tried more than a million cases of genocide and crimes against humanity committed between 1990 and 1994. The positive assessment of this mechanism led to the institutionalization of traditional methods of conflict resolution within the Rwandan legal system (Mutisi, 2012).

Strengths and weaknesses of traditional methods

Strengths

The relevance of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution is vividly captured by a polar view, which affirms that traditional institutions are indispensable for political transformation in Africa since the continent's history, culture, political, and governance systems are embedded in them (Economic Commission for Africa, 2007). Thus, while the government often neglects traditional efforts at conflict resolution between Balikumbat and its neighbors, the people, on the other hand, still hold great respect for their traditional institutions and leaders and sometimes prefer to align with decisions taken by the latter in efforts to resolve conflicts.

Traditional methods open up avenues for participation and inclusion (Boege, 2011). Land in the chiefdoms of the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions is considered communal property and therefore must be protected by all. As such, when conflicts broke out between Balikumbat and its neighbors over land, everyone participated in the violent confrontations that ensued. Even women, to a limited extent, carried out war activities that had traditionally been attributed to men (Ngufor, 2007). As a result, efforts were made from various angles and by different members of the community to put an end to these conflicts. This collective search for solutions can be contrasted with most modern methods, which rely on coercive means to arrive at decisions that are often rejected by parties in conflict.

The application of traditional methods of conflict resolution does not require large expenditures and can lead to the expedient resolution of conflicts. For example, the Gacaca courts in Rwanda tried more than 1.3 million cases of genocide and crimes against humanity since 2001. The same number of cases would have taken Rwandan modern courts more than three decades (Mutisi, 2012). Similarly, modern methods of resolving conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring chiefdoms have achieved very limited success.

Endogenous conflict resolution methods allow for the resolution of conflicts while taking into consideration local beliefs, values, and attitudes, as well as local procedures, actors, and practices (Bukari, 2013). This helps in resolving conflict while keeping intact African religious customs and traditions. These traditional beliefs and practices, which sometimes involve oaths, rituals, and libations, have generally earned the respect of the people who identify with them. As such, conflicting parties are more likely to accept the outcomes of negotiations, in contrast to modern methods and court systems, whose decisions are often rejected by disputing parties, especially in land conflicts. For instance, the people of Balikumbat have on many occasions flouted government and court decisions or complied with them more out of fear than genuine acceptance.

Traditional methods of conflict resolution are indispensable in areas where the presence of the state is relatively weak or completely absent. This often leads to large-scale conflicts, as violent groups take advantage of fragile situations (Boege, 2011). In the absence of

state-based institutions and mechanisms for the control of violence and regulation of conflicts, people resort to non-state customary ways of addressing them (Boege, 2011). As such, the administration wasted considerable time after the outbreak of conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring ethnic groups, as troops had to be deployed from Bamenda (the regional capital of the North West region, where the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions are located), situated about 60 kilometers away.

However, by the time troops arrived, the situation had already reached uncontrollable levels, and the resulting damages increased hostility and reduced the chances of effective resolution. Under these conditions, many were encouraged to resort to traditional methods, which could bring a swift end to conflicts in the area.

Weaknesses

Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms enjoy little or no legal recognition. Consequently, decisions taken by traditional authorities in this respect are not always binding, except in situations where all parties to the conflict owe allegiance to a common god or ancestor. In recent times, many people involved in conflicts prefer to flout decisions taken by traditional authorities and take their cases to state-run judicial systems, especially in instances where these decisions are not in their favor. A glaring example is the reconciliatory meeting organized by NOWEFA after the 1995 Balikumbat–Bafanji conflict. The Fon of Bafanji neglected and boycotted the meeting and preferred to sue the Fon of Balikumbat at the Bamenda High Court (Deyeb, 2014). Had NOWEFA been recognized by law as a legal judicial organ for conflict resolution, and had its summons and decisions been binding, the Fon of Bafanji would have respected the association's call, and this might have contributed to preventing the outbreak of the 1998 Balikumbat–Bafanji violence (personal communication, December 17, 2014).

Secondly, the manipulation of traditional systems by government and politicians has equally undermined the role these traditional institutions can play in conflict resolution. The importance and applicability of endogenous conflict resolution mechanisms have been significantly weakened by political interference, corruption, and misuse of traditional structures, especially traditional chieftaincy, which has progressively compromised legitimacy in the resolution of land conflicts (Sobseh, 2011).

For instance, after the creation of NOWEFA in 1993, which brought together most of the Fons of the North-West region of Cameroon, the Fon of Balikumbat, with the alleged complicity of Prime Minister Achidi Achu, created the North West Fons Conference (NOWEFCO) as an alternative to NOWEFA. The new association sought to unite Fons who were members of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) (Fokwang, 2009). This created division among traditional rulers, thereby diminishing the impact such an organization would have had in conflict resolution in the North-West region of Cameroon (personal communication, August 14, 2014).

Another weakness of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms is the inability of traditional actors such as Fons, village mediators, elders, community leaders, clan leaders, and local religious figures to enforce decisions aimed at resolving conflicts (Fokwang, 2009). Unlike administrative officials such as governors, DOs, and SDOs, who can rely on armed forces to compel compliance, traditional authorities and associations like NOWEFA are often perceived as lacking the means to implement their decisions. This is because they do not have the necessary financial and human resources to ensure enforcement.

It is for this reason that one highly skeptical strand contends that “Chieftaincy is anachronistic, a hindrance to development and transformation of the continent, undemocratic, divisive, and costly” (Economic Commission for Africa, 2007, p. 11). As such, the peace pact signed following the Balikumbat–Bafanji conflict of 1995 contained no provisions obliging leaders of the different chiefdoms in the region to refrain from using violence as a means of resolving conflicts. The only proposal — that a “curse involving point” be included in land conflict resolution to bind the Fons to the agreement — was quickly rejected by the Fons of Mankon and Bali (Sobseh, 2011). This served as clear evidence that, under indigenous approaches to conflict resolution, parties have the power to reject any settlement with which they are not satisfied (Boege, 2011). Consequently, advice is accepted only when both parties consent.

Again, women and youths are given only subsidiary roles in indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms. Women are generally subordinate to men in much of Africa, especially in systems that practice patrilineal succession. Here, opportunities for women to participate in decision-making are limited, although there are considerable differences between communities (Economic Commission for Africa, 2007). In most of these African societies, elders are considered wise due to their age and are accorded respect and responsibility for maintaining peace within the community.

These traditional African societies and traditions often reflect male dominance, and a woman’s place is considered to be in the kitchen and in ensuring family continuity through reproduction. In this regard, during formal peace negotiations following the Balikumbat–Bafanji conflict, women played marginal roles such as cooking and dancing to entertain negotiators (Ngufor, 2014). In fact, it is commonly observed that in most fondoms of the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions, women are excluded from most socio-political decision-making traditional institutions.

Youth, who make up the majority of the population in the different chiefdoms of the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions, are often relegated to the background on the grounds that they are too young to understand important societal issues, including conflicts. This is ironic, considering that many of these youths in rural settings are involved in agriculture and are therefore directly affected by land-related issues. This neglect of youth continues to be a major setback for indigenous methods of conflict resolution.

In addition, the efficacy of traditional methods is mostly felt in intra-chiefdom conflicts, as opposed to the difficulties encountered when applying the same methods in

inter-chiefdom conflicts (Sobseh, 2011). This is especially true when the conflicting villages have different cultures, traditions, and values. In such situations, methods such as sacrifices, rituals, and libations are set aside, and other methods, which may be less effective, are prioritized. For instance, after the 1995 Balikumbat-Bafanji conflict and during efforts to resolve it, the Fon of Bafanji refused to swear an oath in Bamunka to determine who had caused the conflict (personal communication, August 11, 2014). This was because he did not feel any obligation toward the gods to whom the oath would have been sworn. Had it been an internal conflict, the villager(s) would have been obliged to take the oath to resolve the matter. The limitations of traditional actors and institutions of conflict resolution are captured in the following assertion by the Economic Commission for Africa (2007):

Many of Africa's nationalist, first-generation leaders such as Houphouet-Boigny, Sekou Toure, Leopold Senghor, and Kwame Nkrumah, saw Chiefs as functionaries of the colonial State and Chieftaincy as an anachronistic vestige of the old Africa that had no place in the postcolonial political landscape. African nationalist leaders, therefore, often pursued policies to Africanize the bureaucracy without indigenizing the institutions of governance (p. 8).

Another weakness of traditional approaches to conflict resolution is their variation from place to place. There is no “one size fits all” approach when it comes to traditional methods of conflict resolution. In fact, every African society or community with a specific history, culture, and customs possesses its own methods of conflict resolution (Boege, 2011). These traditional approaches function in relation to the specific context of the people concerned. This marks an important difference between traditional and Western approaches, the latter aiming at universal application (Boege, 2011).

Consequently, it becomes difficult to apply traditional approaches in situations where the two conflicting parties possess different cultural values and beliefs, since what is considered taboo in the traditions of one village may be acceptable in another. To make matters worse, most African societies have forgotten aspects of their cultures, values, and ethics (Bime, 2012). In fact, African forefathers, for various reasons, left behind elements of their culture, including art, music, dance, sports, religion (Bime, 2012), and conflict resolution. These shortcomings can be addressed if, and only if, there is some form of codification of African customs and traditions, along with the general recognition of certain practices by different African communities on the continent, especially those that are constantly affected by conflicts.

Strengths and weaknesses of modern conflict resolution mechanisms

Strengths

Modern methods of conflict resolution, with their multiplicity of actors, provide opportunities for third-party intervention. The third party may not always have a direct interest in the conflict, thus paving the way for a transparent and trustworthy conflict

resolution process. This is contrary to traditional methods, where the main actors — who are most often traditional authorities — believe they are right and are not always ready for compromise. This partly explains why Plan International Cameroon was the first NGO to bring the people of Balikumbat and Bambalang to the negotiation table after the violent confrontations in 2011 (DDSA, 2011).

Modern actors and institutions of conflict resolution, such as administrative authorities and state-run judicial systems, enjoy legal recognition and are not only able to carry out their activities in full legality but are also capable of taking decisions that are binding on conflicting parties. These modern actors and institutions often represent the state, which is a supreme and autonomous structure insofar as it makes rules and laws that all actors operating within its territory are required to obey. The decisions taken to resolve conflicts are considered law, and any violation of such decisions is punishable. Thus, any decision taken — whether it suits the whims and caprices of the disputing parties or not — is often respected, albeit more out of fear than compromise.

Again, state-run judicial systems, the government, and NGOs often possess the necessary resources to ensure effective conflict resolution. These institutions often have state resources at their disposal and can use them to support conflict resolution processes. In effect, the continuous relegation of traditional actors and institutions to the background has greatly undermined their role. This has pushed some traditional rulers into other income-generating activities that neither suit their status as traditional authorities nor please the indigenous people who hold them in high esteem. As such, people have begun to question the credibility of these authorities in effectively resolving their problems. This explains why NGOs such as Plan Cameroon, thanks to their goodwill gestures in the form of humanitarian aid, were able to win the trust of the villages of Balikumbat and Bambalang and bring them together to discuss and resolve their differences (personal communication, August 14, 2014).

Thirdly, modern methods of conflict resolution are generally recognized and used by the different institutions involved in conflict resolution. Methods such as mediation, negotiation, moderation, adjudication, arbitration, and conciliation are applied, and specific outcomes are expected. This is contrary to traditional methods, wherein mechanisms differ from one ethnic group to another. Thus, while chiefdoms with strong attachments to their customs and traditions might have the strong conviction that oath-taking, rituals, and libations may determine the culprit in a conflict and lead to its resolution, other chiefdoms with characteristics of Western culture and beliefs may not think in the same direction. For instance, while the Fon of Balikumbat called for the swearing of an oath to determine who started the Balikumbat-Bafanji conflict of 1995, the Fon of Bafanji rejected the idea and preferred to take the case to a modern court of law (personal communication, August 11, 2014).

Gaps in Modern Resolution Mechanisms

Western methods have not been able to effectively address all cases of conflict in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. Following the outbreak of conflicts in this area, representatives of the government and other conflict resolution experts quickly intervened with alien and often tardy solutions, which sidelined local realities and indigenous conflict management mechanisms. Decisions taken by administrative authorities are often marred by corruption, as they sometimes ensure that conflicts are resolved in favor of a particular party for personal gain or use the resolution process as a means of taking revenge for presumed damages inflicted on them. For example, the Acholi and neighboring populations of Uganda, who had suffered civilian atrocities at the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army, challenged the decision of Yoweri Museveni, who took the issue to the International Criminal Court in 2003. They preferred Mato Oput, a traditional Acholi voluntary peace and justice process involving recognition of wrongdoing, compensation, mediation, restoration, and trust-building (Wasonga, 2009).

Similarly, in the Balikumbat-Bafanji conflict, and following the judgment of the Buea Federal Court, which had ruled in favor of Bafanji in 1971, the Balikumbat people claimed that their land had been unjustly taken away from them by the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, Hon. Muna, because the Balikumbat people had supported Bali Nyonga in their land dispute against Widikum in 1952 (the place of origin of Hon. Muna) (Simo, 2011). This frustration was further exacerbated when an appeal by the Balikumbat people before the Supreme Court was rejected. This left many Balikumbat diehards disgruntled (Ngwochu, 2005). The resulting grievances were a determining factor in the outbreak of the 1998 conflict between the two villages.

Secondly, modern methods sometimes run contrary to cultural values and priorities in Africa. These methods, which were adopted by African states at independence, were based on alien systems and often failed to take into consideration the milieu and cultural context of conflicts (Bukari, 2013). Consequently, they are often perceived by most indigenous people with suspicion, fear, and distrust. Decisions taken are therefore disregarded, as people see no reason why they should accept decisions from institutions that contradict values with which they have identified for a very long time (personal communication, August 12, 2014). This confirms the fact that "when policy neglects history, culture and social context, huge amounts of effort and resources can be wasted on poorly conceived initiatives" (Economic Commission for Africa, 2007, p. 11).

Inadequate resources and capacity are also major impediments to the use of modern methods in conflict resolution. Unlike traditional methods, which do not require many resources since negotiations are often conducted at the village level and involve local actors, the procedures used by modern conflict resolution mechanisms are often lengthy and expensive. For instance, the post-independence conflict in Congo between the governments of President Kasavubu and Prime Minister Lumumba on the one hand, and other politicians such as Moïse Tshombe from the mineral-rich province of Katanga on the

other, led to the creation of a United Nations force by Hammarskjöld. This intervention was enormously expensive and nearly brought the UN to bankruptcy (Peacock, 1982).

Such exorbitant financial requirements make the resolution process difficult, especially due to the fact that parties are sometimes required to pay large sums of money to support the progression of cases. This was the case with Balikumbat and Bafanji, who were instructed by the land boundary tribunal to pay the sum of 138,000 FCFA each to facilitate investigations into the land boundary disputes between the two villages. The Bafanji people complied immediately, but their Balikumbat counterparts failed to pay the said sum on time. Even after the case had been resolved by the land boundary tribunal in favor of Bafanji, the Balikumbat people could not accept this loss, as they demanded a refund during the deliberations of the Balikumbat-Bafanji land conflict at the Buea Federal Court of Appeal (National Archives Buea, 1970).

Integrating Traditional and Modern Methods of Conflict Resolution

With the advent of colonialism, African institutions of governance were radically changed, with the subsequent fundamental restructuring of African political entities and socioeconomic systems (Zartman, 2000). As such, African traditional conflict resolution methods have continued to face significant challenges in the face of new realities. This has led many to believe that the prospects for a peaceful resolution of Africa's conflicts can be improved considerably if the indigenous principles, skills, and methods of conflict resolution on the continent are understood and harmonized with those of the modern nation-state (Ben-Mensah, 2004). It is within this context that effective collaboration between traditional institutions and the modern state becomes not only observable but also imperative.

Such moves toward integrating traditional and modern institutions have already gained ground in countries like Rwanda, whose government passed Organic Law No. 31/2006, which recognizes the role of Abunzi, or local mediators, in the resolution of disputes and crimes (Mutisi, 2012). In the same way, traditional authorities and associations have sometimes worked hand in hand with the state and NGOs in the resolution of conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring chiefdoms.

The composition of the actors who made the very first real attempt at the resolution of the Balikumbat-Bafanji conflict reflected a hybrid of traditional and modern actors (personal communication, August 18, 2014). In effect, on the instructions of the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, the Fons of Bambalang, Baba I, Babungo, Bamali, Balikumbat, and Bafanji, Hon. Mukong, and the District Officer of Ndop decided to look into the dispute. These authorities accordingly met on 27 February 1967 near the Balikumbat new market and set up a committee to examine the matter (National Archives Buea, 1969).

In fact, the political will expressed by the Cameroonian government in involving traditional actors more and more in the resolution of inter-chiefdom conflicts cannot be

overemphasized. The 1972 ordinance on handling conflicts related to land tenure is a clear example. The hybrid consultative board it created, composed of both administrative and traditional authorities, led to the adoption of a more holistic and comprehensive approach to resolving land-related disputes (Deyeb, 2014).

Such a hybrid composition often allowed conflicts to be resolved while taking into account local specificities, while at the same time affirming the authority of the state. This demonstrates that the state has come to acknowledge the indispensable role that traditional actors and institutions continue to play in the resolution of conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon, where people remain strongly attached to their culture, customs, and traditions.

NGOs have also increasingly come to recognize indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution and now consider them indispensable partners in resolving conflicts. These NGOs, which did not always use methods aligned with those of most indigenous people in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions, found it increasingly difficult to effectively resolve inter-village disputes (personal communication, August 11, 2014). This is probably because these methods had been tested in other continents and proven successful. However, Africa has its own specificities and history, and any method intended to bring a definitive end to violent disagreements must take the African context into account (Bukari, 2013).

For instance, in the resolution of conflicts between Balikumbat and Bambalang, Plan International Cameroon, in collaboration with the Divisional Delegation for Social Affairs (DDSA) for the Ngoketunjia Division, facilitated negotiations between the two villages. This was done in line with the political configuration of the concerned villages, which recognizes the important role institutions such as the village traditional council play in pacifying affected populations after conflicts. The chairpersons of these traditional councils were therefore granted the opportunity to present their respective sides of the story, with the goal of finding mutually acceptable solutions.

However, much still needs to be done toward integrating traditional and modern methods of conflict resolution. This is because, even though the state has continued to recognize the indispensable role of traditional authorities in conflict resolution, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms still face serious problems of legal and political neglect. Hence, Fons' associations, which would have been very instrumental in resolving conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions if given legal prerogatives in this domain, have been relegated to the background and placed below modern courts of justice, which have proven to be ineffective in resolving culturally sensitive inter-chiefdom conflicts in the area.

Conclusion

Various traditional and modern methods were used in the resolution of conflicts that plagued Balikumbat and neighboring chiefdoms in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. The differences in these mechanisms at the level of actors, institutions,

and outcomes generally determined their degree of effectiveness. This is because, while traditional methods are generally embedded in the customary practices of the parties in conflict, their relevance within the modern state and its governance system is in steady decline.

Conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions, which often began as simple misunderstandings, turned violent in subsequent years. In an effort to find solutions to these violent differences, formal conflict resolution mechanisms were employed. As such, administrative authorities, the forces of law and order, law courts, and NGOs worked relentlessly to find solutions to these disputes. The methods used generally included mediation, force, conciliation, adjudication, and arbitration. Even though these methods were credited for the possibilities they created for third-party intervention and the opening of new conflict resolution avenues, many are of the opinion that the processes were often marred by bribery and corruption. Again, the use of force often created antagonism and fear in the hearts of the disputing parties and increased their resistance to decisions taken to resolve disputes.

Ethnic groups in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions are endowed with rich traditional socio-political institutions that perform various religious, political, and social functions. Thanks to these institutions, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms were extensively used in the resolution of conflicts in the area. In this regard, rituals, libations, oath-taking, local negotiation, and mediation undertaken by local authorities became useful, especially when modern methods failed. These methods, however, have continued to lose value as many people have increasingly minimized their potential impact on conflict resolution processes and outcomes. This is principally because the people of Balikumbat, Bafanji, and Bambalang, like most other indigenous populations in Africa, have continued to develop the perception that everything about Africa is negative and should be replaced.

Recommendations

Modern conflict resolution actors, who often possess the necessary financial resources for resolving conflicts, could help build the capacity of traditional institutions through training programs on traditional methods. If this is done, the knowledge required for seeking indigenous solutions to conflicts in the area of study and beyond will be ensured. This may prevent the degeneration of conflicts into uncontrollable proportions through more expedient resolution. Building the capacity of traditional institutions could equally be facilitated through research, education, and the dissemination of knowledge about these methods to people with traditional responsibilities in the area. This will enlighten them and provide the required skills for resolving conflicts.

Further, the governments of different African states, including Cameroon, should put in place a dual system that recognizes both traditional and modern institutions. The example of Rwanda, with its legal system that recognizes traditional Gacaca courts alongside

modern institutions, should be emulated by other African countries. This will help decongest already overburdened modern courts, which cannot cope with the increasing number of conflicts they handle. Again, such a dual system would allow for more effective conflict resolution, as cases affecting indigenous people and their various chiefdoms could be resolved in local courts that enjoy greater legitimacy.

In addition, certain traditional institutions can be granted legal authorization. This would give these local bodies *locus standi* to adjudicate and take important decisions aimed at bringing conflicts to an end. NOWEFA, for example, which brings together most traditional rulers of the North West Region and which has made significant efforts in resolving conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions, could be given legal recognition. If this is done, its proximity to the people of the region, both geographically and culturally, could lead to more expedient resolution of conflicts that might take modern courts much longer to handle.

Furthermore, it is common knowledge that young people in different regions of Cameroon generally look up to successful elites from their respective areas as role models and therefore accord great respect to them. As such, role models can be put to good use in the conflict resolution process in these subdivisions. Similarly, important religious figures could be highly instrumental in resolving conflicts. This is because many of these religious leaders are held in high esteem, and their experience could be effectively used to ensure that the conflict resolution process is acceptable to those in conflict.

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