CHAPTER 5

Peacemaking in the Horn of Africa: From Democratic Change to Political Survival

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Introduction

The Horn of Africa is the location of some of the world's most intractable and catastrophic conflicts. This reflects both long histories of conflicts in each of the major countries (each of which has, not coincidentally, undergone secessions, whether de jure or de facto) and the region's position as a strategic hinterland of the Middle East. Commensurate with a complicated array of armed conflicts, there is a rich tapestry of peacemaking. Many peace processes, especially in the Sudans, have been the focus of intense scrutiny in the academic and policy literature. Others, notably in Ethiopia, have been less accessible to researchers.

This chapter provides a succinct overview of peace efforts in these countries in the twenty-first century. Guided by the injunction of President Thabo Mbeki, that "the first duty of the mediator is to define the problem",[1] this history outlines how different processes have defined, explicitly or implicitly, the problems they seek to solve. It deals only with peace efforts at the national or inter-state level, not local initiatives, which would require a different and more extended treatment. Each of these peacemaking exercises has a theory of change, usually unstated, drawn from the interests and perspective of the leading protagonist and the political moment. Earlier peacemaking was explicitly or implicitly based on a programme of development and democratization. Today, the priority is simply political survival.

One key theme is that even as the political-economic context has been transformed, multilateral mediators have not adapted their theories of change. If there are to be prospects for more effective peacemaking in the region, rethinking is in order, based on a candid assessment of the "real politics" of conflict and its resolution.[2] As the prospects for liberal peacemaking fade, several alternatives are being practiced. We have not yet seen fully fledged illiberal or authoritarian peacemaking in the Horn because the states are too weak to impose that, so the actual practice is cutting security pacts labelled as peace agreements. We have also seen "populist peacemaking", which is characterized by a "rejection of 'peacemaking

[1] Alex de Waal and Abdul Mohammed, *Defining the Crisis in the Sudans: Lessons from the African Union High-Level Panels for Sudan and South Sudan* (Johannesburg, Thabo Mbeki Foundation, World Peace Foundation and US Institute of Peace, 2024).

[2] Cf. Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008); Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge, Polity, 2015).

elites' and their established rules and practices, including international norms, a refutation of context-specific knowledge, and a clean-slate approach that disregards past peacemaking attempts and alienates other international mediators."[3] The dominant logic is dealmaking in the "political marketplace" in which the key component is political payout, usually cash or licenses, to leaders who sign.[4] Instead of aspiring to democratic change, peacemaking is now concerned with short-term political survival. In this vein, commercial dealmaking may soon emerge as a primary driver in political pacts.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, it provides an analytical narrative of peace efforts across the region since 2000, taking in turn Ethiopia and Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan.[5] It then steps back and examines the region as a whole over this period. Four strands stand out, namely: (1) the expansion and contraction of multilateral peacemaking; (2) the integration of the Horn within the Red Sea Arena as a strategic periphery of the Gulf states; (3) the entrenchment of the political marketplace; and (4) changes in the norms and processes of peacemaking.

It will be helpful to define three key concepts. One is the *African peace and security architecture* (APSA). This is the construction of a complex multilateral system of peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding structures, including the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the UN, supported by the US and the European Union. This APSA was the centrepiece of the AU agenda at its creation over years spanning the millennium.[6]

The second is the *Red Sea Arena*.[7] This refers to the maritime and onshore spaces around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, including the nine littoral countries, as well as countries at one geographical remove that have commercial or strategic interests in that space, notably Ethiopia, the UAE, Qatar and Türkiye. It is an arena in two senses: first, unlike a region, which is bound together by shared interests and institutions, it is a zone of contest, and second, it has concentric circles of actors and active spectators.

Third is the *political marketplace*, the operating system for transactional politics, whereby political office, allegiance and services, including national sovereignty, are treated as commodities and are traded. The most powerful actors are those able to dispense the largest political budgets with the greatest freedom.

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[3] Dana Landau and Lior Lehrs, "Populist peacemaking: Trump's peace initiatives in the Middle East and the Balkans", *International Affairs*, vol. 98, No. 6 (2022), p. 2002.

[4] Alex de Waal, Benjamin Spatz and Aditya Sarkar, "Situating the contribution of the political market framework to peace processes" (Edinburgh, Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, 2022). Available at https://peacerep.org/publication/contribution-political-marketplace-framework-peace-processes (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[5] Many important places and issues are hereby neglected, including Djibouti and Somaliland.

[6] Mulugeta G. Berhe, "The norms and structures for African peace efforts: the African peace and security architecture", *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 24, No. 4 (2017), pp. 661–685.

[7] Alex de Waal, "Pax Africana or Middle East security alliance in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea?" Occasional Paper (Boston, World Peace Foundation, 2019). Available at https://worldpeacefoundation.org/blog/pax-africana-or-middle-east-security-alliance-in-the-horn-of-africa-and-the-red-sea/ (accessed on 25 November 2025); US Institute of Peace, *Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena, Final Report and Recommendations* (Washington D.C., 2020).

Ethiopia and Eritrea

Every peace process involving Ethiopia has unfolded on the terms laid down by the Ethiopian state. Jealous of protecting its sovereignty, Ethiopia has always insisted on defining the problem. Having taken this first step, it has determined the processes and largely dictated the outcomes – or in one instance, invited a former enemy, Eritrea, to do so. Successive peace processes reflect how Ethiopia functions as a state and how it is positioned in the regional and international order. Under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Ethiopia was an illiberal peacemaker at home, though less so abroad. On assuming power in 2018, Abiy Ahmed enjoyed a brief flourish as a populist peacemaker, quickly superseded by cutting partial deals to manage conflicts and consolidate power.

The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea of 1998–2000 was ostensibly a conflict over a disputed boundary, but arose from other factors, notably a contest over which would be the predominant power in the Horn. Fighting ended in June 2000 when Ethiopia's army overran Eritrean positions and advanced into Eritrea and called a ceasefire. Negotiations were held under the auspices of the Organisation of African Unity, with Algeria and the US as facilitators.

Ethiopia imposed the terms.[8] Prime Minister Meles Zenawi defined the problem as Eritrea's aggressive policy towards its neighbours. He overruled others in the EPRDF leadership who saw the problem as Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki and disregarded many Ethiopians who wanted to reverse Eritrea's independence. Ethiopia successfully isolated Eritrea diplomatically and economically, but Isaias remained in power. The dispute festered, with each country destabilizing the other. During the period when Meles was in office (he died in 2012) and continuing to a lesser degree under his successor Hailemariam Dessalegn, this peace served Ethiopia's national security doctrine, which prioritized economic development.[9] Meles's theory of change was that Ethiopia needed to be on good terms with its neighbours for its development strategy and that if Eritrea could not participate in that regional order, it should be isolated.

Ethiopia's political transition of 2018 marked the demise of the EPRDF and the ascent of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. His dream of making Ethiopia great required him to win personal recognition. A new style of peacemaking was heralded at a bilateral meeting in Asmara in July 2018, at which Isaias and Abiy publicly declared the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship.[10] This single-page statement was followed by further meetings in Abu Dhabi and Jeddah at which more details were fleshed out, though little was made public. The core agreement – a security pact between the two – was kept secret, though Isaias repeated his line, "game over, *weyane*" (referring to the Tigray People's Liberation Front, TPLF).[11]

[8] Agreement between the Government of the State of Eritrea and the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (the Algiers Accords), 12 December 2000. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag221_57349afd3b144.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[9] Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, *Foreign Affairs and National Security Strategy* (Addis Ababa, 2002).

[10] Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, 9 July 2018. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2097_5be56376d02e8.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[11] Eritrean Center for Strategic Studies, "President Isaias Afwerki: Weyane have committed four major mistakes. The TPLF has come to the end of the road. The game is over!" 17 February 2018. Available at https://www.ecss-online.com/president-isaias-afwerki-weyane-have-committed-four-major-mistakes-the-tplf-has-come-to-the-end-of-the-road-the-game-is-over/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

Destroying the TPLF was Isaias's agenda, and on this occasion, Isaias defined the problem and allowed Abiy to take the plaudits. Isaias got Ethiopia to implement Eritrea's security agenda, and Abiy got the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Asmara pact led directly to joint military efforts by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) along with special forces and militia, and the Eritrean Defence Force (EDF) against Tigray in November 2020. The EDF was fully committed to the war, but neither Isaias nor Abiy publicly admitted its presence. The war lasted two years and was ended by the Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities between the Federal Government and the TPLF, signed in Pretoria.[12] This could be called a "fast-track peace process".[13] The negotiations were hasty,[14] and the ungainly title of the final accord points to the fact that the aim was a truce, not a political resolution of the conflict, a weakness that has become more apparent over time.

During the war, which included weaponized mass starvation, neither party had been ready to talk peace, and the US, the sole external party with leverage, chose not to use it. Addis Ababa appears to have made its peace offer for public relations purposes, but the TPLF and the US seized the opening to attend talks. The TPLF agenda was to stop the war before the total destruction of the Tigrayan people. Abiy sought better relations with the US. He was in a position to define the overall crisis facing the country, but used that strategic opportunity to pursue tactical advantage. At the time of writing, the only provision of the Pretoria agreement that has been implemented fully and fairly is the truce between the two armies. As the government in Ethiopia has regressed from being an institutionalized state to the court of a "big man", Tigray has become one of the arenas in which the carousel of transactional bargaining is played out.[15]

Eritrea was excluded from the Pretoria talks and is mentioned only obliquely in the text of the agreement (as "non-ENDF forces"), although it was a principal belligerent. Regular and irregular forces from Amhara region were also not represented. This reshuffled the political deck, leading to a volatile militarized standoff between Ethiopia and Eritrea and an insurgency in Amhara region, and the mutation of the truce into a security pact between the signatories.

Somalia

In Somalia, top-down peace processes have been the product of power projection by key regional actors. In turn, those efforts have suffered from tensions between the objectives of external sponsors and from the brute fact that those objectives rarely enable the Somalis

[12] Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2443_63e011138623e.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[13] Mark Freeman, "'Fast-track negotiation': a white paper" (Paris, Proceedings of the Paris Institute for Advanced Study, 2025). Available at https://ifit-transitions.org/publications/fast-track-negotiation-a-white-paper (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[14] Concerned Pan African Scholars, "Assessing the peace accord for Tigray", The Elephant, 26 November 2022. Available at https://www.theelephant.info/documents/assessing-the-peace-accord-for-tigray/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[15] Mulugeta G. Berhe, "The story of Ethiopian governance: from a centralized public service monopoly to 'big man' politics" (Edinburgh, Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, 2025). Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.7488/era/5664 (accessed on 25 November 2025).

to define their own problems, let alone seek their own solutions. In the decade after the collapse of the central government in 1991, more than a dozen attempts were made.[16] In all cases, attention was focused on who would lead the process, allowing that actor to define the problem. Peace processes for Somalia have been subsidiary to the neighbouring states' security agendas, especially counter-terrorism, and the international community's state-building agenda.

Most policy briefings on Somalia identify the origin of the crisis as the collapse of the state in 1991. This is a rudimentary error. It mistakes a problem (the Somali state) for a solution.[17] The kleptocratic tyranny of President Mohamed Siad Barre provoked a civil war that collapsed the state. Somalis understand this well and prefer managing a balance of power within their political marketplace over a return to the status quo ante of potential dictatorship. Once initiated, Somali peace conferences tend to become more inclusive due to the pressure of numerous people clamouring to be heard. This means that at crucial moments, external parties' priorities were subverted by Somalis' democratic culture. No one has succeeded in imposing an illiberal peace on Somalia.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Ethiopia and Egypt sponsored rival political processes. Each process was an alliance-building exercise intended to construct a state favourable to the patron's interests. Ethiopia invested more diplomatic and military resources and used the IGAD to build a coalition, notably including Kenya, to legitimize its projection of power and solicit international resources.[18] Ethiopia preferred a federal governance model built around provincial political-military formations based on the clan units that had emerged in the civil war,[19] leading to a formula of power sharing among the four major clan family units, with an additional half allocated to minorities. This also opened the door to widespread participation of Somali clan elders, women and diaspora groups, with the unanticipated outcome that political conferences in Eldoret and Mbagathi (in Kenya) expanded from becoming power-sharing negotiations into something more akin to a national dialogue.[20] The international donors financing the Mbagathi talks complained of the large number of delegates and the expansive and often inconclusive nature of the talks. The bill was, however, likely a fraction of the cost of even a minor military deployment and much more productive than sending troops. The outcome was the 2004 Transitional Federal Charter, which led to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) eight years later. The dialogue this entailed helped forge a Somali political community.

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[16] Ken Menkhaus, "Governance without government in Somalia: spoilers, state building, and the politics of coping", *International Security*, vol. 31, No. 3 (2006), pp. 74–106; Ibrahim Farah and Sekou Toure, "Engineering peace in Somalia: a call for a re-examination of the Somali peace processes", *Development*, vol. 60 (2017), pp. 183–189.

[17] De Waal, *The Real Politics*, chapter 7.

[18] Seyoum Mesfin and Abdeta Dribssa Beyene, "The practicalities of living with failed states", *Dædalus*, vol. 147, No. 1 (2018), pp. 128–140; Abdeta Dribssa Beyene, "Sovereignty preservation attenuating it elsewhere: the political and security dimensions of Buffer Zones", PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 2017.

[19] Alex de Waal, "Somalia's disassembled state: clan unit formation and the political marketplace", *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 20, No. 5 (2020), pp. 561–585.

[20] Maimuna Sheikh Abdulle Mohamud, "Peace negotiations and remaking political community in Somalia", PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2020.

Excluded from this process was the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). This was a locally initiated governance initiative, building on the business community's need for local security and a system for adjudicating civil disputes, including commercial law. Islamic law and courts were legitimate through custom, understood and respected by all, swift and predictable, with low levels of corruption and their decisions enforced through the courts' militia.[21] Many Somalis preferred the intolerance and brutality of the Islamic courts to the lawlessness of the warlords. The regional powers and international community nonetheless excluded the possibility of negotiating with the UIC. Ethiopia intervened militarily, with US support, to enforce this exclusion and impose a political settlement that in due course became the FGS. As feared, this radicalized UIC members. The militia became Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, known as Al-Shabaab, which affiliated itself with Al-Qaida, and carried out terrorist attacks in Kenya as well as Somalia. In response, regional states (except Eritrea) mounted the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) with support from the US and European Union that backed the FGS for reasons of counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, regional stability, state-building and development. This assemblage faced the problem that fighting a war against Al-Shabaab overshadowed all else, undermining the legitimacy of the state it was intended to protect.

Conflict resolution between Somalia, the self-declared Republic of Somaliland and Ethiopia constitutes another overlay of negotiations, bilateral and mediated. The same features of turbulent transactionalism have been repeated at the regional level. In January 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding, the contents of which are still not public, whereby Ethiopia would obtain access to the sea. This enraged Somalia. Subsequently, Türkiye has mediated talks that restored relations between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa, leaving the status of the MoU uncertain.

Since the 1980s, Somalia has been a paradigmatic case of a deregulated political marketplace, consisting of a "security arena" in which central military and security organs are only one contender among many[22] and diverse channels of political finance. Somalis' political business skills have been demonstrated in their ability to navigate the rivalries of Middle Eastern powerbrokers without becoming the locus of proxy wars. The test of these skills will be negotiation with Al-Shabaab, which is not only undefeated but which consistently demonstrates its capacity to administer a state-like entity with efficiency and resilience. There is no institutionalized state on the horizon. Somalia is manageable only by consensus among a broad and dispersed political elite.

[21] Aisha Ahmad, "The security bazaar: business interests and Islamist power in civil war Somalia", *International Security*, vol. 39, No. 3 (2014), pp. 89–117.

[22] Alice Hills, "Security sector or security arena? The evidence from Somalia", in B*uilding Security in Post-Conflict States*, Ursula Schroeder, ed. (London, Routledge, 2017), pp. 43–58.

Sudan and South Sudan

Nowhere has had a richer experience of peace processes than Sudan and, since its independence in 2011, South Sudan. Mediation efforts in the Sudans are distinguished by a high degree of international engagement and, relatedly, documentation, analysis and theorizing.[23] It is a leading exemplar of efforts to achieve a liberal peace, which have too often been reduced to either buyouts or partial deals that function as security pacts.[24]

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in January 2005,[25] is the lodestar of these efforts. It is an exemplary case of an internationally mediated agreement to end a long-running civil war, the outcome of three years of talks between the principal belligerents, resulting in a paradigmatic template for a "liberal peace", with the three pillars of power sharing, wealth sharing and security arrangements instituted as steps in a transition to democracy and post-conflict development. The chief mediator was from IGAD, supported by the "troika" of the US, the UK and Norway. It resulted in a major multi-mandate UN peacekeeping mission. Less studied but no less important were the previous 16 years of peace efforts, most of them Sudanese domestic initiatives, that led to partial agreements and a "literature of accord", which framed the substantive agenda for the peace talks, including defining what could be considered a legitimate outcome in the eyes of Sudanese citizens.[26]

Although the war was hurting the population, there was no stalemate. Both sides anticipated that they could withstand any onslaught by the other and that events could reconfigure to their advantage. The GoS was using oil revenues to rearm, and the SPLM was fomenting insurrections in Darfur and eastern Sudan. The agreement was made possible by several other factors. Among them were the unipolar moment in world history, including the unique context of the US's recent declaration of a "global war on terror" that put Sudan, as a former host of Al-Qaeda, in the sights for potential regime change, alongside a high-level decision in Washington to seek a negotiated settlement. Sudan experienced a fast-growing economy during an oil boom, which made a share-out of resources politically feasible. There was international readiness to invest in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. The agreement postponed the most explosive issue, namely southern Sudanese secession, for a later date – an example of the Sudanese practice of 'tajility'.[27] The CPA promised that the SPLM, then led by John Garang, would work for unity. That promise did not survive Garang's untimely death.

During the six and a half years from the signing of the CPA to the independence of South Sudan, a series of peace talks tried to emulate the CPA formula and buttress the CPA itself.

[23] Sarah Nouwen, Laura James and Sharath Srinivasan, eds., *Making and Breaking Peace in Sudan and South Sudan: The Comprehensive Peace Agreement and Beyond* (London, British Academy, 2020); Sharath Srinivasan, *When Peace Kills Politics: International Intervention and Unending Wars in the Sudans* (London, C. Hurst, 2021).

[24] De Waal, Spatz and Sarkar, "Situating the contribution", p. 15.

[25] Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Sudan People's Liberation Army. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag337_5616aeb31cf24.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[26] Alex de Waal, "Concluding reflections: Sudan's comprehensive peace agreement and theories of change," in *Making and Breaking Peace*, Sarah Nouwen, Laura James and Sharath Srinivasan, eds. (London, British Academy, 2020).

[27] From the Arabic *ta'jil*, meaning delay.

The 2006 Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement[28] was a fast-track negotiation between the GoS and Eritrea, the external sponsor of the Eastern Front armed groups. The principal goal was amity between Khartoum and Asmara, which was achieved, though the underlying issues remained unaddressed.[29]

By contrast, the Darfur peace talks replicated the CPA in their protracted, detailed and wide-ranging scope and structure. Darfur was the site of a vicious war that the US characterized as genocide, and there was a high level of international interest and engagement. The African Union led the mediation effort. The structure was cumbersome and unable to adjust to the reality that the CPA's promise of national unity had evaporated. The rationale of the negotiations was also compromised by the American prioritization of dispatching a UN peacekeeping mission, which meant that the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA)[30] was ancillary to an international peace operation rather than the other way around.[31] The failure of the DPA led to an initiative convened by Qatar and run mainly by UN technical experts. The fragmentation of the armed groups meant that much effort was devoted to forming a rebel delegation sufficiently coherent to sit across the table from the GoS. A group known as the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM) was constituted for this purpose. The process became one in which the mediators polished a Doha Document for Peace in Darfur[32] and then invited the parties to sign on to it, with the promise of material rewards in the form of government positions and development funds.[33] The GoS signed, as did the LJM. Civil society groups were invited to discuss the document, not to shape the agenda. The war was not resolved.

The AU High Level Panel for Darfur (AUPD) was created to seek a solution to the challenges of justice, peace, reconciliation and democratization in Darfur. The panel chairperson, Thabo Mbeki, began by posing the question: how do the people of Darfur define their problem? On learning that they had not been consulted, the AUPD held 40 days of town-hall-style meetings, seeking answers.[34] The outcome was that the AUPD report distinguished between issues that the Darfurians could and should resolve among themselves and the wider "Sudanese conflict in Darfur" that needed to be resolved through nationwide democratization, involving an inclusive political process.[35] Fearful of a unified Darfurian political bloc, Khartoum set out

[28] Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement, October 2006. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag373_5630e1c2b7f69.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[29] Munzoul Assal, "Six years after the Eastern Sudan peace agreement: an assessment", in S*udan Divided: Continuing Conflict in a Contested State*, Gunnar Sørbø and Abdul Ghaffar Ahmed, eds. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 141–160.

[30] Darfur Peace Agreement, May 2006. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag350_562f511bbfb5c.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[31] Alex de Waal, "Darfur's elusive peace", in *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*, Alex de Waal, ed. (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 366–388.

[32] Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, May 2011. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag853_5630ed637d2b6.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[33] Rosalind Marsden, "Peacemaking in Darfur and the Doha Process: the role of international actors", in *Making and Breaking Peace in Sudan and South Sudan: The Comprehensive Peace Agreement and Beyond*, Sarah Nouwen, Laura James and Sharath Srinivasan, eds. (London, British Academy, 2020), pp. 230–257.

[34] De Waal and Mohammed, *Defining the Crisis in the Sudans.*

[35] African Union High-Level Panel on Darfur, "Darfur: the quest for peace, justice and reconciliation, report of the African Union High-Level Panel on Darfur (AUPD)", October 2009.

to block this. The US and UN also did not concur and instead pursued the Darfur-only track in Doha.

The AUPD was reconstituted as the AU High-Level Implementation Panel for Sudan, and its principal activity was facilitating negotiations between the GoS and SPLM over the independence of South Sudan and its consequences. The panel identified the joint challenge as establishing "two viable states". However, the two parties were too rancorous and their leaders too weak to make the necessary strategic decisions to achieve this goal. The panel also insisted that the split did not create an "African" state and an "Arab" one but rather two African states, each characterized by diversity. The GoS was reluctant to acknowledge this, resulting in a new conflict in the "two areas" of the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile at the time of South Sudan's independence. This new war prevented the normalization of relations between Sudan and South Sudan, leading in turn to a dispute over payments for pumping South Sudan's oil through Sudan for export, in response to which South Sudan shut down its oil production. This was followed by an inter-state conflict over their common border in 2012. The AU, acting in close coordination with the UN, IGAD, the League of Arab States and the US, was able to prevent this from escalating. The AU Peace and Security Council adopted a communiqué that included a road map,[36] which then became, almost unchanged, the text of UN Security Council Resolution 2046.[37] This, in turn, led to negotiations that resulted in a package of nine cooperation agreements.[38] It was a model of how the APSA was intended to work, cutting through a generalized deadlock at the UNSC to generate a consensus that all international actors would coordinate to de-escalate the crisis. Multilateral engagement prevented the two states taking the shortcut to hell, but it could not take them off that path in the longer run.

Civil war erupted in South Sudan in December 2013. The internal political conflict was rooted in rivalries among contenders for the presidency, in anticipation of elections, and was accentuated by a demand from Sudan to determine the composition of the South Sudanese cabinet as a quid pro quo for reopening the oil pipeline. The cash flow squeeze from the oil pipeline shutdown limited the government's scope for managing the crisis.

When the political dispute turned violent, the neighbours and the international community responded rapidly. Within days, IGAD pressed for a ceasefire and return to political dialogue. These efforts did not succeed, and the war developed its own dynamic. At this point, with a switch from fast-track negotiations to a protracted process, it would have been appropriate for the mediators to have reassessed their framework and what they expected to achieve. This they did not do, so that the proposed formulae for a settlement did not correspond with the changed military and political realities. Only under extreme pressure was the Government of the Republic of South Sudan ready to sign the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCISS),[39] and the provisions of that agreement were almost impossible to

[36] AU PSC, "Communiqué: on the situation in Sudan and South Sudan", 22 April 2012.

[37] UN Security Council Resolution 2046, S/RES/2046, 2 May 2012.

[38] The Cooperation Agreement between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan, September 2012. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag860_5627e93f8523c.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[39] Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, 17 August 2015. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag1357_562e4ff19c7b1.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

implement. ARCISS was criticized as an imposed deal[40] and as a "payroll peace" based on material incentives for the belligerents, which required external aid flows that were never in prospect.[41] After the violent breakdown of ARCISS, the governments of Sudan and Uganda stepped in to facilitate a Revitalized ARCISS that was based on a sounder assessment of political realities;[42] however, neither Sudan nor Uganda had the resources or political focus to follow through on implementation. The R-ARCISS quickly became a shadow of peace and a cover behind which the government consolidated power, ultimately leading to a new conflict in 2025.[43]

Post-secession, the Sudanese state also faced a crisis of viability, and in due course economic and political crisis brought about a revolutionary situation. A non-violent civic uprising brought down the government of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019. Following this, conditions were uniquely auspicious for a domestic process towards resolution of Sudan's crises. But the regional and international context was less propitious. Having devoted huge effort to isolating and punishing Sudan over decades, foreign powers did next to nothing to support the prospects for democracy when the Sudanese people succeeded in effecting a civic revolution.

In all Sudanese and South Sudanese negotiations, the US was a key protagonist, whether or not its envoys were in the room. In the 1990s, the US had imposed a raft of sanctions on Sudan and listed it as a state sponsor of terror. Lifting those sanctions and withdrawing the threat of regime change were top priorities for the GoS under President Al-Bashir. Repeatedly, Washington promised to lift sanctions if Sudan took specific steps (signing the CPA, allowing UN peacekeepers into Darfur, permitting South Sudanese independence). Each time, Sudan met the requirement. But in the meantime, it had committed another transgression (atrocities in Darfur, obstructing humanitarian aid), and sanctions remained. It was only after Sudan agreed to join the Abraham Accords in 2020 that the Trump Administration removed sanctions.

At a structural or systems level, the unipolar world order of the first decade of the 2000s was replaced by a multipolar order in which an increasing number of middle powers were competing for influence. The first Trump Administration delegated policy over the Red Sea Arena to Israel, Egypt and the Gulf monarchies, a stance sustained by the Biden Administration.[44] Qatar and Türkiye also played roles. The regional powers' style of engagement was also different: they openly played the regional political marketplace. This sidelined the UN and AU, which accepted their diminished roles without complaint.

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[40] Jok Madut Jok, "South Sudan's elusive peace: between local drivers of violence and the actions of external actors", in *South Sudan: Post Independence Dilemmas*, Amir Idris, ed. (London, Routledge, 2018), pp. 74–91; Zach Vertin, *A Poisoned Well: Lessons in Mediation from South Sudan's Troubled Peace Process* (New York, International Peace Institute, 2018).

[41] Alan Boswell and Alex de Waal, "South Sudan: the perils of payroll peace" (London, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics, 2019).

[42] Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, 12 September 2018. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2112_5be57be98faf9.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[43] Joshua Craze, "Is this the end of the peace process?" African Arguments, 28 March 2025. Available at https://africanarguments.org/2025/03/is-this-the-end-of-the-peace-process/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[44] US Institute of Peace, *Senior Study Group*; Charles Dunne, "US Middle East policy: the Trump-Biden doctrine in action", Arab Center Washington DC, 23 March 2023. Available at https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/us-middle-east-policy-the-trump-biden-doctrine-in-action/ (accessed on 25 November 2025).

The strengths of the multilateral organizations lay in agenda setting, which would have required a sharp analysis of the problem, using their institutions to translate this analysis into an agenda and providing proactive diplomatic resources. The efficacy of this had been amply demonstrated by the AU Panel in 2010–2012. However, multilateral leaders focused on technical and tactical issues, turning the UN and AU into errand runners for the powerbrokers, rather than convenors and agenda-setters.

Following the non-violent revolution in April 2019 and the failed attempts by the generals of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) to suppress ongoing demands for democracy, the TMC and the civilians of the Forces for Freedom and Change agreed to engage in talks. This took the form of a fast-track process. Hard bargaining was done by the Quartet (US, UK, Saudi Arabia and UAE), with African mediators providing a public face and claiming the credit.[45] This led to the Khartoum constitutional declaration that heralded power-sharing between the generals and a civilian cabinet.[46] The document resembles a midpoint between the positions of the contending parties. It postponed most of the key issues including how to bring the armed movements into the political process and how to dismantle the military sector's capture of the greater part of the economy, a delay that enabled the generals to consolidate economic and military power and to control the negotiations with the provincial armed movements. The generals got most of what they wanted. Eager for a quick win, the AU mediator went along with it. The civilians signed without having obtained robust promises of economic assistance and a process of dismantling the kleptocratic "deep state".

The Juba Agreement,[47] signed in 2020 with several of the armed movements, did not build a platform for democracy but instead entrenched the military. Implementation of the Juba Agreement required major inflows of money to pay for all the positions allocated to the rebels and the ambitious programme of integrating their fighters into the national army.[48] Given that the needed budgetary expansion was never in the cards, the implicit pact was that the leaders of the signatory parties would obtain the resources they sought either by joining Khartoum's military kleptocracy or by looting the general populace, or both.

Following the outbreak of war in April 2023 there has been a succession of mediation initiatives in Sudan. They began with a joint effort in Jeddah co-chaired by Saudi Arabia and the US. Had this succeeded in reaching a ceasefire it would have been counted a success. It did not. Its sole achievement was a "declaration of commitment" by the belligerents to protect civilians,[49] which has not been honoured. Nonetheless, the mediators persisted and thereby filled the diplomatic space, bringing in the AU in an ancillary role, making other initiatives

[45] Institute for Security Studies, "Mohamed El Hacen Lebatt: a new doctrine for African-led mediation", PSC Insights, 12 December 2020. Available at https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/mohamed-el-hacen-lebatt-a-new-doctrine-for-african-led-mediation (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[46] Political Agreement on Establishing the Structures and Institutions of the Transitional Period between the Transitional Military Council and the Declaration of Freedom and Change, 17 July 2019. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2243_5e32b42be6ffb.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[47] Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan between the Transitional Government of Sudan and the Parties to Peace Process, 3 October 2020. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2325_603fc8e9cece1.PDF (accessed on 25 November 2025).

[48] Nils-Christian Borman and Ibrahim Elbadawi, "The Juba power-sharing peace agreement: will it promote peace and democratic transition in Sudan?" Working Papers, No. 1490 (Cairo, Economic Research Forum, 2021).

[49] Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan, 11 May 2023. Available at https://pax.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2543_6463560cdc612.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2025).

less viable. There were other efforts by IGAD, Egypt and in Bahrain, none of which made progress. US support was necessary for any initiative to gain traction. But Washington could not decide whether to pursue an Africa-centred multilateral process, which required a much broader diplomatic effort including the UN, or a Middle East-centred transactional bargain, which would have required elevating the issue to a high level in Washington to ensure that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi took it seriously. The Biden Administration did neither. It handed an intractable conflict to the incoming Trump Administration. Secretary of State Marco Rubio took the Middle East-focused approach, trying to bridge the differences between Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE at a high level. His first effort, in July 2025, foundered on the regional powerbrokers' unreadiness to compromise. Rubio's second effort, in September, yielded promising results in the form of a joint statement by the "Quad" of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE agreeing to refrain from providing military support to the belligerents and to work for a unified, civilian-led government. This opens the door to peacemaking among the Sudanese themselves.

Implications

The last quarter-century has seen a number of important developments in the Horn of Africa that have transformed the landscape of conflict resolution. As elsewhere, peacemaking practice informs theory – or should do so.[50] Let me draw out four implications from the above.

First, we have seen the *expansion and contraction of multilateral peacemaking.* The APSA was designed, partly built and collapsed. It was the most concerted and coherent assemblage of norms, practices and institutions for peace and security in the region, and it held out much hope.[51] It is gone. The AU surrendered strategic leadership. The UN, which had some of its largest and most ambitious peace missions in the region, shifted from proactive partner to passive spectator, partly citing the notion of subsidiarity and the slogan of "African solutions". The UN is fully aware that the AU is not capable of finding solutions, not least because the solutions require the middle powers of the Middle East. Ethiopia has surrendered its role as the anchor of regional peace and security.[52]

Second, *the Horn has been integrated within the Red Sea Arena as a strategic periphery of the Arab Gulf states.* This is a reconfiguration of older patterns from the colonial era and the Cold War, with the new factor that the middle powers of the Middle East have become the drivers of political and military outcomes. Yemen was the first crucible of this new arrangement, and the same pattern of engagements has been extended across the Red Sea to the Horn. The political budgets dispensed by the Arab states sustain client regimes and insurgencies, insulating the recipients from the political and economic constraints of their

[50] Eileen Babbitt and Fen Osler Hampson, "Conflict resolution as a field of inquiry: practice informing theory", *International Studies Review*, vol. 13, No. 1 (2011), pp. 46–57.

[51] World Peace Foundation, *African Politics, African Peace: Report of the World Peace Foundation to the African Union* (Boston, WPF, 2016); Alex de Waal and Rachel Ibreck, "A human security strategy for the European Union in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea", in *EU Global Strategy and Human Security*, Mary Kaldor, Iavor Rangelov and Sabine Selchow, eds. (London, Routledge, 2018), pp. 103–119.

[52] Harry Verhoeven and Michael Woldemariam, "Who lost Ethiopia? The unmaking of an African anchor state and US foreign policy", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 43, No. 4 (2022), pp. 622–650; Sonia Le Gouriellec, "Regional power and contested hierarchy: Ethiopia, an 'imperfect hegemon' in the Horn of Africa", *International Affairs*, vol. 94, No. 5 (2018), pp. 1059–1075.

own, increasingly ravaged countries. Israel's capacity for projecting military power will likely drive the next reconfiguration of alliances. The contestation across the Horn must also be seen as intersecting with other key arenas, including the Sahara-Sahel and the Indian Ocean.

Third, the *dominant logic is the political marketplace*. This is the logic of monetized transactionalism as the operating system for politics, and as a consequence, for conflict resolution.[53] This in turn poses some questions that the would-be mediator needs to address before engaging with a conflict. Those questions include whether the political market is in a boom or a bust, and how political rivalries are structured, specifically whether there are two parties or many, and whether the parties will fragment during or after the negotiations. The mediator needs to ask whether the outcome of negotiations is a *political settlement*, akin to a proto-constitution or treaty, or a *political pact* – namely, a deal in a turbulent political market that is only good as market conditions prevail. The logic of the political market requires substantial material rewards for signatories, opening the door to a model of peacemaking in which the political settlement is ancillary to a commercial deal, for example, contracts for minerals or construction. Mediators will need to ask whether they are ready to embrace this model.

The current configuration across the Horn appears paradoxical. While the real economies that sustain the populations are collapsing, with obvious symptoms such as famine, mass displacement and the contraction in essential public services, the funds available for political leaders to spend on claiming or consolidating power, including waging war, are resilient or expanding. This is because of external sponsorship by Middle Eastern powerbrokers. Those patrons have the resources to fund inclusive buy-in, should they collude in doing so, but show no interest in that. In the absence of a grand bargain, domestic politicians within the Horn are reduced to cutting deals that either license theft of public funds or expropriation from the populace (or both), or making "peace" deals that function as security pacts and merely shift the battlefield elsewhere.

Fourth, there have been *radical changes in the normative and processual character of peacemaking*, including a possible collapse in confidence in mediation as such. During the period in which the liberal order was consolidating, it was valid to assume that aspirational norms would, in due course, become political facts and that empirical and ethical tensions over normative practices such as inclusion and gender equity would be resolved over time.[54] This implicit theory of change no longer holds. Protracted, complex and ambitious processes that aspired to democratic transformation and developmental peacebuilding no longer occur. Instead, there are, at best, fast-track negotiations aimed at securing immediate outcomes[55] and, at worst, security pacts or commercial deals in a turbulent political marketplace. There is no theory of change, but rather a theory of political survival for regime leaders. In the past, we might have hoped for formalized political *un*settlements – agreements that stabilized conflicts and created the context for moving beyond irresolvable issues.[56] Today, we face only *informal* political unsettlements, namely context-specific bargains and pacts. Norms

[53] De Waal, Spatz and Sarkar, "Situating the Contribution".

[54] Alex de Waal, "Inclusion in peacemaking: from moral claim to political fact", in *The Fabric of Peace in Africa: Looking beyond the State*, Pamela Aall and Chester Crocker, eds. (McGill, Queen's Press, 2017), pp. 165–186.

[55] Freeman, "Fast track negotiations".

[56] Christine Bell and Jan Pospisil, "Navigating inclusion in transitions from conflict: the formalized political unsettlement", *Journal of International Development*, vol. 29, No. 5 (2017), pp. 576–593.

of inclusion, human rights, humanitarian principles and democracy are vanishing. While discreet payouts and secret military and business pacts have long played a part in peace processes, they were relegated to the background; now they are becoming the main event, with the barest pretence otherwise.

The erstwhile champions of principled mediation, notably the UN and AU, have become largely quiescent in the face of attempts to silence, co-opt or bypass them. Past advocates of peacemaking as the protection of human rights and the promotion of democracy and development have passively surrendered to a model of peacemaking concerned only with belligerent leaders' political survival.