# BEYOND THE DEAL?

## Rethinking Statebuilding Amid Conflict Fragmentation and Transactional Peacemaking

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Discussion of statebuilding in contemporary peacemaking is mired in a paradox. Problems with states persist as core drivers of armed conflict. They can be weak, fragmented, corrupt or repressive, and unable or unwilling to provide for the needs of populations through legitimate and accountable institutions. Yet in a new era of conflict fragmentation and geopolitical upheaval, the nature of the state is rarely the subject of negotiation or at the centre of ensuing agreements.

This brief reflects on the role of statebuilding in conflict-affected settings, addressing the reasons for which it is largely absent from current international peace negotiations. It concludes with consideration of other avenues by which security and a sustainable peace may be pursued incrementally or at a subnational level.

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### STATEBUILDING AND PEACEMAKING

Statebuilding is broadly associated with the liberal peacebuilding agenda of the 1990s and early 2000s. In 2008, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2008: 2) defined statebuilding as 'an endogenous process to enhance capacity, institutions and legitimacy of the state, driven by state-society relations' and recognized it as the 'central objective' of international partnerships in fragile situations and in countries emerging from conflict.

In practice, activities associated with statebuilding shaped both comprehensive peace processes, many developed under the auspices of the United Nations, and the reconstruction efforts that followed military interventions of this era led by the United States. In the aftermath of the

Cold War, the mandates of UN peacekeeping missions expanded from the narrow goals of separating combatants and monitoring ceasefires to authorizing complex multidimensional presences in countries emerging from civil war (United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2003). They included activities that ranged from disarming and demobilizing combatants to reforming security institutions, promoting democratic elections and supporting human rights and transitional justice. Meanwhile, the USA adopted an approach to nation building after military interventions that was frequently equated with statebuilding (Dobbs et al. 2007). These efforts were grounded in an understanding of weak or fragile states as impediments to both development and security.

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The West's broad ambitions for the transformation of fragile states soon encountered setbacks, a consequence, as Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk (2007: 1) suggested, of 'insufficient knowledge and analysis of the intrinsic tensions and contradictions of externally-assisted statebuilding'. The implementation of peace agreements in the Balkans and Central America, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan fell short of their stated goals. The failure of diverse interventions in Afghanistan, Haiti, Iraq, Libya and Somalia dampened enthusiasm for externally driven regime change.

A robust literature critical of liberal peacebuilding, and of the statebuilding at its core, developed around concerns about the imposition of Western models; the neglect of national actors, including agency at the local level; and donor preoccupations with short-term projects rather than sustained engagement (Richmond 2006; Campbell, Chandler and Sabaratnam 2011; Chandler 2020).[1] This critique was shared by rising powers deeply committed to principles of sovereignty and non-interference and thus inherently sceptical of externally (Western) driven and funded solutions, which many saw as echoing colonial practices (Call and de Coning 2017). At the same time, more nuanced analysis of non-state-centric approaches to governance also began to emerge. Volker Boege, M. Anne Brown and Kevin P. Clements (2009), for example, highlighted the resilience of local sociopolitical formations and their contribution to 'hybrid political orders'. They argued that 'the capacities and legitimacy of non-state providers of security and other public goods have to be acknowledged and integrated into processes of building of political orders beyond the Western model of the state' (Boege, Brown and Clements 2009: 20).

While adaptations were made, statebuilding remained an important element of the international peacebuilding architecture. Pressure from a new grouping of fragile and conflict-affected countries, the g7+, established in Timor-Leste in 2010, contributed to the launching of the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States and the initiation of a decade-long reform of overseas development assistance (Simonds 2026). The New Deal acknowledged that externally imposed solutions did not work, while reaffirming that peacebuilding and statebuilding were foundational. It committed to 'new ways of engaging to support inclusive country-led and country-owned transitions out of fragility',

[1] See also the work of Séverine Autesserre, Roger Mac Ginty and Roland Paris.

contributing to what would later be described as a 'headlong rush' to local solutions, or localization (OECD 2012; Mac Ginty 2025: 12).

At the UN, peacekeeping pivoted towards robust mandates that prioritized stabilization and the management of conflict rather than its resolution. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the Force Intervention Brigade in support of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) were established in 2013, and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) followed in 2014. In parallel, a major review of peacebuilding completed in 2015 informed twin resolutions on sustaining peace adopted by the General Assembly and the Security Council the following year (United Nations 2015). Statebuilding—and the centrality of 'effective accountable and inclusive institutions', as recognized in Goal 16 of the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals—remained a key aspiration. In 2018 the flagship UN–World Bank report *Pathways for Peace* underlined its centrality to conflict prevention by arguing that weak, exclusive or unaccountable state institutions are drivers of violence. It maintained that, to sustain peace, statebuilding should be tied to inclusion, justice and development—once more reflecting a notably Western agenda (United Nations 2018).

In practice, statebuilding continued to struggle, a reality that the collapse of the Afghan state in August 2021, after 20 years of international assistance at a cost of more than USD 140 billion, brought into sharp focus (Landers and Aboneaaj 2021). Meanwhile, even statebuilding ventures that were clearly grounded in peace agreements and pursued by national governments encountered significant obstacles. In Colombia, for example, the uneven implementation of the 2016 peace agreement reached between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) contributed to the expansion and fragmentation of dissident and other armed groups, fuelled by illicit economies. In 2022, the government of President Gustavo Petro launched an ambitious initiative, dubbed 'Total Peace', to open nine simultaneous dialogue processes with different armed groups. This effort recognized the importance of a territorial approach to peace, grounded in local realities, through the extension of the state's presence. However, its limited achievements have seen these groups continue to expand (Dickinson 2024).

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In her analysis of what she calls 'the five fallacies of international statebuilding', informed in part by reflection on Afghanistan, Christine Cheng (2026) identifies the core problem as conceptual: international statebuilding failed because of how the intervenors conceptualized the state, universalizing Western experience and treating the 'good [Western] state' as the standard to be pursued. In their statebuilding efforts, she argues, international actors ignored local power dynamics and realities, including, for example, that more state capacity—whether in the form of a state security apparatus intrinsically related to insecurity, or of a justice system that was inherently politicized—benefited political elites and armed groups in lieu of building good governance.

As Alex de Waal (2009: 2) argued in earlier critiques of statebuilding, it is critical to ground external engagement in the 'actual functioning of politics'. Countries such as Afghanistan, the DRC and Sudan should be studied 'as they actually are rather than as deficient examples of what we think they ought to be'. This means recognizing the importance of the 'political marketplace'—the bargaining within patronage systems that underpins politics in complex countries that lack functioning institutions and a strong state—and the difficult reality that external interventions or peace processes are unlikely to be able to transform their underlying dynamics (de Waal, Spatz and Sarkar 2023: 16).

## A TRANSFORMED ENVIRONMENT FOR PEACEMAKING

**In 2026 the world is experiencing extreme turbulence and widespread violations of norms relating to sovereignty and the use of force.**

In 2026 the world is experiencing extreme turbulence and widespread violations of norms relating to sovereignty and the use of force. Conflicts are at a post–Cold War high, no comprehensive peace agreements have been reached for a decade, and humanitarian and development assistance is plummeting as military budgets rise. When peace negotiations do take place, the subject of the state is rarely the focus, and international statebuilding appears to have lost momentum. 'The liberal peace', as Roger Mac Ginty (2025: 2) has argued, 'is over'.

The reasons for these changes are complex but include rapid geopolitical change and diminished confidence in multilateral institutions; the evolving nature of conflicts, which are increasingly interstate or, when internal, frequently internationalized and persistently fragmented (in part as a result of the failure of earlier interventions); and radical challenges to the existing model of external assistance, in which 'a crisis of legitimacy matched only by a crisis of solvency' is fundamentally transforming the contours of international cooperation (Malloch-Brown, Pantuliano and Simons 2026).

Geopolitical dynamics are characterized by great powers' assertion of spheres of influence—a trend accelerated by US President Donald Trump's pursuit of an aggressively transactional and increasingly militarized foreign policy—as well as rising multipolarity, as middle and regional powers with access to resources and political influence assert their strategic autonomy. Diminished confidence in multilateral institutions and an erosion of international law and other norms were accelerated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel's devastating response in Gaza, as well as by the perceived hypocrisy of the West in its differential response to these two conflicts. Violations are more widespread, however, extending from Rwanda's intervention in the DRC in support of the M23 rebel group to the persistent impunity of aggressors in long-running conflicts in Myanmar, Sudan and elsewhere.

The most critical change, however, has been the USA's 'wrecking-ball' approach to the post-1945 international order (Munich Security Conference 2026: 9), in which the USA has abandoned the liberal values it has long projected—if

hypocritically at times—across the world in favour of the exercise of raw power. US power has been most evident in the terrifying capabilities of its armed forces, evident to all in the 'extraction' of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, as well as the full-scale war launched with Israel on Iran. It has also been demonstrated in President Trump's pursuit of 'peacemaking through strength' as a hallmark of his second term in office (The White House 2026b).

The USA joins a crowded field of states that, like long-time mediators Norway and Qatar, recognize mediation as 'a core instrument of security policy' (bin Abdulaziz Alkhulaifi and Motzfeldt Kravik 2026), as well as a means by which to 'project [their] ambitions on a world stage', as Christine Bell (2024: 28) has put it. These states include a mix of regional and middle powers. Some have long engaged in peacemaking initiatives of some kind, while others have been afforded more opportunities by the new geopolitical environment and the waning legitimacy of multilateral peacemakers.

The diplomatic styles, approaches, and economic and security interests of states vary significantly. The kinds of outcomes that they pursue through their peacemaking also differ. Authoritarian governments or monarchies, to make an obvious point, are likely to prioritize sovereignty, regional security and strong state institutions in ways that are distinct from the concerns of at least some inclusive democracies. The fact that there are many circumstances in which ad hoc coalitions of these different states have found, and will continue to find, the need or opportunity to work together contributes to the narrowing of their goals to modest common denominators and raises critical questions for potential partners (Whitfield 2025).

## OUTCOMES AND CHALLENGES

When peace agreements are reached, they are far from comprehensive, increasingly transactional and often not straightforwardly about peace. This tendency was already seen in the Abraham Accords, concluded during Trump's first presidency, which were in essence a series of defence agreements, and in the Pretoria Agreement, which brought the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia to an end in November 2022 without addressing its underlying drivers (Landau and Lehrs 2022). More limited agreements respond, first and foremost, to the more constrained ambitions of the parties to a conflict (the terms of the Pretoria Agreement were largely dictated by Ethiopia) (International Crisis Group 2022). They also reflect differences among the external actors involved, as well as resistance to either mandating or hosting large new peace operations to monitor implementation. While several countries have demanded the withdrawal of UN peace operations—Mali and Sudan in 2023 most notably—no new peacekeeping operation has been established since 2014.

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The power-based diplomacy of Trump's second term—ever more clearly backed by the threat or use of military force—has yielded some results. These results are demonstrably not commensurate with his claims to have

'successfully ended eight long-standing conflicts' (The White House 2026b). They also highlight the limitations of an approach grounded in deal making, in which a primary driver consists of perceived benefits to the USA. However, Trump's approach also reflects an underlying logic grounded in assumptions regarding the potential for commerce and prosperity to prevent conflict. There is, therefore, more than 'America first' in the transit corridor foreseen in the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), agreed as part of the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace deal in August 2025, or the preferential access gained by US buyers to critical minerals as a result of the administration's role in brokering fragile agreements between the DRC and Rwanda. The prioritization of access to Venezuelan oil over democratic transition after Maduro's ouster has been self-evident, but it also reflects recognition that economic and political stability will be required for the oil to flow (Titeca 2025; Guliyev 2026; McCoy 2026).

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A business-minded approach to peace mediation has potential to get things done, but, as Arthur Boutellis (2025) has suggested, it also carries risks related to the lack of patience required for further negotiations and the long-term work of implementation. Since early 2025 Qatar and Türkiye—among the most active state mediators, and both close partners of the USA—have variously been involved in negotiating the Gaza ceasefire and hostage–prisoner exchange, and later helping ensure Hamas's agreement to Trump's 20-point Gaza peace plan (Qatar and the USA, with Egypt). They also secured an Afghanistan–Pakistan ceasefire in October 2025 (Qatar with Türkiye) and mediated iterative partial agreements on the DRC–M23 conflict (Qatar with the USA), as well as the ceasefire in June between Iran and Israel (Qatar with the USA). Working closely with the USA, Türkiye has also emerged as a primary mediator in Syria following the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad, with a focus on integrating the Kurdish-led forces into the new Syrian army, securing the country's borders and establishing economic ties.

Collectively, these agreements offer diverse but fragile frameworks for progressing towards sustainable peace. Several have already seen reversals into violence; others leave work to be done without clear frameworks for who is to do it, or how it will be financed and supported. With a few exceptions, such as Western Sahara—where the USA is, in atypical fashion, working in a mediation partnership with the UN—the nature of the state is rarely the focus of negotiations. However, several of the processes in which the USA is engaged contain elements of a statebuilding approach, as well as the prospect of significant economic gains from reconstruction. While the new US–Israel war on Iran has the Middle East in flames, the Gaza peace plan, for example, envisages oversight by Palestinian technocrats of the restoration of public services and the rebuilding of civil institutions, as well as reform of the Palestinian Authority, even if it contains no guarantee of the establishment of a Palestinian state (The White House 2026a).

It is relatively easy to criticize the transactional basis of recent agreements—even as it must be recognized that transactions will always be an inherent element of negotiations—but they also reflect the limits of what can be

achieved in the current environment. As internal and external fragmentation incentivizes predatory politics and the pursuit of military victory at all costs, mediators focus on what they may be able to achieve—short-term imperatives, such as ceasefires, prisoner exchanges and other humanitarian measures, or economic arrangements such as the Black Sea Grain Initiative (2022). Such partial agreements do not address the root causes of conflict or promote structured institutional reform—and thus, for the most part, bypass the question of the state. They are, however, widely perceived as being better than nothing. In the best case, they may create opportunities to move forward and refocus on big questions about governance and institutional reform, as well as the security and well-being of civilians.

In the meantime, in situations of conflict fragmentation where weak states contest or have ceded territory to a diverse array of armed and criminal groups, some international actors, mostly working through non-governmental entities, are paying attention to local peace efforts and processes. Beyond the immediate humanitarian benefits, they recognize that local agreements of different kinds can play critical roles in mitigating or ending conflicts by addressing subnational conflict drivers and actors, building peace and contributing to governance at the local level (Bell and Wise 2022). At the same time, it would be unrealistic to draw a straight line between such local peace efforts and their contribution to national peace processes, especially if they are not aligned with elite political dynamics.

This situation, involving multiple actors with different goals and ambitions for peace and engaged across different levels and localities of conflict, has been addressed in recent literature. It has been described as one of 'multimediation', 'disaggregated mediation', 'patchworked', 'iterative' or 'hybridised' peacemaking (Bell 2024; Palmiano Federer and Hirblinger 2024; Thornton 2024; Adhikari et al. 2025; Mac Ginty 2025). Reduced ambitions include 'piecemeal transitions in an age of state disintegration' or peace processes 'lite' (Kaplan 2025; Adhikari, Hodge and Wise 2026). While different authors bring different perspectives to their analysis, they also identify a number of similarities—in the recognition that both comprehensive peace agreements and the idea 'that states can be put back together again with some international involvement' appear beyond reach—to form the basis for urgent and critical thinking on how donors and others should recalibrate their support for peacemaking and reconsider the future of the state—and of states (Kaplan 2025: 4).

## WHAT NEXT?

Beyond efforts to move forward from the disruptive but nonetheless consequential agreements and interventions pushed through by the USA and others, there are more questions than answers. Suggestions can perhaps be grouped into four main areas. All require humility in the face of both the profundity of the changes to the global order underway and the complexity

of the conflicts with which different multilateral institutions, states and non-governmental actors continue to engage.

First, there are benefits to exploring ad hoc groupings of diverse diplomatic partners to coordinate support for ongoing peace or political processes and to build consensus on core issues beyond the like-minded (Whitfield 2025: 38–41). Such groups of friends or other minilateral mechanisms carry risks but also offer the potential to build coherence in peacemaking and to support the development of institutional capacities that will be required to sustain it. In different contexts, there is, for example, much to be done to 'backfill' some of the frameworks being agreed by the USA and its different partners (e.g. in the DRC, Sudan and Western Sahara).

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Second, there is a need to better understand and appreciate the value of partial and local agreements, emphasizing the importance of local governance and bottom-up approaches by incorporating lessons from the contributions of local peace agreements and what Cedric de Coning, Rui Saraiva and Ako Muto (2023) have termed 'adaptive peacebuilding'. This work needs to prioritize decentralization, recognize the limitations of local engagement when powerful elites are not involved, and also identify and help support the resilience of the 'invisible institutionalisation' present even in states that suffer from extreme fragmentation (Bell and Wise 2022: 578). Kaplan (2025: 11) advocates this 'piecemeal approach' as a means to 'leverage the strongest pockets of social cohesion and capable government that exist'.

Third, greater attention should be paid to the benefits of helping stabilize key state institutions, including outside the parameters of formal peace agreements. This point is made by Kenny Gluck (2023: 53–54), drawing on practical experience in Libya and Yemen, where UN peace operations, working in partnership with other actors, including the World Bank, engaged directly in efforts to preserve the functioning of central banks and other institutions. In November 2025, for example, Libya's Central Bank announced that rival parliaments had reached agreement on a framework for unifying spending and allocating development funding that, if successfully implemented, would represent a significant contribution to Libya's economic stability (United Nations Support Mission in Libya 2025).[2] However, while preventing the collapse of state institutions during conflict can help maintain services and enable resources to reach populations, the risks of mismanagement and corruption are high.

Finally, there is also a need to explore new coalitions for development financing to support capacities to build peace—a complex endeavour when development itself is increasingly marked by a clear trend towards a transactional approach and where many states' priorities do not align. With traditional overseas development assistance contracting, non-OECD countries, including several, such as the Gulf States, that are already deeply invested in peacemaking,

[2] Since 2014, Libya has suffered a political stand-off between the internationally recognized Government of National Unity in Tripoli in the west and the House of Representatives in the east; the latter supports a separate government and has been aligned behind Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces.

have an ever more important role to play. As they increase their development assistance, and with the investment model for global development ascendant, new approaches are imperative (Kumar 2026). As Monalisa Adhikari (2025) has demonstrated, with specific reference to the role of China and India in shaping political institutions in Myanmar and Nepal that are central to each country's peace process, statebuilding occurs 'beyond Western interventions', and its potential should be carefully considered.

Together, these points suggest that peace- and policymakers alike have much to do to increase their understanding of incremental statebuilding as it takes place alongside government and political processes as they actually function in conflict settings. Such an approach will involve accepting long-term timelines. It is also likely to raise difficult questions about the extent to which such reality-based statebuilding may involve trade-offs with key values such as human rights.

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