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The Fragmentation of War and Peace: Rethinking Peace Processes in a Polycentric World

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ABSTRACT

This Special Issue argues that fragmentation is a structuring condition of contemporary conflict, operating within domestic conflict systems and across the international order. Domestically, authority is dispersed among elites, armed groups, and civic actors; internationally, peacebuilding frameworks have given way to parallel mediation, regionalised intervention, and competing geopolitical projects. These forms are mutually reinforcing. What appears as disorder is a patterned architecture of authority through which peace processes reconfigure rather than consolidate power. The articles show that contemporary peace architectures manage fragmentation rather than resolve it, producing a post-liberal peace that blurs the boundaries among settlement, stabilisation, and predatory governance.

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Introduction

Today, the fragmentation of war and peace operates simultaneously within domestic conflict systems and across a transforming global order. This introduction to the Special Issue shows how these levels are mutually constitutive, producing transcalar conflict systems – systems in which authority is continually assembled and reassembled across local, national, regional, and international scales – rather than being contained within any one of them. Rather than treating fragmentation as a breakdown, we conceptualise it as an ordering condition: what appears as disorder is, in practice, a patterned architecture of authority structured by coercive relationships, resource flows, and recognition practices. This Special Issue brings into sharper focus not fragmentation itself, but its stabilisation as a durable governing logic, and the ways in which domestic and global fragmentation reinforce one another.

The liberal peacebuilding era was never unitary, but it was shaped by a historically brief moment of political convergence in the global order. Across the immediate post-Cold War

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years, the post-2001 security turn, and the post-2011/12 period of renewed geopolitical contestation and institutional strain, the place of norms, human rights, inclusion, and international legal frameworks shifted considerably (Bell 2017; Hellmüller and Badache 2025; Kaldor 2012). Yet, despite this variation and the heterogeneity of post-conflict settings, peace and transition practice remained rooted in a relatively coherent set of assumptions about statehood, legitimacy, and institutional reform, supported by a shared repertoire of global governance tools largely led by Western states and multilateral institutions (Kaldor 2012).

That organising hierarchy is now eroding. In the present configuration, ideological divergence over liberal and illiberal governance frameworks, intensified geoeconomic competition, and intersecting energy and technology transitions have produced a more polycentric and geopolitically fragmented international order. In conflict-affected environments, this shift is visible in the multiplication of actors and networks engaged in conflict, the proliferation of parallel mediation and stabilisation initiatives, and the increasing entanglement of coercion, diplomacy, and material forms of power (Adhikari et al. 2025; Hellmüller et al. 2026; Peter and Rice 2022). The result is not simply a more crowded peacebuilding field, but a setting in which the distinction between warmaking and peacemaking has become increasingly blurred, and the leverage and legitimacy once associated with relatively unified international frameworks are harder to sustain.

The ambiguities between peace and war, conflict and post-conflict resolution, and the controversial roles of international actors have long been recognised (Mac Ginty 2006, 60; Kaldor 2012, 31). Recent scholarship has explained the fragmentation of contemporary peacemaking in several ways. Some accounts emphasise the proliferation of concepts within peace studies itself, asking whether the multiplication of ‘peace with adjectives’ reflects conceptual fragmentation or innovation in response to changing conflict environments (Boulanger Martel et al. 2024). Others argue that the liberal peacebuilding project became a victim of its own success, insofar as the rights-based discourses associated with liberal internationalism helped drive a wave of bottom-up advocacy and protest that existing institutions proved unable to answer (Richmond 2025, 2022). A further strand emphasises the need to reset the boundaries of peacebuilding in a changing global order by focusing more directly on political ordering in conflict-affected states (Kobayashi, Krause, and Yuan 2025). Others point to the growing salience of competing ideas about order, sovereignty, and conflict management associated with so-called ‘non-Western’ powers (Jütersonke et al. 2021; Peter and Rice 2022). Finally, scholars have identified democratic regression and the illiberal, populist turn within formally democratic states as central to the erosion of liberal peacemaking authority (Landau and Lehrs 2022). Taken together, these developments have weakened the dominance of Western liberal actors and the United Nations as peacemakers, while producing a more fragmented international peace system.

Under these conditions, nominally peace-oriented architectures can institutionalise frozen states of war within their governing practices. In perhaps the most extreme example of this dynamic, US President Donald Trump’s ‘Board of Peace’ in Gaza articulates a personalised, kleptocratic and quasi-colonial concept of governance formally written into a peace-oriented institutional structure endorsed by the UN Security Council (El Kurd 2026). Seen against the broader backdrop of democratic regression and the growing role of autocratic states as conflict managers, the Board may mark a

revival of an authoritarian international order (Richmond 2025), albeit one deeply entangled within fragile yet still functioning liberal governance institutions.

In our view, fragmentation provides a useful lens for analysing these developments because it unsettles binary distinctions between democratic and autocratic regimes, or between liberal and illiberal geopolitical blocs. It recognises that the boundaries between rights-based and illiberal regimes are often blurred (Levitsky and Way 2010), and that authoritarian practices (Glasius 2023) and networks (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Galeotti 2025) operate across national borders.

Global fragmentation is also no longer external to conflict-affected states. It increasingly intersects with elite and societal fragmentation within them, as regional powers, international mediators, donors, armed groups, business networks, and civic actors compete to shape authority on the ground. In such settings, political authority is rarely consolidated under a single hierarchical state order. It is assembled and reassembled through overlapping systems of coercion, resource control, recognition, and legitimacy. External patrons may recognise or finance rival authorities; armed groups may shift between local bargains and transnational networks; and civic actors may sustain collective life across fragmented jurisdictions. As a result, contemporary conflict systems are transcalar: authority is produced through interactions across domestic, regional, and international arenas rather than being confined within any one of them.

These realignments can obscure how fragmentation is lived and governed in conflict-affected countries. Everyday practices of survival, exchange, and negotiation are not merely adaptive; they perform constitutional work. They do so by defining who owes what to whom, which authorities can make claims, and how obligations, rights, and access to resources are negotiated in practice. As the contributions to this Special Issue demonstrate, fragmentation is not only a symptom of geopolitical flux but also a condition through which social and material order is built and sustained. Material and fiscal practices – including taxation, budgeting, resource control, monetary instruments, reform, and oversight – can therefore serve as constitutional work, shaping institutional boundaries, obligations, and claims to authority under conditions of fragmentation (Benson-Strohmayer 2024; Desai *forthcoming*). One of the central themes developed through our research in the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), and echoed throughout this Special Issue, is the reconceptualisation of violent conflict not as a discrete episode to be resolved but as a complex and enduring social condition: a conflict system.

A conflict system refers to the patterned interaction of armed actors, political authorities, economic networks, civic organisations, and external interveners in discrete pockets of conflict that connect across local, national, and transnational scales. Such systems are sustained not only by violence but also by routines of governance, extraction, mediation, and survival that reproduce conflict dynamics over time, even in the presence of formal peace processes (Autesserre 2014; Bell and Pospisil 2017; Mac Ginty 2011). Contemporary conflict systems, therefore, entangle multiple arenas of authority and legitimacy in ways that render traditional state-centric peacemaking tools increasingly inadequate. This cross-scale, or transcalar, structure exposes the limits of conventional peacebuilding approaches premised on institutionalising functional statehood through political legitimacy, coherent institutions, and a monopoly on the use of force (Millar 2020; 2021). It also suggests that peace and conflict must be understood as interacting

systems that operate across local, national, regional and international scales, rather than as bounded national transitions.

Building from this argument, the remainder of this introduction draws on the contributions to the Special Issue and broader PeaceRep research to examine how peace processes operate within fragmented systems. Rather than treating peace as a singular diplomatic outcome or a linear transition, we foreground peace as a set of political, material, and civic practices through which collective life is sustained, contested, and reconfigured amid enduring fragmentation. The main body of the introduction develops this thesis across elite, societal, and geopolitical dimensions of fragmentation. We then show how the articles in the Special Issue address these dynamics across diverse empirical sites and conceptual frameworks, before concluding with implications for peace and transition practices in a polycentric world.

Fragmentation of political authority: A challenge to peace and transition processes

Peace and transition processes often map imperfectly onto the fragmented nature of conflict and of geopolitics in the most complex and protracted settings. As a result, political authority has fragmented across three interconnected levels: elite, societal, and geopolitical. We examine each in turn, highlighting their respective logics and manifestations. However, these levels are not discrete; they operate concurrently, and our analysis foregrounds their interrelations rather than treating them in isolation.

Elite fragmentation and predation

Elite fragmentation in the context of conflict refers to the breakdown or division of political, military, or economic elites into competing factions, resulting in a lack of unified leadership, coherent governance or even vision of the medium-term future. This fragmentation significantly shapes the dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding in several ways. It creates competing power centres, entrenches predatory governance, and fosters spoiler dynamics. Such fragmentation is not only structural but also political-economic, reflecting the dispersal of resources, coercive authority, rents, and recognition across networks linking state, militia, market, and external actors.

Elite fragmentation is not just a process of ruling coalitions fracturing; it has generated a distinctive form of governance or rule in contemporary conflict systems. Across cases from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sudan and South Sudan to Libya and Yemen, elite networks sustain authority through patronage networks, the circulation of rents, including oil revenues, customs, aid, and other off-budget resources, rather than through institutionalised taxation or accountability. These arrangements are often portrayed as symptoms of state weakness. Yet they can also be understood as adaptive political orders or strategic systems of fragmentation that distribute authority through overlapping fiscal and coercive hierarchies. This simultaneous splintering and recomposition recalls earlier accounts of ‘fraggementation’, though here the focus is on how such processes operate through elite bargains, coercive extraction, and peacebuilding institutions rather than globalisation alone (Rosenau 2003).

State fragmentation, with overlapping sites of authority and centres of power, should not be understood simply as disorder. It can also constitute a form of order structured through shared rules, transactions, and mutual recognition. International Relations scholarship has generally understood order to refer to ‘a domain that is more or less organised or structured by some set of shared norms and rules’ (Koschut and Mende 2026, 2; see also Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2020). The fragmented polities encountered in conflict environments are often domains of shared rules and mutual recognition, even if these rules are structured around transactions involving money, power and violence (de Waal 2015). While concepts such as ‘legitimacy’ sit uneasily with such settings, these environments may nonetheless be said to constitute ‘systemic configurations of political authority, comprising multiple units of authority’ (Reus-Smit 2018, 194) involving both forms of voluntary compliance with authority as well as violent coercion (Kaldor and Theros 2018, 3–4). Above all, the rise of multiple ‘dictators without borders’ (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Heathershaw, Pitcher, and de Oliveira 2023) has reshaped regional conflict systems (Donelli 2025). Authoritarian regimes empowered by resource and financial rents (Hanieh 2018; 2025) have engaged in networked forms of external predation, patronage and intervention, sustaining and becoming key players within the brokerage markets of violence and money that underpin fragmented conflict environments.

In conflict contexts, fragmentation serves a dual function. It diffuses accountability by multiplying intermediaries and revenue points and simultaneously sustains loyalty, as positions in fragmented networks confer access to extraction (Benson-Strohmayr 2024, 2026). These dynamics transform predation from an aberration of conflict into a technique of predatory rule. Following Levi’s classic account, rule becomes predatory when rulers use coercive and extractive power to maximise revenue or rents while minimising reciprocal obligations to those they govern (Levi 1981). In fragmented conflict systems, this logic is intensified: authority is exercised by controlling access to rents rather than providing public goods or enforcing uniform obligations.

Peace processes that seek to stabilise through elite bargains rarely disrupt this architecture of predation; on the contrary, they frequently institutionalise it. Their dynamics are often best observed in longer-running peace processes, such as those in South Sudan or Bosnia and Herzegovina. Peace agreements, development compacts, and donor programmes designed to consolidate stability often end up redistributing rents among competing elites, creating an illusion of reform while embedding the material foundations of coercive rule. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as Gueudet (2026) writes in this Special Issue, this resulted in the creation of a para-state of Republika Srpska, which seeks its own patronage networks. South Sudan’s recent trajectory also illustrates this pattern, with successive peace agreements functioning as fiscal instruments that reorganise access to rents without dismantling the militarised and opaque revenue systems on which power rests (Benson-Strohmayr 2024). Authority is dispersed but never straightforwardly inclusive.

The result is what Benson-Strohmayr (2026) calls strategic fiscal fragmentation: a system in which rulers deliberately multiply revenue-collection points across ministries, military actors, and local administrations to manage loyalty and blur lines of accountability. Far from signifying state failure, this is a modality of rule calibrated to crisis (Pugh 2005; Pugh, Cooper, and Turner 2008). It allows elites to maintain control through delegated predation, disguised as peacebuilding and state reconstruction supported by external actors. These dynamics give rise to predatory peace: a condition in which settlements

stabilise elite coalitions by reorganising access to rents while leaving coercive systems of extraction intact, a concept Benson-Strohmayer develops in dialogue with Lund (2018) and Braithwaite (2023). Fragmentation is not merely the failure of centralisation but a structure of power that ties rulers, intermediaries, and external patrons into a shared political economy of extraction. While conventional peacebuilding logics focus on procedural legitimacy or power-sharing, they leave the political economy of rule untouched.

Revealing another dimension, elite fragmentation in Somalia illustrates how predatory governance disrupts the alignment between top-down and bottom-up statebuilding logics. In Somaliland, locally negotiated agreements fostered stability and gradually built the capacity for statehood. Yet this bottom-up consolidation challenged the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, or the inviolability of colonial-era borders, by creating a de facto state outside the internationally recognised Somali framework. Efforts to construct a transitional government in Mogadishu, meanwhile, resulted in a state apparatus with limited reach, often confined to the capital and even then, inconsistently. As the central state struggled to gain legitimacy, the relative success of local peacemaking efforts gave rise to a narrative of bottom-up statebuilding. Bottom-up statebuilding was simultaneously articulated as both an alternative to the central state's legitimacy problems and as part of the same state-building project. It involved constructing political settlements in Somalia's regions while implementing national processes, such as electoral law reform.

Stepping back from this complexity, Somalia shows us how different fragments in play can be understood as capable of assembling and disassembling around distinct ideas of how power can be held, exercised, and legitimised in different moments. The Somali experiment underscores that this tapestry is not confined by the borders of a nation-state but has a distinct transnational dimension. Jubbaland provides a good example: a region of Somalia, it is, in fact, a hybrid polity constituted by overlapping clan, commercial, and security networks linking southern Somalia to Kenya and Ethiopia. Its president, Ahmed Madobe, embodies multiple roles, such as clan leader, Islamist figure, broker, and state representative, demonstrating how political entrepreneurs navigate and sustain authority across fragmented landscapes (Majid and Abidrahman 2026). In this context, the national government in Mogadishu is not a central authority but one actor among many, struggling to assert dominance within a constellation of global and regional actors who increasingly engage directly with subnational entities.

Similar stories could be told across other fragmented political economies. In Libya and the Central African Republic, projects of central statehood sit uneasily with the proliferation of armed actors, many of them small, localised, and embedded in shifting patronage networks. In Libya, the localisation of the national is especially stark: the internationally supported transition process has produced competing sites of government, while deals between armed actors in Tripoli defy clear categorisation as national or local. Yet because these bargains concern control over the putative capital, they continue to claim national significance. In such contexts, efforts to construct or consolidate a central state may compound rather than contain fragmentation, especially when international statebuilding assumptions remain misaligned with fragmented political authority on the ground.

Societal fragmentation over goals and ideas

Conflict has become more fragmented within countries. Conflict now often involves multiple fragmented armed actors rather than a state and a ‘big armed opposition’ group. Armed groups come together in alliances and fall apart again. The lines between official state forces, paramilitary alliances, political conflict, and organised crime are blurred. Local armed actors have transnational and geopolitical alliances. As a result, conflict often exists as a fragmented, diverse, complex system, involving proliferating groups that come together and fall apart in shifting alliances, move transnationally, and can broker directly with states near and far. This reality creates constantly shifting conflict tapestries.

The variety of actors in conflict situations gives rise to what might be described as ideational fragmentation, with very different norms and very different framings of conflict. The fragmentation of predatory elites is often associated with extremist identity politics as a method of political mobilisation. Yet the logic of extremist identity politics does not always fit the logic of predation; once unleashed, identity politics has a (polarising) life of its own, which only adds to the complexity of fragmentation (see Kaldor and de Waal 2020). The legacy of sectarian conflict in Syria, constructed through violence, exists alongside competing efforts to capture the rents of the state (see Daher and Mehchy 2025).

Contemporary conflict systems often mobilise society unevenly, rather than through the more encompassing forms of mobilisation associated with conventional interstate or mass-mobilisation wars (Kaldor 2012). Alongside armed actors are elements of society that, where possible, continue to sustain everyday life. These include legitimate businesses, especially at the local level, and professionals such as health workers, teachers, and engineers who keep infrastructure operational. Civil society groups also continue to exist or are being established to act as first responders, document war crimes, or contribute to mediation and dialogue at the local level. These groups include neighbourhood committees, professional guilds, women’s groups, faith networks, and municipal administrations that broker everyday reciprocity (care, services, dispute resolution) amid predation. Many of these actors are also linked transnationally. In addition, a range of international actors are usually present, including journalists, humanitarian agencies, and peacekeepers, particularly if an agreement has been reached. Civil society should not, however, be treated as a homogeneous or necessarily liberal sphere. Civic actors may sustain care, accountability, and protection, but they may also reproduce exclusionary, nationalist, anti-gender, or illiberal agendas. Civil society is itself fragmented ideationally and organisationally, and its actors can contribute to both civicness and to the consolidation of coercive or exclusionary forms of order (Bob 2012).

Fragmentation, therefore, has horizontal, diagonal, and vertical layers. A good example of diagonal fragmentation can be seen by focusing on the different perceptions of gender relations among the variety of actors. Many contemporary armed groups that are associated with predation and sectarianism have an extremist view of masculinity, sometimes in contrast to earlier revolutionary groups. Thus, for example, in Iraq and Syria, the Kurdish Peshmerga, who are more likely to favour gender equality, coexist with ISIS, which was responsible for the enslavement of Yazidi women. On the other hand, many civil

society groups are committed to women's rights, while businesses hugely vary in their treatment of gender issues.

Some of this tapestry of ideational and predatory fragmentation is owed to past peace and transition processes. Institutionalising the central state has been the focus of internationalised stabilisation, but these efforts have often produced constituted states with limited legitimacy, authority, capacity, and commitment to deliver public services. These have focused on constructing revised central state institutions to resolve what is understood as 'the national conflict', often through repeated rounds of internationalised brokerage.

Externally sponsored peace and transition frameworks have often produced what Bell and Pospisil (2017) describe as formalised political unsettlement: institutions that resemble those of liberal democratic states yet operate under fundamentally different logics of authority and accountability. These unsettled orders are both localised and transnational, comprising diverse conflict dynamics, some of which are territorialised and others not. They are also fundamentally hybrid (Mac Ginty 2011) or 'glocalised' across international, national and local actors, discourses and power brokers. As a result, politics in supposedly 'post-conflict' settings often remain 'indefinitely transitional', dependent on recurrent internationalised mediation and exceptional brokerage rather than ordinary political and legal institutions. The 'local turn' has often proved shallow or instrumentalised; such 'local washing' has left macro power relations intact and underscored the need to locate authority where it is actually rooted rather than where policy imagines it to be (Mac Ginty 2025). Read from below, these hybrid orders are sustained not only by coercive bargains but also by civic adaptations undertaken within spaces of civiness. Such practices do not romanticise 'the local'; instead, they identify the civic levers through which predatory orders can be disrupted or redirected (see Kaldor and Radice 2022).

Geopolitical fragmentation and the breakdown of peacebuilder consensus

Geopolitical fragmentation has made consensus on joint approaches to peacemaking increasingly difficult. The issue is not simply the emergence of a 'multipolar' order, since global politics has long involved competing centres of power, but the weakening of shared frameworks through which peace settlements were previously brokered, guaranteed, and implemented. As a result, contemporary peacemaking is increasingly organised through overlapping regional initiatives, ad hoc coalitions, and minilateral arrangements, rather than through coordinated international conferences or UN-centred processes (Badanjak 2023; Brosig and Karlsrud 2024; Whitfield 2025). These arrangements create openings for flexible diplomacy, but they also allow competing mediators, regional powers, and conflict parties to pursue strategic interests through nominally peace-oriented processes. Diverse mediation initiatives increasingly map onto underlying proxy wars, blurring the distinction between warmakers and peacemakers. The contributions by Gueudet (2026) and Majid and Abidrahman (2026) in this Special Issue illustrate these blurred boundaries.

Regional powers now seem crucial in brokering interim arrangements and ceasefires during conflicts. Examples include Turkey's facilitation of the 2022 grain deal during the Russia-Ukraine war, and Qatar and Egypt brokering short ceasefires and hostage exchanges in the Israel-Gaza conflict since 2023. In some cases, international legal and

political constraints, including counterterrorism regimes, have limited the ability of Western and UN actors to engage directly with proscribed groups, creating space for states such as Qatar and Turkey, as well as other regional brokers, to assume roles that more rule-bound actors could not easily occupy. A recent mapping of mediators found that in every conflict across the Middle East and North Africa, neighbouring states ranked among the top mediators (Peter 2025).

While regional involvement is not new, it is becoming more pronounced and, in some cases, displacing global initiatives. This shift forms part of a broader uncertainty over the future of collective conflict management, as the shared understandings that once enabled UN-centred peace operations and wider multilateral responses become harder to sustain (Paris 2023). This regionalisation of peace support is occurring alongside a broader escalation in global armed conflict. UCDP/PRIO data recorded 61 state-based armed conflicts in 2024, the highest number since 1946, even as UN operational presence has contracted (Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg 2025). By 2025, the UN led only 11 peace operations, seven of which were small observer missions, while all multidimensional missions were under pressure to close. Conversely, we are seeing a rise in regional peace support operations with increasingly diverse mandates.

Alongside the growing role of regional actors, the field of global peacemaking has diversified to include a wider range of major powers, many of whom operate beyond and often actively contest the norms associated with liberal peacebuilding (Jütersonke et al. 2021; Peter and Rice 2022). States such as Russia and China have expanded their roles as brokers and guarantors across multiple conflicts, from Syria and Libya to the Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement and intra-Palestinian dialogue efforts (Badanjak and Henry 2024). Their involvement reflects not only the diffusion of global influence but a broader shift in the norms and practices of conflict management. Crucially, this transformation is not driven solely by the rise of illiberal actors outside ‘the West’. It is also shaped by an internal reorientation within Western states themselves, where commitment to liberal peace architectures has increasingly been tempered by normative commitments and strategic and geoeconomic priorities (Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka 2023). This is not just the shift in the US policy under Donald Trump. The European Union policymaking, for example, now combines appeals to multilateral norms with more transactional approaches, as seen in migration-security-resource partnerships in Africa (Conde 2025). Together, these external and internal shifts are producing a more pluralised and contested peace system, in which liberal and illiberal logics coexist, compete, and intertwine.

As a result, global reorganisation has fundamentally reshaped traditional alliances and patterns of cooperation. Rather than aligning with like-minded states and working through international organisations to pursue long-term goals, there is a growing trend toward ad hoc collaboration through minilateral arrangements – smaller, flexible groupings formed around shared short-term interests that often bypass formal institutions (Whitfield 2025). A comparison between peacemaking efforts in Sudan during the 2000s and the 2020s illustrates this shift. The earlier process, culminating in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, was led by the Troika (US, UK, Norway) in partnership with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and followed by UN-led missions in South Sudan and a joint UN-AU operation in Darfur. In contrast, contemporary peacemaking involves the US working alongside Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE as part of the Quad. We are also seeing competing regional and neighbour-led initiatives.

Many key mediators, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are themselves stakeholders in the conflict, pursuing a predatory logic similar to that of local elites. Today's peacemaking diplomacy is increasingly transactional, short-term, and driven by strategic interests. Acheson and Theros (2025) identify similar patterns in the negotiations over Israel-Gaza, Ukraine, and Afghanistan, describing this trend as 'strategic peacemaking', in which conflict resolution becomes transactional, short-term, politically expedient, and driven by strategic calculations.

This proliferation of actors has fundamentally reorganised the conflict management landscape, leading to territorially segmented and parallel peace processes in areas of high international and regional interest (Adhikari et al. 2025; Beaujouan 2024; Hellmüller 2023). In some cases, conflict parties and local elites are able to 'mediator shop', moving between competing forums to maximise leverage or avoid constraint. Other processes, however, are civic-led or locally grounded efforts to sustain dialogue, protection, and everyday governance amid violence. These competing and overlapping processes can feed into local elite fragmentation, but the reverse is also true: international conflict actors can quickly change both local and international partners, with developments in one conflict influencing engagement and cooperation patterns in another. Seemingly discrete conflicts are increasingly interconnected through third-party actors, with one conflict complex influencing others (Peter et al. 2026). The Russia-Ukraine war, for example, has affected cooperation patterns among third parties in the Western Balkans, Syria and Libya (Hellmüller 2023; Peter and Houghton 2025). Interview-based work with senior mediators reinforces the perception that the 'era of big peace processes is over'; in its place, a field of 'too many mediators' and ad hoc regionalised multimediation sits alongside a sclerotic UN system. Rather than marking the collapse of order, the mediation landscape is becoming a hybridised international peace system in which Western and non-Western actors coexist, cooperate, and compete (Mac Ginty 2025).

New and not-new

None of the dynamics examined in this Special Issue is entirely unprecedented. Fragmentation, elite bargaining, hybrid authority, and geopolitical competition have long been recognised features of conflict and post-conflict governance. What is distinctive in the present configuration is how these elements are now unfolding together and, crucially, how they are being stabilised as durable architectures of rule rather than treated as transitional conditions to be resolved.

Across countries experiencing the most protracted and large-scale conflicts, fragmentation now involves rapid cycles of fracturing, splintering, recomposition, and collapse among armed and political actors. Large-scale conflict reversals, or more accurately, conflict continuities, can be generated almost overnight, as recent trajectories in Sudan and Syria illustrate. Elsewhere, as in Libya, fragmentation takes the form of multiple rival governments, competing 'capital cities', and the absence of any authority capable of exercising national effective control. Bosnia and Herzegovina, though formally at peace, reflects similar dynamics. As Zulueta-Fülscher and Welikala (2025) demonstrate in this Special Issue, its political logic increasingly resembles that of Somalia: a fragmented but enduring system of rule rather than a stalled transition awaiting consolidation.

What this brings into view, therefore, is not fragmentation per se, but the recognition that fragmentation has become a governing condition, reinforced by the mutual interaction of global and domestic fragmentation. As the contributions to this issue show, elite bargains and peace agreements do not simply consolidate state authority. At their best, they may reduce violence and create political openings. Yet they may also reconfigure power through dispersed institutional, material, and coercive networks, stabilising the conditions under which predatory political economies that frequently underpin war-making continue by other means. Peace processes can therefore become ambivalent instruments: necessary breaks in violence that also risk institutionalising fragmentation and leaving deeper structures of division and predatory rule intact. The significance of the present configuration lies not only in heightened geopolitical turbulence but in the deepening entanglement of fragmented political order across multiple scales.

Geopolitical alignments are simultaneously in flux. Analysts debate whether the current moment marks a return to Cold War dynamics, a shift toward multipolarity, or a more indeterminate global transformation, which is an uncertainty reminiscent of Yeats' *Spiritus Mundi*. While uncertainty during periods of global transition is historically familiar, what is distinctive today is that mediation itself has become a strategic instrument through which states project power, pursue regional influence, or secure domestic interests, as evidenced by the proliferation of mediation initiatives among a wide diversity of actors. Patterns of intervention are increasingly hybrid, combining diplomatic engagement with informational patronage and networked influence over local clients. Digital platforms now constitute a critical arena in which conflict narratives are shaped, contested, and mobilised, both for escalation and for mediation (Gueudet 2026; Ibrahim 2025; Pohjonen 2022).

Critically for peace and transition processes, what is changing is not simply the effectiveness of mediation, but the distribution of leverage between mediation efforts. These dynamics constrain actors invested in liberal, law-centred peacemaking, while simultaneously creating strategic openings for others. First, mediation as a practice is being redefined. Stabilisation-oriented mediation can de-escalate violence but often does so by consolidating incumbent powerholders rather than pursuing compromise responsive to civilian needs or justice claims. For many regional and non-Western actors, and even authoritarian Western actors, however, this shift enables more flexible, interest-driven engagement unconstrained by liberal procedural expectations. Second, the already fragile consensus that international law should govern peacemaking is weakening. Mediation spaces increasingly operate not only to shape conflict outcomes but to project competing visions of global order, with highly uneven commitments to international legal standards, including those on gender inclusion. Rather than a simple pluralisation of norms, this marks the declining force of shared normative expectations and liberal conditionality, expanding room for informal, transactional, or opaque arrangements.

Finally, these transformations also strain liberal peacemaking states themselves. Conflict-driven migration flows, for example, are increasingly mobilised by Western governments to justify departures from human rights and asylum norms, exposing tensions between external peacebuilding agendas and domestic political constraints. Geopolitical fragmentation, in this sense, does not signal the end of mediation, but its reconfiguration into a more competitive, stratified, and politically instrumental field.

Contributions to the special issue

This Special Issue assembles five contributions that, taken together, recast fragmentation not as the absence of order but as a dominant form of rule, including material, juridical, social, and geopolitical forms. Each paper advances a different register of this argument while identifying practical implications for peace and transition practice under conditions of fragmentation.

Predatory peace and the material foundations of rule

Benson-Strohmayr (2026) uses South Sudan to show how internationally backed peace agreements have reconfigured, rather than dismantled, coercive systems of extraction. He introduces predatory peace to describe settlements that stabilise elite coalitions by reorganising access to rents, offices, revenue streams, and external finance while leaving coercive wartime systems intact. The article also develops the concept of strategic fiscal fragmentation to capture how opaque and overlapping revenue points diffuse accountability, bind subordinates through extraction, and transform coercion into a durable mode of rule. Methodologically, it triangulates 210 interviews, archival sources, and peace agreement coding to show how donor finance, oil-backed instruments, checkpoint economies, and off-budget systems embed predation within the architecture of post-war statebuilding. Its wider implication is that South Sudan is not an exception but a hard case that exposes a recurring risk across resource-dependent and aid-saturated conflict settings: peace processes may legitimise the material foundations of coercive rule even as they claim to transform them. The article grounds the Special Issue's claim that fragmentation can operate as rule rather than disorder and suggests that transforming predatory peace into non-predatory peace requires embedding fiscal-material accountability and civic oversight within peacebuilding itself.

Fragmenting the gender order of war

Kaldor and Chinkin (2026)'s article on gender fragmentation argues that 'new wars' unsettle the binaries of protector/perpetrator and agent/victim that structure the Women, Peace and Security architecture. Using Ukraine as a case, it traces shifting narratives, roles, harms, and political economies to show how violence against civilians, civilian-led mobilisation, and hybrid authority demand a re-grounded approach to participation and protection that matches contemporary conflict systems. The policy implication is to focus less on numerical inclusion and more on transforming the content of peace processes to address everyday material systems of harm and care. In so doing, it demonstrates how gendered relations constitute a critical dimension of the civic and material structures that sustain or transform fragmented orders. This article shows that fragmentation is not only institutional or geopolitical but also gendered, reshaping the social relations, harms, and forms of agency through which war and peace are lived.

Building up federalism from below

Zulueta-Fülscher and Welikal (2026) identify a third pathway to federal state formation: 'building up' federalism. In extremely fragile and conflict-affected settings, they argue,

fragmentation does not necessarily signal the collapse of political order but can shape how authority is organised, as sub-state actors consolidate governance and constitutional space in advance of a settled central state. Through Bosnia–Herzegovina and Somalia, with a note on Myanmar, they show how interim sub-state constitutions prefigure and later constrain central constitutional design, yielding federations with more expansive sub-state competences than standard ‘holding together’ models would predict. In this pathway, the constitution emerges through negotiated accommodation among central and sub-state entities and actors, often resulting in a weaker central state. In juridical terms, constitutional fragmentation is reframed as a negotiated pathway of political ordering rather than a failure of central statecraft. The article challenges statebuilding assumptions by showing that fragmentation can be constitutionally generative as well as destabilising. It also raises the question of how civic compacts around service delivery, participatory budgeting, local courts, and accountability might be protected so that ‘built-up’ federalism is rooted in civicism rather than only in juridical inscription.

Somalia’s transboundary public authority

Majid and Abidrahman read Somalia’s order as a patchwork of public authorities situated within a political marketplace, using the Federal Member State of Jubbaland to trace a transboundary formation that is simultaneously regional, clan-diasporic, and market-mediated. They show how Jubbaland’s leadership navigates security patronage, check-point and corridor economies, and external ties to Ethiopia and Kenya, illustrating the ambiguities of ‘bottom-up’ state-building when subnational polities straddle borders and rent circuits. The case provides the Special Issue with a grounded account of how fragments assemble, disassemble, and endure. It also shows how state collapse and external intervention can generate new and unexpected political-territorial forms of order, distinct from the better-known Somali cases of Somaliland and Puntland. Majid and Abidrahman’s contribution, therefore, demonstrates that public authority is assembled across borders rather than contained within the state, and that fragmented conflict systems can produce durable forms of rule that exceed conventional statebuilding frameworks.

Patron-client systems under geopolitical fragmentation

Gueudet (2026) examines Republika Srpska to show that the Dayton framework not only failed to prevent predatory rule but actively enabled it. The Special Parallel Relations clause institutionalised a resource exchange between Serbia and Republika Srpska, empowering Dodik’s ethnocratic regime from within the peace architecture itself. In this sense, elite fragmentation and predatory rule appear not as deviations from the peace process but as by-products of it. The article then traces how the erosion of previously dominant geopolitical hierarchies and the multiplication of external actors transformed the Serbia-Republika Srpska dyad into a multiple-patron configuration involving Russia and transnational non-state actors. Russia’s export of autocratic governance models, ideological frameworks, and paramilitary and security capacity created parallel infrastructures of coercion operating beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina’s central state. By bringing in actors such as the Russian Orthodox Church and paramilitary networks, the

article shows how ideological diffusion and coercive capacity are built across borders to sustain secessionist claims. Gueudet's contribution, therefore, demonstrates how global fragmentation reconfigures local patron-client relations from within, producing overlapping and competing orders that fragment authority beyond what the peace architecture can contain.

Taken together, these contributions reveal the material architectures (fiscal rents and corridors), juridical pathways (sub-state constitutions), geopolitical re-wiring (multi-patron constellations), and social consequences (gendered roles, harms, and care economies) through which fragmentation is sustained. They provide both conceptual and empirical tools for understanding how authority is assembled and contested in contemporary conflict systems, and for rethinking peace practice beyond elite bargains toward civic compacts.

Conclusion

The analyses gathered in this Special Issue reveal fragmentation not as the breakdown of order, nor as an entirely new phenomenon, but as a dominant political logic whose domestic and international dimensions are increasingly mutually reinforcing. Across juridical, social, material, and geopolitical domains, fragmentation structures how power is exercised, shared, and contested. It enables elites to rule through dispersion, external patrons to project influence through proxies, and civic actors to navigate between systems of coercion and care. What often appears as disorder is in fact a patterned architecture of authority, an assemblage of partial, contingent connections rather than a unified system, one that conventional statebuilding models have struggled to grasp or transform (Tsing 2015).

Understanding peace and transition processes in this context requires a shift in perspective. Rather than assuming that conflict resolution proceeds through the consolidation of a coherent central state, the contributions in this Special Issue show that authority is often assembled through overlapping and competing arrangements that span scales. In many settings, the state itself operates as one fragment among others, embedded within wider constellations of fiscal, coercive, and political power. When pursued uncritically, centralising statebuilding projects may therefore compound fragmentation rather than resolve it, generating new forms of opposition and instability.

This perspective does not imply abandoning the state as a site of political aspiration or institutional reform. Rather, it calls for situating state institutions within the broader conflict systems in which they operate, and for recognising how peace processes, aid compacts, and constitutional frameworks interact with existing systems of extraction, mediation, and legitimacy. Peace and transition practice must move beyond procedural inclusion and formal institutional design toward engaging the material and relational foundations of authority, such as how rents, rules, and recognition circulate across scales, and how accountability is constructed in practice.

Across the cases examined here, civic organisation emerges as a critical terrain for rebuilding legitimacy and redirecting predatory orders. Civic actors do not simply fill gaps left by weak or fragmented states; they actively mediate relations between coercion, resources, and social obligation. Attention to civic compacts, grounded in everyday practices of service provision, care, and accountability, offers pathways for transforming predatory peace into more inclusive and durable forms of political order.

Taken together, the contributions to this Special Issue reposition peacebuilding as a fundamentally political and material endeavour. Peace is not a singular diplomatic outcome, but an ongoing process through which collective life is sustained, contested, and reimagined within fragmented conflict systems. Recognising fragmentation as an organising condition rather than an anomaly is a necessary step toward developing forms of peace and transition practice capable of engaging the realities of contemporary conflict.

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