

Coercion in Peacebuilding: A Conceptual Framework

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Coercion in Peacebuilding: A Conceptual Framework

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Zimmer, Sabine Mannitz, Sophia Birchinger

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Coercion in Peacebuilding: A Conceptual Framework

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Sophia Birchinger**

Abstract

Interventions aimed at building peace continue to be a crucial element of international politics and order. This has prompted extensive research into the conditions for successful intervention practices and the normative frictions interventions often engender within target countries. Scholars have tracked the evolving approaches to international peacebuilding in several ‘turns’ from a liberal to a local, robust, pragmatic, and spatial focus, not to forget the debates about blurring lines between peacebuilding and peacekeeping. A pivotal question arising from these debates concerns the role of coercion in peacebuilding: Are we witnessing a shift towards more coercive (robust) approaches, or has the criticism of liberal peacebuilding and the increasing role of Southern/non-Western peacebuilding actors led to a trend of less coercive (light footprint) strategies with an increased attention to local ownership and inclusivity? Building on a review of conceptual literature on coercion, this working paper proposes a comprehensive conceptual framework to explore the role of coercion in peacebuilding. It examines the intricate relationship between coercion and peace and delineates diverse manifestations of coercion in peacebuilding. The conceptual framework is illustrated through the examination of the implementation of the African anti-coup regime and its coercive character, to spell out one example. In conclusion, this working paper emphasizes the necessity for a systematic consideration of coercion in peacebuilding research, highlighting its significance in shaping the outcomes and effectiveness of international interventions.

Zusammenfassung

Internationale Interventionen zur Friedenskonsolidierung sind seit den 1990er Jahren in der internationalen Politik in den Vordergrund gerückt. Dieser Wandel hat zu umfangreichen Untersuchungen über die Bedingungen für erfolgreiche Interventionspraktiken und die normativen Spannungen, die sie in den Zielländern oft hervorrufen, geführt. Der wissenschaftliche Diskurs hat die sich entwickelnden Ansätze der internationalen Friedenskonsolidierung in mehreren *turns* konzeptualisiert: Das Konzept des *liberal peacebuilding* wurde mit dem Fokus auf *local ownership* kritisch beleuchtet, gefolgt vom Ruf nach robusteren oder pragmatischeren Mandaten. Immer wieder wird auch die konzeptionelle Debatte über die verschwimmenden Grenzen zwischen Friedenskonsolidierung (*peacebuilding*) und Friedenserhaltung (*peacekeeping*) geführt. Eine zentrale Frage, die sich aus den genannten Debatten ergibt, betrifft die Rolle von Zwang in der Friedensförderung: Erleben wir eine Verschiebung hin zu mehr zwangsbasierten (robusten) Ansätzen? Oder hat die Kritik an der liberalen Friedenskonsolidierung und die zunehmende Bedeutung von sogenannten „neuen“ Akteuren aus dem Globalen Süden zu einem Trend von weniger Zwang (*light footprint*) und einer stärkeren Berücksichtigung von *local ownership* und Inklusivität geführt? Aufbauend auf einem Literaturstand zur Konzeptualisierung von Zwang schlägt dieses Working Paper einen konzeptionellen Rahmen vor, um die Rolle von Zwang in der Friedensförderung zu untersuchen. Es untersucht die komplizierte Beziehung zwischen Zwang und Frieden und beschreibt die verschiedenen Erscheinungsformen von Zwang in der Friedensförderung. Der konzeptionelle Rahmen wird beispielhaft in einer Untersuchung afrikanischer regionaler Reaktionen auf Putsche als Zwangsregime veranschaulicht. Abschließend unterstreichen wir die Notwendigkeit einer systematischen Betrachtung von Zwang in der Friedensforschung und heben dessen Bedeutung für die Gestaltung der Ergebnisse und der Wirksamkeit von internationalen Interventionen hervor.

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

Since the 1990s, international interventions aimed at building peace and reconstructing societies after violent conflict have become an increasingly salient aspect of international politics. This has led to a growing body of research on the conditions under which such intervention practices are successful, as well as on the normative frictions they quite often cause in the countries concerned. With a view to the evolution of the field, scholars have analyzed shifting approaches and practices of international peacebuilding over time. In the beginning, this meant a particularly liberal framing of peacebuilding as an endeavor inscribed with liberal norms such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Scholars have asserted that “liberal norms have both shaped the objectives of peacebuilding efforts” and “provided institutional blueprints that have informed peacebuilding practices” (Zaum 2013, p. 107; Chetail 2009; Wolff 2022, p. 3). In recent years, a more critical stance to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm has evolved, labelling the former as “normatively questionable” (Zaum 2013, p.109; see also Richmond 2005; Paris 2010; Donais 2012; Hagman 2014). In a similar vein, the literature on peacebuilding has produced several “turns”: Most recently, researchers have debated the move to robust peacebuilding (e.g. Tardy 2011; Nsia-Pepira 2011), a new generation of more ‘pragmatic’ peacebuilding operations (e.g. Chandler 2010; Moe & Stepputat 2018; Bargués 2020), and hence the blurring of lines between peacebuilding and peacekeeping (e.g. Howard 2019; Schmidl 2000; Pinto Arena 2017). New forms of local ownership were formulated in response to the critique of liberal models in international peacebuilding (e.g. Donais 2012; Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013; van Billerbeck 2016). Lately, the role of space, spatializing practices and scale in international relations and in peace processes in particular has gained ground (e.g. Bell & Wise 2022; Björkdahl & Buckley-Zistel 2022; Brigg et al. 2022; Herpolsheimer 2021; Lambach 2022; Niang 2023). Furthermore, scholars have started to analyze the potentially transformative impact that the growing engagement of Southern and/or non-Western actors may have on the norms and practices of peacebuilding (e.g. Aning & Edu-Afful 2016; Call & de Coning 2017; Christiansen 2021; Richmond & Tellidis 2014).

A crucial question that is being raised by all these debates concerns the role of coercion in peacebuilding: Are we witnessing a shift toward increasingly coercive (‘robust’) forms of peacebuilding, or has the limited success and widespread critique of liberal peacebuilding combined with the increasing role of Southern/non-Western actors rather ushered in a trend toward a less coercive (‘light footprint’) approach with increasing respect for local ownership and inclusivity? Unfortunately, so far, the question of the (potentially changing) role of coercion in peacebuilding has mostly been treated in passing or implicitly. While some authors explicitly refer to peacebuilding as an altogether non-coercive form of intervention (Lederach 1998), others emphasize the at least partially coercive nature of liberal peacebuilding (Pugh 2012; Richmond 2005; Turner & Kühn 2016; Gippert 2017). Still, within this latter group of scholars, different understandings of the concept of coercion prevail. Birte Gippert, for instance, defines coercion as “the threat or application of sanctions or punishment for non-compliance” (2017, p. 4). Oliver Richmond suggests a somewhat broader understanding of coercion – as the opposite of consent or “consensual ne-

1 Previous versions of this paper were presented at two international workshops at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) in Accra, Ghana, in October 2022 and November 2023, co-organized by KAIPTC, the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and PRIF in the context of the project “The Role of Coercion in International Peacebuilding: Insights from Africa in an Interregional Perspective” that was generously funded by the *Fondation Avec et Pour Autres*. We thank Samantha Ruppel for her work in the initial project phase. This paper has benefitted from most helpful comments from the workshop participants and our colleague Ben Christian. We also thank the interns and research assistants Younna Christiansen, Julia Sigrid Radke, Maïke Wäscher and Jonas Kießling for their support.

gotiation” – and, therefore, peacebuilding becomes coercive to the extent that it applies “top-down approaches”, “sometimes through the use of force, or through conditionality and dependency creation” (Richmond 2005, p. 214). This last, more structural form of coercion (through dependency), is explicitly articulated by Michael Pugh (2012). In his discussion of “coercive peacebuilding”, Pugh highlights “the structural violence inherent in hierarchies of power and global capital accumulation” (p. 417) and notes a whole range of “techniques and instruments of disciplinary practice ranging from military control and policing to efficient accounting and benchmarks of ‘progress’” (p. 419). Both Pugh and Richmond, however, refrain from explicating their conception or definition of coercion.

To date, there has been only scant research conceptualizing and empirically exploring the specific role of coercion in peacebuilding. This paper, therefore, sets out to propose a conceptual framework that builds on a working definition of coercion (2.1) and a discussion about the ambivalent relationship between coercion and peace (2.2). It systematically sketches different forms in which coercion can manifest itself in peacebuilding (2.3). In addition, these different forms are illustrated by examination of the African regional anti-coup regime and its coercive dimensions (3). In light of this example, we conclude that peacebuilding research – but after all also peacebuilding practice – could gain a lot from the (more) systematic consideration of coercion (4.).

2. COERCION, PEACE AND PEACEBUILDING: A CONCEPTUAL PROPOSAL

2.1 *Defining coercion*

Before discussing the relationship between coercion and peace, we have to briefly clarify our own notion of coercion, which is based on the conceptual thoughts developed in PRIF’s research program “Coercion and Peace”.²

In the latter, coercion is defined as the threat and/or the actual imposition of costs on an actor, directed towards eliminating this actor’s freedom of action with regard to a specific set of actions. This conceptualization is both broader and more precise than many current usages of the term. Often, in particular in the International Relations literature, coercion is defined in terms of the threat or use of physical violence.³ In these studies, however, no systematic reasons are given for why even minimal physical force should be considered coercive, while – for instance – an all-out economic blockade or neo-liberal conditionality in the international financial market should not. Other scholars include economic sanctions or conditional economic aid, but usually without providing criteria as to when such (threatened) costs should be regarded as coercive (Art & Greenhill 2018, pp. 4–5). In a study on the international diffusion of liberalism, Beth Simmons and colleagues also add what they dub “forms of ‘soft’ coercion”:

“With a sort of Gramscian ideological hegemony, dominant actors can influence others through ideational channels without exerting physical power or materially altering costs or benefits. By virtue of their central positions in policy networks, more powerful countries may be influential in the framing of policy discussions” (Simmons et al. 2006, p. 791).

2 This section draws heavily on the PRIF Report that presents the institute’s research program on “Coercion and Peace” and which constitutes the overall framework in which this paper has also been developed. In particular, the definition of coercion and the general discussion of the relationship of coercion and peace (2.2) are based on the respective sections in PRIF 2018 (pp. 1–9).

3 See, for instance, Byman & Waxman (2002); Eilsberg (1975); Freedman (1998); Schelling (1966).

Finally, ever since Karl Marx' famous dictum on the "silent compulsion of economic relations" (1976, p. 899), scholars have noted that structures can also have coercive effects (e.g. Valentini 2011; Wendt & Barnett 1993, p. 335) – yet such structural or systemic forms of coercion are excluded from most definitions.

To grasp these different forms of coercion, the conceptualization proposed here uses as the key criterion the significance of the prospective consequences for the actor that is being coerced, regardless of whether these consequences involve overwhelming physical violence, unbearable economic costs or an unacceptable loss in reputation, and no matter whether these consequences are the result of deliberate actions or a feature of social structures. Exercising power, therefore, only becomes an instance of coercion if it is directed towards the *elimination* of alternative ways of action (PRIF 2018, pp. 6–7).⁴ This notion of 'directedness' implies that coercion "is *non-arbitrary* in the sense that it either reflects the intentions of a coercing actor or the systematic features of a coercive structure" (PRIF 2018, p. 6). Still, coercion, "as an *attempt* or a *tendency* to force an actor (or several actors) into doing something", can also fail: "An actor's freedom of action is never entirely eliminated" (PRIF 2018, p. 6). Finally, in line with the established distinction between deterrence and compellence (Schelling 1966), coercion can be either negatively directed at excluding one specific option or positively aimed at forcing an actor into taking one specific action.

2.2 Coercion and peace: An ambivalent relationship

In International Relations, peace and conflict studies and the broader social science literature, we can identify two contrasting perspectives on the relationship between coercion and peace. Building on Hobbes' notion of the state of nature (as a state of war), scholars have argued that coercion is indeed a precondition of peace. At the level of individual countries, this position points to the emergence of modern states, during which the accumulation and concentration of coercive means in the hands of states enabled a relative pacification of intra-societal relations (Tilly 1990; Pinker 2011). At the international level, according to realist and liberal internationalist theories, it is precisely the absence of any superior coercive power that would be able to authoritatively solve conflicts among states that constitutes the systemic cause of war (Waltz 1979; Fearon 1995).

At the opposing end of the spectrum, critical and/or normative peace researchers have stipulated that coercion contradicts, undermines or endangers peace. Here, a more demanding definition of peace is applied, which includes more than the absence of war and manifest violence. In Galtung's famous definition, positive peace requires the absence of "structural violence", which also implies the absence of coercion (Galtung 1969). Also, in Czempiel's liberal view, which understands peace as a process of declining violence and increasing justice (Czempiel 1998), peace is thought to be realized by progressively renouncing violence, replacing coercion by cooperation and consent, and implementing human rights, individual freedom and global justice.

4 Classic definitions of coercion (e.g. Nozick 1969, pp. 441-445) and power (e.g. Dahl 1957, p. 202–203) are almost interchangeable, "with the exception that power refers to the *potential* to shape the behavior of another actor, while coercion connotes the actual exercise of power" (PRIF 2018, p. 7). In current debates, however, power is usually understood in a much broader sense. Barnett and Duvall, for instance, define power as the "production [...] of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their own circumstances and fate" (2005, p. 45). To be sure, the analytical distinction between just any type of "effect" and those effects that are directed towards eliminating alternative ways of action is hard to operationalize and measure. As with any analysis of social structures that cannot be directly observed, the challenge is to identify empirical traces of the coercive logic (the 'directedness') of a given social interaction or systemic relationship (e.g., by analyzing the material and discursive setting and/or the specific tools used by a potential coercer as well as by assessing the intentions of a potential coercer and/or the perceptions of the coerced) (see PRIF 2018, p. 9).

These opposing views on the relationship of peace and coercion can partially be explained by the fact that scholars obviously use quite different definitions of peace. As Richmond has argued, “Galtung’s positive/negative peace proposal actually indicates that peace can be conceptualized as a coercive order, as structural violence or terror, or as consensus and harmony, as trade, democracy, or human rights” (Richmond 2005, pp. 194–195). Still, this conceptual controversy does not entirely solve the problem at hand. Even if we stick to a more limited definition of peace, which does not per se include the absence or progressive reduction of coercion, both arguments still make plausible empirical and theoretical claims. As Jane Mansbridge has argued with a view to the ambivalent relationship between democracy and coercion, even democratic orders will always require some amount of coercion, which can never be fully legitimate. For this very reason, they also regularly provoke resistance (Mansbridge 1994, 1997). Similarly, it is hard to imagine how peace can be built and sustained without some degree and forms of coercion.⁵ At the same time, however, such coercive elements of order will never coexist easily with peace, but may give rise to violent resistance and/or enable the use of coercive violence against perceived challengers (Daase & Deitelhoff 2021, p. 495).

In line with PRIF’s research program on “Coercion and Peace”, on which these conceptual thoughts are based, we therefore suggest to understand the relationship between coercion and peace as a fundamentally ambivalent one (PRIF 2018). The research program, in addition, introduces the distinction between “coercion *in* peace” and “coercion *to* peace”. The former refers to the (ambivalent) role of coercion in maintaining and/or undermining a given, more or less peaceful order; the latter focuses on coercion as a (more or less problematic) means of establishing – if not enforcing – peace (PRIF 2018, p. 14). It is in this latter context that the ambivalent impact of coercion on peace becomes particularly acute. As both, classical political sociology and more recent studies on statebuilding show, the process of centralizing effective coercive capacity in the hands of a single authority – even if it eventually might bring (relative) peace – is itself fundamentally violence-prone (Tilly 1985; Jung et al. 2003; Bridoux 2011; Giustozzi 2011).

2.3 *Coercion in peacebuilding: A typology*

Peacebuilding, understood as the broad range of “external interventions that are designed to prevent the eruption or return of armed conflict” (Barnett et al. 2007, p. 36), aims at establishing, maintaining and consolidating peace in ‘post-conflict’ contexts that are perceived to be situated somewhere in between war and peace. Coercion in peacebuilding, therefore, takes place at the intersection of “coercion *to* peace” and “coercion *in* peace”, as defined in the previous section, and can be expected to include elements of both. The prevailing notion is that peacebuilding, unlike peacemaking or peacekeeping, primarily involves the stabilization and consolidation of a (negative) peace following violent conflict. However, in practical terms, peacebuilding typically encompasses activities directly targeted at addressing ongoing violent conflicts as well (see Barnett et al. 2007; Ryan 2013). Based on the definition of coercion introduced above, we can distinguish between different mechanisms and sources of coercion (see Table 1). In terms of mechanisms, coercion can operate through physical violence and economic sanctions but also through normative pressure or hegemonic discourses. In terms of the sources, coercion can be applied by an identifiable actor (or a set of actors) but also be the effect of structural (or systemic) forms

⁵ As Gramscians would argue, even if hegemony allows the coercive elements of the capitalist state to take a backseat, such a consensus-based order remains “protected by the armour of coercion” (Gramsci 1971, p. 263).

of coercion. For the latter distinction, it is important to recognize that actor-centered and structural forms of coercion often coexist and mutually reinforce each other, e.g., when structures asymmetrically coerce some actors, while empowering others; or when powerful actors deliberately use – and thereby reinforce – coercive structures.⁶

Table 1: Mechanisms and sources of coercion

		Sources of coercion		
		Actor	Structure	
Mechanisms of coercion	<i>Materialist</i>	Force	Threat ⁷ /use of overwhelming physical violence	n.a.
		Resources	Threat/use of unbearable sanctions and overwhelming conditional rewards	Systemic logic of overwhelming material costs and rewards (“silent compulsion of economic relations”)
	<i>Ideational</i>	Norms	Threat/use of unacceptable costs of reputation and status (“shaming and blaming”)	Shared norms exclude certain options/actions as normatively unacceptable (“moral taboo”)
		Discourse	n.a.	Hegemonic discourse excludes certain options/actions as unspeakable and unthinkable

Generally speaking, we expect that all these forms of coercion will be present in peacebuilding – of course, to varying degrees and in diverse configurations. When Richmond mentions the “use of force”, “conditionality” and “dependency creation” as elements of a “conservative” or “top-down” approach to peacebuilding (2005, p. 214), he highlights different forms of actor-centered and materialist coercion. While liberal ideas and norms still very much inform and shape today’s peacebuilding practices, their implementation works through an array of materialist and ideational coercion both in terms of structures and actors. Critical scholars point to the fact that liberal peacebuilding entail top-down approaches and blue-prints by donors and generally lack attention to local needs/ownership (Donais 2012; Mannitz 2014; Wolff 2022). The use of military-based coercion is analyzed by Lise Howard in her case study on the Central African Republic, which focuses on UN peacekeeping (Howard 2019, chapter 4).⁸ But in her discussion of the (limited) capacity of UN peacekeepers to employ military-based deterrence, Howard also suggests that the belligerents, normally, “do not fear physical punishment from peacekeepers, but they may fear sanctions or exclusion from economic and political processes, or shame, if they do not comply with peacekeepers’ requests” (Howard 2019, p. 139). This points to the complexity in which material and ideational aspects may become conflated but also to the relevance of ideational factors as effective mechanisms of coercion beyond the distinction of peacebuilding vs. peacekeeping.

6 As to the two empty cells in Table 1 (n.a.): By definition, structures do not apply (military) force, and individual actors do not directly coerce through discourses. Still, of course, a given (asymmetric) distribution of military capabilities is a structural feature that enables actors to threaten and use military force against others. Also, hegemonic discourses, which have coercive effects in structural terms, are certainly shaped by powerful actors.

7 Here, the assumption is that the mere threat of applying coercive measures is often times enough to trigger the imposition of costs, hence threats can qualify as coercion, too (see e.g. the instance of the threat of use of force by AU and ECOWAS in Burundi, Wilén & Williams 2018).

8 According to Howard’s analysis, in the context of UN peacekeeping, military-based coercion does normally not include compellence or deterrence because UN peacekeepers usually lack the necessary military capacity. Yet, they do exercise coercive power in terms of defense, surveillance and arrest. In addition, other actors that do exercise compelling and/or deterring forms of coercive power, may coexist with (and ‘complement’) UN peacekeeping (Howard 2019, pp. 129-147).

Coercion in the form of sanctions is studied by Birte Gippert (2017), amongst others (see also Agbonifo 2017). As Gippert shows, the EU Policy Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina used “coercive threats” against Bosnian police officers, which could be fired by the Office of the High Representative (Gippert 2017, p. 8), while in the case of the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo, judges were “punishing retrospective non-compliance with Kosovo state laws regarding corrupt practices” (p. 11).⁹

In addition to such forms of targeted, local actor-specific forms of coercive behavior, other scholars – in line with Richmond’s remark on “dependency creation” – emphasize the “coercive powers” of external actors (Western governments and international financial institutions) that use their control over economic resources to enforce specific policies on target countries in the context of peacebuilding missions (Chandler 2008, p. 341). In fact, the use of (economic) conditionality has been analyzed as a key feature of the broader “political economy of peacebuilding” that is based on and reinforces the structural, coercive features of the global political economy and globalized financial market (Pugh et al. 2008; Pugh 2012). Driven by external actors, such as international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Funds, promoting market-based economies in fragile and conflict-affected states usually comes with strings attached that not seldom leads post-conflict countries into a debt-trap (Pugh 2005; von Engelhardt 2018) and that are “at cross purposes to peace” (Woodward, 2013, p. 329). Coercion in liberal economic peacebuilding takes shape in highly asymmetric relationships between international organizations and international financial institutions with financial and other resources at their disposal on the one hand, and (post-)conflict affected countries with often limited resources on the other hand.

From a broader perspective that combines theoretical considerations from political economy, post-colonialism and post-structuralism, peacebuilding has been studied as “an imposition of liberal peace by the West on the rest”, which operates less through “physical coercion” than through “symbolic domination” (Hagman 2014, p. 10). Combining materialist and ideational mechanisms, Paul Fritz proposed the concept of “coercive socialization” to grasp the “process of forcibly inducing a state into the norms and rules of a community by highly constraining the courses of action available to that state” (2015, p. 380).

While most of the literature has focused on sources and mechanisms of coercion, how we can think of and conceptualize targets and effects of coercion has remained largely understudied (except e.g. Grieco & Hutto 2023, Langlois 2022). This is partly due to the fact that states and international institutions remain the common unit of analysis, thereby neglecting the effects of coercion on societies and non-state actors affected by coercion. Therefore, we propose to integrate both, targets and effects, when studying coercion. These effects can be (un)intentional as well as uni- or multidirectional. With his attempt to re-conceptualize coercion from a two-actor dyad towards a triangular setting of coercion, Sobelmann takes into account leverage and intermediaries for better reflecting the complexities of coercion (Sobelmann 2023). Shedding light on the effects on those affected by coercion interlinks with the question of consent and legitimacy of coercion (see e.g. Barker 1990, Booker 2022, Daase & Deitelhoff 2021, Gippert 2017).

In sum, there is plenty of evidence suggesting that peacebuilding is characterized by a wide range of coercive mechanisms – material and ideational –, but so far, the literature is very much fragmented and characterized by rather different (and mostly implicit) un-

⁹ In another paper, Gippert analyzes coercion as one mechanism to ensure compliance in the case of police reform in Kosovo (2016).

derstandings of coercion. Existing studies that explicitly study coercion in peacebuilding so far focus on one particular form of coercion. We therefore want to make a case for a broader, comparative research agenda that takes coercion and the diversity of coercion in peacebuilding seriously. To illustrate empirically the conceptual framework proposed in this working paper, the remainder examines African regional organizations' responses to coup d'états and establishes these responses as practices that constitute a coercive regime.

3. THE ANTI-COUP NORM IN AFRICAN REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: A COERCIVE REGIME?

Regional organizations like the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have become important peacebuilding actors on the African continent (Karbo & Virk 2018; Adetula et al. 2020). Their formal mandates and actual practices range from military peace support operations to a wide range of non-military interventions, including preventive diplomacy, mediation, human rights investigations, and sanctions (IPSS 2022). Traditionally, African peacemaking activities have been described as non-coercive in nature. In this regard, scholars have particularly stressed the importance of consent and consultation as well as solidarist and inclusive norms in shaping how peace is built through African regional organizations (e.g. Khadiagala 2006; Bareebe 2018). This image is also reinforced by the self-presentations of African regional organizations themselves, whose mantra of "African solutions to African problems" portrays peacebuilding as a generally harmonious and locally adapted endeavor. However, this description of African peacebuilding crucially neglects its political and potentially coercive character (on the political character, see Curtis & Dzinesa 2012; Tieku et al. 2022).¹⁰

In this sense, it is not surprising that coercion has so far not played a prominent role in the scholarly literature about the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and its implementation. One important exception, however, is Nina Wilén's and Paul D. Williams' (2018) analysis of the AU's reactions to the 2015 crisis in Burundi. The two authors describe the AU's approach to the crisis in Burundi as "coercive diplomacy", arguing that the AU Peace and Security Council's invocation of Article 4(h) of the AU's Constitutive Act constitutes another kind of coercive pressure which emanates from the threat to deploy military force even without invitation by an incumbent in order to protect civilians and prevent the escalation of armed conflict (Wilén & Williams 2018, p. 684). Burundi, they argue, was a "rare", even "unique" African case of coercive diplomacy, which is defined as "the use of threats to either stop another actor from doing something they planned to do (deterrence) or pressurize them to do something against their wishes (compellence)" (Wilén & Williams 2018, p. 674). In the case of The Gambia, the threat to use force eventually materialized with the deployment of the ECOWAS Mission to The Gambia (ECOMIG) that turned, on paper, from an initial quick and more coercive intervention into a long-term but light-footprint military presence, based on the now incumbent's invitation. In a more recent instance that went beyond coercive diplomacy, ECOWAS reacted to the 2023 coup d'état in Niger by threatening the use of military force against the putschists – even though, at the time of writing, this threat has not yet been acted upon.

In the following, we argue that coercion is actually not so uncommon to African diplomacy and peacemaking and, more importantly, that it is not reduced to instances in which military means or the threat to use such means are at stake. One field in which the coercive

¹⁰ A similar set of observations has also been made with a view to other peacebuilding actors from the Global South such as Brazil (see Christiansen 2021).

character of African peacebuilding can be explored is the responses by the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs). As we seek to demonstrate in this section, regional policy frameworks and actual reactions to UCGs are a pertinent field for exploratively studying the place and nature of coercion in African peacebuilding. Stressing the (potentially) coercive character of African peacebuilding is not to deny the importance of norms of solidarity and inclusivity shaping African peacebuilding practice. However, these norms only partly reflect both the practice and the outcomes of African peacebuilding. By taking the evolution of regional anti-coup practices into account, we also demonstrate the ambiguous effects as well the failures that this coercive approach has produced so far and increasingly does.

In the year 2000, African Heads of State and Government, then still operating under the AU's predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), adopted the African anti-coup norm. In the Lomé Declaration, they condemned the unconstitutional takeover of state power as undemocratic and as a threat to regional and continental peace and security (OAU 2000). They therefore decided that from that day onwards, governments that come to power by unconstitutional means shall be suspended from the continental organization. They also mandated the Secretary-General of the OAU to work to "facilitate the restoration of constitutional order" within six months by engaging the perpetrators "with a view to ascertaining their intentions regarding the restoration of constitutional order" (OAU 2000). If these efforts remained ineffective, "a range of limited and targeted sanctions against the regime that stubbornly refuses to restore constitutional order" (OAU 2000) are foreseen. Since the adoption of the Lomé Declaration, the African anti-coup norm has been both expanded and made binding on AU member states (AU 2007; Wiebusch et al. 2019). Likewise, RECs, in particular ECOWAS, have adopted similar norms in their policy doctrines to promote peace, security, and democratic governance within their respective realms of jurisdiction (ECOWAS 2001: Art. 1C). Even more importantly, the anti-coup norm has been translated into a regular practice of African interventionism. Since its adoption in 2000, it was invoked in 26 instances, the most recent being the cases of Niger and Gabon (see also ISS 2022; Souaré 2014).

Already the wording of the Lomé Declaration points to the anti-UCG policy's intention to impose costs on African putschists, directed towards eliminating their freedom of action and making them to work for the re-establishment of constitutional order. Hence even on paper, the AU's anti-coup policy is coercive, if coercion is understood as threat and/or the actual imposition of costs on an actor, directed towards eliminating this actor's freedom of action with regard to a specific set of actions, as defined above. Apart from this declared or intended coercion, however, there is also a practiced coercion, which becomes visible once the actual processes and practices to restore constitutional order after coups are considered. This practiced coercion then provides a more nuanced picture of the place and character of coercion in African post-coup peacebuilding and the concrete means by which African post-coup peacebuilding becomes coercive.

Concretely, there are three ways in which the practice of African anti-coup peacebuilding is coercive.¹¹ Firstly, AU/RECs' reactions to coups add costs on African putschists through intentional blaming. By immediately condemning coups, the AU and RECs work for the international diplomatic isolation of putschists and thereby limit the latter's realm of action. For instance, other international actors, Western donors in particular, usually back the AU and

11 Apart from these three, reactions to coups can of course also be coercive when they are backed by military means or the threat to use such means, as for instance in the case of The Gambia (Hartmann 2017; Williams 2017) as well as more recently Niger. However, the focus here is on those forms of coercion that do not rely on military means.

RECs' public condemnation. Oftentimes, this comes with a decision to temporarily suspend development aid. Unlike in the decades before the adoption of the anti-coup norm, African putschist regimes are thus immediately internationally isolated. That intentional blaming is effective is also proven by the fact that immediately after taking power, African putschists themselves usually engage in international diplomacy, seeking to present themselves as forces for the good in order to avoid international blaming (see for instance Whitehouse 2012; Witt 2020). While this coercive mechanism has been very effective until around 2017, with the coup(s) in Sudan and the more recent series of coups in francophone West Africa this is no longer the case. International isolation is becoming increasingly difficult due to the diversification of positions of member states within the regional organizations granting or withholding recognition. On the one hand, especially with the increasing role of states such as China or Russia on the continent as well as the rising tension between these non-Western powers and 'the West', African putschists have more alternatives to receive international support – and hence isolation becomes less effective. On the other hand, the more putschist governments are able to maintain themselves in power, the more difficult it is to create regional pressure. The recent international collaboration among the putschist regimes of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (and to a lesser extent Guinea) in the Alliance of Sahel States, is a case in point, which effectively creates an alternative regional alliance, thus undermining the coercive powers of ECOWAS (Dieng & Frowd 2023).

Secondly, apart from the costs of suspension and international isolation, African reactions to coups oftentimes also come with the application of targeted individual sanctions, such as freezing of asset, travel bans, etc., thus creating economic and political costs for putschists. In the recent case of Mali, ECOWAS and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) even decided to impose general financial and economic sanctions on the country, including a ban on trade of goods between Mali and its neighbors, with exceptions for food, fuel and medicine (Aubyn 2022). While sanctions as such are not automatically coercive, there are several instances in which applied sanctions did actually pose unbearable costs on the addressees, and can thus be considered as coercive, even if they did not always result in the intended effect. Here, addressees must be understood beyond the country's leadership as, in the case of Mali, the military junta. The closure of borders and the subsequent interruption of cross-border trade as a result of the imposed sanctions has "disproportionately impact[ed] Malians more than the military [junta]" (Avoulete 2022). The sanctions have not only had severe effects on the economic situation of the wider Malian public and the neighboring countries, but eventually also sparked a growing public backlash against ECOWAS (Oxford Analytica 2022). A similar dynamic can be observed in Niger following the 2023 coup d'état, where similarly harsh regional sanctions against the putschists have increased public anger against ECOWAS and cemented rather than undermined popular loyalty to the new regime in power (Africanews 2023). Not least, the sanctions have also increased rifts within the sanctioning body itself – as some ECOWAS member states even publicly denounced the disproportionate social and other costs these sanctions have been producing.

Thirdly, and finally, African post-coup peacebuilding is also coercive in a more structural sense by prescribing a particular path to constitutional order and, by consequence, rendering alternative paths almost impossible (Witt 2022). Since the adoption of the Lomé Declaration, re-establishing constitutional order has meant to organize new, competitive and reasonably free and fair elections. Although the timing for re-admitting member states to the AU has not been consistent, what was consistent throughout the years of post-coup peacebuilding was the equation of re-establishing constitutional order with the organization of elections (Witt 2020, p. 207). In all but one case, the organization of elections was

thus the default means by which constitutional order was re-established. In many cases, this has reduced complex political situations to a technical issue, depoliticized the search for alternative political orders, and silenced societal and political forces who claimed more fundamental political transformations (Witt 2020: chapters 6 and 7).

In sum, apart from the threat to use military means, AU and RECs have been responding to UCGs – at least in theory and in their initial implementation – by applying coercive means. They have done so, on the one hand, through both economic sanctions as well as the punishment and isolation of norm violating actors (governments and individuals). On the other hand, regional anti-coup norms, by prescribing a particular model of constitutional order to which no alternative is on offer, can also be considered as coercive in structural terms. At the time of writing, six AU member states (Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Sudan, Niger, and Gabon) remain suspended, while the AU, and for the four West African cases ECOWAS, find it increasingly difficult to actually coerce putschists into re-establishing constitutional order as imagined in the Lomé Declaration. In fact, while in previous times it took on average 20 months to re-establish constitutional order, the current generation of coup leaders either proposed several years of transitional period or refrained from making any statements as to when they would hand over power again. Thus, while the coercive mechanisms have been relatively effective in the first 15 years of the anti-coup regime, the most recent series of coups has both exposed the ambiguous effects of this regime and rendered regional actors largely inefficient in ‘undoing’ coups as in previous times (Witt 2020). However, these practical failures do not limit the potentially (or intendedly) coercive character of the African anti-coup regime and regional post-coup peacebuilding. In fact, the very failure to effectively coerce can be a way of rendering that in-built coercion visible, as it is precisely this coercive character of responses to coups that currently receives such widespread popular backlash.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

Our contribution aims to make the case for a systematic research of the role of coercion in the political practice and normative agenda of peacebuilding. In view of the crises which liberal peacebuilding has experienced as an academic paradigm and a political template, multi-directional shifts can be observed in this field. These shifts, on the one hand, point towards less intrusion, presumably leaving more room for local steering and ownership. On the other hand, however, they also suggest a turn towards more robust types of intervention. While the latter clearly contributes to an increased blurring of boundaries between military and non-military forms, thus cutting across the conventional distinction between peacebuilding and peacekeeping, evaluations which could validate the effects of this shift do not yet exist. Similarly, the simultaneous move towards leaner interventions remains as well to be assessed in terms of what it actually accomplishes. Which of the contradictory trends should be seen as the more fruitful path towards realizing sustainable peace? This question is not at all trivial, in particular when considering the fundamentally ambivalent relationship between coercion and peace(building). Given the resources which are invested into peacebuilding, it is crucially important to choose the best possible strategy. What is more, however, failed peacebuilding missions are not just an unpleasant scenario but have already in the past proven to possess the harmful potential of even deteriorating the (human) security situation in affected countries. The goal of peacebuilding, once described by Kofi Annan as “to consolidate peace and prevent a recurrence of armed confrontation” (Annan 1998, § 63) is put at risk of being reversed to the opposite if state actors are assisted by peacebuilders in improving their effectiveness but continue to follow other ends than the declared mission aims.

Against this backdrop, the systematic empirical analysis of the impact of coercion in peacebuilding is highly relevant and timely. After all, the crisis of liberal peacebuilding could be the result of either too little or too much coercion involved in interventions, or else be due to a counter-productive combination of both at the same time. Either option would entail different policy implications. With our proposal of scrutinizing the role of coercion in this field, the objective is to determine the possibilities and limitations of peacebuilding, to clarify the goals of missions and to assess the assumptions and instruments which inform the practice and the programming of interventions for peace consolidation.

As spelled out above, the proposed systematic analysis of coercion in peacebuilding requires at first a definition of coercion and secondly a differentiation of the sources and the mechanisms of coercion. In addition, research should investigate perceptions of actor-centered and structural forms of coercion by governmental elites and the broader population as well as their reactions. Under which conditions does coercion lead to compliance, to forms of contestation or resistance, to subversive practices or to attempts to reform peacebuilding (as, e.g. with the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States)?

Based on the conceptual discussion proposed by PRIF's research program "Coercion and Peace" (2018), we defined coercion as the threat and/or the actual imposition of costs on an actor, directed towards eliminating this actor's freedom of action with regard to a specific set of actions. This definition deserves particular attention in the domain of peacebuilding where coercion tends to be denied by many actors and scholars alike, on the grounds of the routine definition that is focused predominantly on the use (or threat) of physical violence to denote coercion. In this paper, we argue that a broader approach is promising that allows to take coercion and the diversity of forms it may take in peacebuilding into view. To that end we illustrated the multiple forms of coercion in peacebuilding by looking at the responses by African regional organizations to unconstitutional changes of government. While this example evidences forms of coercion in the context of peacebuilding, further reaching questions remain: How do different forms of coercion combine, including with non-coercive means, in these attempts to respond to coups in ways that preserve and stabilize peace? What exactly are the consequences of these more or less, and differently coercive responses, and which conditions (local, regional, global) may shape their effectiveness. These questions call for far more research, including by drawing on a greater universe of empirical case studies.

The point here is that, theoretically and normatively, coercion may at best be an ambivalent means of establishing peace. However, too little is as yet known about the practical dynamics, strategies and responses that coercion triggers in peacebuilding to substantiate clear assessments. In this vein, the necessity to analytically distinguish the research findings pertaining to the different sources and mechanisms of coercion suggests a number of strands for fruitful arguments and future research:

- > In what form and with what consequences for the goals of peacebuilding are measures perceived as coercive?
- > Do ideational forms of coercion yield different reactions than coercion operating with materialist mechanisms?
- > Do perceptions of and responses to coercion differ depending on the mechanism and/or the sources of coercion?
- > Under what conditions do forms and configurations of coercion contribute to or rather undermine the building of sustainable peace?

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