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The Resolution Illusion: Why No Conflict Has Ever Been Terminally Resolved, and What Peace Practice Should Do Instead

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Abstract

Conflict resolution is the founding promise of peace and conflict studies. It assumes that a conflict can be brought to an end so that the issues that caused it no longer exist. In this article, I argue that this promise is an illusion. My central claim is that no conflict has been terminally resolved. What peace agreements, court judgments, amnesty and military victories achieve is the end of an episode, not the end of the conflict. The incompatibility that produced the conflict survives in a changed form: as latent grievance, as collective memory, as structural inequality, or as a new organisation pursuing an old cause. I support this claim through qualitative documentary analysis of global and Nigerian cases, along with over a decade of my published arguments and lectures. The global cases are the Korean peninsula, Cyprus, Israel–Palestine, Northern Ireland, Sudan and South Sudan, the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and Russia–Ukraine. The Nigerian cases include the Biafra question, the Jos–Plateau crisis, electoral violence, the Niger Delta, the Boko Haram insurgency, and the Bakassi Peninsula. In every case, a declared end was followed by recurrence, relapse, or a transformed struggle over the same underlying issues. Drawing on social conflict theory, Galtung's peace theory and Lederach's conflict transformation framework, I present a resolution illusion cycle and a Conflict Continuity Management Matrix. I conclude that peace practice should abandon the language of final settlement and adopt continuous management and transformation of conflict, supported by long-term funding, early conflict warning and response systems, and inclusive local institutions. For Africa, this means designing peace architecture for permanent engagement rather than for exit.

Keywords*:* conflict resolution; conflict transformation; conflict recurrence; resolution illusion; Nigeria

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Introduction

From 7 to 13 September 2001, Jos, the capital of Plateau State in central Nigeria, experienced mass killing on a scale it had not known in its recent history. Figures compiled by local human rights groups and religious bodies indicated that more than 1,000 people were killed in six days in a city that had long prided itself on peaceful coexistence (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2001). The federal and state governments set up commissions of inquiry, and the crisis was treated as an event that had ended. It had not. Large-scale violence returned to Jos in 2008 and again in 2010, a pattern that Krause (2011) described as a deadly cycle. Each episode was followed by security deployment, inquiry and reconciliation efforts; each was followed, in turn, by another episode.

Jos is not an exception. The World Bank (2011) reported that 90 per cent of the civil wars of the 2000s occurred in countries that had already experienced civil wars in the previous 30 years. Estimates of how often wars return differ with definitions and methods. Collier, Hoeffler and Söderbom (2008) placed the risk of reversion within a decade at about 40 percent, while Suhrke and Samset (2007) showed how an earlier and higher estimate travelled into policy documents even after its authors had revised it downwards. The precise figure is contested; the pattern is not. A significant portion of the conflicts that are declared ended return.

In this article, I go further than the recurrence literature. I argue that conflict resolution, understood as the final and complete removal of a conflict and its causes, is an illusion. My claim is that no conflict, local or global, has been terminally resolved. Conflicts are settled, suppressed, managed, adjudicated, frozen or transformed; they are not extinguished. I call the belief that they can be extinguished, and the practice of declaring that they have been, the *resolution illusion*. The claim is not a counsel of despair. It is a call to replace the goal of ending conflict with engaging it continuously and constructively.

This is not a new position for me. I have advanced it in my studies of domestic terrorism and inter-group relations (Obi, 2015, 2018c), civil society and peacebuilding (Obi, 2018a, 2018b, 2022; Obi & Edet, 2023), electoral conflict (Obi, 2018d, 2018f), early warning (Akujobi & Obi, 2024; Obi, 2025) and regional security (Ayuk, Obi, Aboh, et al., 2026; Ayuk, Obi, Tiku, et al., 2026). I have also argued about it with professional colleagues in several forums. Since 2019, I have made the case in my lectures on peace support operations and conflict resolution mechanisms to officers on the Naval Warfare Course at the Naval War College, Nigeria. I

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have argued it in postgraduate seminars and doctoral supervision in the Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution, University of Calabar. I have also pressed it within the Society for Peace Studies and Practice (SPSP), where I served as First National Vice President and on its committee on curriculum development in conflict analysis and peacebuilding, and in the festschrift volumes that the Society has published (Obi, 2019; Obi & Edet, 2024; Obi, 2025). In policy forums, I have addressed this issue in my work published with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Obi, 2022) and the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (Obi, 2023). In these settings, the most frequent objection from colleagues has been that the claim is either self-evident or unfalsifiable. I answer both objections in this article.

The article has four objectives. First, it defines terminal resolution and sets out criteria for testing whether any conflict has reached it. Second, it examines global and Nigerian cases against those criteria. Third, the article explains how the resolution illusion is both produced and sustained. Fourth, it proposes an alternative framework for practice, presented as a resolution illusion cycle (Figure 1) and a Conflict Continuity Management Matrix (Table 2), and draws out its policy implications. After this introduction, the article reviews the literature, sets out its theoretical framework and methodology, presents and discusses its findings, and ends with conclusions and recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual clarification

Five terms need to be kept apart. *Conflict* is a situation in which parties pursue goals they see as incompatible; Galtung (1996) calls this incompatibility the contradiction at the base of every conflict. *Settlement* is an agreement that ends hostilities by bargaining over interests without necessarily touching the needs underneath them. Burton (1990) drew this distinction sharply, reserving *resolution* for outcomes that remove the underlying causes by satisfying basic human needs, so that the parties no longer have reason to fight. *Conflict management* refers to efforts to contain and limit a conflict, often without any claim to end it (Zartman, 1989). *Conflict transformation* treats conflict as a normal and continuing part of social life and seeks to change its expression, its relationships and its structures over time (Lederach, 1995, 2003; Miall, 2004). Finally, *termination* is an empirical category used in conflict datasets: the Uppsala Conflict Data Program records a conflict episode as ended when organised violence falls below its threshold, and a later return is recorded as a new episode of the same conflict (Kreutz, 2010).

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From these distinctions, I derive the concept of *terminal resolution*. A conflict is terminally resolved only when three conditions are met together: the underlying incompatibility has been extinguished rather than suppressed; there has been no relapse into organised violence over the same issues within at least one generation; and no successor actor has mobilised around the same grievances. This definition matters because most claims of resolution rest on only the first half of the second condition, a period without violence.

2.2 The resolution paradigm

Conflict resolution emerged as a field in the 1950s and 1960s, shaped by Cold War anxiety. The *Journal of Conflict Resolution* was founded in 1957 by scholars including Kenneth Boulding, whose general theory of conflict treated it as a system open to rational analysis (Boulding, 1962). Burton (1990) developed the problem-solving approach for deep-rooted conflicts, while Fisher and Ury (1981) popularised interest-based negotiation. Zartman (1989) added the idea that conflicts become ripe for resolution when parties face a mutually hurting stalemate. These contributions share an optimistic premise: that a proper analysis can bring an end to conflict. That optimism was a deliberate rejection of fatalism about war, and it produced valuable tools. Its weakness lies in the endpoint it assumes. Human needs, interests and identities are not fixed; they change as populations, economies and political orders change. A settlement that satisfies the needs of one generation may frustrate those of the next.

2.3 Traditions that question resolution

A second body of work has long expressed scepticism about the possibility of ending conflict. Social conflict theorists treat conflict as a permanent feature of society. Coser (1956) argued that conflict performs social functions, including group cohesion and the adjustment of norms, and so cannot be removed without changing society itself. Dahrendorf (1959) held that conflicts arising from the unequal distribution of authority can be regulated but not eliminated. Azar (1990) described protracted social conflicts as prolonged, fluctuating struggles over identity and basic needs that have no clear point of termination. Galtung (1969) distinguished negative peace, the absence of direct violence, from positive peace, the absence of structural violence, and so showed that the end of fighting may leave the roots of conflict intact. Mac Ginty (2006) documented how many peace accords produce a condition of "no war, no peace" rather than settlement.

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The conflict transformation school provides a practical framework for addressing this doubt. Lederach (1997, 2003) argues that conflict is a normal part of human relationships and that the task is to change destructive patterns into constructive ones across time horizons that run from immediate crisis response to generational change. Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall (2016) treat transformation as the deepest level of conflict resolution, while Kriesberg (1998) shows how conflicts pass through cycles of escalation and de-escalation. What these writers do not quite do is state plainly that resolution in the terminal sense has never occurred. Transformation is usually presented as a better route to resolution, not as its replacement. This is the step I take.

2.4 Empirical studies of recurrence

Quantitative studies strengthen the case. Licklider (1995) found that civil wars ended by negotiated settlement were more likely to resume than those ended by military victory, and Toft (2010) reached a similar conclusion. These findings are often read as support for victory over negotiation. When interpreted differently, the results indicate only that victory suppresses opponents more effectively within the study's observation window; however, they do not demonstrate that the incompatibility has been resolved. Walter (2004) found that renewed war is more likely where living conditions are poor and political access is limited, which places the source of recurrence in unresolved structural conditions. Wallensteen (2015) argues that the proper test of peace is its quality over time, including security, dignity and inclusion, rather than the signing of an agreement. The recurrence literature therefore measures how often the resolution illusion fails visibly; it does not measure how often it fails quietly.

2.5 My contributions and the gap

My own work has developed this argument in stages. In rethinking the role of Islam in the Boko Haram phenomenon, I argued that reducing the insurgency to religion hides the social and political grievances that sustain it, so that defeating a group does not remove its causes (Obi, 2015). I extended the argument to inter-group relations, showing how terrorism leaves lasting damage to relations between communities (Obi, 2018c), and to the language of the state, demonstrating how extreme labels can close the public account of a conflict while insecurity continues (Obi, 2023). In the Niger Delta, I argued that civil society must remain engaged across cycles of crisis rather than at their peaks (Obi, 2018b, 2022), and with

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colleagues I traced how the crisis spilt over into the wider Gulf of Guinea (Simbine & Obi, 2018). In the Mano River Union, my co-author and I argued that peace operations need an exit strategy grounded in the roles of women in sustaining peace, not a departure premised on an achieved end (Obi & Obaji-Akpet, 2018). My work on early warning and response systems rests on the premise that conflicts are latent before they are visible and return after they are declared over (Akujobi & Obi, 2024; Obi, 2025). More recently, my co-authors and I have shown how climate stress and resource insecurity reshape communal violence in Africa (Obi, Fofanah, et al., 2026) and how war economies provide actors with a stake in continued insecurity (Obi, Sonime, et al., 2026).

The gap this article addresses is conceptual. Literature treats recurrence as the failure rate of an outcome that is possible in principle. I treat terminal resolution as an outcome for which there is currently no confirmed case, and I outline the implications for theory, policy, and practice if continuity, rather than closure, is considered the normal condition of conflict.

3 Theoretical Framework

I anchor the argument in a *conflict continuity* framework that combines three traditions. The first is social conflict theory. Following Coser (1956) and Dahrendorf (1959), I take conflict to be a permanent property of social life that arises from differences in interest, identity and authority. On this point, the relevant question is not whether conflict will end but how it will be regulated.

The second is Galtung's peace theory. Galtung (1996) models conflict as a triangle of attitudes, behaviour and contradiction. Ceasefires, amnesty and military victories act mainly on behaviour. They leave hostile attitudes and the underlying contradiction in place, which is why they produce negative rather than positive peace (Galtung, 1969). The resolution illusion is, in Galtung's terms, the mistaking of negative peace for a resolution.

The third is Lederach's conflict transformation. Lederach (1997, 2003) places relationships at the centre of peace and insists that peacebuilding must work across time frames, from crisis response to generational change. Because relationships and structures are always changing, the work of transformation cannot be completed; it can only be sustained.

From these traditions, I derive four propositions. First, every conflict rests on an incompatibility that can be changed but not permanently removed. Second, instruments that act on behaviour alone produce episodes of calm, not resolution. Third, the declaration of

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resolution is itself a cause of recurrence because it withdraws attention and resources while residue remains. Fourth, durable peace is a condition that must be continuously produced, not a state that is once achieved.

4. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative, interpretive design. It is a conceptual and comparative case study that relies on documentary analysis. The sources are primary documents (peace agreements, court judgements and United Nations resolutions), reports by human rights and research organisations, and peer-reviewed scholarship. No human participants were involved, so no ethical clearance was required.

I selected cases purposively for maximum variation. The global cases cover interstate and intrastate conflicts and different forms of ending: armistice (Korea), peacekeeping without settlement (Cyprus), negotiated framework (Israel–Palestine), comprehensive peace agreement (Northern Ireland; Sudan), recent mediated accords (Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo) and failed ceasefires (Russia–Ukraine). The Nigerian cases cover civil war (Biafra), inter-communal violence (Jos–Plateau), electoral violence, resource conflict (Niger Delta), insurgency (Boko Haram) and an international judicial settlement (Bakassi). I deliberately included cases that are usually cited as successes, such as Northern Ireland and Bakassi, because these provide the hardest test of my claim.

Each case was assessed against the three conditions of terminal resolution set out in Section 2.1. The analytical strategy was to trace, for each case, the declared end, what followed it, and whether the underlying incompatibility survived. A second strand of evidence is reflexive. Following Schön's (1983) account of the reflective practitioner, I draw on my publications and professional engagements to show how the argument has been developed and tested with colleagues. This strand documents the history of the argument; it is not used as evidence about the cases.

The study has limits. Documentary analysis depends on the quality of existing sources, and case selection can bias findings. I reduce this risk by including success cases and by stating the claim in a form that can be refuted: a single case that meets all three conditions over a generation would falsify it. This also answers the objection that the claim is unfalsifiable.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Global cases

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The Korean peninsula. The Armistice Agreement of 27 July 1953 stopped the fighting of the Korean War but was never followed by a peace treaty (Korean War Armistice Agreement, 1953; Stueck, 2002). The demilitarised zone continues to divide the two Korean states more than seven decades later. The war ended as an episode; the conflict continues as a frozen state of armed rivalry.

Cyprus. In 1964, the Security Council established the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (United Nations Security Council, 1964). The island has been divided since 1974, and the force remains in place. Peacekeeping has prevented large-scale war for decades, which is a real achievement, but it has managed the conflict rather than resolved it.

Israel–Palestine. The Declaration of Principles signed in 1993 set out interim self-government and a timetable for permanent status negotiations (Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, 1993). The permanent status issues were never settled, and decades have seen repeated cycles of violence. The agreement was widely celebrated as a breakthrough; it turned out to be a waypoint.

Northern Ireland. The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement of 1998 is often cited as proof that resolution is possible (The Belfast Agreement, 1998). Armed conflict has largely ended, and that is a major gain. Yet in 2012, 69 per cent of residents living near Belfast's peace walls believed the walls were still necessary because of the continuing potential for violence (Byrne et al., 2012). The conflict has been transformed from armed struggle into a political and communal contest. It has not been extinguished.

Sudan and South Sudan. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 ended Africa's longest civil war and led to South Sudan's independence in 2011. Within two years, South Sudan itself descended into civil war in December 2013 (de Waal, 2014). The agreement answered one incompatibility, over self-determination, only for others, over power and resources, to surface inside the new state.

Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The M23 armed group, which first emerged in 2012, relaunched its offensive in 2021 and captured Goma and Bukavu in early 2025 (Al Jazeera, 2026a). The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda signed the Washington Accords in December 2025, and the Congolese government signed the Doha Framework with M23 in November 2025. By September 2026, fighting between the Congolese army and M23 had continued in North and South Kivu, and key obligations under the Washington process had not been declared complete (Al Jazeera, 2026b; Council on Foreign Relations, 2026). The

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roots of the conflict reach back to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the collapse of the Mobutu regime.

Russia–Ukraine. The ceasefire arrangements agreed in Minsk in 2014 and 2015 did not prevent the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. My colleagues and I examined the security consequences of that war for Africa (Obi et al., 2024), and in a separate study my co-author and I examined how tensions around the Strait of Hormuz recur and affect African security and development (Obi & Samuel, 2026). In both cases, the global order treats episodes of calm as settlement, and African states bear the costs when the underlying rivalries return.

5.2 Nigerian cases

The Biafra question. The Nigerian Civil War ended in January 1970 under the policy of "no victor, no vanquished." The war ended, but the question of the South-East's place in the federation remained unresolved. It returned through the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which the Federal High Court proscribed as a terrorist organisation in September 2017, a designation the Court of Appeal upheld in January 2025 (European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA], 2025). I have argued that such agitation reflects unaddressed questions about the structure of the federation, which I proposed to address through a region-centred restructuring framework (Obi, 2018e).

Jos and Plateau State. As shown in the introduction, the 2001 crisis was followed by further major episodes in 2008 and 2010 (HRW, 2001; Krause, 2011). The dispute over indigeneity, land and political representation that drives the violence has been the subject of enquiries but not of a lasting change in its structural basis. My work with colleagues on climate stress and communal violence shows that these disputes are now being reshaped by resource pressures, producing a new geography of an old conflict (Obi, Fofanah, et al., 2026).

Electoral violence. Violence after the April 2011 presidential election left more than 800 people dead in three days of rioting across 12 northern states (HRW, 2011). Nigeria's later elections have been less deadly, but the winner-takes-all stakes that produce electoral conflict remain. In my studies of the election–security–development interface and of conflict sensitivity in election programming, I argued that each election cycle re-opens the same contest and should be planned for as such (Obi, 2018d, 2018f).

The Niger Delta. The Presidential Amnesty Programme of 2009 was a pivotal moment that significantly decreased armed militancy. Yet the grievances over oil revenue, environmental

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damage and exclusion that produced militancy remained largely in place (Obi & Rustad, 2011; Watts, 2004). My studies of civil society in the region (Obi, 2018b, 2022) and of its spillover into the Gulf of Guinea (Simbine & Obi, 2018) show a conflict whose form changes, from protest to militancy to oil theft and piracy, while its core persists. The war economy that develops around such conflicts gives some actors an interest in their continuation (Obi, Sonime, et al., 2026).

The Boko Haram insurgency. In December 2015, President Muhammadu Buhari told the BBC that Nigeria had "technically won the war" against Boko Haram (BBC News, 2015). The same report noted critics' observation that each time the army claimed to have wiped out the group, it had quietly rebuilt. In October 2016, the president insisted on the group's defeat while acknowledging continued attacks on soft targets (Africanews, 2016). The insurgency has continued in the years since. I have argued that the insurgency is rooted in grievances that military action alone cannot remove and that civil society has a continuing role in countering violent extremism (Obi, 2015, 2024a).

The Bakassi Peninsula. This is the hardest test of my claim. The International Court of Justice (2002) ruled on the land and maritime boundary between Cameroon and Nigeria, and the Greentree Agreement of 2006 set out the modalities for Nigeria's withdrawal and the transfer of authority (Greentree Agreement, 2006). The interstate dispute has not returned to war, and this is a notable success of judicial settlement. Yet the Greentree Agreement itself contained provisions to protect the rights of Nigerian nationals living in the peninsula. The parties therefore anticipated that the human questions of identity, livelihood and belonging would continue after the transfer of sovereignty. The conflict was transformed from an interstate dispute into a set of local and humanitarian questions; it was not extinguished.

Table 1 summarises the cases against the conditions for terminal resolution.

Table 1: Declared ends and what followed in selected global and Nigerian conflicts

Case	Declared end	What followed	Sources
Korean peninsula	Armistice, 1953	No peace treaty; divided states in armed rivalry	Korean War Armistice Agreement (1953); Stueck (2002)
Cyprus	UN peacekeeping from 1964	Division since 1974; peacekeepers still deployed	UN Security Council (1964)
Israel–Palestine	Declaration of Principles, 1993	Permanent status unresolved; repeated cycles of violence	Declaration of Principles (1993)
Northern Ireland	Belfast Agreement, 1998	Armed conflict largely ended; peace	Byrne et al. (2012)

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Case	Declared end	What followed	Sources
		walls still seen as necessary	
Sudan / South Sudan	Comprehensive Peace Agreement, 2005	Independence 2011; civil war in South Sudan from 2013	de Waal (2014)
Eastern DRC	Washington Accords and Doha Framework, 2025	Fighting continued into 2026	Al Jazeera (2026a, 2026b); CFR (2026)
Biafra question	End of civil war, 1970	Renewed separatist agitation; IPOB proscribed 2017	EUAA (2025); Obi (2018e)
Jos–Plateau	Inquiries and security response, 2001	Major episodes in 2008 and 2010	HRW (2001); Krause (2011)
Electoral violence	Elections concluded, 2011	More than 800 killed after polls; contest renewed each cycle	HRW (2011); Obi (2018d, 2018f)
Niger Delta	Amnesty Programme, 2009	Militancy reduced; grievances and illicit economy persist	Obi & Rustad (2011); Obi (2018b, 2022)
Boko Haram	"Technically defeated", 2015	Insurgency continued	BBC News (2015); Africanews (2016)
Bakassi Peninsula	ICJ judgment 2002; Greentree Agreement 2006	No interstate war: human and livelihood questions persist	ICJ (2002); Greentree Agreement (2006)

Source: Author's compilation (2026) from the sources listed.

No case meets all three conditions of terminal resolution. Some cases, notably Northern Ireland and Bakassi, show real and valuable reductions in violence. But in each, the underlying incompatibility survives, either in latent form or in a new arena.

5.3 How the resolution illusion is produced and sustained

The cases point to five mechanisms. The first is *structural residue*. Agreements address the most visible dispute while leaving the conditions that made it possible, such as horizontal inequalities between groups, in place (Stewart, 2008). The second is *relational residue*. Signed documents change formal relations but not the fear, mistrust and memory that shape how communities treat each other, which Lederach (1997) places at the heart of peacebuilding. The third is *accumulated memory*. Each unresolved episode adds to a store of grievance that lowers the threshold for the next, as the Jos cycle shows (Krause, 2011). The fourth is *spoiler incubation*. Actors who lose from an agreement, or who profit from insecurity, use their remaining capacity to undermine it (Stedman, 1997; Obi, Sonime, et al., 2026). The fifth is *narrative closure*. Declarations such as "technically defeated" signal to publics, funders and officials that the task is complete. Attention and resources are withdrawn at the moment when the residues are most active. My work on extreme labels makes a related

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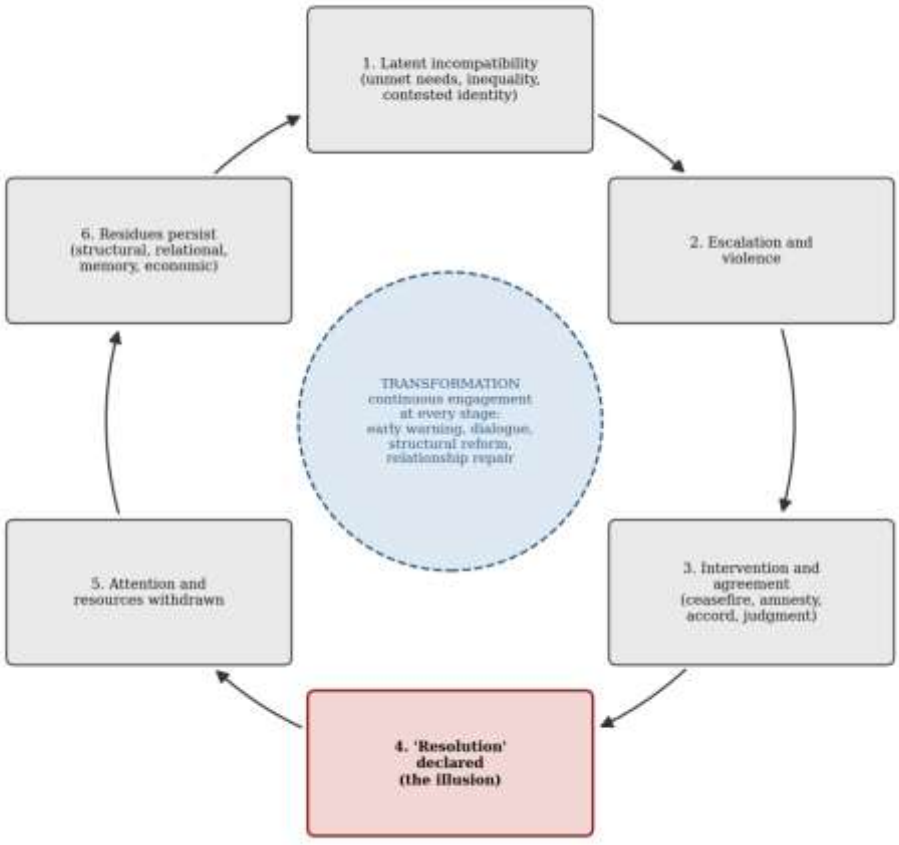
point: the words the state uses to describe a conflict can close it in public discourse while leaving it open on the ground (Obi, 2023).

These mechanisms form a cycle, shown in Figure 1. Latent incompatibility escalates into violence; intervention produces an agreement or victory; resolution is declared; attention is withdrawn; residues persist and feed the next round. The alternative is not a better exit from this cycle but continuous engagement at every stage of it.

Figure 1: The resolution illusion cycle and the transformation alternative



Source: Author's conceptualisation (2026), drawing on Galtung (1969, 1996), Lederach (1997, 2003) and Kreutz (2010).

5.4 Counter-arguments

Colleagues have raised three objections to my claim in the forum described above. The first is that some conflicts clearly have ended, with Franco-German rivalry after 1945 often cited. My response is that this case shows transformation, not termination. The rivalry was channelled into shared institutions that continue to manage competing national interests. The

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conflict of interest remains; its violent expression has been made unthinkable by constant institutional work. That is precisely the model I advocate.

The second objection points to West African post-war successes such as Sierra Leone. Here, too, peace has been sustained, not completed. My co-author and I show that peace in Sierra Leone depends on the continuing, community-led work of women and local institutions within decentralised governance (Fofanah & Obi, 2026). Where that work weakens, the risk returns. My analysis of threats to peace in Guinea (Obi, 2018g) and of the role of women in the Mano River Union (Obi & Obaji-Akpet, 2018) supports the same conclusion for the wider sub-region.

The third objection is that the claim cannot be tested. As stated in Section 4, it can: a single conflict that meets all three conditions of terminal resolution over a generation would refute it. The burden of evidence rests on those who claim that resolution has occurred, and so far, the cases examined here do not meet it.

5.5 The Conflict Continuity Management Matrix

If continuity is the normal condition of conflict, practice needs tools for managing it. Table 2 presents the Conflict Continuity Management Matrix. For each of the five common conflict types, it sets out the resolution illusion, what remains, the transformative approach, and indicators that show whether transformation is taking place. The indicators measure outcomes, not activities.

Table 2: Conflict Continuity Management Matrix

Conflict type	Resolution illusion	What actually remains	Transformative approach	Continuity indicators
Inter-communal	Peace accord signed means conflict ended	Land and indigeneity disputes; memory of past violence; mistrust	Land governance reform; community dialogue; truth-telling; early warning and response	Joint market activity; inter-group trust; early warning alerts acted on
Resource-based	Amnesty or compensation means conflict resolved	Revenue and environmental grievances; illicit economy; exclusion	Revenue transparency; environmental remediation; livelihood investment; disruption of illicit economy	Livelihood diversification; decline in oil theft; remediation coverage
Electoral	Results accepted means contest over	Winner-takes-all stakes; distrust of institutions	Conflict-sensitive election programming across cycles; institutional reform	Trust in electoral bodies; trend in violence across cycles
Insurgency	Military victory means insurgency	Ideological and material grievance;	Community reintegration; education;	Recruitment rates; return of displaced

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Conflict type	Resolution illusion	What actually remains	Transformative approach	Continuity indicators
	ended	displaced and traumatised communities	governance reform; civil society role in countering violent extremism	persons; community acceptance of returnees
Workplace and organisational	Grievance closed means dispute settled	Relational damage; power imbalance; unaddressed systemic causes	Self-mediation and standing dialogue structures; culture change	Repeat grievance rate; staff trust; retention

Source: Author's construction (2026), drawing on Lederach (2003), Obi (2018f, 2021, 2024a, 2025).

The matrix rests on a simple principle drawn from my work on self-mediation in the workplace: parties who must continue to live or work together need a standing means of handling their differences, not a one-off settlement (Obi, 2021). The same principle holds at the level of communities and states.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

I have argued that conflict resolution, in the sense of the final removal of a conflict and its causes, is an illusion, and that no conflict examined here has been terminally resolved. The global cases, from Korea to the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Nigerian cases, from Biafra to Bakassi, show the same pattern: a declared end followed by recurrence, relapse or transformation into a new arena. The finding is not that peace efforts fail. Many of them save lives and reduce violence. The finding is that they succeed in management and transformation but fail only when they are mistaken for resolution. The most harmful effect of the resolution illusion is institutional: it rewards agreements signed rather than conditions changed, and it withdraws attention when the residues of conflict are most active.

The following recommendations follow from the analysis.

For national governments. The Nigerian government, and governments in similar settings, should replace resolution-based measures of success with continuity indicators of the kind set out in Table 2. Peace programmes should be funded over a horizon of at least ten years. Conflict early warning and response systems should be made permanent parts of national and state peace architecture so that monitoring continues after a crisis is declared over (Akujobi & Obi, 2024; Obi, 2025). Community policing should be developed as a continuing link between security agencies and communities rather than a crisis response (Obi & Edet, 2024).

For ECOWAS and the African Union. Regional bodies should monitor post-agreement situations through the periods between crises, not only when violence returns. My co-authors

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and I have shown the limits of current regional mechanisms in West Africa and the Sahel (Ayuk, Obi, Aboh, et al., 2026; Ayuk, Obi, Tiku, et al., 2026). Their design should assume continuity of engagement and include clear exit criteria based on outcomes rather than calendars.

For international partners. Donors should extend funding cycles, tie disbursement to outcome indicators, and conduct evaluations five and ten years after signing agreements. The United Nations Secretary-General's *A New Agenda for Peace* already places prevention and national capacities at the centre of peace efforts (United Nations Secretary-General, 2023); the continuity approach offers a way to make that commitment measurable.

For civil society. Civil society organisations should build peace "from the ground up" and remain engaged between crises, since they are often the only actors present before and after external interventions (Obi, 2018a; Obi & Edet, 2023). Youth and women, whose exclusion is a recurring source of residue, should be treated as permanent partners rather than project beneficiaries (Obi, 2017, 2024b).

For universities and professional bodies. Peace and conflict studies curricula should teach the resolution illusion alongside conflict transformation so that future practitioners can resist pressure to declare premature success. Professional bodies such as the Society for Peace Studies and Practice should support long-term, post-agreement research across African conflict settings to test the continuity indicators proposed here.

Peace, in this view, is not a destination to be reached and then left. It is a practice that must be sustained for as long as people live together with differing interests, which is to say, always.

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