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'Illiberal Peace': Oxymoron, Political Necessity, or an Old Wine in a New Bottle

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Abstract

With growing multipolarity and geopolitical polarization, the role of international organizations as third-party actors within the framework of liberal peace, has been steadily declining over the past two decades. The most recent spike in armed conflict since 2014 has not been accompanied by an associated increase in peace agreements and negotiated settlements, as was the case in the 1990s. Considering the undersupply of conflict management by international organizations, the role of state actors in third-party roles has grown, often with weak normative support and commitment to nonviolent conflict management. This has often legitimized the use of violence as a strategy of coercive kinetic diplomacy. Drawing from historical analyses of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, this article examines the question as to whether the current period of growing illiberalism in peacebuilding is historically anachronistic. It introduces a framework of analysis and engages in concept development to understand and operationalize "illiberality of peacebuilding."

Keywords

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Lamentations and fears that the US-led liberal hegemony and its rules-based world order is declining are widespread within scholarly and public discourse (Ikenberry 2020; Cooley & Nexon 2020; Wallensteen 2015). In terms of the durability of liberal principles, the post-Cold War euphoria that great power polarity would melt away into democratic stability in post-Communist Eurasia (Fukuyama 2006) soon dissipated. In the post-Communist space, the "end of history" became the beginning of politics, great and small. The young states in these regions soon settled into varied levels of authoritarianism, hard and soft (Levitsky & Way 2010), with associated small wars simmering as "frozen conflicts." And the string of post-Soviet wars at the end of the Cold War highlighted the limits of a rules-based world order in advancing minority protections and addressing the weak statehood problem which emerged from the ruins of Soviet collapse in the 1990s (Ohanyan 2022; Zürcher 2007; Kaufman 2001).

Still, even with these caveats, the post-Cold War period is now emerging as the Golden Age when it comes to conflicts ending with negotiated settlements. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, there was an increase in peace agreements and conflicts ending with negotiated settlements (Petterson, Högbladh & Öberg 2019; Wallensteen, 2015), despite the spike in numbers of armed conflicts. As reported in the Uppsala Conflict Database, 40% of armed conflicts ended with negotiated settlement in the post-Cold War period (1989–2010), which is an increase from 14% in the period preceding it (1975–1988) (Wallensteen 2015). Similarly, others have shown (Gurr 2000; Cederman, Gleditsch & Wucherpfennig 2017) that ethnic civil war has been in decline in the post-Cold War period, in 1990s, and that decline is partly driven by governments' increasingly accommodative policies toward ethnic minorities. Since 2014, there is a similar increase in armed conflict and organized violence, comparable to the levels in 1990s. Unlike the 1990s, this spike in armed conflicts is not accompanied by a similar increase in negotiated settlements and peace agreements. Viewed in this backdrop of the post-Cold War Golden Age in conflict management, the current period, with expansion of regional and often illiberal, and neo-imperial, powers in mediation diplomacy, this period is emerging as uniquely illiberal both in the way conflicts are ending (militarized victory consolidation), how the post-war conditions are managed, and the prominent rise of internally illiberal actors in conflict diplomacy.

Considering the undersupply of conflict management by international organizations (Ohanyan 2015), the role of state actors in third-party roles has grown, often with weak normative support and commitment to nonviolent conflict management. This has often legitimized the use of violence as a strategy of

coercive diplomacy. On the one hand, one may argue that the undersupply of conflict management by international organizations necessitates a closer consideration of states, often deeply illiberal ones, in third-party roles. Beggars can't be choosers, so to speak. At the same time, not all illiberal players are equal when it comes to their political will and organizational capacity to build and advance conflict management processes which are in line with best practices and lessons learned in peacebuilding throughout the 20th century.

Against this backdrop, this study tackles whether authoritarian actors and authoritarian mechanisms can produce sustainable outcomes in ending armed conflicts. What are the risks, liabilities, and prospects for conflict resolution in such settings? How should we think about the "quality of peace" which at times is established and enforced at the barrel of a gun (Wallensteen 2015)? Within growing multipolarity and America's potential exit from a hegemonic position within the rules-based world order, these questions gain a renewed significance.

This article presents a systems approach to understand peacebuilding processes, viewing them as continuous and variable across time and cases, with illiberality and liberality as the two ends of a spectrum. Illiberality of peace processes is a variable feature of conflict systems, which are formed between conflict actors, relationships between them, and the institutional landscapes that these actors and their institutions create. This systems approach to the analysis of peace and conflict helps to recognize that conflict dynamics are rooted within the broader political context of conflict actors and third-party players.

Specifically, this article presents a systems approach to the study of illiberal peace processes, thereby furthering its conceptualization as an operationalized variable. By focusing on illiberal peace *processes*, the study juxtaposes it with liberal *peacebuilding*, which has evolved as a comprehensive set of strategies of international, post-conflict interventions in civil wars and internationalized armed conflicts. The systems approach advanced here identifies a given conflict system, and argues that any peace processes prevalent in the system, can be situated on a spectrum between illiberality and liberalism. Levels of illiberality, then, emerge as a feature of this system, rather than "illiberal peace" as a fixed outcome.

The article starts by offering a theoretical rationale for this project, grounded in the context of post-Communist Eurasia. It then reviews some of the existing scholarship on illiberal peace, followed by a discussion of the systems approach to understanding illiberality of peace processes over time and space. The empirical section offers a methodology of concept development

for illiberal peace processes within the systems approach introduced here. The last section applies the systems approach to illiberal peace within the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Victor's Peace and the Rise of Neo-imperial Politics in the Eurasian Continent

The mixed outcomes from negotiated settlements in the post-Cold War period, and the most recent resurgence of militarized endings of conflicts, "the victor's peace," have created a tragic dilemma for large swaths of populations caught in conflict regions. On the one hand, Western approaches of liberal peacebuilding, with greater protections for minority rights, have been weakening. On the other hand, the emergent vacuum in international conflict management was increasingly filled by state actors in third-party roles, who often stood out due to their domestic authoritarianism and militarized foreign policies. Communities looking for peace and stability within post-conflict orders of victorious powers, were forced to jump out of the frying pan into the fire.

And nowhere is this predicament so stark than in the post-Cold War period in post-Communist Eurasia. This region has witnessed the outbreak of ethnic conflicts with varying severity. Some of these conflicts received the full "liberal peacebuilding" treatment, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Others, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and now Nagorno-Karabakh since the 44-day war in 2020 in Azerbaijan, are eased militarily into fragile and an uneasy stability. Abkhazia and South Ossetia enjoy "Russian security," courtesy of the Russian recognition of the statelets, and Georgia's democratization since the conflict outbreaks in the twilight years of the Soviet collapse. In contrast, Nagorno-Karabakh, with a Russian peacekeeping presence, has been struggling to consolidate the "Russian peace," as the rhetoric from Baku continues, quite predictably, to remain bellicose and unrelenting, making the tri-lateral statement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, signed on November 9, 2020, increasingly ineffective in moving fragile peace processes forward. Authoritarianism continues to deepen in Azerbaijan, making the fragile peace process all the more vulnerable to collapse.[2]

Broadly described as "post-Soviet wars," these conflicts have deeply pre-Soviet, imperial roots (Ohanyan 2022; Broers 2019). While largely silenced and pacified in Soviet years, the conflicts continue to defy peace processes,

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[2] See: https://oc-media.org/opinions/opinion-who-benefits-from-dragging-out-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict/.

liberal or not. Viewed historically, these conflict structures highlight the need for analytical frameworks which (1) capture peace processes over time; and (2) recognize and problematize conflict actors within their respective political institutional contexts. This study argues that illiberal peace processes and liberal peacebuilding are two ends of a spectrum, and that illiberality of peace processes is a feature of a conflict system, not a bug, to be fixed by liberalizing peace processes, without accounting for the deeper political and institutional contexts driving them.

Indeed, these conflicts, often described as "post-Soviet wars" (Zürcher 2007), are mostly explained by the ethno-federal nature of the Soviet Union. All three Communist ethno-federal systems disintegrated at the end of the 20th century (USSR, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia), while unitary states have survived a break-up along ethnic lines (Hale 2008). Attempted as a tool to pacify restive nationalities within a single ideological community, the Soviet ethno-federalism ended up fueling the very forces it sought to contain (Martin 2001; Hirsch 2005).

While important in the context of Soviet ethno-federalism, this narrative often obscures that most of the contemporary ethnic conflicts in Russia's vicinities (as well as inside it) have deeply imperial roots, predating the rise of the Soviet Union (Ohanyan 2022; Broers 2019). The framework of illiberal peace introduced here, raises the question concerning the determinants of nearly century-long stability of ethnic-ethnic relations within the Soviet Union. The illiberality of peace in the multi-ethnic Soviet federation was sustained and managed by the ideological levers of Marxism-Leninism, which saw the "nationality question" as one to dissipate with economic growth and the consolidation of the Communist system. And the bursting of the Soviet system at its nationalist seams in its peripheries, caught the Soviet leadership at the time off guard (Suny 1989).

Clearly top-down and coercive, the Soviet Union can be thought of as a relatively effective case of conflict management, authoritarian in its mode and political conditions. Perhaps with hindsight it can be seen by some ethnic groups (particularly by the current de facto states secured by Russian political and military support) as a mechanism to manage inter-ethnic coexistence. But it can also be understood and assessed as a failure due to the weakness of local and regional institutions to manage ethnic conflicts when they erupted in the twilight years of the Soviet Union. Having penetrated and demolished the civic structure in the Soviet republics, most being multiethnic, Moscow has eliminated civic connectivity as a tool for peacebuilding and coexistence, as observed elsewhere (Varshney 2002). Their violent outbreak, when the imperial center weakened, can be thought of as a proxy of poor inter-ethnic

connectivity and integration. But the lack of a measurable conceptualization of the Soviet, imperial peace makes it difficult to analyze illiberal actors, such as the Soviet Union, in their capacity to manage conflict and peacebuilding conditions for long-term inter-ethnic coexistence. Understanding illiberal forms of peace can be helpful in uncovering conditions which fail to meet the liberal criteria of politics but where some type of peace between multiple ethnic groups has been achieved.

Liberal Peacebuilding and Illiberal Peace Processes: Jumping from the Frying Pan into the Fire

The core objective of this study is to understand and further the conceptualization of illiberal peacebuilding processes within a given conflict system. The existing scholarship on illiberal peace is rapidly growing, and much of it is in reference to liberal peace in general, and liberal peacebuilding, in particular, formed in the context of the post-Cold War period. The contemporary scholarship on liberal peace and liberal peacebuilding defines it as historically specific to the post-Cold War era, shaped by outsiders, usually the Western world, in a given conflict (Piccolino 2015). In broad strokes, peacebuilding in this period was conceived as a form of intervention to prevent state collapse or a return to war (Barnett et. al. 2007). Liberal peacebuilding initiatives were expressed through internationally brokered peace negotiations, which at times also introduced peacekeeping forces in a conflict region. Internationally monitored elections and the promotion of human rights/minority protections, along with rule of law and security sector reform were also associated features of liberal peacebuilding operations (Lewis et al 2018). They usually also curtailed the use of force by parties to the conflict (Campbell et al. 2011; Newman 2009).

Liberal peacebuilding intervention has focused mainly on the type of state to be built and developed, to prevent further conflict outbreaks, as opposed to degrees of statehood. Donor countries have identified liberalization, movements toward democracy and markets, the rule of law and human rights protections, as the best remedy for preventing conflict and state collapse (Barnett et al. 2007; Paris 2004). 'Liberal state versus state capacity' has been the choice, and the Western-backed intervention tended to tilt towards the former (Barnett et. al. 2007). Driven by the political theory of liberal peace, such interventions identified democratization and economic liberalism via market institutions as the best tools in pacifying societies after wars (Paris 2004). As such, liberal

peacebuilding is understood as the Weberian ideal of state. Statebuilding and creation of political and economic institutions of statehood, within a largely liberal mold, is viewed as the most secure avenue of peace (Piccolino 2015).

Indeed, liberal as well as illiberal peacebuilding, are also understood in terms of actors and agency that are driving a given peacebuilding process. Here, liberal peacebuilding is often criticized for its top-down, Euro-centric, technocratic nature. Poor prospects of sustainability of internationally driven peacebuilding interventions have been discussed as a key hurdle for peacebuilding prospects. International actors, working within the liberal peacebuilding model, remain sensitive to the domestic political cycles of the major donors. And multilateral support for such interventions, such as from the World Bank or United Nations agencies have faced challenges of sustained financial support, while trying to advance peacebuilding agendas that are apolitical, that is, are not tied to specific donor preferences for a given conflict region. Indeed, against the backdrop of liberal peacebuilding, and in terms of actors driving liberal peacebuilding agendas, "autonomous recovery" has emerged as an alternative to liberal peacebuilding. This has been celebrated for its "indigenous state-making," in contrast to the international efforts that stifle indigenous statebuilding efforts, while trying to push the liberal agenda (Englebert & Tull 2008).

The case of post-conflict reconstruction in Angola, is quintessential for these debates on the relationship between liberal and illiberal peacebuilding. This is a case of a four-decades long civil war that was ended by victory consolidation – a victor's peace as a highly illiberal outcome. This mode of exit from the conflict imposed a hegemonic order by the winning political party in the civil war. Also reflecting illiberal peacebuilding modes, the post-conflict order was established by the winning party, which institutionalized its hegemonic position in the country and fueled oil-driven authoritarianism. Stable political order was achieved in the country, but with a range of negative consequences for long-term sustainable peace. Similar to the Angolan case, other instances of illiberal peace/post-conflict order, established at the barrel of a gun (Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Eritrea, Chechnya/Russia, Nagorno-Karabakh/Azerbaijan), shared the following features and markers of illiberal peacebuilding, as identified by de Oliveira (2011: 305–308):

1. Military victory or hegemonic post-war oversight
2. Hegemonic election-running, designed to earn international support yet not endangering the regime
3. Secretive formal or informal structure for running the reconstruction process

4. Reconstruction opportunities distributed among insiders and promotion of an oligarchic capitalism
5. Constitutional change to extend presidential powers and strengthen the *status quo*
6. Penetration/co-optation of civil society organizations and the media
7. Acceptance of the situation by Western donors who carry on business as usual while deploying a vulgarized version of the 'transition paradigm' to explain illiberal practices
8. A high-modernist vision and technocratic mindset, with much public expenditure on infrastructure and heavy borrowing
9. A general amnesty, no 'justice and reconciliation,' or less clearly manipulated victor's justice

10. A peace dividend that favors the powerful, while poverty reduction is not a priority."

Victor's peace creates specific opportunities and limitations for post-conflict order in a given conflict region. Viewing victor's peace as an illiberal outcome, the emerging scholarship on illiberal peace highlights the challenges of translating victory in the battlefield into sustainable stability within a post-conflict order (Martel 2011; Piccolino 2015; Smith 2014). In contrast, Toft (2010) has argued that a democratic process in ending a civil war, that is, a negotiated outcome versus militarized victory, is not a guarantee for a democratic outcome. Her study has shown that civil wars ending in negotiated settlements are more likely to recur, and the immediate democratic opening soon subsides, with the country sliding back into authoritarianism within ten years. In parallel, the use of war as a strategy has shown declining utility since the 1970s, with most civil wars settling into no war-no peace gray zone political orders (Wallenstein 2015).

Also important in the scholarship on illiberal peace are the strategies of authoritarian conflict management, used by victorious powers to pacify their post-war orders. Such authoritarian patterns of conflict management are described as:

> … the prevention, de-escalation or termination of organized armed rebellion or other mass social violence such as inter-communal riots through methods that eschew genuine negotiations among parties to the conflict, reject international mediation and constraints on the use of force, disregard calls to address underlying structural causes of conflict, and instead rely on instruments of state coercion and hierarchical structures of power (Lewis, Heathershaw & Megoran 2018: 491).

Three specific mechanisms of authoritarian conflict management are identified. First, victorious powers constrain the dissenting voices and promote hegemonic discourse, which delegitimizes opponents of the state, and precludes viewing them as potential partners in negotiation. Such players coerce and repress alternative sources of information and control news dissemination and knowledge production (Lewis et al. 2018). One most commonly used strategy is to apply the label of "terrorism" to an ongoing conflict, thereby delegitimizing the minority claims for rights and representation. Turkey's use of this strategy relative to the Kurds in and outside of Turkey, and currently, Azerbaijan's attempts at depicting the Armenian community in the Nagorno-Karabakh entity as "terrorist," carry the same hallmarks of authoritarian conflict management, in an aftermath of a military victory by Azerbaijan in the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Second, authoritarian conflict management also expresses political, physical, and symbolic dominance of space. Azerbaijan's erosion of Armenian cultural monuments, turning churches into mosques or denying them as Armenian cultural heritage, within newly reconquered territories in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, is also an example of authoritarian conflict management. Third, economic consequences of authoritarian conflict management are expressed in denying the rebels economic and financial resources, and, as importantly, ensuring that loyal clientelist groups are beneficiaries of financial flows in the conflict zone (Lewis et al. 2018).

Summarizing the discussion so far, Table 1 presents the major dimensions which delineate liberal peacebuilding from illiberal peace processes. Liberal

TABLE 1   System-level indicators of illiberal peace

	Liberal peacebuilding	Illiberal peacebuilding	The variance range
Process	Negotiated; inclusive; grassroots (ideally); institutionalized	Coercive; top-down; exclusive; patrimonial; militarized	Lead actors in the peace process, in terms of their numbers and network, reach to the grassroots levels; higher numbers of lead actors and deeper grassroots connectivity is indicative of a liberal peace process.

TABLE 1   System-level indicators of illiberal peace (*cont.*)

	Liberal peacebuilding	Illiberal peacebuilding	The variance range
Principle of third-party outcomes	Negotiations, arbitrations, and other instruments of nonviolent problem-solving	Militarized to perpetuate illiberal outcomes; coercive and kinetic diplomacy	The level of public and political rhetoric in support of nonviolence; the level of (il)legitimacy of coercive and kinetic diplomacy.
Ideology	Democratization; economic institutions; human rights; minority protections	Statist; territorial integrity	The level of governmental support for human rights, their support domestically and internationally; higher levels of human rights support in parallel with the norms of territorial integrity.
Values	Transparency; participation; inclusion; dialogue	Vague, opaque, arbitrary, ad hoc, no rules; no dialogue; violence as legitimate	Levels of support for transparency, participation, and inclusive peace processes at various levels of the conflict system; the reduction of levels with associated increases in arbitrary and non-transparent values in peace processes will signal growing illiberality within a conflict system.

TABLE 1   System-level indicators of illiberal peace (*cont.*)

	Liberal peacebuilding	Illiberal peacebuilding	The variance range
Actors	Civic depth and cross-conflict connectivity, civil society actors and their social networks, institutions of participatory politics, international and regional organizations, NGOS	Centralized/patrimonial states, coercive institutions, security forces, paramilitary and military institutions	Levels of illiberality will range, depending on the prevalence of civic depth and grassroots institutions, across conflict lines, as well as within conflict parties; personalized autocracy inside conflict parties will heighten illiberality within the conflict system as it will silence non-state actors and stakeholders of peaceful conflict resolution.
Institutions	Diverse and multi-layered institutions of dialogue and conflict management	Top-down, limited to political elites; sabotaging institutions; power-based, coercive negotiation formats	Deepening and thickening institutional connectivity within and between conflict parties will reduce illiberality of a conflict system, offering new mechanisms of diplomacy and conflict management; interest-based bargaining, as opposed to power-based diplomacy and kinetic engagement, will be possible if many stakeholders and groups of cross-conflict engagement are active and empowered within the public space.

peacebuilding as a post-Cold War policy framework of international interventions and conflict diplomacy, differs from illiberal processes of conflict management in terms of the following: the extent of coercion/bargaining within a process of managing a conflict and/or establishing a post-conflict order; types of tools utilized for pacifying a conflict region, ranging from conflict diplomacy to militarized and coercive approaches, with violence as a legitimate instrument; values, actors and institutions, expressed in terms of the rise of participatory and representative political institutions, and the civic fabric in a post-conflict society, ranging from high participatory and bottom-up, to state-driven and top-down.

Conflict Systems and Peace Scales

When considering the ongoing conflicts in post-Communist Eurasia, as well as parts of Africa, their imperial roots and cyclical nature necessitates a reckoning with the long view of internationally designed peace processes, as well as historically inherited political conditions in which such peace processes unfold. While liberal peacebuilding is commonly understood as a post-Cold War phenomenon, enabled by the American unipolar moment, the longer view into political histories of the continent reveals patterns and processes of attempted coexistence and conflict management, whether applied from Soviet-era social engineering and modernization from the top, or bottom-up civic initiatives from below, largely in the pre-Soviet, imperial period in the post-Soviet space.

It is with this backdrop that the politics of peace processes emerges as a variable on the continuum between liberal peace and illiberality. These processes are highlighted in this work as a feature of conflict systems, which have crystalized, in a cyclical nature, transcending the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. Recognizing this variance in the forms and patterns of peace processes, the scholarship on peace scales, therefore, becomes necessary towards advancing the systems approach of illiberal peace processes, carried out in this article.

There is already a vibrant debate within peace and conflict studies for the urgency to broaden our understanding of "peace." The growing chorus of voices challenges the conceptual bias within this field towards measuring "peace" as an extension of "war." We know more about what causes war, large or small, than what causes peace (Regan 2013). And for far too long, understanding the causes of war has been viewed as sufficient for understanding what causes peace. Studying "peace" on its own, rather than as an extension of war and conflict, remains the task ahead for peace scholars. "Peace" as "not war" views it as an extension of war, rather than a distinct category. While the study of war

and armed conflict remains an important understanding in this endeavor, we are learning that it is far from sufficient.

Peace research is also increasingly challenging the dichotomous understanding of "peace," usually understood as "not war." Instead, studies are calling for operationalizing the concept of "peace" in a way that will produce a continuum and variance in its indicators of expression (Reagan 2014; Klein, Goertz & Diehl 2008). Peace research, to capture this nuance, has already started to distinguish between "negative peace," "positive peace," "working peace," and "cold peace," to name a few (Diehl 2016), a debate that started in the 1970s.

The measures of "peace scale" developed by Klein, Goertz and Diehl (2008) have been essential in moving this discourse on measurements forward. This scholarship highlights the variance in the levels of peace, a key departure from the dominant scholarship that treated "peace" as a dichotomous concept. Instead, the "peace scale" framework, while dyadic, views relationships between two states as a variance rather than a fixed construct. And the overarching theoretical framework within which "peace scales" are developed relate to how states transition from armed hostility (rivalry) to peace and back again. "Peace scales" framework also is important to capture the hybridity within societies: some territories or demographic groups may be more open to post-war engagement across conflict lines, while others not so much. Within this framework of "peace scales," three broad categories of peace are identified: rivalry, negative, and positive peace. The peace scale ranges from rivalry to low-level conflict, to negative peace, to positive peace, to pluralistic security community.

The second framework capturing the variance along the "peace" continuum, and relevant for this research, is the "peace triangle," developed by Höglund and Kovacs (2010). This is a heuristic devise, built around the Conflict Triangle as introduced and developed by Galtung (1969) and more prominently by Mitchell (1981). The Peace Triangle, as a heuristic device, seeks to advance our understanding of post-war conditions, with an emphasis on the types of "peace" that are established or that evolve after the hostilities and violence are ended. As the Conflict Triangle was used to study variance in armed conflicts, the Peace Triangle is developed to examine variance in types of peace which emerge in post-war societies. As such, the Peace Triangle is specific to post-war societies, identifying issues at the heart of the conflict, attitudes and behavior of conflict parties. Whether issues are addressed or not, will determine the emergence of "unresolved," "restored," or "contested" peace. This classification shows the variance in terms of the degree to which core issues are addressed within a post-conflict setting. The study of attitudes helps to identify "polarized," "unjust," or "fearful" peace, indicating variance within the levels

of polarization and discontent post-conflict. The behavior of conflict parties highlights "partial," "regional," or "insecure" peace, signaling the varying levels of public support for the established post-war conditions on the ground.

In a similar vein of capturing the varied outcomes in post-settlement conditions, Wallensteen's framework of "quality peace" is also relevant (2015). The quality peace in a post-war setting is one that prevents the outbreak of another war. Peace agreements and post-war conditions which allow for the dignity of all communities, predictability of post-war settings, and security for all conflict parties, are the three conditions delineated by Wallensteen (2015) as necessary attributes of peace agreements and post-war conditions that these agreements help to create. The extent to which these conditions are established in a post-war setting will determine whether the fragile post-war transition will lead to war or more durable and workable peace in the conflict region.

Concept Development

"Illiberal Peace" as a Post-Cold War Era Concept?

Operationalizing peace as a distinct ontological subject of study, as opposed to being a "negative" concept or a conceptual extension for war, advances peace and conflict studies tremendously. But it also raises a whole new set of problems. Theorizing "peace" and its various dimensions has shown forms and degrees of "peace," but the concept remains conceptually stretched beyond recognition. Goertz (2006), referring to Sartori (1970), argued that the precision built within a concept can determine the number of empirical cases it can include. Loosening of the conceptual boundaries of a concept leads to its application to more cases, an outcome referred to as "conceptual stretching," which these authors argue can eventually make the concept unusable. In the case of conceptualizing "peace" and the road towards identifying its degrees, scales, and forms, the research is in its nascency. Conceptualizing illiberal peace and illiberal peacebuilding is one component of that journey.

When it comes to concept development, identifying the "negative" concepts of the one being developed, is one step toward boundary delineation for the concept. Identifying the "negative" pole of a given concept/phenomenon being analyzed is essential because it allows us to capture the continuity and the substantive range in variance between the negative and positive poles of a given concept (Goertz 2006). In thinking about "illiberal peace," or "illiberality of peace processes," understanding the liberal peace as the negative pole for this concept is an important methodological step.

Illiberal peace is not just a reversion to pre-liberal forms but is specifically anti-liberal because of its wider context. This argument that illiberal peace is emerging within the weakening liberal rules-based world order, may lead to the erroneous conclusion that illiberal processes of peace and stability, no matter how limited in their usage, are historically anachronistic. And they are anachronistic up to a degree, when considering that they are unfolding within the overall liberal international framework and the rules-based world order established under US hegemony after World War II. But when expanding our temporal frames by a century or more, it is the liberal peace which emerges as a nascent form of conflict management. Authoritarian approaches to conflict management have deep historical roots in most empires. One example is the Ottoman Empire's *millet* system, which provided some ethno-national self-governance, while segregating non-Turkic ethno-religions groups to second class citizenship. As such, inter-communal conflicts and clashes were addressed peacefully, often through negotiations between communities, as well as between the minority communities and the imperial center. But violence was a recurrent condition within the empire for centuries (Gocek 2015), at times also used as a form of imperial governance (Klein 2011). Within the Russian empire, in the early 20th century, there were cases of inter-communal negotiations between the communal leaders of Armenians, Georgians, and Azeris (referred to at the time by their place of origin, or as Muslims, Turks, or Caucasian Tatars) (Goff 2020; Broers 2019). As a matter of fact, Armenian writer Hovhannes Toumanyan had been imprisoned by Tsar Nicholas two times for his peace activism (Ohanyan 2018).

This historical perspective of illiberality of peace within imperial systems raises the question as to whether or not "imperial peace" can be/should be studied within the literature of peace and conflict studies. Considering the deeply violent and exploitative nature of the imperial system, such an undertaking, of course, would require extreme caution. Within this context, is the illiberal peace in the post-Cold War environment a reversion to much older forms of control and coercion, or is it something specific to the current liberal moment? Understanding the Tsarist Russian, Soviet, French, British, and Ottoman forms of authoritarian conflict management is therefore essential.[3] The framework of illiberal peace developed here, allows one to engage in these questions and the argument of "imperial peace," and doing so comparatively, situating it within existing social science research on effective peacebuilding practices and processes.

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3   I credit Paul D'Anieri and David Lewis for these arguments.

Such a deeper historical dive reveals authoritarian and illiberal forms of conflict management but also helps to uncover grassroots and participatory forms of peacebuilding carried out in the shadows of imperial governance at the time. Therefore, while illiberal peace is hardly a new practice, understanding its forms and variations allows us to analyze it comparatively, within the current moment of illiberality in conflict management, and the imperial peace that preceded the Soviet formation. The post-Cold War Golden Age of negotiated settlements remains an important marker in this comparison.

Indeed, this current period of illiberal peace is distinct in many respects. The first relates to *organizational complexity* of the international system. The international system, as it moves to multi-polarity constitutes great powers, mid-powers, and smaller states (Long 2022). Highly territorialized across state boundaries, the system is one of organizational and political complexity. While great and regional powers, some being previously imperial (Mankoff 2022; Ohanyan 2022), enjoy privileged positions in this system, they still have to contend with smaller states, social movements, and non-state actors. And the political fabric in this system consists of greater connectivity than was the case before the imperial collapse at the beginning of the 20th century and again in the aftermath of World War II (Ikenberry 2020).

The implications of this organizational complexity for trends in peace and armed conflict are numerous. Factors such as terrorist groups adding to and driving armed conflicts is one example of greater transnationalization of armed conflict. The organization of violence along non-state lines is an unfortunate development in the world. But there are also more actors engaged in peaceful conflict management. The fabric of state diplomacy has shifted, with subnational institutions and non-state actors performing in diplomatic capacities (Ohanyan & Ter-Gabrielyan 2021). The infrastructure of collective conflict management is also much evolved (Tonge 2014; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall 2011), and the forms of intervention are also more diverse.

Second, this period of illiberal peace also stands out with heightened *great power rivalry*, which creates conditions less amenable to negotiated settlements and peace agreements. The end of the Cold War created a unique window of opportunity for peaceful and rules-based conflict management, largely because the Cold War bi-polar rivalry had receded. With great power rivalry back with a vengeance, carving rules and political spaces for peaceful conflict management may be hard to achieve. Great power rivalry, often expressed in the rise of offensive alliance formations, is linked to increased armed conflicts (Sprecher & Krause 2006; Ohanyan 2022). With the rise of states in conflict diplomacy (Crocker, Hampson & Aall 2021; Ohanyan 2015), such great power

rivalry dynamics are being exported into already fragile peace systems, under-mining their organizational and political capacities for years to come.

Importantly, authoritarian resurgence and great power rivalry have created opportunities for status quo autocratic powers to rely on unresolved armed conflicts as frontlines for their legitimacy. Unresolved conflicts reinforce the false dilemma of security-versus-democracy inside states. Fueling and fanning armed conflicts, therefore, is a strategy for many authoritarian actors to con-solidate their rule. As a result, when such powers become engaged in peace processes, the possibility of capture of peace processes for their narrow politi-cal gains is very real and likely. As such, peace processes as international and internationalized initiatives, can have powerful effects on the domestic politics of conflict parties. Peace processes are institutionally rooted in the relevant conflict parties and third-party actors, and therefore, are always subject to cap-ture by geopolitical players, as well as narrow political elites in conflict states. Scholarship on the interconnectedness between domestic and international politics is hardly new (Gourevitch 1978), but the systemic study of peace pro-cesses as international tools with domestic political impact is relatively new.

Third, illiberal peace is also distinct, both as a period as well as a set of policy tools, because it expresses the so-called *dictator's dilemma*. Best prac-tices in peacebuilding have amply demonstrated the value of connectivity, participation, civil society groups, and women, in increasing the changes of peace agreements and their effective implementation (Varshney 2002; Wallensteen 2015; Tonge 2015). Yet, these features and actors of functional peace processes create a conflict of interest for status quo autocracies. The very factors and actors that can move the needle on functional peace processes also can be dangerous and threatening to authoritarian governments. Fostering connectivity, integration, and the empowering of civic groups, runs contrary to the authoritarian regime survival predicament. This particular period of democratic declines and authoritarian resurgence, therefore, constitutes an important background about the way peace processes will form, if ever, and how they will be implemented, if ever. These factors and actors of connectivity are indeed key to long-term and sustainable conflict resolution, which is partly the reason as to why illiberal peace formats tend to freeze conflicts to avoid challenges to authoritarianism which conflict resolution may bring about.

On Continuity, Degrees, and Indicators

To reiterate, concept development around illiberal peace processes carried out here connects with the scholarship on identifying variation within the concept of "peace" in general. Viewing "peace" as a distinct ontological category, rather

than an extension of war, is the overall framework supporting this research as well. "Illiberal" peace processes or "illiberality" of peace as an indicator, is then only continuous, rather than dichotomous. It is variable on the continuum of peace, with two of its poles being positive peace and deep coexistence between communities on the one hand, and negative peace on the other hand, based on the "peace scales" as developed by Klein, Goertz and Diehl (2008). The "peace scales" approach developed here focuses on the level of rivalry (Diehl & Goertz 2000; Klein, Goertz & Diehl 2006) between the two actors, as opposed to a single event or a conflict. Within this continuum, rivalry and positive peace are the two poles, and illiberal peace, developed in this work, falls on this continuum.

On this continuum, the "rivalry" pole is defined in terms of the spatial consistency, duration, militarized competition, and linkage of conflict (Klein, Goertz & Diehl 2006). These indicators measure whether the rivalry is driven by the same two actors (spatial consistency) over a certain period of time, with this dyadic rivalry relationship also linking and building a broader, multilateral security complex. Second level indicators for the "rivalry" end of the "peace scale" include: whether war plans exist or not; the frequency of militarized disputes between the parties; the variety of hostility levels; whether main conflict issues are usually unresolved; whether communication is absent; whether diplomatic engagement is minimal, if any, as the parties to not recognize each other, fueling diplomatic hostility; and whether any agreements regulating the relationship are present.

The other end of the "peace scale," positive peace, is defined in terms of the absence of major territorial claims, institutions for conflict management, high levels of functional interdependence, and satisfaction with the status quo. Secondary indicators include joint war planning, the possibility of new conflicts is low; main issues are resolved; institutionalized mechanisms of communication are extensive, as is diplomatic coordination and institutionalized functional agreements.

While placing "illiberal peace" within this continuum, the approach developed here is structural-systemic, rather than relational and dyadic, as observed within the "peace scale" framework discussed above. In this structural-systemic approach, illiberal peace is an attribute of a particular system, a conflict structure which is formed by the dyadic/multilateral rivalry of conflict parties. It is a property of that system rather than a distinct system of its own. This structural-systemic feature highlights institutional factors in developing the ontology of illiberal peace. This approach is useful because it helps to capture the causality inherent in this concept.

> Much of what good ontology entails is an analysis of those properties which have causal powers and which are used in causal explanations and mechanisms. The atomic structure of copper explains how it acts in many situations, e.g. its conductivity, reactivity with other chemical agents, reaction to heat, and so on. Social science concepts are no different (Goertz 2006: 30).

Viewed as a property of a particular system, various levels of illiberal peace processes signal the specific structural changes within the given system. Positive peace, then, indicates a system with highly institutionalized, diverse, and heteropolar connectivity, a condition of "bridging social capital," which I have argued elsewhere in my work, is a necessary minimum condition for peaceful resolution of conflicts when they arise (Ohanyan 2021, 2022). This structural approach allows for the possibility that an illiberal third-party actor can produce liberal peace outcomes in a conflict situation, provided that certain levels of connectivity exist between the conflict parties. The pockets of "imperial peace" within an otherwise violent empire were possible in the 18th–19th century Ottoman empire. But much depends, according to this framework, on the existing patterns of connectivity within a given system. Idealizing transactional connectivity across conflict lines should be avoided, while highlighting the significance of associational forms of cross-conflict engagement (Varshney 2002).

In terms of causality inherent in this approach to defining illiberal peace as a property of a system, multiple causal pathways are possible, and a fresh new research program can be developed in that context. One is to identify the constituent components of a system in order to understand its structural composition. This allows us to track and connect such structural attributes to changing levels of illiberal peace (or illiberality of peace) which the system produces. This structural approach helps to account for political institutions, including democratic, authoritarian, hybrid political systems, and levels of connectivity between various sub-units, to name a few. Whether systems with more democratic features will track with lower levels of illiberality in peace processes can be a research question to be examined. Democratic peace theses, or scholarship on the nature/levels of democratization and conflict settlement potential can also be advanced within this framework.

Moving forward, two immediate tasks emerge for this work. First, how to define "the system"? Second, what are the indicators of illiberal peace (or illiberality of peace), as a property of a particular system? In terms of the first, elsewhere in my research I have discussed in detail and provided the methodology

for boundary definitions of a system at a regional level. (Ohanyan 2022a, 2022b). I will summarize it here as it relates to this research. A key dimension in identifying the boundaries of the conflict system relates to its regional contours. Political regions are geographic regions made by the regional flows of ideas, actors, and regionally-wired institutions of varying levels of connectivity. Political regions are socially constructed political systems, with their constituent units reflecting the world order of the day. Political regions as imperial peripheries emerged from imperial institutions and regional administrative bodies, as well as ethno-religious groups and professional associations. And the political reach of these actors was predominantly regional.

Conflict systems are usually regionally embedded. The systemic feature in the ontology of the concept is manifested by consistent behavior patterns that regional connectivity demonstrates over a long period of time: this is an indication that a "feedback loop" exists – a key component in identifying social systems (Meadows 2008). The systemic characteristics of these political regions have shifted over time, particularly with the imperial collapse and the rise of the nation-states, which changed the structure and the political composition of these regions. The nation-state system fragmented these political regions, often weakening the previously existent regionally wired connections and civic ties. Such regions as political systems varied between regional fracture and resiliency (Ohanyan 2021, 2022), and the institutional depth and balanced societal connectivity across these regions remained a key condition of their resiliency. Table 2 introduces the second-level dimensions of political regions, largely using a systems approach which includes units and relationships that create such regions.

This regional systems approach to the study of peace and conflict, connects Boulding's (1978) identification of a model of peace that "turned on

TABLE 2   Second-level dimensions of the regional fracture concept (Ohanyan 2022a)

Unit level dimensions	Relationships between the units
Unit organizational coherence	Hegemonic influences and overlay/geopolitical embeddedness
Organizational density and diversity of units	Unit coordination, intra-regional bargaining, and security orders
	Systemic coherence of regional flows

a competing balance between peace systems and war systems" (Reagan 2013: 349). War systems were then defined as a collection of institutions and behaviors that push toward war as an outcome or a policy. The transformation inside the system, it was envisaged, could break down this war system towards a peace system, in which behaviors and institutions of peaceful conflict resolution would dominate. Regan (2013) argued that this systemic approach developed by Boulding does not explain the sources of the strengths and the strains within a system – a necessary analysis to highlight systems transformation. One area of scholarship that has moved to address that limitation is led by Goertz, Diehl, and Balas (2016), which sought to explain the sources and drivers of increasing peacefulness of the international system.

The second methodological task defined earlier relates to identifying the indicators of illiberal peace (or illiberality of peace) within a given system. These indicators of illiberality are expressed in terms of the following measures, as listed in Table 1. Illiberality of peace within a system can be expressed in terms of the extent to which existing processes of conflict management are participatory or coercive and imposed; whether they are inclusive with broad-based public participation, or led by a select few; the overall values, ideologies and dominant narratives driving conflict management in a given system; and institutional connectivity, expressed in the density of existing organizations/ social capital, and whether these institutions bridge across ethnic divides or "bond" within a given ethnic group.

The systemic and regional approach to the study of peace illiberality allows one to track political conditions of illiberal peace over time, reflecting the changes in regional orders (actors, issues, connections between actors) as contextual factors shaping the contours of illiberal peace. This approach also allows us to assess the quality of conflict management institutions, third-party roles, and geopolitical rivalries, to name a few, as they relate to peace processes applied to a particular conflict case.

Emerging peace scholarship has produced a range of indicators, some of which were reviewed earlier. The systemic approach developed here privileges the institutional structures of a region, with the assumption that these institutional arrangements shape the possibilities and directions of peace processes in a given conflict (Ohanyan 2015). As such, illiberality of peace is a historically contingent outcome, but illiberality is also addressed as a feature of a particular conflict system. In this approach, illiberality is a property of a conflict system, as well as a characteristic feature of societal relations and post-war outcomes in particular.

Identifying the System Around the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

As with most other conflicts, much of the political history of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) is often narrated in dyadic (rather than regional) terms, focusing on Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh on the one hand, and Azerbaijan on the other. But the conflict has pre-Soviet, imperial roots, dating to the Russian empire. As the South Caucasus was incorporated into the Soviet Union in the period of 1918–1921, the Karabakh region remained independent (Zürcher 2007), with its predominantly Armenian population continuously trying to defend its independence against the newly established Azerbaijani republic. On July 3, 1920, the Caucasian section of the Russian Communist Party decided to assign the Karabakh region to Soviet Armenia, a decision which was reversed two days later when the region was placed inside Soviet Azerbaijan, with no land connection to the Armenian republic. The region enjoyed very few cultural and political rights (Zürcher 2007; Goff 2020) inside Azerbaijan, as the Armenian-language cultural associations were eliminated, with no Armenian-language institutions of higher education or electronic media (Zürcher 2007). The discontent from the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh started publicly emerging in the 1960s, after the Stalin era was over. Continuing demonstrations in Karabakh and Armenia for unification kept the issue alive; in 1963, there were violent clashes in the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, Stepanakert, which resulted in the death of 18 Armenians.

With political discontent simmering throughout the Soviet years, this conflict was the first one to erupt as the Soviet center started weakening during Gorbachev's reforms in the 1980s. With the backdrop of the reunification vote in the Karabakh regional Soviet in February 1988, and ongoing protests in Yerevan, Armenia, violence erupted in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait on the Caspian Sea in which an anti-Armenian mob attacked the Armenian community, and as a result, 26 Armenians and 6 Azeris lost their lives. Over 200 Armenian apartments and cultural institutions were ransacked. This violent event escalated the political conflict, making it hard to find a peaceful solution to the problem. The cross-communal clashes became more frequent in the summer of 1988, with the Azeri population leaving Armenia, and the Armenian population leaving Azerbaijan. Political protests around Nagorno-Karabakh started erupting in Azerbaijan as well, in November 1988.

While a low-intensity war was already burning between February 1988 and the summer of 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, this low-level violence escalated into a full-blown war between Azerbaijan and the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, supported by the military of the newly independent

Armenia. The war ended with a Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement signed in May 1994. The fragile stability was punctured by recurrent clashes along the line of contact, with a major four-day escalation in 2016, in July 2020, and the full-blown second war which started on September 27, 2020, which was a Turkish-backed Azerbaijani offensive that ended with another Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement on November 9. The first war in NK and the ceasefire agreement left the Armenian forces in control of the entity, with several surrounding districts that Armenia claimed as a security buffer-zone with Azerbaijan. In the second 44-day war, the Turkish-backed Azerbaijani offensive, Baku recovered all of the territories surrounding the entity, along with chunks of the Nagorno-Karabakh entity itself. In this truncated form, the NK managed to survive not only as a territorial, but also as a political, entity, with its institutions of representative and participatory politics largely intact.

In its most recent manifestation, the conflict erupted within the periphery of the Soviet Union, and the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major shift in the overall conflict system surrounding this case. As such, the system supporting this conflict was transformed structurally. The core of the conflict system was Soviet Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Republic inside Soviet Azerbaijan, and Armenia, with Soviet ethno-federalism and the Soviet state constituting an essential organizational-political layer around the conflict.

The constituent units of this conflict system changed over time, with the collapse of the Soviet Union being the most significant transformation. With Armenia and Azerbaijan emerging as separate states in the international system, these two entities, along with war-torn Nagorno-Karabakh, constituted the key units within this conflict system. Initially, the institutional weakness of both states drove the emergent insecurity for both ethnic communities in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The nascency of statehood is indeed established as a key condition contributing and even facilitating armed conflict (Lake & Rothchild 1996; Kaufman 2001), as it perpetuates conditions of mutual security fears by the conflict groups. With both Armenia and Azerbaijan trying to liberalize, with varying levels of success, the persistent domestic political instability also added to the conflict moving into a protracted stage.

In terms of its organizational implications, state weakness translates into weak institutions of state governance, paucity of civil society organizations, instability of party politics, lack of professional and community organizations, and business groups, to name a few. Institutional weakness was partly reflected in high levels of political mobilization and protest activity in both countries (Altstadt 2017; Ghaplanyan 2017; Broers 2021; Levitsky & Way 2010). Born into

conflict and war, both countries and their societies moved towards complete isolation from one another. Trade and transit routes started to demarcate conflict lines, with Baku's newfound political independence fueled by petrodollars and Western-backed energy pipelines circumventing the Armenian state. Organizational paucity inside the conflict parties, and non-existent links and contacts across conflict lines, worked to cement conflict cleavages, making the conflict the dominant factor shaping the regional fabric in the South Caucasus (Ohanyan 2015, 2018).

After the first war in Nagorno-Karabakh, the political trajectory in all three conflict actors, moved in substantially different directions, with direct implications on the overall conflict system. Azerbaijan's deepening authoritarianism and a steady slide into patrimonial authoritarianism led to continued suppression of civil society and emerging political parties in opposition; all this ended up silencing the voices that could have and should have reached out across conflict lines. After its initial liberalization after the Soviet collapse, Armenia's statehood also moved towards authoritarianism, albeit a softer, competitive, and more stable one. These conditions have left openings for civil society to grow and consolidate. Opposition political parties were formed, civil society connectivity was growing, and privatization reforms decentralized the economic power. But the ruling party consolidated the executive and dominated the legislative and judiciary branches of government, creating systemic corruption within the state. In both Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, despite Armenia's victory in the first war, ended up creating and consolidating the false dilemma of security-versus-democracy. While in organizational terms the Armenian political and civil society were much more open than those in Azerbaijan, the authoritarianism in both countries, albeit in various shades, worked to disincentivize a meaningful peace process directed towards a long-term negotiated settlement of the conflict.

The Nagorno-Karabakh entity itself emerged as an institutionally coherent de facto state, and has enjoyed independence since the end of the first war in 1994. Indeed, as in many other unrecognized de facto states, internal statebuilding and internal sovereignty was considered by the elites as a strategy to claim international recognition (Caspersen 2012). Year after year, the Freedom House rankings of Nagorno-Karabakh have exceeded those in Azerbaijan from which it has been trying to secede. In 2022, Azerbaijan scored 2 out of 40 in its political rights and 7 out of 60 in its civil liberties.[4] The corresponding scores for Nagorno-Karabakh were 16 out of 40 and 20 out of 60, respectively.[5]

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4   See: https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-world/2022.

5   See: https://freedomhouse.org/country/nagorno-karabakh/freedom-world/2022.

In 2018, these scores were 12/40 and 18/60 for Nagorno-Karabakh,[6] while for Azerbaijan they were 3/40 and 9/60 respectively.[7] Indeed, some scholars have argued that the non-recognition of the entity drove its democratization in significant ways (Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2012). Currently, the Russian peacekeepers provide the only security for the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the status of the entity, the core issue at the heart of the conflict, remains unresolved.

Degrees of Illiberality of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict System in the 20th Century

The relevant conflict system surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has undergone a range of changes throughout the 20th century. The political history of the conflict is usually framed as one of Soviet collapse, which, however, obscures the century-long and imperially-rooted pre-Soviet origins of the conflict. And this longitudinal, historical frame is critical for identifying the sources of failed peace processes in the most recent history of this conflict, in addition to thinking forward to building peace processes that are functional in a heightened geopolitical environment. At the crux of this systemic approach is the argument that the institutional characteristics of a particular conflict system reflect the degrees of its illiberality, and thereby constrain and shape what is possible in terms of functional peace processes. Table 1 presents the associated markers of such illiberality expressed at the system level.

The conflict system before the formation of the Soviet Union was institutionally different from its avatar formed with the creation of the Soviet Union. The inter-communal clashes that were taking place within Transcaucasia, one of the political peripheries of the Russian empire, constituted an important imperial expression of this contemporary conflict. The first two decades of the 20th century in this region are known for these inter-communal clashes. Less narrated is the intensive collaboration and engagement between political elites and civic associations from these three ethnic groups. Transcaucasia was a periphery within the Russian empire (Kappeler 2001), with high levels of ethnic comingling and mixed population settlements (Kivelson & Suny 2017). In parallel, the inter-ethnic political engagement between the elites and civic groups (Berberian 2019), within a deeply authoritarian and illiberal political system, stands out as much more progressive when compared to the truncated, fragmented, and inter-mediated interactions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over the NK conflict in the post-Soviet period.

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6   See: https://freedomhouse.org/country/nagorno-karabakh/freedom-world/2018.
7   See: https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-world/2018.

Peace Process

In terms of the institutional markers of illiberality, the conflict system has shifted between its pre-Soviet and contemporary periods. The existing peace processes within the context of this conflict system, differed markedly throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. In terms of the *process* (see Table 1), the pre-Soviet, imperial period in this conflict system, stood out with its hybridity, which, in the conflict resolution literature, refers to the extent that local actors and grassroots level were involved in peace processes (Tardy 2014). While the concept of "hybridity" applies to contemporary peace processes, with international organizations and other global actors in third-party roles, the application of the concept at the beginning of the 20th century illustrates that local agency in conflict diplomacy was unfolding within this particular imperial periphery, with the imperial center dramatically weakened by autocracy and World War I.

The first part of the 20th century, before the formation of the Soviet Union, stands out as a peace system over this conflict which was significantly more grassroots-driven than is currently the case. Leaders across conflict lines, most vividly exemplified by Armenian writer Hovhannes Toumanyan, frequently joined forces to prevent inter-communal clashes in the region (Hovannisian 2004). The imperial center viewed the inter-communal clashes as a problem and tried to address it by various administrative tools of imperial governance. The liberal dimension of the sporadic peace process was expressed by its grassroots nature. Violence was at a communal level: while it was taking place in a significantly geopoliticized setting, with Russia-Turkey clashes as the backdrop, its recurrence was mostly a result of weakened administrative structures and security dilemmas between the ethnic groups, with geopolitical patrons playing only a minimal role at the time. At the same time, the imperial attempts at managing the conflict were top-down and coercive, but lacked the strategic use of militarization and violence – a condition characteristic of the post-2020 war conditions on the ground. Azerbaijani victory in 2020 has only elevated the use of violence and coercion, referred to as kinetic diplomacy (Broers 2021; Toft 2018).

Still, in terms of the overall process of peacebuilding, these grassroots efforts failed to bubble up and congeal into an organizationally coherent peace system. The ultimate outcome over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh status was reached behind closed doors, as mentioned earlier, with Stalin's decision on July 5, 1920, reversing the July 3rd decision. With this reversal, the majority-Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh was assigned to Azerbaijan as an autonomous district. The decision was rather arbitrary, lacking any consultation with broader groups across conflict lines. Coercive and top-down in

nature, it set up an uneasy peace in the entity, with recurrent attempts by the entity to separate from Azerbaijan and join Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR. Suny and others have written extensively on how ethnic differences were managed within the Soviet system (Kivelson & Suny 2017; Suny 1993; Martin 2001). What has remained constant throughout the Soviet years is the imposed, hegemonic peace by Soviet ethno-federalism, with cross-ethnic connectivity lacking and cross-conflict peacebuilding engagement a rarity (Suny 1989; Hale 2008; Pearson 2001).

Viewed from this angle of the illiberality of the peace process in a conflict system, the imperial, pre-Soviet period was more participatory and broad-based, and led by civic groups, than the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The levels of illiberality varied, with the post-Soviet period being the most illiberal, as expressed in militarized outcomes to produce relative stability. The post-Soviet period of illiberality also stands out because it unfolded in the backdrop of a large number of international organizations and international law on peaceful conflict resolution.

And in the Soviet era, despite periods of engaging with and supporting ethnic minorities, particularly the titular nations leading the Soviet republics (Goff 2020), the Soviet approach to the nationalities issues remained largely hegemonic and coercive. Soviet ethno-federalism provided much security for subnational minorities within the republics, but this approach was limited when it came to producing deep inter-ethnic connectivity between the titular nations and subnational minorities. Moreover, the relations between these subnational minorities and titular nations were set up into an ethnic competition, which snowballed into security dilemmas for subnational minorities when the Soviet Union started disintegrating.

The conflict system and its associated peace processes in the post-Soviet period underwent dramatic changes. With Armenia and Azerbaijan emerging as independent states, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) remained in a political limbo, with deep insecurities. The OSCE Minsk Group mediation format emerged as a core third-party actor in the peace process (Broers 2019), but it worked under the constant threat of a resuming war.

After cycles of ethnic cleansing in the region during the first war in NK, the militarized outcome, with clear separation of forces along the line of contact, created an uneasy, illiberal peace, with almost no cross-conflict contact between the communities. The militarized, as opposed to a negotiated, settlement was an outcome that drove the deepening authoritarianism in both Armenia and Azerbaijan in subsequent years, forcing the false choice of security-versus-democracy on their respective political systems for decades to come.

Some analysts use the mirror image as a way to argue that the situation on the ground after the 2020 war has reversed, this time with Azerbaijani victory in its Turkey-backed offensive in 2020. Using this framework of illiberality in longitudinal analysis, the differences between the post-war orders in 1994 and 2020 become apparent. While violence remains a recurrent strategy by Baku to reverse the facts on the ground, the Armenian "victory" in 1994 remained content with the status quo, which provided the uneasy stability in the region for almost 30 years. Since the 2020 war, Baku continues to rely on violence and regularly stresses the Nagorno-Karabakh entity as well as the Armenian border, as a way to kinetically coerce Armenia to a "peace agreement" with NK within Azerbaijan, without any political status for the entity.

The Principles of Third-Party Involvement

In terms of *the principles of third-party involvement*, the imperial, pre-Soviet period saw a hybridity between hegemonic control imposed by the Russian empire, along with grassroots and cross-ethnic peacebuilding efforts. Russia's approach to its multi-ethnic peripheries, lacking domestic liberalizing reforms characteristic of the Habsburg empire at the time, was largely illiberal. Russian elite utilized broad-based developmental approaches to pacify its multiethnic peripheries, but also vacillated to divide-and-conquer strategies (Ohanyan 2022). The illiberality of the conflict system in the periphery of the Russian empire is boldly manifest when compared to the Habsburg empire at the time, and its approach to managing ethnic coexistence (Judson 2016; Ohanyan 2022). The conflict system in Transcaucasia was characterized by a lack of participatory institutions as part of imperial governance – a condition that weakened the Russian empire as a whole.

Broad liberal principles (cross-conflict connectivity, civic depth, and participatory politics, among others) that drive such peacebuilding efforts have been a rarity. This structural flaw extended into the Soviet period, albeit with much more systematic and institutionalized approaches to ethnic conflict management, with Soviet ethno-federalism being central among them. The formation of the Soviet Union was partly possible because Communist Party leaders, with Lenin in particular, advocated for integrating and accommodating ethnic minorities into the Soviet Federal system. Soviet ethno-federalism created political status for numerous ethnic minorities in titular nations, which some scholars, erroneously in my view, have argued to be the dominant cause of the ethnic wars in the twilight years of the Soviet Union. The Soviet ethno-federalism, combined with hegemonic imposition of regional security orders, have helped to quell the inter-ethnic tensions which the Soviet Union imported from the Russian empire. But this transition was accompanied with

institutional obliteration of grassroots organizations within Transcaucasia, which has made the system more dependent on coerced consent of Soviet ethno-federalism (Ohanyan 2022).

The principles of third-party involvement in the post-Soviet period, despite two major wars engulfing the region, has been largely unfolding within the OSCE Minsk Group – the epitome of the liberal peacebuilding framework, which has dominated the post-Cold War period of global security. As such, it was built around principles of nonviolent resolution of conflicts and offered a forum for negotiated settlement. While organizationally limited, with nearly nonexistent organizational links to the grassroots level in all conflict societies in the region, this was the only framework in which Russia and the West cooperated, for better or for worse, and was the only one with a modicum of legitimacy for a negotiated settlement.

In the aftermath of the current rupture of relations between Russia and the West, it remains unclear if the OSCE Minsk Group will muddle through, or whether alternative/parallel diplomatic structures will emerge in this conflict case. The Biden Administration in the US has consistently insisted on this Minsk format, the only one which emphasizes the issue of political status for the Nagorno-Karabakh entity. What is more likely is the long-expected split between Russia and the Western powers as third-party actors in the conflict (Broers 2022). But if the liberal peacebuilding principles of the OSCE Minsk Group survive within the emergent diplomatic structures, this will be a welcome development for the trajectory of conflict management, not only in the NK conflict, but also in taming the rivalry between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Ideology

In terms of the *ideology* shaping the dominant peacebuilding processes, the liberal principles of democratization, economic integration, and human rights protections, have hardly been the dominant guiding principles throughout the political history of this conflict in the 20th and early 21st century. Within the imperial, pre-Soviet period, the region was characterized with high civic depth and ethnically cross-cutting revolutionary activities, documented most effectively by Berberian (2019). As the Russian empire was weakening and crumbling, Transcaucasia's ethno-political forces were working towards liberalizing the Russian (as well as the Ottoman) empire, pushing for protection of minorities and accommodative tools of ethnic groups. The inter-ethnic clashes in this context were unfolding in hybridity of cross-ethnic grassroots collaboration. With the military advances of the Soviet forces, a wave of institutional obliteration took place, eliminating the fragile but significant institutional resources for bottom-up conflict management (Ohanyan 2022; Wig 2016). The Soviet

years were shaped by somewhat illiberal ideologies of statism and hegemonic management of inter-ethnic relations, despite the recognition of minority rights via Soviet ethno-federalist structures. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus region entered a period of political liberalization, which was intertwined with the most recent eruption of this conflict. As both Armenia and Azerbaijan slowly settled into soft and hard authoritarianism, respectively, the conflict became a useful tool for suppressing domestic movements towards democratization. Armenia's Velvet revolution in 2018 helped to transcend that false dilemma in the country (Ohanyan 2021).

In this post-Soviet period, while the liberal principles of negotiated settlement and minority protection remain on the agenda for the OSCE Minsk Group, the organizational limits of this forum limited the opportunities for liberally-crafted understandings of the peace process. And in terms of the key principles advanced by the OSCE Minsk Group, the principle of territorial integrity along with national self-determination rights of the Armenians in NK, became the two principles guiding the negotiations. The Azerbaijani offensive on the Armenian forces in the NK entity in 2020, during the pandemic, was justified by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, as a military necessity for the recovery of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, which he claimed the OSCE Minsk Group had failed to deliver via negotiated settlement. With the end of the war through a trilateral agreement brokered by Russia, the norm and principle of territorial integrity has emerged as dominant. This was partly of Azerbaijani military superiority, and partly due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which elevated the value of territorial integrity amidst this war of conquest. The war in Ukraine contributed to the loss of nuance and detail in the political trajectories of post-Soviet wars in Russia's vicinities, as all of these ethnic conflicts were now portrayed as Russian invasions and secessionist conflicts (Goddard 2022).

Values

Values underpinning more liberal peacebuilding systems include transparency, participatory and inclusive politics, and dialogue. On the other end of the spectrum of highly illiberal peace processes are ones that are vague and opaque, arbitrary and ad hoc, with no rules and institutions to regulate cross-conflict interaction; violence is viewed as a legitimate negotiation strategy. Understanding the importance of values and their clarity in each conflict system matters for the effectiveness of peace processes as it provides leverage for all third-party actors, and particularly those more sidelined and marginalized by geopolitically more powerful actors. With imperial competition

emerging as a dominant factor in the Eurasian continent for decades to come (Mankoff 2022; Ohanyan 2022), supporting liberal values at the grassroots level emerges as necessary for building sustainable peace processes. Such value-clarity is also critical against withstanding geopolitical capture of already fragile peace processes. Imperial competition by neo-imperial powers, such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, and China (Menkoff 2022), often translates into revanchism against the neoliberal rules-based world order. Supporting value-driven peace processes, particularly at the grassroots level, can be a powerful antidote against top-down geopolitical rivalry, in which unresolved conflicts become levers.

Within the NK conflict system, the pre-Soviet imperial years made up a period of great turbulence, expressed in imperial collapse and genocidal violence in the neighboring Ottoman empire (Ohanyan 2022). Nationalist and revolutionary ideas were sweeping the region, and Berberian (2019) has demonstrated how revolutionary movements and revolutionaries were connected between the Ottoman, Russian, and Iranian empires. Deeply progressive ideas propagated by the revolutionaries in both the Ottoman and Russian empires were also developing in parallel with cycles of violence and communal clashes in the respective peripheries of both empires. Norms against violence were nearly nonexistent. With the formation of the Soviet Union and the NKAO within Soviet Azerbaijan, values of "brotherly coexistence" were propagated from Moscow, and the hegemonic peace imposed by the Soviet powers worked to make them stick. The gradual formation of Soviet ethno-federalism supported peoples who the Soviet ethnographers saw as less-developed in terms of their national consciousness, and they did so by creating special administrative units for such groups. Nations with established national consciousness were viewed to be assimilated eventually but were being monitored for signs of "bourgeois nationalism" (Hirsch 2005). Even if accepting the thesis that Soviet ethno-federalism encouraged national differences (Martin 2001), the paucity of mechanisms of inter-ethnic conflict resolution is glaring. Taking a big risk of overgeneralization, one can argue that hegemonic conflict management from the top, with societal coexistence from below, describes the styles of conflict management within Soviet governance, at least before and after the Stalinist periods.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the NK conflict system was one of the security dilemmas for the Armenian communities in NKAO, who, along with Abkhaz and South Ossetians in Georgia, and many Russians in the newly formed post-Soviet states, had very few assurances for their security. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the South Caucasus created a value

gap (along with a political and institutional gap), and the "victory" of the neoliberal rules-based world order was slow to trickle down into this conflict system.

Indeed, 'the end of history' proclaimed for the world was the beginning of politics in the South Caucasus, and many other conflict regions in Russia's peripheries. With the ceasefire of the first war in NK, and the formation of the OSCE Minsk Group, a basic yet weak commitment to nonviolence as a value for conflict resolution emerged within the conflict system. The liberal values of national self-determination were part of the peace process and public discourse, but, as elsewhere in the world, they were overshadowed by the value of territorial integrity and state sovereignty. The lukewarm response by the international community to the 44-day Azerbaijani offensive in NK is partly explained by the dominance of "territorial integrity and state sovereignty" discourse, which President Aliyev regularly states as how he recovered territorial integrity through war. He further justifies his military offensive by blaming the OSCE Minsk Group for failing to produce an agreement – the very organization whose work that President Aliyev has obstructed by closing down the OSCE office in Azerbaijan. President Aliyev also regularly prevented confidence-building measures through civil society contacts to take place (Ohanyan 2015). In doing so, the norm of nonviolent forms of conflict management became diluted within this conflict system, and the kinetic diplomacy used by Azerbaijan since its military victory in 2020 continues to feed the erosion of the norm. The deepening authoritarianism inside Azerbaijan and its continued justification and use of violence as a negotiation strategy remains a tremendous obstacle in maintaining the fragile peace in NK, as it weakens prospects of a sustainable peace agreement.

Actors and Institutions

In terms of *actors and institutions*, the pre-Soviet, imperial period of this conflict continues to stand out as much more progressive as a conflict system than is the case currently. Peace processes are more distinctly liberal if grassroots actors and civic groups are active participants – a condition which is supported by the rapidly growing literature on best practices in peacebuilding. In addition to the diversity of actors engaged across conflict lines, such interactions will also be continuous, predictable, and transparent, indicating the growing institutionalization of such contacts. Peace processes that are inclusive and organizationally diverse, have a better track record of consolidating than those that are exclusive and limited to political elites (Wallensteen 2015; Tonge 2014; Lederach 1998).

As such, the pre-Soviet, imperial period in Transcaucasia was one of civic vibrancy and deeper connectivity across ethnic lines, even as the major ethno-religious groups in the region started embarking on their state-building processes in 1918, leading to the collapse of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR). The existing dialogue between ethnic leaders also shaped a political culture in the region which was relatively open and decentralized, but also vulnerable to regional power overlay, most distinctly from the neighboring Ottoman empire, as well as from the German and the British empires (Ohanyan 2022). These political conditions were conducive to the formation of multi-layered institutions of dialogue to be formed, of which the TDFR was an early manifestation. Indeed, judging from contemporary cases of regional institutions and the way they produce security cooperation, it is safe to assume that the TDFR was an early model of such a regional grouping: had it survived, it would have been useful in forging regional security cooperation between its members. Of course, the TDFR was formed before the nation-states in the South Caucasus were created. In contrast, contemporary regional institutions, including security cooperation forums, are established by states, with state resiliency as a key precondition.

This conflict system underwent dramatic shifts in various periods throughout the Soviet years, both in terms of the conflict parties/actors as well as the nature of relationships and institutions between them. Stalin's decision to transfer the Armenian-majority entity to Azerbaijan was, perhaps, a blatant divide-and-conquer approach to manage the "nationality problem" in the formation of the Soviet Union. A bit more conservative account for the decision casts it as pure "gerrymandering" – an attempt to use boundary delimitation as a way to manage governance challenges. In this case, however, assigning a majority-Armenian entity to Azerbaijan would have hardly eased Soviet governance. It is also possible that at the time, the tension between making administrative regions based on national boundaries, as opposed to "economic orientation," also played a role (Hirsch 2005). Relying on armies of ethnographers, economists, and statisticians, the authorities were trying to assuage fears of various nations of their self-determination claims, while also creating pathways towards a single, unified Soviet nation, as socio-economic modernization would dilute the political power and potency of nationalities.

Regardless of which of these contexts played a role in Stalin's decision, it is the closed and opaque nature of the decision that is of particular relevance in understanding this conflict system. As the entity became part of Azerbaijan, the government there, as in many other Soviet Republics, proceeded to engage in nation-building, using its titular hegemony to "nationalize" its republic

(Goff 2020). The Soviet approach to minority issues was markedly territorial, creating administrative units to support as many smaller ethnic groups as possible, but with an eye on the long-term goal of crafting the Soviet nationality. The strategy of mobilizing ethnic support for the revolution (Martin 2001) soon became a liability as the Bolsheviks started to build the Soviet nation and the centralized Soviet state. In this process, the emergent Soviet ethno-federalism was limited as a conflict management instrument mostly because it was crafted to centralize and institutionalize the ideological hegemony of the Soviet state. Meaningful ethno-federalism, built on grassroots institutions and supported by regionally wired economic systems, remained a mirage. The Soviet ethno-federalism crystallized the NK conflict system by freezing any possible management processes for decades to come. Any meaningful conflict management process, with engagement of actors and institutions across conflict lines, was a rarity, as it would have been contrary to the long-term objectives of the state. The case of the NK decision, whether a result of divide-and-conquer policies by Stalin, or political confusion in the path to forming the Soviet state, was a step backward from the more diverse and connected conflict system when the region was in the periphery of the Russian empire in the early 20th century.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, in which the NK conflict played a significant role, these weaknesses of underdeveloped conflict management instruments contributed to protracting the conflict. In the aftermath of the first war in NK, and the Russia-brokered ceasefire, the fragile peace process was led by the OSCE Minsk Group (Cavanaugh 2016). The OSCE Minsk Group stands out because of its ability, over decades, to sustain geopolitical attention, with both Russia and the US sharing membership in this forum (Cavanaugh 2016). As a key third-party actor, the OSCE Minsk Group has been criticized for its inability to bring about a resolution to the NK conflict, most prominently by President Aliyev. But Cavanaugh correctly points out that bringing about a resolution is not the mission of this forum, considering its role as a mediator, not an arbiter, to the conflict. Cavanaugh (2016) also highlights that the conflict parties themselves failed to advance the necessary compromises within their respective polities, as their positioned hardened over the years. Indeed, smaller states have shown a growing capacity not to follow great powers in the post-Cold War period (Jesse, Lobell, Press-Barnathan & Williams 2012). In this case, despite the value-driven approach to this conflict by the OSCE Minsk Group, embedded in values of nonviolence, compromise, human rights, and state rights, the overall conflict system became increasingly illiberal since the end of the war in 1994.

In terms of actors, the conflict system lacked inter-ethnic connectivity, and international actors dominated yet lacked the leverage (or the political

willingness) to push the conflict parties towards a resolution. The existing process was top-down, dominated by political elites from the conflict sides, which set up the peace process on the trajectory to failure. Importantly, the frustration of mediators that the political elites failed to "prepare people for peace" reflected a level of political naiveté: preparing people for compromise has been, and remains, a deeply political question, rooted in domestic political institutions.

The contemporary peace process led by the OSCE Minsk Group, before the 44-day war, was created in the period of "liberal peacebuilding" in the post-Cold War period (Broers 2019). However, its organizational paucity and shallow institutional footprint in the region, made it vulnerable to sabotage by the conflict parties themselves, who had settled into the status quo. The 44-day war and the Russian invasion in Ukraine weakened the OSCE Minsk Group, with the US and France announcing that they will cease to work with Russia in this forum. The Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has consistently expressed support for this forum, seeing it as the only one capable of advancing a pathway which is rights-based, and focused on the core issue of the conflict – the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh entity.

The Russian-brokered agreement that ended the 44-day war on November 9, 2020, positioned Russia as the only actor capable of brokering a ceasefire and providing a modicum of security through its peacekeeping forces for Nagorno-Karabakh. Importantly, the agreement also called for unblocking the region, which, if implemented, can be the most effective tool in advancing cross-conflict societal connectivity within this conflict system (Ohanyan 2021, 2021).[8] After the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the deepening geopolitical gulf that emerged between Russia on the one hand, and the US and France on the other, creates the possibility for enhanced liberality within the system. However, Russia's posture in the conflict remains unclear. While the national elites on all sides played their role in preventing a negotiated settlement to emerge, the Kremlin remains a key stakeholder in the suspended nature of this conflict, as it provides a rationale for Russian peacekeepers to remain in the entity.

The institutional divergences between these powers so far has failed to tilt the peace process towards liberality, and are quite reflective of the shifting patterns of conflict diplomacy in many other conflict regions. The weakening of international organizations and the ascendancy of states in third-party roles,

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8   See: https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/24/russia-and-west-still-need-each-other-in-nag orno-karabakh-pub-83295; and https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2021/06/16/the-forty-day-war-and -the-russian-peace-in-nagorno-karabakh/.

has the danger of weakening rules-based approaches and predictability as key values in peace processes. Therefore, as the Western and Russian tracks of third-party mediation are emerging (Broers 2022), the possibility that the peace process can be caught up in great power rivalry is very real.

Conclusion

The weakening rules-based world order has opened up security vacuums and capacity gaps in global conflict management. Domestically, illiberal actors and coercive processes of conflict management are emerging as alternatives. Any mediation diplomacy or peacekeeping intervention carried out by Russia, Turkey, or China, without a supportive political context and normative clarity, raises the possibility that their peace processes might result in illiberal ends, focused on advancing their interests in their respective neighborhoods, as well as globally. With democratic backsliding as the backdrop, such unresolved conflicts have become tools for authoritarian resurgence, with good-faith conflict resolution efforts rarely at the frontline.

This study presents a conceptual analysis of emergent illiberal peacebuilding, within a framework of growing multipolarity in world politics. In doing so, it seeks to answer the question as to whether illiberal peacebuilding is a qualitatively new development within the post-American world order, or whether it is the revival of imperial strategies of conflict suppression and coercion, as well as management, as carried out by imperial centers in their vast environs before their formal collapse. Put differently, is there room for historicizing the concept of illiberal peace, and if so, what is the methodological path forward? This article has answered in the affirmative, eager to probe some of these questions in future work.

The policy implications from this research trajectory are numerous. "Peace" is increasingly used as a euphemism, as a discursive tool to justify highly illiberal, exploitative, coercive and expansionist goals. Having tools to assess ongoing peace processes is one way to identify cases when peace processes are nakedly captured for renewed violence and war. Most peace processes take place in contexts of heightened geopolitical rivalry, but only in some of these cases does the geopolitical dimension overdetermine the peace process. Sifting through post-war conditions and exposing key characteristics of peace processes in terms of deeply or moderately geopoliticized situations is essential in explaining trajectories toward liberal or illiberal peace.

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