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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Democratic Recession and Illiberal Peacebuilding in Latin America: A Case Study of the Guyana-Venezuela Conflict

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Abstract: This article explores the intersection of the processes and dynamics of democratic regression, illiberal peacebuilding and path dependence in the context of the Guyana-Venezuela territorial dispute for the Essequibo region. It was based on colonial era resentment, and has been worsened by the oil discovery - it speaks to different but equally implacable forms of conflict resolution. Venezuela uses nationalist mobilization and autocratic means for domestic hegemony, while its partner Guyana resorts to technocratic legalism in the form of international adjudication, all too often avoiding broad-based public participation. The analysis employs a qualitative comparative-historical analysis (CHA) within an HI approach to demonstrate how path dependent institutional behavior influences state response to geopolitical disputes. The study makes comparisons to other international disputes, including Russia's forcible annexation of Crimea and China's construction works in the South China Sea, with a view to illustrating how territorial conflicts can be exploited by illiberal regimes. The evidence indicates that procedural democracy without participation and overt authoritarianism support the erosion of democratic governance. The article argues in favour of transparent, inclusive and participatory peace-building approaches with regional organizations and impartial mediators. It maintains that a sustainable solution to conflict must harmonize legal structures and democratic values when dealing with territorial disputes and domestic challenges to regime legitimacy in the Latin American context.

Keywords: Democratic, Illiberal, Conflict, Peace.

1. Introduction

The territorial dispute between Guyana and Venezuela (border crisis) has persisted for over a century and is a significant stumbling block in the relationship between the two countries. The territorial dispute, which goes back to colonial times, has become a major geopolitical problem, especially after promising discovered oil and gas deposits. It now embodies a wider tension of national sovereignty, resource struggles, and domestic political stability (Brewer-Carías, 2009). As the costs increase, the Guyana-Venezuela crisis provides a critical lens through which to consider how unresolved territorial disputes relate to and are influenced by the democratic well-being of the countries in question.

A new literature on illiberal peacebuilding has at last emerged that seeks to study how states control conflict while foreclosing democratic participation (Smith, 2014, 2020). Instead of



advancing open and inclusive processes, illiberal peacebuilding prioritizes state-centered authority and control, frequently through means that undermine civil liberties and marginalized oppositional voices (Cheung, 2019; Diprose, 2008).

This contrast in managing conflicts reflects how both countries fail to live up to democratic norms in different ways. Autocraticism in Venezuela characterised by repressive practices towards opposition groups, information control and weakening judicial independence is a classic example of democratic erosion (Diamond, 2021; Levitsky & Way, 2020). The conflict serves Venezuela Nicolás Maduro as a political strategic tool reflected in nationalism, propaganda, and control to limit referendums to consolidate internal support and distract from deepening economic and humanitarian crises (Aboh et al., 2023; Chabrol, 2023). While Guyana still has the vestiges of democracy, but is grappling with issues around inclusiveness and transparency as national security (Brewer-Carías, 2009) concerns mount (Clegg, 2014). In both cases, the war has exacerbated other shortcomings of governance and hastened the erosion of democratic norms that had been proceeding apace, contributing to what scholars increasingly describe as a “democratic recession” in the region (Holenstein, n.d.). Conversely, Guyana has pursued legitimation through international legal institutions but at the risk of overlooking the public and relying on technocratic diplomacy (Capoani et al., 2025).

In path-dependent path dependence policy decisions and institutional lifespan continue to constrain contemporary choices (Gilder, 2023). Venezuela’s revolutionary populism and anti-imperialist legacy has authorised its nationalist claims, while facilitating mobilisation at home. Yet at the same time Guyana has also pursued legal arbitration, a reflection of its British colonial heritage (Bethell, 2024; Ince, 1970). These rigid structures do not only constrain the pool of strategic options, but also serve as barriers to democratic innovation in the management of territorial disputes (Cummings, 2018).

Importantly, the Guyana-Venezuela dispute is not only confined to its sense. We are not an exception, but rather a clear echo of what is taking place around the world when illiberal governments legitimize themselves by creating territorial threats to maintain internal control be it Russia’s annexation of Crimea or China’s classic aggressive territorial expansion in the South China Sea (Mustabshira & Ahmed, 2024; Padula, 2023). In this context, the Guyana-Venezuela dispute is a symbol of how geopolitical disputes are weaponized by states in a moment of democratic erosion. Latin America, with its aspirations for democracy, is no exception to these dynamics, especially when international conflicts are seized upon as pretexts for cracking down on dissent and enhancing power (Mustabshira & Ahmed, 2024).

This paper examines the relationship between illiberal peacebuilding, democratic backsliding, and path dependency in the Guyana-Venezuela dispute. I find, most of all, identifies the borrowing of mundane goods and behaviours as a stimulus for difference while reacting against this otherness, depending on the social, cultural, and national responses. Concern for the difference is most apparent when a person or group is seen to be living uncivilised because we care so deeply for how other people are and act. The Guyana-Venezuela controversy demands a multi-pronged strategy that comprises legal adjudication, diplomatic negotiation, and regional collaboration. International community participation, notably through the auspices of bodies such as the United Nations and regional organizations, is necessary to help establish dialogue and guarantee compliance with international law. Applying effective means for resolving conflicts in this setting is not only a way to reach a final solution to a territorial dispute but is also a step towards the long-term end of preserving peace and preventing instability in Latin America (Wolff, 2015).

2. Literature Review

The growing body of scholarship on democratic recession, illiberal peacebuilding, and territorial conflict provides an essential foundation for understanding the dynamics of the Guyana–Venezuela dispute. This section reviews three key strands of literature: (1)



democratic backsliding and competitive authoritarianism, (2) illiberal peacebuilding, and (3) path dependency in conflict governance. (Diamond, 2021)

2.1. Democratic Recession and Competitive Authoritarianism

The concept of democratic recession has gained prominence in recent years, referring to the global decline in democratic quality and the rise of hybrid or authoritarian regimes (Diamond, 2021). Scholars such as Levitsky and Way (2020) conceptualize this trend through the framework of competitive authoritarianism, where formal democratic institutions exist but are systematically undermined by incumbents through media control, repression, and electoral manipulation. In Latin America, this phenomenon is particularly visible in cases where leaders instrumentalize crises—such as territorial disputes—to consolidate power and suppress dissent (Keen, 2021). Existing studies emphasize that external conflicts often serve as political tools for regime survival. For example, authoritarian governments may invoke nationalism and sovereignty narratives to legitimize internal control and marginalize opposition groups (Keen, 2021). This literature is directly relevant to Venezuela's use of the Essequibo dispute as a mechanism for domestic political consolidation.

2.2. Illiberal Peacebuilding

The literature on peacebuilding has traditionally been dominated by liberal frameworks emphasizing democracy, participation, and institution-building. However, a growing critique highlights the emergence of “illiberal peacebuilding,” where conflict management prioritizes stability and state control over democratic inclusion (Cheung, 2019; Smith, 2014). Illiberal peacebuilding often involves top-down approaches, restricted civic space, and the exclusion of local actors from decision-making processes (Diprose, 2008; Stokke, 2022). Comparative studies demonstrate that illiberal peacebuilding is not limited to authoritarian regimes but can also occur in formally democratic contexts through technocratic governance and elite-driven diplomacy (Wolff, 2015). This duality is important for analyzing both Venezuela's authoritarian mobilization and Guyana's reliance on legalistic, non-participatory approaches. As Björkhagen (2019) notes, such models may achieve short-term stability but risk undermining long-term legitimacy and sustainability.

2.3. Path Dependency and Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalism provides a useful lens for understanding how past political decisions shape present policy choices. Path dependency suggests that once institutions and strategies are established, they tend to persist due to increasing returns, institutional inertia, and normative reinforcement (Mahoney, 2004; Pierson, 2004). This framework has been widely applied in comparative politics to explain continuity in state behavior, even in changing geopolitical contexts. In the context of territorial disputes, path dependency influences how states select and maintain conflict resolution strategies. For instance, Guyana's reliance on international legal mechanisms reflects its colonial and post-independence institutional trajectory, while Venezuela's nationalist and populist strategies are rooted in its revolutionary political history (Gilder, 2023). These entrenched approaches limit policy innovation and constrain the adoption of more inclusive peacebuilding models.

2.4. Territorial Disputes and Geopolitical Instrumentalization

A related body of literature examines how territorial disputes are increasingly used as instruments of geopolitical and domestic strategy. Studies on conflicts such as Crimea and the South China Sea highlight how states leverage legal ambiguity, historical claims, and military signaling to assert sovereignty while reinforcing regime legitimacy (Charap & Colton, 2017). These cases illustrate broader patterns of illiberal conflict management, where international law is selectively applied or disregarded. In Latin America, territorial disputes have historically been managed through legal and diplomatic mechanisms (Schenoni, 2020). However, recent scholarship suggests a shift toward more politicized and securitized approaches, particularly in contexts of democratic fragility. The Guyana–Venezuela dispute

thus fits within a global pattern where territorial conflicts intersect with domestic political agendas and democratic decline.

While existing literature provides valuable insights into democratic recession, illiberal peacebuilding, and path dependency, there remains a gap in integrating these frameworks within a single case study of Latin American territorial conflict. Most studies examine these concepts in isolation or focus on other regions such as Eurasia or Southeast Asia. This article addresses this gap by offering a comparative-historical analysis of the Guyana–Venezuela dispute, demonstrating how these dynamics interact to shape conflict resolution and democratic outcome.

3. Research Method and Materials [11pt, Garamond, Bold, Justified]

This article follows a comparative politics research design and approaches the Guyana-Venezuela conflict and resolution by analysing a comparative historical case study using CHA and HI to investigate the reverberations of democratic recession and illiberal peacebuilding. This also allows for a profound exploration of how institutional inheritances and historical political choices continue to shape present conflict management strategies. The qualitative methodology helps deal with the interpretive aspects of political behaviour, rhetoric and institution-building with which the dispute over Essequibo is closely related (Mahoney, 2004; May et al., 2024; Thelen, 1999). Various secondary sources, including legal documentation, scientific journals, newspaper reports and government communications, were used to triangulate perspectives and maintain analytical rigour.

Historical institutionalism lets us see the path dependency in how Guyana and Venezuela have handled the dispute. It is important to understand path-dependent policy choices, such as Guyana's faith in international legal mechanisms and Venezuela's nationalist mobilization, in conditioning the present (Gilder, 2023). The CHA framework allows for a comparative dimension linking the Guyana-Venezuela case to other trends in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the common disputes in the South China Sea. Such comparative analyses are crucial to understanding how authoritarian regimes often play territorial conflicts against minority communities to strengthen state power and to delegitimize democratic opposition (Levitsky & Way, 2020; Mustabshira & Ahmed, 2024).

The data is collected using library research, based mainly on official documents provided by institutions such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ), United Nations (UN) and Organisation of American States (OAS), as well as on peer-reviewed academic studies and reliable media. The thesis draws on discourse analysis to explore the political narratives produced by state actors, and especially the role of nationalism, legality and sovereignty in the justification of conflicting narratives. This approach also facilitates the evaluation of how democratic norms are constructed, contested or subverted in the domestic politics of each country (Chabrol, 2023; Cheung, 2019). With an institutional, historical, and discursive approach, this paper provides a holistic perspective regarding the relationship between conflict resolution strategies and the problematic erosion of democratic governance in Latin America.

4. Results and Discussion

This article analyses the intersection of path dependency, illiberal peacebuilding and democratic backsliding in the battleground between Guyana and Venezuela over the border region of the Essequibo. The main thrust of the evidence is that with completely different conflict resolution mechanisms legal arbitration on behalf of Guyana and nationalist mobilisation on behalf of Venezuela both countries have somehow replicated forms of democratic fragility. Authoritarian management of conflict by Venezuela instrumentalize the dispute for domestic political purposes, in line with competitive authoritarian regimes that utilise territorial crises to deflect criticism and utilise nationalist energies (Levitsky & Way, 2020; Mustabshira & Ahmed, 2024). In contrast, Guyana's technocratic international legalism, despite being institutionally democratic, is not similarly participatory within each

state, and thus, top-down diplomacy prevails without genuine civil society engagement there (Anderson, 2024; Clegg, 2014).

However, they both display illiberalism trends in conflict resolution that indicate that peacebuilding, as a process that marginalises participative governance, can reinforce non-democratic practices (Cheung, 2019; Diprose, 2008). Thus, the main research question is answered: How do institutionalised institutionalised behaviour(s) and strategic political choice(s) influence the nature and outcome of conflict resolution initiatives? The consensus on illiberal peacebuilding reveals that a wider democratic recession is taking place across Latin America, even within supposedly democratic systems, when faced with high-stakes geopolitical standoffs.

4.1. *Historical Grievances*

The bitter border rivalry between Guyana and Venezuela involving the Essequibo is based on legacy territorial claims from the colonial era. Throughout the 19th century, the British and Venezuela conducted negotiations to define the boundaries between the states in South America; however, no agreement was reached that was acceptable to both sides. The border dispute officially began in 1840 between British Guiana and Venezuela, and two years later, in 1842, the latter declared that it would not negotiate, and there, the matter was put to rest. A close-up of the air alert in Guyana in 1899, an international tribunal organised by the United States (the Paris Arbitral Award) ruled that the land belonged to the British-Guyana. However, Venezuela has consistently opposed this judgment's claims and accused it of being politically motivated without being impartial. This persisting challenge has contributed to a source of bilateral grievance (Cummings, 2018; Mustabshira & Ahmed, 2024; Nicolic, 2018; Schenoni, 2020).

The dispute has been exacerbated by the discovery of large amounts of oil and gas in the disputed area. In 2015, Exxon Mobil announced enormous offshore oil discoveries in Guyana's territorial waters, which have ratcheted Venezuela's territorial claims over the Essequibo. The expected economic gains from these resources have raised the stakes, leading to increased diplomatic acrimony and greater military signaling from India and Pakistan. Venezuela has taken actions, to build infrastructure close the disputed boundary, which Guyana sees as a violation of its sovereignty, worsening relations between these two countries (Cummings, 2018; Mahabir & Ganpat, 2024; Padula, 2023).

The case is still being pursued in international courts. Guyana has asked the ICJ to rule that the 1899 Arbitral Award is valid and conclusive, and a judicial confirmation that there exists no boundary dispute between Guyana and Venezuela. The ICJ's involvement highlights the challenges of litigating over colonial-era claims in a 21st century international legal environment. Of course, a judgment will arrive soon enough, but adjudication is slow and can therefore be subject to strategic diplomacy as states find themselves left in limbo with only their own political interests to protect. The whole world continues to watch with worry. Stressed the need for a peaceful resolution in accordance with international law and to maintain peace and stability in the region (Anderson, 2024; Mustabshira & Ahmed, 2024; Padula, 2023).

4.2. *Comparative Analysis: Guyana vs Venezuela*

Venezuela is an interesting 'case study' for this kind of authoritarian conflict management (the exploitation of contested territories in order to shore up state power). The Maduro dictatorship has used the Essequibo dispute as an excuse to generate jingoistic hysteria and suppress political opponents. In December 2023, the administration announced a questionable structure for a referendum to reinforce its claims on the Essequibo—a flaccid initiative dismissed globally as illegitimate and occurring amidst broad spread press harassment and political oppression (Chabrol, 2023). The conflict is cast by the regime as a patriotic struggle against foreign “interference” designed to distract attention from the economy and humanitarian crisis (Diamond, 2021). These approaches are consistent with the

general playbook not of coup-plotting military officers this time but of competitive authoritarian regimes themselves, which frequently wield geopolitical conflict as a weapon in order to solidify autocratic rule, discredit domestic opposition and foster a sense of siege among their own society (Levitsky & Way, 2020).

Venezuela's story is one that has relied on propaganda as one of its central figures. International legal institutions such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) are depicted as biased and/or illegitimate in state-controlled media. At the same time, domestic mobilisation is presented as the superior manifestation of sovereignty (Padula et al., 2023). In the process, the government becomes disdainful of multilateralism and an internal conversation equating criticism with treason is promoted. These rhetorical manoeuvres are characteristic of illiberal approaches to peacebuilding in which regimes construct peace and conflict in terms of internal unity, external enmity, and sovereign dignity, as well as the exclusion of political pluralism (Cheung, 2019). This effect is two-fold: nationally, national security critics are silenced; internationally, legal norms are overridden in favour of power politics.

By contrast, Guyana's is founded on multilateral diplomacy and judicial arbitration. The country has always sought peaceful means to pursue its claims, including the one before the ICJ, in which the Philippines is seeking to secure a ruling based on international law. This approach is consistent with the historical positioning of Guyana in favour of British legal traditions and multilateral dispute settlement arrangements (Clegg, 2014). "However, Guyana's embrace of legalism is matched by a technocratic mode of governance in which foreign policy is the preserve of elite bureaucratic and diplomatic circles. There is little if any, internal effort to consult domestically, predominantly Indigenous and border communities directly affected by the conflict (Mustabshira & Ahmed, 2024). This exclusive model restricts public ownership of the peace process and may sow discord between state policy and public consent.

Whereas the former operates through open-handed authoritarianism and repression, the latter is marked by procedural democracy and other peacebuilding forms, but substantial elitism. Instead, the country runs away from hot rhetoric but does not create spaces where Guyanese can have sustained discussions of the Essequibo as participatory. This democratic deficit might not entail the use of military force. However, it mirrors a larger trend of illiberal peacebuilding, in which locally dominated processes of political restoration emphasise international credibility over inclusive governance (Wolff, 2015). As such, neither country does enough to construct a democratic peace: Venezuela does so actively harm and Guyana passively so. This comparative examination highlights that illiberal peacebuilding is not a binary phenomenon but instead occurs along a continuum from populist-authoritarianism to technocratic exclusion, both of which undermine the sustainability and legitimacy of conflict resolution processes in Latin America.

4.3. Path Dependency and Institutional Inertia

This study adds value by using historical institutionalism to account for Venezuela and Guyana's deep roots and diverging conflict strategies. This literature highlights the past, shaping the present and limiting the future (Pierson, 2004). Venezuela has seen the consolidation of executive power, ideological anti-imperialism and reliance on nationalist mobilisation since the late 1990s, particularly throughout the tenure of Hugo Chávez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro. These historical trends have produced a political culture that is inclined to hostility and the externalisation of blame. The Essequibo dispute finds a place in this scripted form of history into what Gilder has called as a "legacy conflict", or one which is rooted in the past and consequently can be resuscitated whenever it serves to legitimate state power at time of internal crisis (Gilder, 2023). On the other hand, there are aspects of Guyana's foreign policy that pander to the colonial inheritance. Upon gaining independence from the British in 1966, Guyana remained determined to use diplomacy, multilateralism and legal arbitration to interact with the states of the international system (Bethell, 2024; Ince,

1970). But by the same token, that legalist approach is also path-dependent — in the sense that institutions and strategies persist not because they work, necessarily, but because they are known and have already taken road.

This path dependence can lead to institutional inertia, that is, where politics-as-usual and bureaucratic rationalities hinder the processes of policy innovation. Guyana, and their unwavering commitment to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) provides a case in point. However, despite the ICJ's stalling and despite its lack of enforcement remedies, Guyana has continually opted to pursue legal adjudication as a top-order matter at the expense of more dynamic or more inclusive options, like regional-sector multilateral diplomacy or civic dialogues (Clegg, 2014). Legalists offer legitimacy in the international arena, but they are prone to marginalise local voices and to stifle adaptability. This intransigence is not wholly irrational as it reflects Guyana's permanent interest in linear normative international structure. Nonetheless, it demonstrates how, once a path has been selected, even its limitations are institutionalised and the space for experimentation and democratic participation is closed down (Mahoney, 2004; Thelen, 1999).

Similarly, Venezuela, reflects an example of institutional lock-in, in which the paths of populist nationalism and referendums have become the routine tools of conflict regulation. This is perhaps best evidenced in the way the state time and time again brings up the Essequibo issue as a means of creating unity and taking attention away from failed governance in times of internal turmoil. The 2023 referendum is a good example, and serves as the model of the argument for this populist drama taking place over the diplomatic behavior (Chabrol, 2023). They may resonate with some audiences for the emotional punch they pack and because they plug into the idea of sovereignty, but overall, these measures help to reinforce authoritarian habits. That this entrenchedness is more or less institutionally “locked-in” also entails that, in times of crisis, the regime (or species) toolbox will be one of enforcement, symbolics and the externalization of domestic problems (Levitsky & Way, 2020). But this path, when it is paved, diverts change and keeps the focus on a status quo that serves regime survival not democratic response.

Moreover, institutional history shapes public expectations and legitimacy. The Guyanese public is very much disposed to rely on the diplomatic elites and, because it is being done for many territories contributes to legal arbitration as a natural thing. Such deference is not purely political in its effects, but cultural; it comes from decades of transnational give and take, from an investment in the normative power of international law (Mustabshira & Ahmed, 2024). In Venezuela it's the other way around: years of an anti-Western narrative and nationalistic education are what have made people skeptical of international bodies. The result is a bifurcated regional environment in which the populations of both states judge the logic of conflict strategies according to their histories. In this way, it is not only path dependence in institutions that shapes the state's behaviour but also citizens' expectations which effectively perpetuate institutional legacies and make the creation of alternative (more inclusive and democratic) forms of peacebuilding more difficult.

4.4. Democratic Recession and Conflict of Politics

Guyana vs Venezuela is a case study in how chronic geopolitical disputes can also accelerate the erosion of norms of democratic governance. In Venezuela, the Maduro government has exploited the Essequibo "controversy" not only as a foreign policy issue but a political talisman to distract attention from an imploding economy and hyper-inflation, and detract from its ever-increasing sway on domestic politics. That of the referendum of December 2023, for example, was presented as a manifestation of national sovereignty, but occurred under conditions of limitation of political participation, censorship and repression (Peralta, 2023). This instrumentalization of external threats is characteristic of what Diamond calls "stealth authoritarianism" (Diamond, 2021), where formal institutions are preserved but genuine power is exercised informally and via coercion (Keen, 2021). The government

narrative of being a victim from the outside shores up repression into the interior –dissent is labelled as unpatriotic, opposition is criminalized.

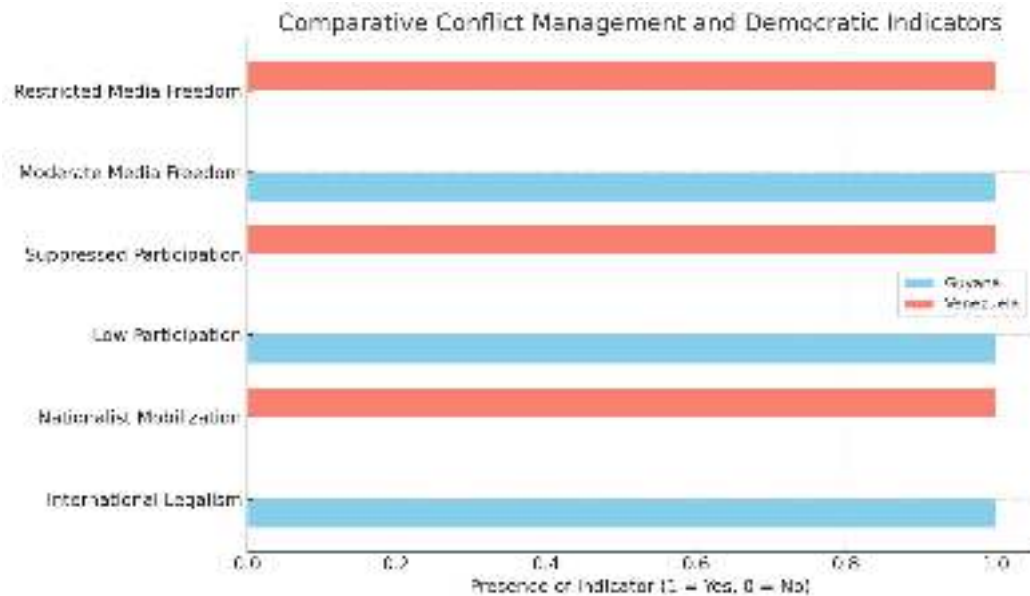


Figure 1: Contrasting Guyana’s and Venezuela’s approach to conflict management and their respective democratic indicators Source Venezuela, as shown, fits clearly into the authoritarian category, and Guyana’s fits into the democratic-but-exclusionary category (Levitsky & Way, 2020).

The country of Guyana, even as it retains democratic institutions and the rule of law, is also evincing subtler but no less meaningful indications of strain on its democracy. Its policy on its dispute over the Essequibo has been carried out largely by an elite with little involvement of civil society, the opposition, or the Indigenous peoples of contested areas (Cummings, 2018; Mustabshira & Ahmed, 2024). This marginalization of the voiceless does not make Guyana any sort of autocracy per se; it simply underscores the procedural more than participatory nature of Guyana's democracy. There is a frequent marginalization of deliberation, oversight and inclusiveness when national security or territorial undercut plays a dominant role. Guyana's reliance on technocratic legalism and international arbitration can therefore unwittingly help to generate democratic stasis, especially where decisions are perceived to be opaque or alien to public sentiment (Wolff, 2015).

This a pattern is not restricted to these two countries; it is a regional one in Latin America in which the logic of external conflict is employed to legitimize executive power and weaken democratic accountability. "The history is that there have been opportunities on multiple fronts historically for this type of thing to happen," says Weitz, citing Argentina's military junta during the Falklands War and Nicaragua adding a military element to the political mix in just the last few years as examples of how conflicts allow leaders who are not particularly democratic or are behaving in an authoritarian manner to use a conflict as a pretext to crack down at home. In these cases, the language of patriotism and of the nation even becomes an instrument of democratic degradation (Levitsky & Way, 2020). Even in democracies, security features more prominently than civil liberties, parliamentary oversight and pluralistic communication. An absence of institutional counterpoints such as independent mass media, working legislatures, and strong local authorities permits the security narrative to contaminate with little opposition, with the result often being to the further detriment of democratic vitality (Diamond, 2021).

As the Russia, China and US have also started to expand their strategic interests in Latin America—with the Guyana-Venezuela conflict at serious risk of becoming an avenue for foreign interference and repression on the domestic front. With Venezuela’s relationships with Russia and China already binding its anti-Western position and Guyana’s deepening

connections to U.S. hydrocarbons bringing their own international drivers, Any potential SR/R will have be heavily influenced by these new geopolitical concerns (Padula, 2023). These processes that raise the stakes of the territorial struggle, can also be expected to further increase polarisation and democratic erosion in the region. Political Contentions: In the absence of strong domestic institutions and transparent regional conflict resolution, politicization of international disputes may entrench authoritarianism with 'the justification' that it is in the interest of national security. In this sense then, the WaMi conflict is more than a mere bilateral squabble: rather it has the potential to be a witches' cauldron for the region's democratic resilience against rising illiberalism and great power competition (Mustabshira & Ahmed, 2024).

4.5. Implication for Peacebuilding and Regional Security

The implications of the findings of this analysis are doubly crucial for peacebuilding in Latin America, as the region has exhibited a longstanding pattern of top-down, elite driven diplomacy that sidelining democratic inclusion. Elite bargains and external arbitration are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions of successful peacemaking. For any peace process to be considered acceptable, as well as perceived legitimate and sustainable, it should feature mechanisms which include rights management, civil participation and public monitoring (Cheung, 2019). It faces systemic civic exclusion (in the case of Venezuela, through the state's control of the political discourse and the obliteration of dissent) prevents participation as a member of a broader citizenry. Procedurally democratic Guyana also displays a technocratic stance, in which foreign policy is made by a small elite and subject to little public deliberation or consultation. This absence of civic engagement erodes the democratic legitimacy of peacebuilding attempts and exposes both countries to potential internal unrest or the influences of political elites (Clegg, 2014; Wolff, 2015).

The research also challenges the notion that international legalism is the only way to provide for a fair settlement of disputes (Berti, 2023). While Guyana's approach of pursuing a judgement from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is consistent with the international rule of law and the principles of multilateralism, its unilateral nature has implications for representation and ownership at home. The regularity and normative clarity of legal structures may serve to exclude ordinary citizens or affected communities from the process of settlement (Goodman, 2020). States are not the only actors, however; both Indigenous peoples and borderlanders are involved in the Essequibo dispute, even though their role is largely missing from international litigation. This failure is a dark space between the state and those who would be its members. Guyana's dependence on legalism, however, as much as it deserves commendation for its loyalty to international order, also illustrates the limits of formalism in the absence of democratization. Several other global disputes, such as the Philippines-China South China Sea arbitration, came under similar critiques and showed that the legal victory does not result in a regional stability or empowerment of the public (Nicolic, 2018).

Finally, the findings emphasize the importance of regional organizations for conflict mitigation as well as democratic quality protection. Organisations such as the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) enjoy not only diplomatic space for manoeuvre but also normative power to support peace and mediate crises (Jackson, 2006; Kurtenbach, 2019). Their participation is needed to curb the unilateral or illiberal behaviour of states. For example, OAS resolutions concerning Venezuela's repression and security development mechanisms and CELAC resolutions on support for pacific settlement of disputes indicate the potential of these organizations to serve as regional adjudicators of democratic peace (Chabrol, 2023; Ince, 1970). Nevertheless, it is the task of these institutions to move away from reactive diplomacy towards proactive systems-based frameworks that would include early warning mechanisms, forums for civic dialogue and multi-faceted peace-building processes. In the absence of sustained regional engagement and robust international observation, the Guyana-Venezuela

conflict threatens to be a lasting tinderbox with serious implications for hemispheric security and the future of democratic governance in the Americas (Padula, 2023).

4.6. *Comparative Cases: Russia-Ukraine and the South China Sea*

The Guyana-Venezuela border dispute reflects global patterns in that states are employing territorial matters to serve domestic politics and within this context authoritarian regimes. There are two noteworthy comparative cases and they include the Russia-Ukraine competition for Crimea, as well as the South China Sea friction between China and its firms with Southeast Asia (Diprose, 2008; Höglund & Orjuela, 2012). These conflicts illustrate how nationalist discourse, historical revisionism and strategic legal or military defiance are being deployed as a means to (re)consolidate state power at minimal cost to democratic norms or international principles (Chalermripinyorat, 2020; Macaraig & Fenton, 2021).

Indeed, the Russia-Ukraine war and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 especially is a prime example of authoritarian problem management. Russia supported with ethno-nationalist propaganda and historical justification to be followed by a referendum held under military occupation in an operation that was subsequently castigated (Charap & Colton, 2017). Strategic Level Despite criticism from United Nations and international law experts, Russia's efforts skirted standard diplomatic paths, such as the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which was created to ensure that Ukrainians give up their nuclear weapons in exchange for the protection of their territorial integrity (Kudelia, 2014). This follows the example of Venezuela's deployment of the Essequibo referendum, both to side-step international legal norms and to present territorial disputes as existential national issues. Domestically, Russian state actors continued to stifle dissent, control media narratives, and outlaw opposition to the annexation, consolidating democratic decay (Andriani & Attata, 2022; Levitsky & Way, 2020; Rais, 2023; Syuryansyah & Berthanila, 2022).

In the South China Sea, China is asserting historic rights over much of the sea, all directly conflicting with the territorial waters claimed by the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and its neighbours. China's military and infrastructure development has not prevented despite 2016 decision by Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague that dismissed China's sweeping "Nine-Dash Line" claim (Kurnia & Agustian, 2021; Schoenbaum, 2016; Thayer, 2019). Beijing's strategy combines economic coercion and military muscle to back up its claims, while refusing multilateral legal arbitration. There is similarities and differences between this method and the Guyana-Venezuela spat: Venezuela, like China, marches to the beat of its own drum on international legal judgments; Guyana, like China, points to historical sovereignty, but has not to democratic principles.

These cases indicate that illiberal peacebuilding, conflict management which prioritized state suppression and regime stability over participatory government and the rule of law, is not limited to Latin America. Useful comparisons can be made with Russia and China, on the one hand, and Guyana and Venezuela, on the other. Russia and Venezuela insist on nationalist populism with a streak of authoritarianism, while Guyana and China (each in separate ways) rely on the strictures of law or history to a gunpoint, more or less consistent with international law and democracy. The lesson is stark: international legalism, even when dressed up by legalism, cannot promise resolution of conflict or democratic integrity unless it also meets with inclusive and transparent governance. From here, it can be seen that the Guyana-Venezuela controversy is also situated within a wider set of global territorial disputes driven more by the nature of regimes and domestic politics than by legality or diplomacy. The latter debates, if unresolved (and if we think peacebuilding must remain illiberal or exclusionary), are not just a regionalised threat to security; the local and regional is also that of global norms relating to sovereignty and international law.

4.7. *Geopolitical Considerations*

The Guyana-Venezuela conflict over the disputed Essequibo territory has enormous geopolitical consequences for regional security and world affairs. Recent Venezuela actions,



such as a referendum to assert claims to Essequibo, have been interpreted by analysts as an attempt to distract from its own problems and boost nationalist sentiment ahead of the 2024 presidential election. These types of maneuvers are a part of global power plays over territory, the author writes, like Russia's annexation of Crimea or when powerful countries roll over and take smaller countries with nothing really legal justifying such actions on the world stage. This juxtaposition has implications for potential regional fragmentation and dismissal of existing international standards.

Nonetheless, some of the most serious regional and international issues arise from the involvement of great powers (especially the United States) in a volatile geopolitical context. Guyana's suddenly lucrative oil industry has attracted significant American investment, primarily from ExxonMobil, which would further cement economic and strategic links between the two governments. The US has also taken the arms build up by Venezuela even higher with recent defense agreements that will protect the hispanicism region's defense interests. These developments move the oil-rich South American country into a strategic camp for the U.S. that could deter some violent moves by Venezuela while raising the risk of an escalation to a wider geopolitical confrontation.

It is also crucial to mediating the role of local actors, especially Brazil. Not only Brazil borders Guyana and Venezuela, but it has also pursued more of a wait-and-see attitude diplomatically regarding this dispute in hoping that the situation will not escalate further. Even Brazilian president Lula da Silva has been reluctantly forced to play the role of middleman, and this has not been an easy path as it becomes increasingly clear how hard it is to find common ground between these two-warring factions. Brazil's part is pivotal, as a military conflict in the region would immediately immerse its national security and economic interests by demonstrating how South American geopolitics are intertwined.

4.8. Effective Resolution Strategies for the Guyana-Venezuela Border Dispute

Multidimensional approach the government's position is that the Guyana-Venezuela territorial dispute will be won or lost along three complementary dimensions: the law or legal chatter, diplomacy, and economic or the as yet untapped venous resource underground. Through adopting international rules of the game, pursuing regional cooperation, and emphasizing public diplomacy, both countries can turn historical bitterness into a new chance for common development and stability. These paths are difficult but represent a complete way out from one of the most long-lasting territorial disputes in Latin America. The second set of visual images is the bar chart of proposed solutions to the Guyana-Venezuela border dispute in terms of the importance of resolving. All strategies are assessed for their ability to be supportive of a peaceful and sustainable outcome, with the "International Legal Adjudication" method, and "Neutral Third Party Mediation" being the most accommodating.

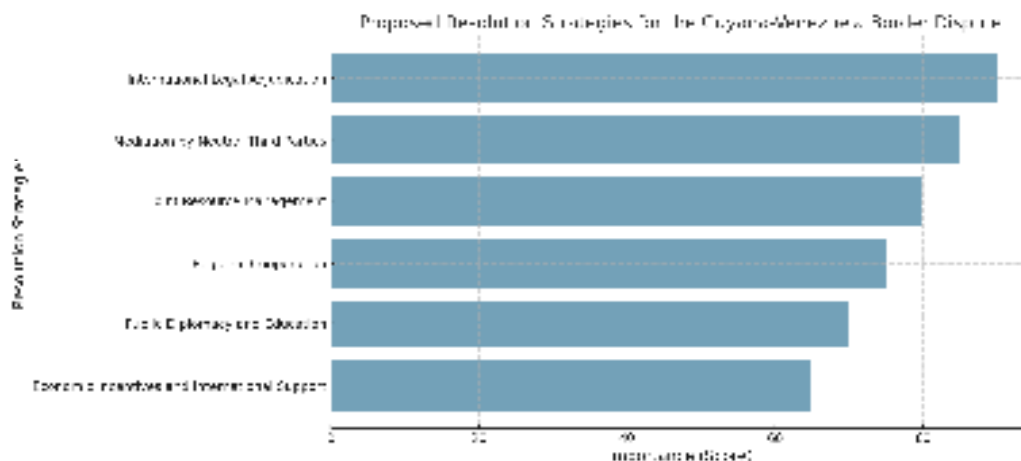


Figure 2: Proposed Resolution Strategies for Guyana-Venezuela Border Dispute

The proposed resolution strategies for Guyana-Venezuela Border dispute are as follows; First, Adjudication at the International Level. The ICJ is central in addressing the legal issues in the dispute. Guyana's application to have the 1899 Arbitral Award upheld is that legal course to bring finality and clarity to the issue of territory. Though Venezuela disputes the ICJ's jurisdiction, compliance by both sides with any judgment by the court would serve as an affirmation of the international rule of law. This process can be reinforced through the provision of capacity-building assistance to regional legal institutions, which can further enhance the influence of international law over territorial disputes (Ince, 1970).

Second, Neutral Third Party Mediation. The U.N., or a third party both nations are comfortable with - perhaps Brazil—could serve as mediators between the two. Mediation should foster confidence-building pacts agreements about how to stop posturing militarily, what language not to fan passions with and how to jointly manage resources. As a large regional state with a track record of interventionism, Brazil can use its influence to convene negotiations, balancing view and an emphasis on equilibrium (Gopin, 2000).

Third, Joint Resource Management. The potential richness of the Essequibo's resources could be the foundation for joint development responsibility. A joint regime for exploiting the resources would bring economic windfalls for both countries, and ease tension over territorial rights. This includes clear opportunities for revenue and investment sharing mechanisms that are administered by an independent international body, which keeps the parties honest and avoids unfair trade (Chabrol, 2023).

Fourth, Regional Cooperation. Boosting the role of South American regional organisations, such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) would enable a forum for joint diplomacy initiatives. CELAC might serve as a platform for dialogue and for proposing economic partnerships; it might serve as a mediator in disputes. Joint resource management projects, like environmental conservation programs for the contested area, could also converge the country's interests (Jackson, 2006).

Fifth, Public diplomacy and education. Both countries can also fund public diplomacy initiatives to dampen nationalistic enthusiasm and misinformation about their differences. Exchange programs and exchanging ideas through media and popular culture can foster understanding and mitigate hatred. Strategically developing people-to-people links is key to building a structure for peace of the willing.

Finally, economic pressure and external support. World powers, and in particular those with interests in the region, including the US and EU, may provide economic incentives for resolution. Aid, investments in infrastructure, and capacity-building programs linked to the success of negotiations could prove to be sufficient incentives for concessions to be made (Haynes, 2018).

5. Conclusion

The Guyana-Venezuela territorial dispute over the Essequibo region exemplifies how past grievances and path-dependent political strategies can perpetuate illiberal peacebuilding approaches and contribute to a more widespread democratic downturn in Latin America. Whereas Venezuela leaned heavily on nationalism and authoritarian mobilisation, and Guyana depended more on technocratic legalism, a common denominator was the marginalisation of civic life and public discussion. These trends suggest that peace initiatives dominated by political elites or shaped by authoritarian interests often sacrifice democratic values in favor of state control and international legitimacy.

Comparisons with conflicts such as Russia's annexation of Crimea and China's actions in the South China Sea show that illiberal approaches to peacebuilding are a worldwide problem. In both cases, territorial disputes function less as spaces for inclusive dialogue and more as instruments of political consolidation. The Guyana-Venezuela dispute similarly extends beyond a bilateral disagreement, illustrating at a regional level how geopolitical pressures and rigid institutions can erode democratic norms. Even where legal mechanisms and

international scrutiny are present, conflicts that exclude civil society, opposition actors, and affected communities tend to reproduce marginalization and instability.

The presence of regional and international bodies highlights the tension between liberal peacebuilding at the international level and local authoritarian practices that tend to be illiberal. The conflicts that arise reflect Wolf's thesis regarding the emergence of post-liberal peace in Latin America, where states have developed hybrid forms of conflict resolution that do not fully adhere to liberal international principles. From the perspective of illiberal peacebuilding, the state as a conflict actor prioritizes domestic regime stability over democratic values and human rights, leading to the neglect of social justice and the rule of law. Meanwhile, regional bodies and international partners strive to engage in legal processes and diplomatic dialogue to enhance the effectiveness of the liberal framework, which will inevitably clash with local authoritarian or illiberal practices that simultaneously challenge the international liberal peacebuilding order. Following post-liberal peace, which explains that states will form hybrid conflict resolution efforts that is, ones not fully aligned with international liberal principles as demonstrated by Venezuela's use of the Essequibo territorial dispute as a political instrument to mobilize nationalist sentiment, divert attention from domestic crises, and strengthen authoritarian control by silencing opposition voices. While Guyana maintains a procedural democratic structure, it exhibits a form of passive illiberalism through technocratic exclusion, as decision-making processes related to conflict are dominated by the bureaucratic and diplomatic elite without any civilian involvement. Conflict resolution that takes the form of local authoritarian practices or what is known as illiberal peacebuilding will erode the mechanisms of multilateralism in attempts to resolve conflicts through the principles of international liberal peacebuilding.

Achieving lasting peace and democratic resilience therefore requires Guyana and Venezuela to move beyond elite bargaining and narrow legalism. Regional bodies and international partners have an essential role to play in fostering peace processes that are open, transparent, and participatory. Options such as shared resource governance, public-facing diplomacy, and impartial third-party mediation offer pathways toward transforming the conflict. Ultimately, resolving the Essequibo dispute will depend not only on legal clarity, but on democratic legitimacy rooted in accountability, citizen engagement, and regional cooperation.

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