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Peacebuilding vs. State-Building: Collective Action and Divergent Paths in Somaliland and Somalia

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Abstract

This paper explores the divergent trajectories of Somaliland and Somalia in their peacebuilding and state-building efforts, providing insights into how varying approaches to collective action have influenced their political and developmental outcomes. The interconnected challenges of peacebuilding and state-building constitute a fundamental collective action problem in post-conflict societies. Following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, Somaliland embarked on a locally driven peacebuilding process rooted in traditional governance structures and clan-based consensus, which fostered relative stability. In contrast, Somalia's state-building efforts have been characterized by externally led interventions that

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often overlooked local dynamics, leading to persistent fragmentation and conflict.

The analysis highlights the role of collective action in reconciling diverse interests, ensuring equitable resource distribution, and fostering legitimacy in governance processes. Somaliland's experience underscores the importance of local ownership and the integration of traditional and modern governance mechanisms in addressing collective action dilemmas. Conversely, Somalia's struggles illustrate the consequences of failing to align external interventions with local realities, resulting in stalled state-building efforts and recurrent instability.

By exploring the interplay between peacebuilding and state-building in these two contexts during the formative period 1991 - 2001, this paper underscores the critical importance of collective action in achieving sustainable peace and functional governance. The findings contribute to broader discussions on post-conflict reconstruction and offer valuable lessons for fragile states navigating the complex dynamics of peace and state-building.

Keywords: State building, peacebuilding, Somalia, Somaliland, clan-based structure, collective action, political settlement, local ownership, and international intervention.

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Somali state in 1991 remains a stark reminder of the profound difficulties of peacebuilding and state-building in post-conflict environments, particularly when viewed through the lens of collective action theory. From the same historical rupture emerged

two political entities—Somaliland and Somalia—that followed markedly different trajectories in their efforts to restore order and construct viable systems of governance. As Professor Mohamed Saeed Gees has observed, Somaliland largely addressed its conflicts through locally driven, grassroots peacebuilding and state-building initiatives, whereas Somalia relied more heavily on external intervention.[2] More than three decades later, Somalia continues to depend extensively on international support for security and finance, hosting thousands of African peacekeepers and sustaining government budgets largely funded by external donors. This contrast frames the central puzzle of this study: how two societies sharing common histories, cultural foundations, and institutional legacies produced such divergent political outcomes. This paper argues that differing elite bargains and institutional trajectories shaped contrasting levels of authority, security, and governance in the two territories.

Recent geopolitical developments have renewed interest in this question. More than three decades after the collapse of the Somali Republic, shifting dynamics in the Horn of Africa are prompting policymakers to reconsider long-standing assumptions about legitimacy and political order. Israel's recognition of Somaliland in December 2025 represents a significant departure from the diplomatic status quo, signaling a broader realignment across the Red Sea corridor and the Gulf of Aden—maritime routes through which a substantial share of global commerce passes. These developments

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[2] Mohamed Saeed Gees, former minister of finance and foreign affairs in President Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal's Somaliland government, interviewed by author, Virginia, April 2024.

have elevated Somaliland from a marginal or anomalous case to a subject of growing strategic importance.

To understand the significance of the present moment, it is necessary to return to the origins of the Somali state. Somaliland gained independence from Britain on June 26, 1960, and within days voluntarily united with the former Italian-administered Trust Territory of Somalia to form the Somali Republic. Often portrayed as a union between North and South, the merger was driven by the powerful appeal of pan-Somali nationalism and the ambition to unite Somali-inhabited territories in the Horn of Africa. Yet beneath this nationalist vision lay unresolved structural tensions, including asymmetries of power and perceptions of political marginalization that would later contribute to instability. When the central government disintegrated in 1991, these unresolved questions of authority, inclusion, and institutional design resurfaced with renewed intensity, setting Somaliland and Somalia on sharply divergent political paths.

In the north, reconciliation happened in the shade—literally. Beneath acacia trees, Somaliland's clan elders, business leaders, and former fighters convened grassroots conferences, placing peace before politics and dialogue before formal institutions, building a new political order[3] from the ground up. In the south, no such shade was sought. Warlords—backed by foreign actors, commanding private militias—competed for dominance instead, pulling southern Somalia into cycles of violence and fragmentation[4] that would outlast them all.

In 1991, Somaliland's decision to withdraw from the union allowed it to pursue a locally led process of reconciliation and institution-building, while Somalia became increasingly dependent on externally

[3] Sarah Phillips, "Political Settlements and State Formation: The Case of Somaliland," report, *Developmental Leadership Program* (2013): 45.
[4] Conciliation Resources, *Somalia*, Accord Issue 21 (2010).

sponsored, top-down interventions that often disregarded local dynamics. Despite decades of international investment amounting to billions of dollars, Somalia continues to grapple with weak institutions, insecurity, corruption, and fragile governance. Meanwhile, Somaliland, though lacking formal international recognition, has managed to cultivate a relatively stable political order, foster democratic practices, and build functional institutions through indigenous, bottom-up processes.[5]

This juxtaposition has revived U.S.[6] policy debates, where recognition of Somaliland is increasingly framed as a strategic investment in a peaceful, self-governing polity—one that has become harder for decision-makers to dismiss after more than three decades of relative stability. The argument gained additional visibility on August 14, 2025, when U.S. Senator Ted Cruz sent a letter urging President Donald Trump to recognize the Republic of Somaliland within its 1960 borders.

Somaliland's distinct approach to peacebuilding and state-building, in contrast to Somalia, has proven effective and is one of the reasons it has recently drawn the attention of the world. Beginning in the early 1990s, Somaliland adopted a strategy that underscored the importance of sequencing. Its reconciliation conferences—conducted largely without foreign funding—were rooted in traditional governance practices and clan-based negotiations. These locally driven processes fostered relative stability, laid the foundations for democratic institutions, and built functioning administrations, all despite the absence of international recognition. As Ambassador Hussein A.

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[5] Jamal Ali Hussein, "The Dynamics of Collective Action and Political Settlements: A Comparative Study of Somaliland and Somalia," thesis, Doctoral, *Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies* (2025): 1-3.
[6] "Republic of Somaliland Independence Act," statute, United States Congress, June 12, 2025.

Duale (Awil) observed, "Somaliland first focused on peacebuilding and then later moved to state-building, while Somalia immediately jumped to state-building without undergoing a genuine reconciliation process.[7] How can people build a state together when they have not even achieved peace?"

This sequencing distinction is critical. Reconciliation generates the trust, cohesion, and shared vision necessary for building durable institutions. State-building consolidates these gains by formalizing governance systems, rule of law, and administrative capacity. Neglecting either dimension undermines long-term stability.

A central challenge in both processes is the collective action problem (CAP): the difficulty of fragmented actors cooperating toward common goals despite divergent interests. Theoretical frameworks, particularly those of Elinor Ostrom and William D. Ferguson, stress the importance of local institutions, trust-building, and context-specific arrangements to overcome such challenges. These insights help explain why Somaliland achieved relative peace and political order while Somalia remained trapped in cycles of externally driven interventions and disunity.[8]

Scholars such as Francis Fukuyama emphasize the tension between local ownership and external intervention.[9] While outside actors can provide resources and technical expertise, sustainable governance ultimately depends on domestic legitimacy. Without local ownership, externally driven state-building efforts often fail or deepen existing divisions. Somalia's experience illustrates these limitations: decades

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[7] Hussein A. Duale (Awil), former Somali ambassador to Uganda and Kenya and later Somaliland minister of finance, interviewed by author, Djibouti, December 2023.
[8] Hussein, "Somaliland and Somalia."
[9] Francis Fukuyama, "The Imperative of State-Building," *Journal of Democracy* 15.2 (2004).

of internationally sponsored peace conferences and donor-supported institutions have struggled to produce durable stability. Somaliland's trajectory, by contrast, demonstrates the potential of locally grounded governance. Despite limited external assistance, it has maintained relative stability, held competitive elections, and established key attributes of statehood, including its own national currency and formal security forces—further demonstrating its capacity for self-governance and institutional development.[10]

This paper examines the formative period from 1991 to 2001, analyzing the divergent trajectories of Somaliland and Somalia in their approaches to peacebuilding and state-building. Guided by collective action theory, it addresses two central research questions, foremost among them: *How have local and external actors shaped the post-conflict paths of Somalia and Somaliland?*

Structure of the Paper

- **Section 1** provides an introduction to the study by outlining its primary themes and objectives, while situating the discussion within the broader historical and contextual background of Somalia and Somaliland.
- **Section 2** presents the theoretical framework—centered on collective action in peacebuilding and state-building—and outlines the core hypotheses and the research methodology employed in the analysis.
- **Section 3** examines Somaliland's locally driven peacebuilding and state-building trajectory.
- **Section 4** analyzes Somalia's externally supported but fragmented efforts at peacebuilding and state-building.
- **Section 5** outlines the key concluding findings, comparative insights, and lessons for post-conflict reconstruction. The

[10] Michael Rubin, "Congress Shouldn't Repeat Decades of Somalia Mistakes," *The Horn Tribune*, October 31, 2022.

afterword depicts a brief update beyond the research period, offering a comparative overview of Somaliland and Somalia from 2001 through February 2026.

While existing literature has examined Somaliland and Somalia largely in isolation, comparative analyses remain limited. This study addresses that gap by employing collective action theory to systematically investigate their divergent post-conflict trajectories. Its principal academic contribution lies in presenting the first comprehensive comparative political analysis of the two former colonial territories, structured around the interdependence of peacebuilding and state-building within the framework of collective action theory.

In sum, the success or failure of post-conflict reconstruction depends on three interrelated factors: (1) elites' capacity to overcome collective action problems, (2) the degree of local ownership and legitimacy, and (3) the careful sequencing of peacebuilding and state-building. Somaliland's trajectory demonstrates how grassroots participation, traditional governance mechanisms, and inclusive elite bargains can generate durable peace even without recognition. Somalia's instability, by contrast, reveals the risks of prioritizing state-building without first achieving reconciliation.

These cases illustrate that institutional reforms must be rooted in societal foundations and shaped by domestic actors. The divergent experiences of Somaliland and Somalia thus offer valuable lessons for post-conflict reconstruction worldwide.

1.2 BACKGROUND: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SOMALIA AND SOMALILAND

1.2.1 Pre-Colonial and Colonial Background

The historical trajectories of Somalia and Somaliland were profoundly shaped by their distinct pre-colonial social systems and contrasting colonial experiences. Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that the Horn of Africa has long been part of global trade networks; Egyptian hieroglyphs record exchanges between Pharaonic Egypt and the Somali coast, indicating early integration into transregional commerce.[11]

Before colonial intervention, Somali society was decentralized and organized around kinship-based clan structures. Governance operated through *xeer* (customary law), an indigenous system that mediated disputes, regulated resource sharing, and maintained social equilibrium—well adapted to the nomadic pastoralist way of life. These mechanisms ensured social cohesion and local accountability without centralized authority.[12]

The European "Scramble for Africa" in the late nineteenth century disrupted these indigenous institutions. The 1884 partition divided Somali-inhabited territories into five separate colonies and protectorates: British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, French Somaliland (Djibouti), the Northern Frontier District (now part of Kenya), and the Somali region of Ethiopia.[13] This artificial

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[11] Hussein A. Bulhan, *In-Between Three Civilizations: Volume 1* (2013).
[12] I. M. Lewis, *Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society* (1994); Joakim Gundel, "The Predicament of the Oday: The Role of Traditional Structures in Security, Rights, Law and Development in Somalia," *Danish Refugee Council* (November, 2006).
[13] Seth Kaplan, "The Remarkable Story of Somaliland," *Journal of Democracy* 19.3 (2008).

fragmentation fractured Somali identity and laid the groundwork for enduring political and territorial disputes.[14]

British Somaliland was administered as a protectorate with minimal interference in local governance. The British adopted an indirect rule strategy, relying on clan elders to maintain order. This approach preserved traditional structures and sustained continuity in local governance. The integration of *xeer*-based authority under British protection allowed for the endurance of indigenous mechanisms of mediation and accountability.[15]

Italian Somaliland, by contrast, experienced direct colonial administration. The Italians pursued centralized and interventionist policies, investing in infrastructure and agriculture while simultaneously manipulating clan divisions to consolidate control. These strategies weakened local institutions, fostered dependency, and bred mistrust among communities.[16] After independence, the highly centralized system inherited from Italian rule collapsed quickly once external support dissipated, leaving behind fragile institutions and fragmented political legitimacy.[17]

Thus, while Somaliland inherited adaptable and resilient governance structures rooted in traditional norms, Somalia emerged from colonial rule burdened with brittle, externally imposed institutions. These divergent colonial legacies profoundly influenced their post-independence trajectories. Somaliland's institutional continuity

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[14] Hussein A. Bulhan, *Politics of Cain: One Hundred Years of Crises in Somali Politics and Society* (2008).
[15] Mark Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland* (2008); Ahmed Y. Farah and I.M. Lewis, *Somalia, the Roots of Reconciliation: Peace Making Endeavours of Contemporary Lineage Leaders* (1993).
[16] Hussein M. Adam, "Formation and Recognition of New States: Somaliland in Contrast to Eritrea," *Review of African Political Economy* 21.59 (1994).
[17] I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa* (2002).

enabled greater cohesion and local ownership of governance, whereas Somalia's legacy of centralized bureaucracy and colonial manipulation fueled recurrent fragmentation and conflict. As I. M. Lewis (1972, 383) aptly observed, "African politics have become virtually synonymous with tribalism (clannism)," a reality that proved especially salient in Somali politics, where clan loyalties alternately served as a source of stability and disunity in national politics[18].

1.2.2 The Union of Somaliland and Somalia: Aspirations and Challenges

Somaliland gained independence on June 26, 1960, and united with Italian Somaliland on July 1, 1960, under the banner of Pan-Somali nationalism. The union was celebrated as the first step toward a Greater Somalia that would encompass all Somali-speaking peoples. Yet the merger was hasty, lacking constitutional clarity or mechanisms for equitable power-sharing.

The union between the two former colonies was broadly characterized as a merger between the north (Somaliland) and the south (Somalia). Northern leaders expected fair representation within the new Somali Republic. Instead, southern elites—dominant in Mogadishu—quickly consolidated control, monopolizing political offices and development resources.[19]As a result, economic and political power became concentrated in the south, while the north was marginalized.[20] Lewis noted that the Republic's creation "reshaped politics, concentrating power among southern clans," compelling northerners to adapt to institutions modeled on Italian administration[21].

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[18] I. M. Lewis, *The Modern History of Somalia* (1972): 383.
[19] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland; Ismail Ali Ismail, Governance: The Scourge and Hope of Somalia* (2010).
[20] Adam, "Formation and Recognition," 21-38.
[21] Lewis, Modern History of Somalia, 393.

These inequalities deepened under Mohamed Siad Barre's authoritarian regime (1969–1991), which centralized authority, suppressed dissent, and targeted northern clans—particularly the Isaaq. The Somali National Movement (SNM)[22], formed in the early 1980s, arose as a response to state violence and exclusion.[23]

By the late 1980s, Barre's regime resorted to large-scale atrocities in the north. His forces bombed and razed major cities such as Hargeisa and Burao, killing tens of thousands and displacing hundreds of thousands.[24] The scale of devastation convinced many Somalilanders that independence was the only viable path toward survival and self-determination.

1.2.3 The Fall of Siad Barre and State Fragmentation

The overthrow of Siad Barre in January 1991 marked the complete collapse of Somalia's central authority. With the regime's fall, warlords and clan militias vied for control, reducing Mogadishu to ruins. The ensuing chaos unleashed waves of shelling, looting, famine, and mass displacement, while piracy and terrorism emerged as symptoms of deep state failure. Warlords entrenched their dominance, exploiting humanitarian aid and obstructing any genuine efforts toward reconciliation.[25]

Amid this anarchy, leaders in Somaliland withdrew from the union and reasserted sovereignty based on their brief independence in 1960.

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[22] The Somali National Movement (SNM), composed largely of members of the Isaaq clan, was a political and military organization that opposed the government of Siad Barre.
[23] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland.*
[24] Africa Watch Committee, "Somalia: A Government at War with Its Own People," report, *Human Rights Watch* (1990).
[25] Menkhaus, "Governance without Government"; Interpeace, "The Role of the Business Community in Peacebuilding in Somalia," report, *Interpeace* (2009).

Unlike the south, they turned inward—drawing on clan-based reconciliation, traditional authority, and local legitimacy to restore order. Through a series of locally convened peace conferences and negotiated settlements, Somaliland gradually built a hybrid political system grounded in consensus and social cohesion.[26]

In contrast, Somalia's externally led peace initiatives, dominated by warlords and shaped by competing foreign agendas, repeatedly failed to produce stability.[27] By the early 1990s, two sharply divergent paths had emerged: Somaliland, though unrecognized, was consolidating peace and governance from below, while Somalia descended deeper into protracted conflict and fragmentation.

1.2.4 Structural Impact

Although Somalia and Somaliland share deep cultural, linguistic, and religious foundations, their divergent political trajectories can be partly explained by structural legacies: colonial inheritance, demographic composition, and varying degrees of social cohesion. These factors shaped the scale of their collective action problems and the nature of elite bargains after 1991, though other decisive determinants, discussed later in this paper, played a more central role.

With roughly one-third of the Somali Republic's population and territory, Somaliland's smaller scale of governance was comparatively more manageable. The predominance of the Isaaq clan—comprising about two-thirds of Somaliland's population—provided a cohesive social base that facilitated negotiation, compromise, and collective action.[28] This internal cohesion enabled local leaders to draw on

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[26] Phillips, "Political Settlements."
[27] Menkhaus, "Governance without Government."
[28] Nicholas Eubank, "Peace-Building without External Assistance: Lessons from Somaliland," working paper, *Center for Global Development* (January, 2010).

shared norms and institutions in rebuilding political order after the state collapse.[29]

In contrast, post-1991 Somalia was marked by severe clan fragmentation and intense elite rivalries. Competition between the Hawiye and Daarood clans escalated after Siad Barre's downfall, while internal divisions within the Hawiye-led United Somali Congress (USC)—particularly between General Mohamed Farah Aideed and Ali Mahdi Mohamed—plunged Mogadishu into destructive factional warfare. Although the Hawiye's predominance in the capital might have offered a foundation for political consolidation, it instead reinforced zero-sum competition and prolonged instability.[30]

Thus, structural factors—especially demographic and geographic advantages—did not by themselves ensure effective governance. Despite their shared cultural roots, the divergent outcomes of Somaliland and Somalia were ultimately shaped by other factors including leadership quality and the capacity of political elites to forge inclusive political settlements.

SECTION 2: THEORY, HYPOTHESIS, AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1.1 Defining State Building and Peacebuilding

According to Fukuyama, state building refers to the construction of state institutions such as the government, judiciary, and security forces.[31] It is focused on the development of a centralized authority

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[29] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland.*
[30] William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (2002); Menkhaus, "Governance without Government."
[31] Francis Fukuyama, "The Imperative of State-Building," Journal of Democracy 15.2 (2004).

capable of administering law, providing security, and delivering public services. On the other hand, peacebuilding as defined by Boutros-Ghali involves efforts to address the root causes of conflict, foster reconciliation, and prevent the recurrence of violence.[32] Peacebuilding often involves non-state actors, including civil society organizations and traditional leaders, and emphasizes the importance of local ownership of the peace process.[33]

In fragile and post-conflict settings, these two processes can come into tension. Efforts to build strong state institutions may prioritize security and stability at the expense of inclusivity and reconciliation.[34] Conversely, peacebuilding efforts that focus too heavily on reconciliation may neglect the development of state institutions, potentially leading to a relapse into conflict.[35] This tension is particularly evident in the case of Somalia, where numerous peace processes have failed to produce a stable and functioning state, while Somaliland's locally driven peace efforts have been more successful in fostering both peace and state consolidation.[36]

2.1.2 William D. Ferguson's Framework and Somalia's Collective Action

William D. Ferguson approaches collective action through the lens of institutional economics, emphasizing the interplay between shared incentives, trust, and institutional frameworks in enabling

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[32] Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *The United Nations and Somalia*, 1992-1996 (1996).
[33] Tim Kelsall, et al., *Political Settlements and Development: Theory, Evidence, Implications* (2022).
[34] Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*, 1st ed. (2009).
[35] Volker Boege, et al., "On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of 'Fragility.'" *Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management* 8 (2009): 15-35.
[36] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland.*

cooperation.[37] For Ferguson, collective action emerges when individuals or groups recognize mutual benefits that outweigh the costs of collaboration. Yet this process is frequently undermined by coordination failures, free-rider problems, and asymmetric power relations. In fragile and conflict-prone contexts, trust deficits and fragmented interests are especially acute barriers. He argues overcoming these obstacles requires inclusive decision-making, equitable benefit-sharing, and governance structures tailored to local contexts.[38]

Somalia's protracted crisis vividly illustrates these dynamics. The country was unable to overcome deeply entrenched collective action problems (CAPs). Despite repeated reconciliation conferences—often mediated by international actors—political settlements have remained fragile, largely because elite fragmentation, clan rivalries, and external mistrust have prevented the formation of credible, self-enforcing agreements.[39]

Intra-Elite Fragmentation deepened societal mistrust and reinforced cycles of violence. Somalia's political class—many of whom rose to prominence as faction leaders during and after the Siad Barre era—struggled to prioritize national stability over personal power and resources. Competition among warlords and political entrepreneurs fostered a zero-sum environment in which cooperation was perceived as a strategic risk.[40]

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[37] William D. Ferguson, *The Political Economy of Collective Action, Inequality, and Development* (2020): 4-6.
[38] Ibid., 112-15.
[39] Ken Menkhaus, "State Failure, State-Building, and Prospects for a 'Functional Failed State' in Somalia," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 656.1 (2014): 154-172.
[40] Ferguson, Political Economy, 142-43.

Clan-Based Divisions compounded these challenges. Historically, clan networks had provided social cohesion and dispute resolution mechanisms. However, during the civil war, they became politicized and militarized, transforming into lines of exclusion and violence. Political actors prioritized clan interests over national goals, stalling agreements on resource-sharing, governance design, and leadership.[41]

External Mediation efforts, though frequent and often well-funded, faced legitimacy crises. Many Somali stakeholders perceived international mediators and neighboring states as pursuing their own strategic agendas, which eroded trust and weakened incentives for genuine cooperation.[42]

Ferguson's analysis suggests that Somalia's failures stem from the absence of credible mechanisms to align incentives, build trust, and enforce cooperative agreements. Without these institutional foundations, CAPs persist, locking the country into a self-reinforcing cycle of mistrust, division, and instability.[43]

2.1.3 Elinor Ostrom's Principles and Somaliland's Collective Action

Elinor Ostrom's work on the governance of common-pool resources, research that earned her the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, provides a valuable lens for understanding how communities can self-organize to overcome collective action problems. Her "good practice" principles emphasize not only fostering cooperation to achieve joint benefits but also protecting governance systems from external capture. As Levy observes, these principles address the challenge of facilitating

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[41] Brian J. Hesse. "Two Generations, Two Interventions in One of the World's Most-Failed States: The United States, Kenya and Ethiopia in Somalia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 51.5 (2016): 254-55.
[42] Menkhaus, "State Failure," 161-63.
[43] Ferguson, *Political Economy*, 198-200.

cooperation while also fending off "predators seeking to capture for themselves the returns from multi-stakeholder governance."[44] This dual focus underscores the need for both internal cohesion and resilience against outside interference.

Ostrom stresses the importance of trust, reciprocity, adaptability, and the embedding of local governance systems within broader institutional frameworks. Her research demonstrates that decentralized, participatory governance often outperforms top-down approaches in building the social capital necessary for sustained cooperation.[45] Several of her design principles are particularly relevant to understanding Somaliland's post-conflict governance trajectory.

Well-Defined Boundaries. Clearly defined boundaries establish who is entitled to participate in decision-making and share in the responsibilities and benefits.[46] In Somaliland, this principle was reflected in peace conferences that ensured representation through the *Guurti* (council of elders), with seats allocated to clans proportionally. This clarity fostered legitimacy and cohesion.

Collective-Choice Arrangements. Governance rules are more effective when created or adapted by those directly affected.[47] While Somaliland's early postwar arrangements were shaped by empowered local elites, over time these frameworks evolved toward greater inclusivity through adaptation and negotiation, with clan-led processes tailoring agreements to local realities.

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[44] Brian Levy, *Working with the Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies* (2014), 152.
[45] Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (1990).
[46] Elinor Ostrom, *Understanding Institutional Diversity* (2005): 260-61.
[47] Ibid., 233-35.

Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms. Accessible, low-cost mechanisms for dispute resolution are critical to sustaining trust.[48] In Somaliland, the skilled mediation of clan elders and political leaders—particularly President Mohamed Ibrahim Egal—helped resolve disputes and prevent escalation during the volatile 1990s.

Monitoring. Effective governance depends on enforcement by accountable actors.[49] Somaliland's community-based monitoring, embedded in peace conferences and clan structures, strengthened compliance and reinforced the legitimacy of agreements.

Taken together, these principles help explain why Somaliland, unlike Somalia, has been able to construct relatively stable governance institutions in a post-conflict environment.

2.1.4 Implications for Somaliland and Somalia

The theoretical insights of Ferguson and Ostrom offer a valuable framework for understanding the divergent political trajectories of Somalia and Somaliland in their pursuit of peacebuilding and state building. Somaliland's grassroots peacebuilding efforts align with Ostrom's principles of self-organization and participatory governance, as demonstrated by its reliance on clan-based negotiations and culturally embedded governance structures. By fostering trust and local ownership, Somaliland successfully navigated collective action dilemmas and established a shared vision for governance.[50]

In contrast, Somalia's dependence on externally imposed state-building interventions illustrates Ferguson's cautionary arguments regarding the risks of misaligned institutional frameworks. The failure

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[48] Ibid., 267-68.
[49] Ibid., 265.
[50] Hussein, "Somaliland and Somalia," 61-65.

to integrate local political dynamics and reconcile fragmented interests has perpetuated Somalia's instability. Together, Ferguson and Ostrom underscore that sustainable peacebuilding and state-building in fragile states require governance structures that align with the cultural, social, and economic realities of affected communities. Their insights provide a roadmap for fostering cooperation and achieving long-term stability.

2.1.5 The Political Settlement Framework

Even though it is not the emphasis for this paper, the political settlement approach also offers a useful framework for understanding the divergent outcomes in Somalia and Somaliland. As Kelsall et al[51] argue, political settlements are the informal and formal agreements between elites that determine the distribution of power and resources in a society. In post-conflict settings, successful state building and peacebuilding depend on the ability of political elites to negotiate a stable and inclusive political settlement. This requires not only the construction of formal institutions, but also the integration of traditional governance structures and the inclusion of marginalized groups in the political process.[52]

In Somalia, repeated failures to achieve a durable political settlement have been a key factor in the persistence of state fragmentation and conflict. In contrast, Somaliland's success in forging a political settlement that incorporates traditional governance structures and ensures the inclusion of key clans has been a crucial factor in its relative stability.[53]

2.2 HYPOTHESES

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[51] Kelsall et al., *Political Settlements and Development*.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland.*

This study proposes three interrelated hypotheses to explain the conditions under which post-conflict state-building succeeds or fails, particularly through the lens of collective action:

- **H1: The resolution of collective action problems through locally driven peacebuilding is a necessary foundation for successful state-building.**
  Drawing on Elinor Ostrom's insights, this hypothesis emphasizes that local ownership and participation are critical for generating the trust, and cooperation needed in post-conflict contexts. Without this foundational collaboration, formal institutions are unlikely to take root or function effectively.
- **H2: Institutional design alone is insufficient without an existing capacity for cooperation.**
  While institutions are vital for governance, they tend to reinforce rather than initiate cooperative behavior. In the absence of social capital and collaborative norms, even well-designed institutions may fail to generate durable governance outcomes.
- **H3: Cooperation is a learned, iterative process that precedes institutionalization.**
  Enduring political cooperation is built over time through repeated interactions, shared struggles, and localized problem-solving. Institutions, when effective, emerge as formal codifications of these grassroots practices rather than as top-down constructs imposed on fragmented societies.

These hypotheses reflect different pathways to resolving collective-action dilemmas and offer a framework to assess the divergent trajectories of post-conflict governance in Somaliland and Somalia. Somaliland and Somalia provide a compelling comparative case study of how the sequencing and nature of peacebuilding and state-building

efforts influence long-term outcomes. The evidence suggests that locally rooted peacebuilding is not only a precondition for effective institutional development but also a driver of political legitimacy and cohesion.

In **Somaliland**, the sequencing of peace before state institutions was central to its relative success. The Somali National Movement (SNM), in partnership with traditional clan elders (*Guurti)*, facilitated grassroots reconciliation and built strategic alliances during the late 1980s and early 1990s. These efforts cultivated trust and fostered a shared sense of ownership among stakeholders. Over time, this social capital enabled elites to introduce formal governance structures, organize inclusive peace conferences, and gradually institutionalize a consensus-based political system. The experience supports **H1** and **H3**, demonstrating that cooperation, once established, can serve as the bedrock upon which legitimate institutions are constructed.

By contrast, **Somalia** illustrates the risks of reversing this sequence. After the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, repeated externally led efforts aimed to rebuild the Somali state through top-down institutional frameworks. These processes largely excluded local actors and ignored the fragmented nature of Somali politics. Lacking a cooperative foundation, externally designed institutions failed to gain traction. The absence of elite consensus and the marginalization of traditional structures contributed to persistent fragmentation and instability. This trajectory exposes the limitations of **H2**, reinforcing the idea that institutional design alone cannot substitute for the social conditions necessary for collective action.

This analysis is guided by two central **research questions**:

1. *What key factors explain the success of Somaliland's peacebuilding and state-building processes, in contrast to the*

failure of similar efforts in Somalia after the collapse of the Somali state in 1991?

2. *How did the roles of local and external actors shape the divergent post-conflict trajectories of the two entities?*

2.3 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in **process tracing** to explore the causal mechanisms behind the divergent outcomes of **peacebuilding and state-building** in **Somaliland** and **Somalia** following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991. Process tracing is particularly well-suited for comparative single-case and within-case analyses, as it enables the systematic reconstruction of political events, institutional developments, and key decisions to identify how particular outcomes emerge. As David Collier notes, process tracing involves "the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of the research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator."[54]

In this study, process tracing is applied to explain why **Somaliland** succeeded in establishing relative peace and functional governance structures, whereas **Somalia** endured prolonged instability, fragmented authority, and recurrent failures in state-building. The approach serves three core objectives:

1. To evaluate hypotheses concerning the sequencing and interaction of peacebuilding and state-building processes in both cases;
2. To reconstruct the chronology of critical events, decisions, and turning points that shaped their political trajectories;
3. To uncover the institutional, social, and collective-action dynamics that explain their contrasting paths.

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[54] David Collier, *Political Analysis: Theory and Methodology* (2011): 1.

This approach facilitates the identification of causal relationships, paying special attention to factors such as **local agency**, **traditional governance mechanisms**, **external interventions**, and the **sequencing of peacebuilding relative to state-building**. Particular emphasis is placed on critical junctures, including Somaliland's community-led peace conferences in the 1990s and Somalia's externally driven state-building attempts during the same period.

Key dimensions explored through this methodological lens include:

- The role of traditional authorities (e.g., the *Guurti* and clan elders) in mediating conflict and facilitating reconciliation;
- The existence—or absence—of elite bargains and inclusive political settlements;
- The sequencing and interdependence of peacebuilding and institutional formation;
- The presence of cooperation and effective resolution of collective action challenges;
- The influence of international versus local ownership of political processes.

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with former and current political leaders, elites, peacebuilding practitioners, and policy experts. This was supplemented with media interviews featuring key actors involved in the process, as well as secondary materials such as academic studies, policy reports, conference proceedings, and archival records. This multi-source approach ensured triangulation and enhanced the analytical depth of the study.

By employing this methodological framework, the study aims to generate a nuanced understanding of why peacebuilding efforts

succeeded in Somaliland but faltered in Somalia, and how these outcomes shaped the capacity for state-building in each context.

SECTION 3: SOMALILAND'S PEACEBUILDING AND STATE-BUILDING

This section examines Somaliland's journey of peacebuilding and state-building through the lens of Ostrom's theory of collective action.

The collaboration and collective action of Somaliland's elites—including Somali National Movement (SNM) leaders, business elites, the diaspora, and traditional clan elders (*Guurti*)—were central to the entity's peacebuilding and state-building trajectory, fostering enduring stability in the aftermath of civil war. As documented by the Academy for Peace and Development (APD), more than thirty reconciliation conferences convened across Somaliland during the 1990s, providing the essential architecture for peaceful conflict resolution and bottom-up state formation.[55] These forums functioned as arenas for political negotiation, cultivating trust, addressing historical grievances, and establishing shared norms among communities that had once been bitterly divided.

A particularly decisive moment of collective action occurred on January 23, 1991, when the SNM captured the strategic port city of Berbera—just three days before the collapse of Siad Barre's regime in Mogadishu. This military turning point paved the way for the first major reconciliation initiative, *Shirka Walaalaynta Beelaha Waqooyiga* ("Brotherhood Meeting of Northern Clans"), held in mid-February 1991. The conference brought together representatives from both Isaaq and non-Isaaq clans, including groups that had previously supported Barre. The result was a broad ceasefire across the northern

[55] Academy for Peace and Development, "Peace in Somaliland: An Indigenous Approach to State-Building," report, International Peacebuilding Alliance (2008).

regions and a mutual pledge to engage in ongoing dialogue and joint peacebuilding efforts.[56]

This gathering exemplified what Ferguson describes as “strategic interdependence,” in which political actors recognize that their individual choices are interconnected and that cooperation is necessary to achieve shared objectives.[57] More broadly, it reflected key dynamics outlined by Ostrom in her theory of collective action: actors operating in a shared problem space can overcome social dilemmas by building trust, crafting mutually agreed-upon rules, and engaging in iterative, face-to-face deliberation.[58] In Somaliland, repeated conferences acted as “trust-building loops,” enabling elites and communities to renegotiate relationships, sanction non-cooperation, and sustain commitments over time—all conditions that Ostrom identifies as critical for maintaining long-term collective governance.
By embedding decision-making in inclusive, locally owned processes rather than externally imposed frameworks, Somaliland's political actors developed a decentralized system of governance. This is what Ostrom terms 'polycentric governance'—a structure in which multiple centers of authority interact to solve problems more effectively than a single, centralized power.

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[56] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland.*
[57] William D. Ferguson, *Collective Action and Exchange: A Game-Theoretic Approach to Contemporary Political Economy* (2013): 58.
[58] Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 88-102.

effectively than a single, centralized power.[59] These arrangements allowed for the integration of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms with emergent state institutions, thereby reinforcing a culture of negotiation over violence.

This study demonstrates that Somaliland's reconciliation conferences functioned as pivotal mechanisms in fostering cooperation and charting a path toward peace. The political settlement forged through Somaliland's iterative, locally driven processes of the 1990s proved generative beyond its immediate context—establishing institutional foundations whose stabilizing effects persist into the present, long after the conditions that produced them have passed. By prioritizing dialogue over force and ownership over external imposition, Somaliland's experience underscores the centrality of indigenous agency in post-conflict recovery. Somaliland's trajectory illustrates that sustainable peace and state-building are most effective when rooted in local legitimacy, cultural traditions, and inclusive negotiation.[60]

3.1 BURCO CONFERENCE – 1991

The 1991 Burco Conference stands as a pivotal milestone in Somaliland's modern political evolution and offers a compelling case study through the lens of Elinor Ostrom's theory of collective action. Convened between April and May in the town of Burco, the gathering brought together Somali National Movement (SNM) leaders, political elites, businessmen, traditional elders, and representatives of both Isaaq and non-Isaaq clans. Chaired by the Vice Chairman of the SNM, Hassan Esse Jama, the conference marked a critical moment in the formation of inclusive post-conflict governance structures in

[59] Ibid.
[60] Kaplan, "Story of Somaliland."

Somaliland.[61] It took place in the immediate aftermath of Siad Barre's collapse, as southern Somalia descended into violence and fragmentation. The timing rendered Somaliland's locally driven peace process both urgent and consequential.[62] Against this backdrop of uncertainty, Somaliland's leaders faced a classic collective-action dilemma: fragmented actors had to decide whether to pursue narrow, clan-based interests or coordinate around shared rules to achieve peace and stability.

The Burco Conference exemplifies Ostrom's proposition that local communities are capable of self-organizing to manage common challenges when inclusive institutions are established. By prioritizing reconciliation and negotiation, participants created a system of shared rules grounded in xeer (customary law) and clan-based dialogue, thereby building trust across historically divided groups. This inclusive approach directly reflects the hypothesis (H1): *the resolution of collective-action problems through inclusive, locally driven peacebuilding is a necessary foundation for successful state-building.*

Evidence from the conference supports this argument. First, the decision to renounce the 1960 union and reassert sovereignty under the Republic of Somaliland on May 18, 1991, was not imposed by external actors but collectively agreed upon by diverse stakeholders. Second, rather than centralizing power exclusively within the victorious SNM, the transitional government (mandated for two years) institutionalized clan participation, ensuring that non-Isaaq groups were incorporated into the emerging order.[63] Local ownership, embedded at the core of the political framework, proved doubly consequential: it enhanced the legitimacy of the emerging settlement

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[61] Hassan Esse Jama, a trained lawyer in the United Kingdom and one of the original founders of the Somali National Movement (SNM).
[62] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland*; Boobe Y. Duale, *Dhaxal-Reeb: Horaad* (2007).
[63] Phillips, "Political Settlements."

while simultaneously diffusing those who might otherwise have emerged as spoilers.

The outcomes validate Ostrom's emphasis on bottom-up governance; by resolving immediate collective-action problems around peace and security, Somaliland created the normative and institutional foundations upon which later state-building efforts could rest. The Burco model demonstrated that sustainable governance must emerge from locally negotiated bargains rooted in shared norms and inclusive decision-making. The legacy of this process is evident in Somaliland's relative stability and enduring political identity.

3.2 BORAMA CONFERENCE – 1993

The 1993 Borama Conference marked a pivotal moment in Somaliland's post-conflict trajectory, transitioning the region from liberation governance to a broad-based civilian administration.[64] Held in the Gadabursi town of Borama, the choice of venue was itself significant because it symbolized inclusivity by giving non-Isaaq clans a central role in shaping Somaliland's political future.[65]

According to Dr. Hussein Abdillahi Bulhan, the Gadabursi—already recognized for their successful mediation in earlier reconciliation efforts—played host, reinforcing their reputation as credible facilitators of inter-clan cooperation.[66]

Entirely organized and funded by Somalilanders, the five-month conference assembled 150 official delegates representing major clans, alongside hundreds of observers, including women and diaspora

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[64] Phillips, "Political Settlements."
[65] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland.*
[66] Hussein Abdillahi Bulhan, Somali scholar who taught at U.S. universities in the 1980s and 1990s and later participated in Somaliland's postwar reconstruction, interviewed by author, Hargeisa, November 2023.

members, under the leadership of Sheikh Ibrahim Sheikh Yussuf Sheikh Madar.[67] Its agenda centered on reconciliation, security, and the institutionalization of governance.

The conference yielded a defining outcome — the **Somaliland Communities Security and Peace Charter**, which codified local security responsibilities for the first time. By requiring clans to disarm militias, regulate security internally, and establish mechanisms for conflict prevention, the charter institutionalized practices that had first emerged informally during earlier peace meetings. This demonstrates Ostrom's principle that *rules generated through collective action and rooted in local contexts are more likely to be followed and enforced.*[68] The charter effectively transformed ad hoc cooperation into structured arrangements that supported the gradual demilitarization of society (APD 2008).

Equally significant, the **National Charter** reaffirmed Somaliland's independence while establishing a hybrid political system that blended traditional clan-based representation the *beel*[69] system with modern state institutions. The charter created an executive branch, a bicameral legislature (including the *Guurti*, or council of elders, as the upper house), an independent judiciary, and oversight bodies such as a Central Bank and Auditor General.[70] Local actors negotiated these institutions from within, building them through successive rounds of dialogue and compromise rather than receiving them from external powers — a process that mirrors Ostrom's insight that enduring institutions evolve from repeated cycles of cooperation.

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[67] Academy for Peace and Development, "Peace in Somaliland."
[68] Ostrom, *Institutional Diversity*.
[69] The *beel* system refers to the traditional Somali clan-based structure of social and political organization, in which elders mediate disputes, enforce *xeer* (customary law), and manage collective affairs.
[70] Phillips, "Political Settlements."

Yet, the most critical outcome was the peaceful transfer of power from the Somali National Movement (SNM) to a civilian government. The election of Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal as president, with Colonel Abdirahman Aw Ali as vice president, symbolized political consensus and inclusivity.[71] It demonstrated inter-clan inclusivity through the sharing of executive power between the Isaaq and Gadabursi clans, while simultaneously bridging the divide between civilian politicians and SNM commanders — integrating two distinct sources of political authority into a single, coherent governing arrangement.

The allocation of parliamentary seats—90 to Isaaq clans and 60 to non-Isaaq clans—represented a negotiated compromise between demographic realities and historical claims.[72] The arrangement was as consequential in principle as it was in practice. It demonstrated that sustained bargaining among former adversaries can generate sufficient trust to enable cooperation to precede formal institutionalization — establishing, in effect, that the emergence of political order need not be contingent upon the prior existence of institutions designed to sustain it.

Through Ostrom's framework, the Borama Conference was a culmination of an iterative learning process, not a one time event. Earlier gatherings in Burco (1991) and Sheekh (1992) had already experimented with reconciliation, and ceasefire enforcement. By the

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[71] Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal briefly served as head of government in Somaliland in 1960, following its independence from Britain and prior to the union with Somalia. He later became Prime Minister of Somalia from 1967 to 1969, helping shape the country's early post-independence politics and leading the last elected civilian government before the military takeover of Siad Barre. Abdirahman Aw Ali, a non-Isaaq senior officer from Awdal region, emerged as a prominent commander in the Somali National Movement (SNM) during its struggle against Barre's regime. His leadership reflected the broader coalition that supported the armed resistance and later contributed to Somaliland's post-conflict political order.

[72] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland.*

time of Borama, elites and communities had developed norms of trust. This supports the hypothesis *H3: Cooperation is a learned, iterative process that precedes institutionalization.* Institutions such as the *Guurti* were only possible because Somalilanders had already internalized cooperation through repeated negotiation and conflict management.

A key factor in the success of the conference was the acceptance of the election results by prominent competitors—Abdurahman Ahmed Ali, Omer Arteh Qalib, and Ahmed Mohamed Halac[73]—who had been contesting Egal. The Borama Conference thus illustrates Ostrom's argument that self-organized, locally legitimate institutions are more resilient than externally imposed ones. It demonstrated that Somaliland's political settlement emerged from cumulative, cooperative learning processes, which over time crystallized into formal governance structures.

3.3 THE SANAAG PEACE PROCESS

The Sanaag Grand Peace and Reconciliation Conference was a critical component of Somaliland's grassroots peacebuilding model. Convened shortly after the Borama Conference, it reflected the broader national strategy of addressing local disputes before institutionalizing governance frameworks. Spanning a vast and symbolically important region in eastern Somaliland, Sanaag is home to four major clans—two Isaaq (Habar Jeclo, Habar Yunis) and two Darood (Dhulbahante, Warsangeli)—in addition to smaller clans. The

[73] Abdurahman Ahmed Ali 'Tuur', the first President of Somaliland (1991–1993), played a central role in the region's declaration of independence and early state-building efforts. Omer Arteh Qalib previously served as Somalia's Foreign Minister during the 1970s and was later nominated for the position of Prime Minister by the Ali Mahdi government following Siad Barre's fall. Ahmed Mohamed Halac was a senior military officer in the SNM.

area also holds cultural importance, with Somali oral traditions tracing the origins of many clans to the region. [74]

From 1991 to 1994, Sanaag hosted at least 15 localized peace meetings that prepared the way for the larger Erigavo conference. These meetings were locally led, relying on traditional structures such as clan elders (*Caaqil*), religious leaders (*wadaado*), and sultans (*suldaano*), who convened under acacia trees to negotiate inter-clan agreements (*xeer*). These gatherings combined customary norms with cultural practices, often expressed through Somali poetry and the symbolic phrase *nabad iyo caano* ("peace and milk"), which tied reconciliation to prosperity and stability.[75]

The results of this iterative process were tangible. Two years after the adoption of a regional charter, reconciliation initiatives directly addressed post-war land restitution. Between August and October 1995, around 500 displaced families—primarily from the Dhulbahante, Warsangeli, and Habar Yunis—returned to their homes with minimal external support.[76] Professor Mohamed Saeed Geesconfirmed that non-Isaaq clans successfully reclaimed properties in Erigavo, a demonstration of both the credibility of the agreements and the cooperative enforcement mechanisms established through collective dialogue.[77]

Applying **Elinor Ostrom's theory of collective action** helps to explain why this process succeeded. Ostrom argues that sustainable cooperation arises when rules are locally designed, context-specific,

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[74] Academy for Peace and Development, "Peace in Somaliland."
[75] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland*, 102.
[76] Ibid., 105.
[77] Mohamed Saeed Gees, interview by the author, Virginia, April 2024.

and enforced by actors with a stake in their success.[78] The Sanaag case illustrates this dynamic clearly:

- **Locally crafted rules (H1):** Agreements were negotiated through *xeer* and adapted to the specific grievances of Sanaag's diverse clans. This reflects **H1**, which posits that resolving collective-action problems through inclusive, locally driven peacebuilding is foundational for later state-building. Without resolving these disputes, formal institutions would have lacked legitimacy and enforceability.
- **Iterative learning (H3):** The 15 smaller meetings prior to the Erigavo conference exemplify Ostrom's principle that cooperation is a **learned, iterative process**. Trust was built incrementally through repeated dialogue and dispute resolution, which created habits of cooperation before institutional frameworks were formalized—demonstrating **H3** in practice.
- **Monitoring and enforcement:** Traditional leaders, backed by reputational sanctions and community pressure, ensured compliance with agreements. These enforcement mechanisms mirrored Ostrom's emphasis on community-based monitoring as key to sustaining collective arrangements.

The Sanaag process thus represents more than localized reconciliation: it provided the building blocks for Somaliland's wider political settlement. By resolving disputes through inclusive, grassroots mechanisms, it both addressed immediate collective-action problems and cultivated cooperative norms that preceded and informed institutionalization. In this sense, the process exemplifies how Ostrom's theory intersects with Somaliland's trajectory: local peacebuilding generated sustainable outcomes precisely because it

[78] Ostrom, *Institutional Diversity*.

was iterative, embedded in indigenous authority, and foundational for the later construction of state institutions.

3.4 CIVIL WARS IN SOMALILAND: FROM FRAGMENTATION TO COLLECTIVE ORDER

Somaliland's postwar trajectory was far from smooth or uniformly peaceful. The nascent state faced a series of internal conflicts that tested its fragile political settlement and, at times, threatened its very existence. The first major crisis erupted in early 1992, when the post-Burco government's efforts to centralize control over public assets, many of which had fallen into private hands after the collapse of Siad Barre's regime, provoked violent clashes among Isaaq sub-clans. In Berbera, competition over revenues from the port, Somaliland's most strategic economic asset, escalated into armed confrontation between the Habar Yunis and Isse Muse clans. The conflict nearly plunged the young republic into full-scale civil war.[79] These resource-driven disputes reflected early collective action problems (CAPs), where the absence of a credible central authority allowed rival factions to pursue short-term rents at the expense of collective stability.

A turning point came with the Sheekh (Tawfiiq) Conference of late 1992, a locally driven peace initiative that reasserted the authority of traditional institutions. Organized by clan elders, the conference laid the foundation for reconciliation by mandating the return of looted property, the withdrawal of militias, and the reopening of trade routes.[80] It institutionalized the principle *"ama dalkaa qab, ama dadkaa qab"* ("either you have your land or your people"), reaffirming local accountability for peace enforcement. The Guurti, Somaliland's Council of Elders, emerged as the central institution bridging traditional authority and modern governance, drawing on

[79] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland*, 89.
[80] Academy for Peace and Development, "Peace in Somaliland."

customary legitimacy to mediate disputes and foreclose the conditions under which warlordism takes hold. No comparable institution emerged in neighboring Somalia, where elite fragmentation and external intervention combined to perpetuate state collapse. [81]

A second wave of civil conflict (1994–1996) tested the resilience of Somaliland's evolving governance system again. Tensions between President Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal's administration and the Garhajis clan over control of key revenue sources—particularly Hargeisa Airport—erupted into violent confrontation, displacing thousands and destabilizing the fragile economy.[82] Yet, unlike Somalia's zero-sum competition for rents, Somaliland's elites demonstrated adaptive collective action. The 1995 London Peace Committee, a diaspora-led initiative, deliberately revived the clan-based mediation frameworks that had proven effective in 1993 — mobilizing traditional authority structures that external actors could neither replicate nor substitute. This effort culminated in the Hargeisa Conference of 1997, which formally ended the civil war and consolidated the political gains of the preceding peace process.

Egal's pragmatic leadership—exemplified by his remark that "war is a project"—and his willingness to compromise with former adversaries underscored the maturation of a political settlement grounded in internal learning and negotiation.[83] This experience illustrates Elinor Ostrom's principle of *polycentric governance*, where nested institutions and repeated interactions sustain cooperation, in contrast to William D. Ferguson's model of Somalia, characterized by predatory competition and weak enforcement that perpetuated collective failure.

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[81] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland.*
[82] Ibid., 116.
[83] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland*, 122.

3.5 LEADERSHIP, ELITE BARGAINS, AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF GOVERNANCE

Somaliland's transition from civil war to relative stability in the 1990s illustrates how inclusive, locally driven peacebuilding addressed collective-action problems and gradually evolved into formal state institutions. Central to this process was the leadership of President Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal, who forged pragmatic alliances with the business elite and traditional authorities (Guurti), effectively blending traditional authority with modern statecraft. By relying on consensus-driven politics, adaptive bargaining, and gradual institutionalization, Egal's administration demonstrates both H1—that elite pacts and settlements form a necessary foundation for state-building—and H3—that cooperation is a learned, iterative process that precedes durable institutionalization.

When Egal assumed the presidency in 1993, he faced a fragmented political landscape marked by clan rivalries, economic scarcity, and widespread militia activity. Drawing on his deep knowledge of Somali clan dynamics, he pursued a consensus-based strategy that sought to balance competing interests while reinforcing stability.[84] A critical partner in this effort was the business elite, many of them diaspora returnees with commercial ties to Djibouti. Their interests extended beyond clan loyalty, hinging instead on the profitability of peace and the reopening of Somaliland's trade routes. Djibouti's limited market made Berbera Port particularly attractive as a regional hub.[85] Their alignment with Egal's peacebuilding agenda reflects Ostrom's principle that actors are more likely to contribute resources when they perceive direct benefits.[86]

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[84] Marleen Renders, *Consider Somaliland: State Building with Traditional Leaders and Institutions* (2012).
[85] Phillips, "Political Settlements."
[86] Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*.

Equally significant was Egal's integration of the Guurti into the emerging political order. By institutionalizing the council of elders as an upper chamber of parliament, he created nested governance arrangements that linked clan-based authority to national institutions.[87] The Guurti continued to serve as a legitimate forum for negotiation and reconciliation, rooted in Somali customary law (xeer), while also acquiring formal roles in conflict mediation and lawmaking.

Their active involvement in settling disputes and preventing renewed violence demonstrated the value of embedding traditional mediators within formal political structures, where they played a pivotal role in ending civil wars and stabilizing Somaliland in the 1990s.

Through elite bargains, Somaliland distributed economic rents, embedded incentives for stability, and constructed an overlapping web of authority. A key element of this system was Egal's consolidation of state control over Berbera, the country's primary source of customs revenue.[88]

By channeling port revenues into discretionary spending and elite accommodation, he reinforced cooperation and stability. This pragmatism reflects Ostrom's principle of adaptive governance, whereby leaders adjust strategies to maintain collective action and minimize conflict. More broadly, Somaliland achieved early collective-choice arrangements that enabled political elites, business leaders, and traditional authorities to shape the rules governing their interactions.[89] By lowering transaction costs and building trust through clan-based mechanisms of mediation and reconciliation, Egal and the

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[87] Phillips, "Political Settlements"
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 93.

Guurti helped overcome the collective-action dilemmas that had fueled fragmentation elsewhere in Somalia.

In sum, Somaliland's experience in the 1990s underscores the centrality of leadership and inclusive elite bargains in resolving collective-action problems. By weaving together traditional authority and modern statecraft, Egal and the Guurti established a hybrid system of governance that not only ended cycles of conflict but also laid the foundations for stability and long-term state-building.

3.6 DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION, AND SECURITY AS A PUBLIC GOOD

Egal's coalition of government leaders, clan elders/*Guurti*, and business elites turned next to disarmament and demobilization—an arena where collective action was both urgent and fragile. Unregulated militias, checkpoints, and widespread firearms threatened the peace process and the viability of a central government.

The strategy relied less on coercion than on negotiated agreements. Clan elders persuaded militia commanders to encamp their forces in designated zones, promising either integration into police and military structures or assistance for civilian reintegration.[90] Business elites provided food, transport, and logistics, ensuring that demobilization was locally resourced rather than externally imposed. International aid was minimal, largely limited to UNDP technical input.

The turning point came in 1994, when clan militias surrendered heavy weapons in Hargeisa's football stadium. The Arab sub-clan of the Isaaq, led by Sultan Mohamed Sultan Farah, was the first to disarm, setting a precedent for others and visibly transferring authority to the

[90] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland.*

state[91]. This moment illustrates Ostrom's principle of graduated sanctions, where early compliance created social and political pressure for broader adherence.[92]

Resource scarcity also spurred innovative solutions. Egal required new recruits to bring their own firearms when joining the police or military. These weapons were retained by the state upon the recruits' departure, both reducing costs and absorbing militia arms into state control.[93] Such policies demonstrate Ostrom's principle of clearly defined boundaries, as the state delineated who was authorized to carry weapons and under what conditions.[94]

While disarmament was not fully successful in eastern regions, the overall process enhanced legitimacy, reduced insecurity, and fostered a culture of cooperation. Importantly, disarmament illustrated H3– cooperation as a learned and iterative process. Initial local agreements—such as clan-based encampments—taught actors the benefits of coordination, which were later institutionalized in national security structures.

3.7 DEMOCRACY AND CONSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The final stage of Somaliland's state-building strategy was institutionalization. By the late 1990s, it was clear that stability could not depend indefinitely on elite bargains or customary consensus. Egal recognized that the agreements forged during the 1990s needed codification in formal institutions to endure beyond his tenure.

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[91] Ibid.
[92] Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 94.
[93] Mohamed Saeed Gees, former minister of finance and foreign affairs in President Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal's Somaliland government, interviewed by author, Virginia, April 2024.
[94] Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 90.

This transition culminated in the 2001 constitutional referendum, which formalized Somaliland's hybrid governance system and introduced multiparty democracy.[95] The constitution established the House of Elders (Guurti) as a permanent upper chamber and the House of Representatives as an elected body, thereby embedding clan authority alongside modern democratic institutions. In Ostrom's terms, this represented nested enterprises, where local, clan-based, and national governance structures were layered to manage collective problems.[96]

With international observers present, the referendum was overwhelmingly endorsed by voters—a remarkable demonstration of popular legitimacy despite the absence of international recognition. Its success reflected not only President Egal's coalition-building but also the iterative learning process of the 1990s. Through repeated negotiations over port revenues, disarmament, and clan reconciliation, Somalilanders gradually developed the capacity to cooperate. By 2001, they were prepared to codify these practices into binding institutions. This progression exemplifies *H3: cooperation precedes institutionalization.*

The constitution also incorporated adaptive mechanisms. For example, electoral law limited the number of political parties to three, preventing excessive fragmentation while still allowing pluralism.[97] This rule reflected Ostrom's principle of adaptive governance, tailored to Somaliland's realities.

Notwithstanding persistent challenges, including uneven development and clan favoritism, the constitutional referendum represented a defining moment in Somaliland's political trajectory. It signaled the

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[95] Phillips, "Political Settlements."
[96] Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 101.
[97] Renders, *Consider Somaliland.*

transformation of a fragile elite pact into a more durable, rules-based political order, one that institutionalized checks and balances, constrained executive authority, empowered citizens, and ensured political continuity beyond the death of any single leader, as demonstrated following Egal's passing in 2002.

In conclusion, Somaliland's experience illustrates how inclusive, locally driven peacebuilding resolved collective-action problems (H1) and how cooperation was gradually learned and institutionalized (H3). Elite bargains with business actors and clan elders laid the groundwork for stability. Disarmament and demobilization transformed security into a shared public good through negotiated cooperation. Finally, the 2001 constitution institutionalized these cooperative practices, embedding traditional and modern structures in a hybrid system.

Analyzed through Ostrom's theory of collective action, Somaliland demonstrates that peace and state-building emerge not from external imposition but from *iterative, locally rooted cooperation*. The case underscores the importance of aligning incentives, embedding customary authority, and gradually codifying agreements into formal institutions, offering lessons applicable far beyond the Horn of Africa.

SECTION 4: SOMALIA'S CHALLENGES IN PEACEBUILDING AND STATEBUILDING

This section examines Somalia's peacebuilding and state-building efforts through the lens of William D. Ferguson's Collective Action Theory.

The interplay between peacebuilding and state-building in Somalia presents one of the most complex post-conflict challenges, shaped by historical legacies, deep societal divisions, and competing internal and

external interests. Since the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, Somalia has exemplified protracted state failure, marked by persistent conflict, fragmented social cohesion, and weak governance. This study applies William D. Ferguson's Collective Action Theory to examine how societal fragmentation has obstructed progress in both peacebuilding and state-building.

Ferguson[98] emphasizes that overcoming collective action problems (CAPs)—where mistrust, conflicting incentives, or power asymmetries prevent cooperation—is essential for stability. Somalia's trajectory illustrates these dynamics, as factions have consistently prioritized short-term, self-serving goals over collective security and governance.

Barre's fall created a power vacuum filled by clan-based militias and warlords. Lacking a central authority, divisions deepened, fueling cycles of violence that dismantled both social cohesion and traditional governance. Elite actors—often former regime figures—failed to agree on leadership, entrenching instability.[99]

External interventions, while aimed at stabilization, frequently privileged elite bargains negotiated abroad, sidelining grassroots reconciliation and indigenous governance traditions.[100] These processes often ignored clan-based realities, weakening legitimacy. Regional rivalries, particularly among Ethiopia, Kenya, Egypt and

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[98] Ferguson, *Game-Theoretic Approach*, 23-25.
[99] Ken Menkhaus, "Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Somalia Case Study," *United Nations University* (2018): 91-94.
[100] Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan, "The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1.2 (2007): 151-160.

Gulf states, further complicated peace efforts, intensifying internal divisions.[101]

Overall, Somalia's persistent fragmentation of political authority and absence of effective collective action constitute the primary obstacles to both peacebuilding and state-building. With power dispersed among factions, warlords, and clan militias, efforts to establish a centralized government have repeatedly encountered resistance—reflecting entrenched mistrust and the enduring predominance of localized authority.[102]

4.1 INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT IN SOMALIA (1991-1993)

The international community attempted to play a role in rebuilding Somalia after the collapse of the central government in January 1991, which ushered in a new era of political fragmentation and conflict. Seeking to broker peace, Djibouti's President Hassan Gouled Abtidon convened the first formal Somali peace talks in June 1991[103]. Known as "Djibouti I," the meeting brought together leaders of six armed factions and was chaired by Somalia's first president, Aden Abdulle Osman. Djibouti I' ran from June 5–11, 1991, and was followed a month later by 'Djibouti II'.

The conference appointed Ali Mahdi Mohamed as interim president, a decision rejected by General Mohamed Farah Aideed.[104] This split the

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[101] Brian J. Hesse. "Two Generations, Two Interventions in One of the World's Most-Failed States: The United States, Kenya and Ethiopia in Somalia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 51.5 (2016): 14-16.
[102] Ken Menkhaus, "Neither War nor Peace in Somalia," *Journal of East African Studies* 12.1 (2018): 1-19.
[103] Ken Menkhaus, "Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping," *International Security* 31.3 (2007): 82.
[104] Ali Mahdi Mohamed was a businessman-turned-politician who emerged as one of the claimants to Somalia's presidency after the fall of Siad Barre in 1991. Although recognized by some factions, he was unable to assert authority over the entire country.

United Somali Congress (USC) and sparked intense urban warfare in Mogadishu, killing an estimated 25,000 people by late 1991 and devastating much of the city's infrastructure.[105] Initially, international engagement was hesitant. UN Special Representative Mohamed Sahnoun later criticized the limited support for regional mediation, calling it a missed opportunity for preventive diplomacy.[106] As the humanitarian crisis worsened, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo through Resolution 733 in January 1992 and facilitated a ceasefire, leading to the deployment of the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) in April (UNSC 1992).

Sahnoun's mediation, praised for its inclusivity, was cut short in October 1992 after his public criticism of UN inefficiency. Two months later, U.S. President George H. W. Bush launched "Operation Restore Hope" under the Unified Task Force (UNITAF), which succeeded in securing humanitarian aid delivery but avoided the politically sensitive task of disarming militias.[107] In March 1993, fifteen faction leaders signed the Addis Ababa Accord under international pressure, pledging to work toward reconciliation and transitional governance.[108] This expanded UNOSOM's mandate through Resolution 814, bringing in 28,000 peacekeepers. However, the perceived UN empowerment of faction leaders fueled mistrust, and shifting alliances—such as the May 1993 Mudug pact between

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General Mohamed Farah Aideed, a former army officer and leader of the United Somali Congress (USC), became his principal rival; their bitter struggle for control of Mogadishu plunged Somalia into a devastating civil war in the early 1990s.

[105] The United Somali Congress (USC), founded in 1989 by members of the Hawiye clan, emerged as one of the principal armed opposition movements against Siad Barre's regime and played a decisive role in his overthrow in 1991; Gérard Prunier, "Somaliland Goes it Alone," *Current History* 97.619 (1998): 225-228.

[106] Mohamed Sahnoun, *Somalia: The Missed Opportunities* (1994): 39.

[107] John Drysdale, *What Happened to Somalia?* (1994): 94.

[108] Conciliation Resources, *Somalia*, Accord Issue 21(2010).

Aideed and Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf, further undermined the process.[109]

A core weakness lay in the Addis Accord's vague provisions, which failed to clarify whether governance would emerge from grassroots local councils or be shaped by faction leaders. This dispute escalated into open conflict between Aideed's forces and UN troops, culminating in the June 1993 killing of twenty-four Pakistani peacekeepers and the October 3 "Black Hawk Down" incident.[110] External negotiations, such as the Nairobi informal talks between Aideed, Yusuf, and General Morgan, often ignored Somalia's intricate clan politics, sometimes exacerbating instability.[111]

While UNOSOM injected hundreds of millions of dollars into Mogadishu's economy, enabling some militia leaders to transition from "warlord" to "landlord" roles, these economic shifts failed to address underlying collective action problems (CAPs) or rebuild public trust.[112] The emphasis on elite negotiations, often held abroad and disconnected from the Somali public, further alienated citizens. Many Somali elites prioritized personal and factional gain over national unity, limiting the impact of external mediation.[113]

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[109] Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf founded the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) after the failed coup attempt of 1978. Predominantly composed of members from the Majerteen sub-clan of the Darod, it became one of the earliest organized armed opposition movements against Siad Barre's regime. He went on to found and serve as the first president of the regional administration of Puntland in 1998, and in 2004 he was elected President of Somalia. Menkhaus, "Governance without Government", 89.
[110] William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (2002): 115.
[111] Conciliation Resources, *Somalia.*
[112] Conciliation Resources, *Somalia.*
[113] Ken Menkhaus, "State Failure, State-Building, and Prospects for a 'Functional Failed State' in Somalia," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 656.1 (2014): 154-172.

In the final analysis, the international community's involvement in Somalia between 1991 and 1993 illustrates both the potential and limitations of externally driven peacebuilding in deeply fragmented post-conflict contexts. Early regional initiatives, such as Djibouti I and II, demonstrated the value of inclusive mediation but also revealed the fragility of agreements reached without broad-based legitimacy. Heavy reliance on elite negotiations—often shaped by external actors' strategic priorities—failed to resolve the underlying mistrust and power asymmetries that William D. Ferguson's collective action framework identifies as core barriers to cooperation. International interventions, particularly UNITAF and UNOSOM, prioritized short-term humanitarian objectives over building sustainable political institutions, inadvertently reinforcing the dominance of armed faction leaders. Moreover, the disconnect between foreign-led processes and local governance traditions weakened public trust and entrenched a war economy in which resource control and security provision remained in the hands of militias. This period planted the seeds of Somalia's enduring instability, underscoring the dangers of imposing top-down state-building models without addressing the root causes of fragmentation, cultivating grassroots legitimacy, and aligning incentives among diverse stakeholders.[114]

4.2 AID DEPENDENCY AND THE LIMITS OF EXTERNAL TOP-DOWN PEACEBUILDING

International actors have played a pivotal yet often ineffective role in Somalia's peacebuilding and state-building processes, fostering a dependency on foreign aid that persists to the present. Missions such as the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM), launched in 1992, relied heavily on externally imposed strategies aimed at restoring centralized governance without sufficiently engaging with

[114] Ibid.

the country's deeply entrenched clan-based political order.[115] While early humanitarian relief operations achieved short-term successes, they underestimated the intensity of clan rivalries, competition over resources, and pervasive mistrust. The U.S.-led raid on General Mohamed Farah Aideed in October 1993—culminating in the "Black Hawk Down" incident that killed eighteen American soldiers—precipitated a rapid U.S. withdrawal and UNOSOM's termination in 1995, underscoring the limits of military solutions to political crises. Externally crafted solutions often alienated local stakeholders, as foreign troop presence and perceived interference eroded the legitimacy of peace initiatives. Elite-focused power-sharing arrangements—imposed without broad grassroots engagement—reinforced zero-sum politics, exacerbating collective action problems (CAPs) rather than fostering cooperation.[116] From William D. Ferguson's perspective, Somalia's post-1991 political settlement suffered not only from material scarcity but from the absence of mutual trust among elites, whose fragmented interests and inability to coordinate around public goods left external state-building efforts without a reliable local foundation.[117]

Parallel to these governance challenges, Somalia's dependence on foreign aid shaped both political incentives and conflict dynamics. Donor-driven programs from the United Nations, European Union, United States, and Gulf states have funneled billions into humanitarian relief and short-term stability projects.[118] While these interventions provided vital services, they often misaligned with local priorities, failed to address structural drivers of conflict, and occasionally intensified elite competition over resource control. Corruption and

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[115] Menkhaus, "Governance without Government", 81.
[116] Barnes and Hassan, "Rise and Fall," 151-160.
[117] Ferguson, *Game-Theoretic Approach*, 52.
[118] Menkhaus, "State Failure", 163.

patronage networks diverted funds, further eroding institutional legitimacy.[119]

International funding sometimes transformed warlord economies into ostensibly legitimate business ventures, as elites reinvested resources into telecommunications, trade, and remittance-based enterprises.[120] However, these economic shifts did not resolve the underlying CAPs or rebuild trust between political actors. Instead, repeated peace process failures—compounded by donor-driven agendas—deepened political fragmentation and alienated regional stakeholders excluded from the benefits of aid flows. In Ferguson's terms, without mechanisms to build elite cooperation and trust, the international community's emphasis on centralized state-building lacked the political cohesion necessary for peace to take root.[121]

4.3 REGIONAL PLAYERS

Following the withdrawal of international actors in the 1990s, regional powers assumed a greater role in Somalia's peace initiatives. Yet much like earlier interventions, these efforts often failed to address structural drivers of conflict or deep-seated clan grievances.[122] Political elites rarely reflected on past failures, and the proliferation of faction leaders—motivated by competition for recognition and resources—further fragmented the political landscape.

A notable strategic shift came with the "building-block" approach, promoted by Ethiopia with Western donor backing and later endorsed by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the United Nations. Drawing inspiration from Somaliland's postwar

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[119] Stig. J. Hansen, "Warlords and Peace Strategies: The Case of Somalia," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 23.2 (2003): 211.
[120] Conciliation Resources, "Somalia," 14.
[121] Ferguson, *Game-Theoretic Approach*, 59.
[122] Conciliation Resources, "Somalia," 19.

reconciliation, the model emphasized localized peace initiatives, traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms, and engagement with clan elders.[123] The vision was for a federal Somalia to emerge from autonomous, locally governed entities. However, without robust safeguards, the approach was co-opted by warlords to consolidate their own authority—unlike Somaliland's leaders, who operated under community-driven checks and balances.[124]

The Arta Peace Process of 2000, initiated by Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh, represented a significant departure from earlier elite-driven negotiations by incorporating civil society, business leaders, and the diaspora into the dialogue. Central to the process was the introduction of the "4.5 formula," a mechanism of proportional clan representation designed to address longstanding inequities in Somali politics. The outcome was the creation of the Transitional National Government (TNG). Yet from its inception, the TNG faced considerable opposition. Puntland boycotted the conference, while Somaliland denounced Djibouti's invitation as a direct challenge to its pursuit of independence.[125] Regionally, Ethiopia—eager to curtail Djibouti's influence and wary of potential Islamist resurgence—backed the rival Somali Restoration and Reconciliation Council (SRRC). Egypt, by contrast, supported a centralized Somali state aligned with its Red Sea and Nile security concerns, putting it at odds with Ethiopia's vision for a decentralized federal arrangement. These competing regional interests underscored how Somali peacebuilding efforts were shaped not only by internal divisions but also by broader geopolitical rivalries.[126]

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[123] Hansen, *Warlords and Peace Strategies*, 59.
[124] Ibid., 60.
[125] Puntland is a semi-autonomous region in northeastern Somalia that declared autonomy in 1998. Unlike Somaliland, it does not seek full independence but advocates for a federal Somali state. Puntland has its own government, security forces, and administrative structures.
[126] "Peacebuilding in Somalia," Interpeace, 44.

Reflecting on why the TNG ultimately failed, President Abdiqasim Salad Hassan[127] highlighted several structural and political obstacles. At the time, Somalia lacked even the most basic infrastructure and functioning institutions, particularly an effective security apparatus. The absence of a tax system deprived the government of financial resources essential for sustaining state operations. Moreover, his administration was quickly delegitimized by warlords who branded it as Islamist, a narrative that Western governments and the United Nations accepted, further weakening international support. Ethiopia, in alliance with Somali warlords, also actively opposed the TNG, obstructing its ability to consolidate authority and govern effectively. Together, these factors reveal the deep interplay between internal fragmentation and external interference, which ultimately doomed the Arta experiment and underscored the formidable challenges of peacebuilding and state-building in Somalia.

From Ferguson's collective action perspective, these processes revealed two persistent barriers to effective state-building: a lack of trust among elites and the absence of mechanisms to align their incentives toward a shared national project.[128] Peace conferences produced narrow elite bargains rather than broad-based agreements, enabling short-term conflict management but failing to build sustainable institutions. Regional actors, driven by strategic self-interest, exacerbated this problem by aligning with particular factions rather than fostering inclusive coalitions. In this environment, collective action for state-building was undermined by zero-sum politics and the prioritization of factional gain over collective stability.

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[127] Abdiqasim Salad Hassan, interview by Abdisalan Hereri, *Universal TV*, Cairo, Egypt, 2015.
[128] Ferguson, *Game-Theoretic Approach*, 77.

Meanwhile, the rise of a powerful business class—dominated by remittances, telecommunications, and trade—introduced both stabilizing and fragmenting effects. The diaspora-funded remittance system sustained local markets and occasionally facilitated cross-clan cooperation. Yet business elites prioritized commercial stability over the restoration of a strong central authority, reinforcing a decentralized and competitive political order.[129]

4.4 LESSONS FOR PEACEBUILDING AND STATE-BUILDING IN SOMALIA

Drawing on Somalia's experience, several lessons emerge for addressing the challenges of peacebuilding and state-building:

1. **Local Ownership is Key**
   Successful peacebuilding must be grounded in local realities. Traditional governance structures, such as clan elders and customary law, have proven effective in bridging divides and fostering trust. External actors should support rather than supplant these mechanisms, ensuring interventions are rooted in Somalia's political culture and social norms.[130]

2. **Incentive Alignment and Trust-Building**
   Overcoming collective action problems (CAPs) requires aligning incentives and rebuilding trust among political actors. As Ferguson observes, without mechanisms that make cooperation more rewarding than defection, elites will prioritize factional interests over collective stability.[131] In Somalia, the absence of such mechanisms consistently

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[129] Stefan Dercon, *Gambling on Development: Why Some Countries Win and Others Lose* (2022): 118.
[130] Menkhaus, "Governance without Government", 89.
[131] Ferguson, *Political Economy*, 56-58.

undermined peace agreements and blocked the emergence of a unified political settlement.

3. **Integrated Approaches to Peacebuilding and State-Building**
   Peacebuilding and state-building are deeply interconnected and must be pursued together. Efforts that end violence without addressing governance issues rarely produce sustainable peace, while institution-building that neglects the root causes of conflict risks perpetuating instability.[132]

4. **Balancing Centralization and Decentralization**
   Somalia's history highlights the limitations of imposing a centralized governance model on a fragmented society. A more viable approach may involve a federal or decentralized system that accommodates regional and clan-based autonomy while fostering national unity.[133]

Somalia's prolonged crisis underscores the urgency of Somali-led, context-specific approaches to peace and governance. International actors would do well to redirect their efforts toward supporting grassroots reconciliation and aligning political incentives with local realities, recognizing that externally designed institutional blueprints have repeatedly failed to address the structural drivers of fragmentation that sustain conflict.

The post-1991 trajectory demonstrates a central lesson: peacebuilding must precede state-building. Efforts to reconstruct institutions without first restoring trust and cultivating a shared national vision have consistently proven unsustainable.

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[132] I. M. Lewis, *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland: Culture, History, Society* (2008): 211.
[133] Hesse, "Somalia: State Collapse," 43.

International mediation efforts often faltered by privileging elite-driven negotiations over inclusive processes and sidelining the perspectives of ordinary Somalis. Conferences convened abroad frequently lacked legitimacy and failed to account for the deeper cultural and political dimensions of the conflict. Many participants—often former warlords with little institutional experience—approached talks as zero-sum contests rather than opportunities for collective problem-solving. The dominance of external agendas reframed state-building as a technical exercise detached from Somali political incentives and public legitimacy.[134] "Building block" approaches that overlooked clan dynamics and regional realities quickly unraveled.[135]

The analysis highlights the limitations of hypothesis (H2), showing that institutional frameworks alone cannot replace the social foundations required for effective collective action. The absence of elite consensus, coupled with the marginalization of traditional governance systems, deepened division and instability. Trust-building must therefore precede institution-building. Without prior reconciliation and genuinely inclusive governance, formal state structures remain fragile and prone to collapse. Sustainable peace requires Somali-led processes that derive their legitimacy from broad cultural and political rootedness, with international actors assuming a facilitative rather than directive role.

Ultimately, Somalia's experience demonstrates that durable stability cannot be engineered from without — it must be cultivated from within, through trust anchored in local realities and governance models that authentically reflect the country's diversity. Peacebuilding and state-building must be integrated, but sequencing matters—peace must lay the groundwork for institutions to take root. External interventions that adapt to these dynamics and prioritize Somali

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[134] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland*, 141-44.
[135] Barnes and Hassan, "Rise and Fall," 151-160.

ownership stand the best chance of fostering a political settlement capable of transforming collective action from a source of division into a driver of stability.

SECTION 5: CONCLUSION

5.1 KEY FINDINGS

The divergent trajectories of Somaliland and Somalia illustrate how collective action capacity and leadership agency decisively shape peacebuilding and state-building outcomes in post-conflict contexts. Emerging from the 1991 collapse of Somalia's central government, both entities faced the immense challenge of rebuilding governance amid deep social fragmentation. Yet, while Somaliland gradually consolidated stability, Somalia remained trapped in cycles of conflict and institutional fragility.

In Somaliland, political and social elites—including clan elders, diaspora actors, religious figures, business leaders, and political movements—transcended narrow factionalism to forge a shared vision of peace and governance. Locally driven peace processes, grounded in indigenous conflict resolution traditions, produced inclusive and legitimate political arrangements. Applying Ostrom's framework, mutual interdependence and credible authority structures reduced transaction costs, resolved coordination failures, and enabled self-enforcing cooperation.

Through successive reconciliation conferences held in Burao (1991), Sheikh (1992), Borama (1993), and Hargeisa (1997), Somaliland institutionalized the *Guurti* (House of Elders) and embedded traditional authority within formal governance structures. This hybrid political order balanced customary norms with modern state institutions, providing both cultural legitimacy and administrative functionality. Elite bargains based on negotiation, compromise, and

mutual restraint transformed collective action from a source of fragmentation into the foundation of durable governance.

Somalia's post-conflict experience unfolded in stark contrast. As Professor Saeed Samatar[136] observed, deep-seated clan rivalries, entrenched patronage networks, and the absence of legitimate mediating frameworks thwarted elite cooperation. External interventions—by regional powers, the United Nations, and the African Union—often prioritized rapid state-building over reconciliation. These efforts empowered warlords without social legitimacy and reinforced zero-sum political competition. Peace processes conducted abroad excluded grassroots actors, imposed externally designed governance models, and neglected Somalia's indigenous political realities. In Ferguson's terms, the resulting institutions were "anti-politics machines"—organizational forms detached from their social foundations and lacking genuine legitimacy.

A central distinction lies in the role of international involvement. Somaliland's relative isolation from direct foreign intervention allowed governance structures to evolve organically, free from the distortions of aid dependency or externally imposed blueprints. Conversely, Somalia's reliance on international mediation and externally funded state-building initiatives disconnected governance from its social base, weakening cooperation and perpetuating instability.

From a collective action perspective, peacebuilding succeeds when stakeholders recognize that long-term stability outweighs short-term gains, and when institutional arrangements are rooted in mechanisms

[136] Saeed Samatar, interview by BBC Somali Service, Rutgers University, January 2011, 20th Anniversary Program Marking the Collapse of Somalia's Central Government.

trusted by local communities. Somaliland's experience demonstrates that grassroots reconciliation, integration of traditional authority, and inclusive elite consensus can yield a resilient political settlement. Somalia's trajectory, by contrast, underscores the risks of bypassing local ownership, sidelining traditional governance, and privileging external templates over indigenous legitimacy.

Even though structural variables—such as colonial inheritance, demographic scale, and clan composition—afforded Somaliland certain advantages in managing collective action problems, it was leadership agency rather than structure alone that transformed these advantages into a sustainable political settlement. Somaliland and Somalia share commonalities in religion, language, and kinship ties, yet their divergent paths reveal the decisive influence of human agency.

In Somaliland, political elites leveraged traditional clan institutions to build legitimacy through locally convened peace conferences and negotiated compromises. These processes fostered accountability and ownership, anchoring the emerging political order in indigenous norms. Somalia's post-1991 trajectory, by contrast, was marked by elite fragmentation, mutual mistrust, and the erosion of mediating structures capable of bridging factional divides. The result was a persistent cycle of zero-sum politics, external dependency, and institutional fragility.

Ultimately, Somaliland's experience illustrates that leadership cohesion, inclusive bargaining, and the alignment of formal and informal institutions are critical determinants of successful political settlements. Somalia's prolonged instability, despite shared cultural and structural foundations, underscores that the quality of leadership and the capacity for cooperative governance remain the most decisive factors in post-conflict reconstruction.

The overarching lesson is clear: in post-conflict contexts, governance must be locally driven, rooted in legitimacy, trust, and mutual interdependence, with peacebuilding serving as the essential foundation for sustainable state-building. Peacebuilding processes that prioritize reconciliation, social cohesion, and the integration of traditional authority create the stability needed for formal institutions to take root. Transforming collective action from a barrier into a catalyst for stability requires political settlements that are inclusive, contextually grounded, and genuinely owned by those they aim to serve—conditions that Somaliland has cultivated, but Somalia has yet to achieve. Ultimately, locally owned and inclusive peace processes—anchored in traditional governance, community consensus, and gradual institution-building—are more likely to produce durable stability than externally imposed frameworks. Equally important, addressing collective action problems early through equitable power-sharing, trust-building, and shared economic incentives can prevent the fragmentation and elite competition that so often undermine both peacebuilding and state formation in post-conflict settings.

5.2 TABLE: CENTRAL CONTRASTS BETWEEN SOMALILAND AND SOMALIA – COLLECTIVE ACTION

Analytical Dimension	Somaliland (Successful Collective Action)	Somalia (Failed Collective Action)	Theoretical Implications
Foundational Process: Sequence of Peace and State Formation	**Peace before state.** Grassroots reconciliation conferences (Borama, Sheikh, Hargeisa) built social trust.	**State before peace.** Governments imposed externally (UNOSOM, TNG, TFG) sought to enforce order	**Ostrom:** Local actors must self-organize to build norms of trust and reciprocity before formal governance emerges. Sequencing matters—trust must precede enforcement. **Ferguson:** Premature state-building

	Peacebuilding preceded institution-building, enabling durable political order.	without resolving clan-based conflicts. State-building attempted without reconciliation, yielding fragile institutions.	amid elite fragmentation creates persistent collective action failures.
Ownership of Process	Endogenous, bottom-up process driven by SNM veterans, elders, business community, and diaspora; minimal external interference.	Exogenous, top-down process dominated by foreign mediation and donor conditionalities; local legitimacy was weak.	**Ostrom:** Local ownership fosters self-enforcing rules and sustainable cooperation. **Ferguson:** External dominance displaces domestic coordination and reinforces elite rent-seeking.
Elite Bargaining and Political Settlement	Elites forged a self-enforcing settlement—balancing clan representation, rotating leadership, and revenue-sharing.	Elite fragmentation; competition over external rents; zero-sum logic among warlords and factions.	**Ostrom:** Institutions succeed when rules are collectively agreed upon and enforced locally. **Ferguson:** Absence of credible commitment among elites leads to repeated coordination failures.
Integration of Traditional Governance	The Guurti institutionalized traditional authority within modern governance, providing dispute resolution and social legitimacy.	Traditional elders sidelined or manipulated by political factions; loss of moral authority.	**Ostrom:** Nested governance arrangements enhance trust and accountability. **Ferguson:** Exclusion of traditional mediators worsens coordination failures and legitimacy crises.

Role of External Actors	Non—Somaliland managed its own process, deriving legitimacy from broad domestic consensus.	Overbearing—UN, international community, regional players, and donors designed governance templates detached from local realities.	**Ostrom:** External imposition undermines self-organization. **Ferguson:** External actors can distort elite incentives, preventing endogenous order.
Outcome (1991–2001)	Durable peace, functioning hybrid institutions, and emergent developmental state despite non-recognition.	Persistent violence, fragmented authority, and donor dependency; absence of collective trust.	**Ostrom:** Successful self-governance of collective goods (peace and stability). **Ferguson:** Persistent collective action trap driven by elite competition and weak coordination mechanisms.

AFTERWORD: DEVELOPMENTS IN SOMALILAND AND SOMALIA AFTER 2001

Since 2001, the trajectories of Somaliland and Somalia have continued to diverge sharply, reflecting the enduring legacies of their political settlements and the contrasting nature of their governance systems. Somaliland has consolidated many of the institutional and security gains established during its formative decade (1991–2001), whereas Somalia has struggled to rebuild a coherent state amidst persistent external dependency, elite fragmentation, and violent contestation.

In the post-2001 period, **Somaliland** deepened its commitment to a hybrid system of governance that blended customary authority with modern state institutions. It became the first Somali polity in East Africa to institute a universal suffrage, one-person-one-vote presidential election, resulting in the victory of Dahir Riyale Kahin

from the Awdal region, a member of the Gadabursi clan. The outcome marked a significant milestone in the territory's democratization. Since 2001, Somaliland has peacefully transferred power among six presidents and multiple political parties—an imperfect but remarkable record in the region—demonstrating the durability and adaptability of its locally grounded political order.[137] The territory has held competitive presidential, parliamentary, national parties, and local council elections in 2003, 2005, 2010, 2012, 2017, 2021, and 2024. At the time of this writing, President Mohamed Abdirahman Abdillahi 'Ciro' won the most recent election in November 2024.This record reflects an institutional maturity rare in the Horn of Africa.

At the time of writing, Somaliland continues to confront several serious and recurring challenges, including electoral delays, high unemployment, recurring droughts, and broader economic pressures. Concerns also persist regarding the dynamism of political leadership and unresolved clan grievances. These tensions were further intensified by the outbreak of violence in parts of the eastern Sool and Sanaag regions, particularly the conflict in the city of Las Anod in eastern Sool in 2023. One of the most significant setbacks to Somaliland's otherwise inclusive political settlement has been the loss of administrative control over Las Anod—one of the original six principal districts of Somaliland following its independence from Britain—which had remained under Somaliland's administration for nearly two decades. The crisis illustrates the continuing fragility of Somaliland's political settlement in peripheral regions, where questions of representation, resource distribution, and political inclusion remain contested despite the broader stability achieved elsewhere in the territory.

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[137] Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland.*

Yet the broader trajectory has remained one of continuity rather than collapse. By balancing customary mechanisms of authority with democratic competition, Somaliland has largely maintained internal stability and policy coherence, reinforcing a path that stands in marked contrast to developments in Somalia.[138]

Economic strategy has further strengthened this position. Leveraging its location along the Gulf of Aden, Somaliland has expanded trade corridors, most visibly through the modernization of Port of Berbera in partnership with DP World. Growth in infrastructure and livestock exports has improved fiscal capacity and deepened regional integration. At the same time, the absence of international recognition continues to impose structural limits, restricting access to global financial institutions and formal development assistance. Diplomatically, Somaliland has responded with pragmatism—cultivating informal ties with Western and regional actors while foregrounding its comparative advantages in stability, electoral practice, and counterterrorism cooperation. Evidence of shifting attitudes appeared on June 12, 2025, when Scott Perry introduced H.R. 3992, the Republic of Somaliland Independence Act, signaling growing bipartisan interest in revisiting long-standing assumptions in Washington.[139]

For decades, Somaliland thus inhabited a paradox: exercising effective sovereignty without recognition, providing security while excluded from formal diplomatic architectures, and sustaining peace in a turbulent neighborhood. On December 26, 2025, that ambiguity narrowed when Israel became the first state to grant formal recognition to the republic. The decision marked a rupture in a

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[138] Hussein A. Duale (Awil), former Somali ambassador to Uganda and Kenya and later Somaliland minister of finance, interview by author, Djibouti, December 2023.
[139] "Republic of Somaliland Independence Act," statute, United States Congress, June 12, 2025.

diplomatic equilibrium that had endured since 1991 and reverberated across the Red Sea arena. Somalia rejected the move, while Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia expressed opposition shaped by their own strategic interests. Others, including the United States and several European governments, reacted more cautiously, whereas the United Arab Emirates was widely viewed as quietly supportive.

Recognition did not manufacture Somaliland's importance; it illuminated it. Near the Bab el-Mandeb, at the crossroads of intensifying competition among global and regional powers—including China—Somaliland now appears less an anomaly than an established political reality.

In contrast, **Somalia's** post-2001 trajectory has largely been shaped by an externally sponsored state-building project centered in Mogadishu. The establishment of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in 2004, followed by the creation of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in 2012, reflected sustained international efforts to restore central authority after more than a decade of state collapse. These initiatives were supported by a wide range of international actors, including the United Nations, the African Union, and major bilateral donors, who sought to reconstruct formal institutions and re-establish a functioning central government. While Somalia's government has made some progress in rebuilding state institutions since 2001—including the re-establishment of federal ministries, the gradual expansion of administrative structures, and the development of a provisional constitution—these efforts have faced persistent structural and political constraints.[140]

A central challenge has been the absence of a cohesive elite bargain capable of underpinning a stable political settlement. Political

[140] Phillips, "Political Settlements."

competition among Somali elites, often mediated through clan-based alliances, has repeatedly undermined attempts to consolidate authority at the national level. Tensions between the federal government in Mogadishu and emerging federal member states have further complicated governance, producing recurring disputes over constitutional authority, resource distribution, and political representation. At the same time, the enduring insurgency of al-Shabaab has posed a major obstacle to both peace-building and state-building efforts. The group has demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt, exploiting governance vacuums and local grievances while maintaining influence in large parts of southern and central Somalia. As a result, insecurity has continued to constrain humanitarian access, limit economic recovery, and undermine the consolidation of state authority.[141]

Somalia's adoption of a federal system was intended to accommodate the country's diverse clan constituencies and provide a framework for power sharing between the center and the regions. In practice, however, federalism has often institutionalized political fragmentation rather than resolving it. Political settlements remain shallow and unstable, with recurring power struggles between Mogadishu and federal member states over authority, legitimacy, and resource control. Although Somalia has benefited from significant international financial assistance—including major debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative and continued donor support for security sector reform and institutional development—the broader state-building project remains heavily dependent on external funding and international political mediation.[142] As scholars of the political settlement approach have noted, externally driven

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[141] Ken Menkhaus, "Neither War nor Peace in Somalia," *Journal of East African Studies* 12.1 (2018): 1-19.
[142] Laura Hammond, "Somalia Rising: Things Are Starting to Change for the World's Longest Failed State," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7.1 (2013).

institutional models often struggle to gain legitimacy when they are not anchored in locally negotiated elite bargains.[143] In Somalia's case, this external dependence has limited the emergence of a genuinely domestically rooted political settlement, leaving governance structures vulnerable to elite fragmentation and persistent insecurity.

In sum, the period after 2001 underscores the dividends of locally grounded peacebuilding, state-building, and leadership accountability in Somaliland, while Somalia's continued instability exposes the limitations of externally driven governance templates. The comparison reinforces a central lesson of the Somali experience: durable state formation depends not only on institutional design or international assistance, but on the legitimacy and inclusiveness of political settlements forged from within. The divergence between the two polities was not predetermined by culture or geography. Rather, it emerged from differing responses to collective action challenges, contrasting approaches to peacebuilding and state-building, and the distinct elite bargains that emerged and consolidated after 1991.

[143] Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (2015).

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Intelligentizing the Dragon: The Landscape of PLA Discourse on AI Militarization in the Era of Intelligent Warfare

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Abstract

China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) has interpreted the increasing importance of artificial intelligence (AI) in US military strategy and on battlefields like the Russo-Ukrainian war as a new revolution in military affairs (RMA). Based on the limited publically available information on PLA policymaking, it has become clear that the militarization of AI is indicative of a move from 'informatized warfare' (信息化战争) to a newer concept of 'intelligentized warfare' (智能化战争). After being incorporated into the PLA's strategic military guidelines in 2019 in response to evolving Sino-American competition, 'intelligentized

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warfare' has since been interpreted by scholars as the monolithic consensus of CCP defense planners. However, these scholars overlook how high-profile, high-tech conflicts like Russia-Ukraine or Israel-Hamas influence China's military strategy. Furthermore, they fail to consider the role of the PLA—a crucial producer of China's defense expertise and knowledge—in its formation. As a unique interest group in CCP politics, the PLA engages in professional yet diverse discourse on defense planning in manners incomparable with other national security oriented party organs. This study conducts a thematic content analysis (TCA) of articles on 'intelligentized warfare' as well as AI military applications from the '*'Military Forum' (军事论坛)*' section of '*PLA Daily (Jiefangjun Bao, 解放军报)*'—the PLA's official newspaper—published between the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the latest CCP Plenum in October 2025. This analysis examines how the PLA's strategic discourse on AI's military applications evolved in light of the Russo-Ukrainian War—the first conflict involving both AI and a great power. It further investigates potential differences in interpretations of 'intelligentized warfare' that emerged from the PLA's discussions. These findings indicate that while the core features of 'intelligentized warfare' are consistent across the PLA orthodoxy, there are notable differences in military discourse regarding the speed, scope, human-algorithm balance, and the preferred domains of AI integration. This study characterizes these differences by level of warfare, categorizing them into distinct schools of thought to allow both scholars and policymakers to trace strategic and conversational changes in the Chinese military in real time and comprehend the nuances that such pressing shifts demand.

A Note on the Use of Translated Primary Sources

The following research is structured around analyzing primary sources originally written in Mandarin, obtained from various official CCP platforms and online collections. Unless stated otherwise, any mention

or analysis of primary source materials refers to a translated version of the original text that has been translated using translation software, including 'DeepL' and Google Translate. Additionally, any articles sourced from Eastview's information systems or the PLA Daily digital archive were analyzed using the AI-powered translation functions embedded in those archives. While every effort was made to ensure the preservation of the nuances and accurate representation of the original texts, existing translation services remain imperfect, and the use of multiple collections and translation services for the analysis of primary sources introduces the possibility of minor discrepancies in exact wording or terminology between Chinese and English.

Whenever ambiguity or uncertainty regarding the precision of a translation arose during this research, the processed text underwent a comparison of translation across multiple services, with potentially unique words manually examined to ensure the most accurate reflection of the expressed written sentiment. Gaps in translation efficacy may have caused misinterpretations or an inaccurate reflection of the original text's sentiment. In cases of ambiguity or critical analysis, the original-language version should be considered the authoritative source. The author accepts full responsibility for any limitations caused by potential minor discrepancies in translations.

INTRODUCTION

On September 3rd, 2025, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) paraded a dizzying array of high tech weaponry across Beijing's Tiananmen Square to celebrate the 80th anniversary of its victory over Imperial Japan. In a notable display of military technological might, security analysts observed as autonomous drones, AI-powered weapons systems, and 'Robot Wolves' marched alongside the

uniformed soldiers of the PLA.[145] The message from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was clear: China was heralding the arrival of 'intelligentized warfare' (智能化战争) in what Secretary General Xi Jinping called "a new Era"—one in which China is determined to modernize itself militarily.[146]

To understand the impact of Xi Jinping's "New Era" and the effects of AI on military reforms, this research examines how the PLA's analysis of and internal debate over AI militarization and intelligent warfare has evolved following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It aims to understand this change across multiple dimensions—the observational, strategic, operational, and tactical levels—in addition to the balance between the various stances that define each level. Underneath the uniformity of CCP posturing, an internal debate within the PLA persists over the nature and direction of the technology's application. While the PLA's observations of AI-powered conflicts, particularly in Ukraine, have strengthened overall support for modernizing China's AI capabilities, disagreements persist over the pace, extent, platform prioritization and autonomy levels of AI integration into military affairs.

The decision to focus on internal PLA debates about AI militarization, particularly in the context of Russia's campaigns in Ukraine, is both deliberate and timely. PRC military strategists are known to analyze the strategic and technological elements of international conflicts to develop their doctrine, viewing foreign wars as opportunities to

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[145] "Low Cost, High Carnage: Robot Wolves Are China's Latest Weapons against Taiwan," editorial, *Lianhe Zaobao* (Singapore), republished in *ThinkChina*, translated by Yuen Kum Cheong, November 13, 2025.
[146] Yatsuzuka Masaaki, "PLA's Intelligentized Warfare: The Politics on China's Military Strategy," Security and Strategy 2 (2020): 1; The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, China's National Defense in the New Era (2019): 7.

observe experimental tactics and equipment in practice.[147] As follows, the discourse surrounding the Ukraine war, the first major AI-powered conflict, carries significant implications for conversations over military doctrine during a period when a confrontation between China and US allies in the Indo-Pacific is becoming more likely. Moreover, research seeks to bridge theory and practice by leveraging analysis of both the PLA's official military discourse and the more diverse marketplace of opinions across PLA-penned articles in state media. It aims to create a more transparent framework for mapping the leading voices underpinning strategic policy creation in the CCP—one grounded in specific theories that enhance foreign observers' ability to recognize trends in the development of Chinese military doctrine.

The importance of this research at this moment of Sino-American relations is threefold. First, the rapid development of AI-powered warfare tools has already sparked a new arms race between the US and China, raising the stakes in examining how China's military is developing and deploying militarized AI platforms. Second, this research challenges the prominent contemporary perception that regards PLA strategic thinking as monolithic and exclusively dictated by the CCP political elite. By examining debates within the PLA, this research offers a more nuanced perspective of the party's military as an intellectual ecosystem vulnerable to factionalism and debate. Finally, by providing a detailed understanding of the primary PLA perspectives on emerging technologies, the following analysis lays a foundation for discussions of Chinese military militarization that move beyond the simplistic interpretations of Marxist theory typically applied to Chinese strategic paradigms.

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[147] Adam Grace, "Lessons-Learned with Chinese Characteristics: Understanding the Limits of PLA Efforts to Adapt to Contemporary Warfare," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 6, 2026, https://understandingwar.org/research/china-taiwan/lessons-learned-with-chinese-characteristics-understanding-the-limits-of-pla-efforts-to-adapt-to-contemporary-warfare/

This article will begin with a review of relevant academic literature, which forms the basis for understanding the subsequent study and its theoretical framework. The following methodological section presents the research design approach. In particular, it breaks down the thematic content analysis (TCA) model and the mixed-methods approach used throughout the analysis. Additionally, it details the chosen approach used for identifying, collecting, and engaging with this study's chosen primary source materials: the '*"Military Forum"* section of the *'PLA Daily (Jiefangjun Bao, 解放军报)*.' This paper's analysis section maps the themes identified within the articles, along with their similarities and differences. Concluding this research is a discussion of the theoretical, geopolitical, and policy implications of its findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this research combines M. Taylor Fravel's theory of continuity and change in Chinese military strategy with elements from Phillip C. Saunders, Andrew Scobell, Joel Wuthnow, and Song Zhongwei's theories on the PLA as a structurally influential actor and interest group within the CCP strategy-making process. Fravel argues that shifts in China's military strategy occur when the CCP recognizes a progression in the conduct of warfare during foreign great-power conflicts.[148] Meanwhile, Saunders, Scobell, Wuthnow, and Song show that the PLA's monopoly over military expertise and knowledge-producing institutions gives it moderate influence over the party's approach to and conversations on

[148] M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (2019): 32.