

Partial Agreements: The Functional Alternative to All-Encompassing Settlements

The ostensible central goal of any negotiation between parties to a dispute is to reach agreements that resolve the dispute. Yet, there are scores of different ways to conceive and design a negotiation to meet this goal. The right form will depend, among other things, on the opportunities and constraints of the context and the strategic interests of the parties.

Particularly in situations of entrenched armed or political conflict, a common tendency is to seek comprehensive rather than limited deals (i.e., comprehensive in the sense of encompassing the totality of major issues in dispute between the conflict parties). This default is often reinforced by the (uncritical) adoption of the rule that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” – a rule that was originally developed for the unique context of the Good Friday (i.e., Belfast) Agreement in Northern Ireland.

Yet, the default to comprehensive and all-encompassing goals can sometimes be counterproductive.

Firstly, while comprehensiveness may stand as a logical political ideal, seldom will the local, regional and global conditions be propitious to achieving it. Secondly, pursuit of the comprehensive ideal may in some contexts have the negative effect of obscuring more incremental pathways to achieve substantially the same result.

An approach of multiple ‘partial agreements’ to ‘shrink the conflict’ (cf. Micah Goodman), instead of seeking its comprehensive end, may sometimes be the wiser choice.

Partial agreements are limited-focus deals reached on limited-focus issues as part of a limited-focus negotiation agenda (with a limited set of actors). In fragile and conflict-affected societies, a stand-alone ceasefire agreement is a classic example of a partial agreement. However, partial agreements may be pursued on a wide range of other

issues, and with a variety of aims – including to improve electoral conditions, facilitate humanitarian relief, or ensure certain institutional reforms.

Partial agreements can be reached incrementally through any combination of Tracks 1, 1.5 or 2 processes, or within any one of those tracks (e.g., a series of partial agreements reached within a stand-alone Track 1 process). In either case, an approach of partial agreements works best when each partial agreement not only brings its own direct and verifiable benefits, but also has the secondary benefit of improving the prospect of new partial agreements on other issues of dispute. By corollary, a process of isolated partial agreements that are not part of a vision of deliberate and incremental accord-making can bring useful short-term dividends but will tend to have a lower transformation potential.

Against this backdrop, this IFIT discussion paper examines 1) the relevance and advantages of partial agreements in situations of armed or political conflict; 2) associated risks and dilemmas – and the means of addressing them; and 3) the range of issues that might be suitable for partial agreements.

Relevance and advantages of partial agreements

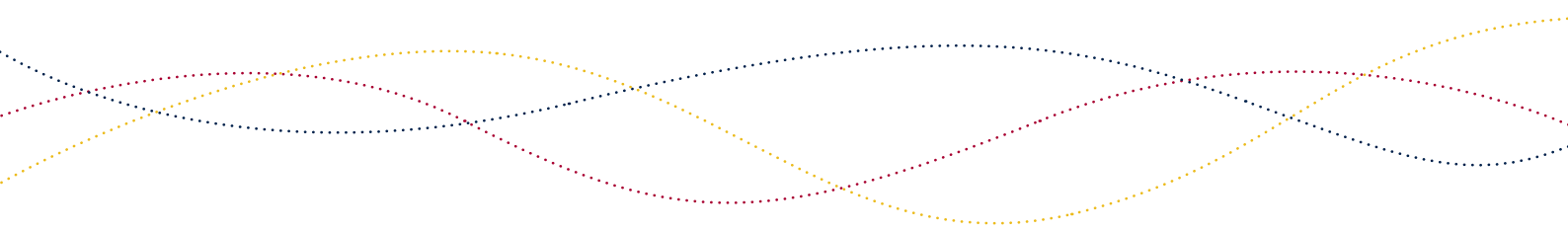
When seeking to resolve wars or political conflicts, partial agreements can help in a variety of ways – especially when pursued through multi-track methods and as part of a larger strategic vision of peace and security. The option is especially relevant when the population has urgent but unmet needs and the ideal of comprehensive negotiation is unfeasible.

Specific benefits that partial agreements may bring include:

- **Empowering moderates and increasing commitment to dialogue.** Partial agreements may serve as a basis for trust-building insofar as they nudge conflict parties and moderate allies to resolve specific issues and establish and implement joint solutions. If a partial agreement leads to the observable alleviation of suffering by the population, it could empower moderate actors – including concerned business, civil society and religious leaders – to promote new agreements, both with perceived out-groups and with more radical members of their own in-groups (e.g., an intrastate peace settlement between communities from the [Central Equatoria region of South Sudan](#) dealing with traditional compensation laws, cattle management and natural resources). When successfully implemented and verified, the agreements may help move all the conflict parties from a confrontational logic to a more cooperative one that could open up progress in other areas.
- **Dividing the resolution of the crisis into ‘digestible’ chunks.** In contexts of war and political conflict, the possibility of comprehensive talks and settlements is often very low (e.g., efforts to reach a comprehensive settlement in [Cyprus](#) have lasted decades). Even if an initial agreement on rules and procedures is reached, the negotiation (not to mention the implementation phase) could take years, delaying the alleviation of suffering for the population. A partial agreements approach could help to segment

the resolution of the crisis into manageable pieces, while allowing for early and tangible benefits for the population (e.g., in the form of access to humanitarian aid or increased safety) for which both parties can share credit.

- **Positive disruption and empowerment of local actors.** A decentralised, multi-track approach of partial agreements can positively transform presumptions about who should ‘lead’ negotiations, making it harder for the de facto or de jure leaders of each side to monopolise or sabotage efforts at dialogue. Concretely, such an approach can provide civic actors a tangible sense of empowerment and agency, allowing them to fill gaps and pursue agreements on limited-focus issues that bring benefits to the population and widen the sense of agency about the protagonists of peace (e.g., [Yemen’s](#) extended family networks have facilitated agreements amongst local actors while Track 1 talks between the Houthis and the internationally recognised government have failed to advance).
- **Creating a common framework for future agreements.** Partial agreements can establish a catalytic benchmark for the relationship among the conflict parties. When new quarrels arise, the rules and processes used to reach previous partial agreements can help limit reversion to prior destructive dynamics. More generally, a methodology of partial agreements can encourage a ‘cooperation framework’ that 1) facilitates future agreements in other areas (e.g., local agreements between tribal leaders in [Iraq’s Salah al-Din province](#) provided the framework for a large conference in Baghdad in May 2016 hosted by the provincial governor) and 2) indirectly helps to define a clearer end-state.
- **Rekindling regional and international engagement.** Protracted conflicts with regional spill-over effects often lead to diplomatic fatigue, causing key regional and international actors to disengage and prioritise other conflicts and challenges that appear riper for resolution. Partial agreements can mitigate this effect by showcasing that the parties are becoming serious about addressing the conflict – an effect that is reinforced when regional and international actors have the opportunity to play a supportive and legitimating role in the reaching of agreements.
- **Facilitating implementable actions.** Comprehensive settlements – even framework-style ones – are hard to implement. They require greater political will, greater resources and, in many cases, greater infrastructure. Countries that have suffered from years of conflict and misgovernance often lack all or most of these (e.g., Mali, Nepal, Lebanon). A series of bottom-up partial agreements that address local grievances, build trust among the parties, and allow for gradual resource mobilisation and capacity building (e.g., prioritisation of certain initial regions to implement peace-building projects) may thus be more realistic in some contexts.



Risks and dilemmas

Partial agreements are not a panacea for resolving deep conflicts. They come with foreseeable risks, especially for the side that has lower bargaining power (e.g., a divided political opposition vis-à-vis an illegitimate but cohesive government). Another general concern is the true extent to which partial agreements can serve not merely to address specific problems but also to facilitate agreements in other key areas related to the larger conflict.

Specific risks and dilemmas to foresee include:

- **Entrenching the stronger party.** A frequent argument against partial agreements is that, on the one hand, they do not resolve the underlying crisis but merely alleviate its effects or address isolated issues; and on the other hand, they serve to legitimise or empower the stronger or less legitimate party by burnishing its political image. This undue ‘validation effect’, it is claimed, reduces rather than increases the incentives for further conflict resolution efforts or for transformational aims. Yet, the risk can be mitigated by negotiating or developing explicit language that highlights a broader vision of conflict resolution that the partial agreement is meant to catalyse or advance, thus reducing the perception (or reality) of a one-off win for the stronger party. Moreover, partial agreements change realities on the ground; it is possible that the stronger party of today may find itself the weaker party of tomorrow as a result of the implementation of a partial agreement.
- **Spoilers.** Strategies are always needed to handle key actors who could threaten possible agreements between parties to a dispute, but they may require special nuances in the context of partial agreements. General actions to mitigate spoiler risks include developing pre-emptive strategies of neutralisation (e.g., through appropriate incentives or quiet engagement and consultation) and addressing the media in ways that take account of important narratives on which the spoilers’ political capital depends. Specific actions to address spoilers in the context of partial agreements might include adopting strategic sequencing of the negotiation topics in a way that mitigates against early and easy attacks.
- **Overload and disorganisation.** Opening simultaneous dialogue spaces on multiple fronts – a reality that is part and parcel of the multi-track methodology associated with most partial agreements – may lead to fragmentation of efforts and lack of coordination across key groups. It might culminate in isolated, asynchronous partial agreements rather than a streamlined process of deliberate and incremental accord-making. This risk can be partly mitigated, however, by situating any effort toward a partial agreement within a larger strategic framework and by establishing ‘need to know’ information-sharing protocols among key allies.
- **Verification.** Comprehensive settlements tend to include certification or verification schemes designed to ensure the parties comply with their obligations. In the context of a partial agreements approach – where different deals may be reached between different actors at different times – certification can present additional challenges, such as finding willing guarantors and devising systems to manage implementation

across different processes even as the negotiation on other issues continues. This risk can be mitigated only when there is a larger strategic framework of conflict resolution in place, such that key supporters, monitors and guarantors of implementation understand their role and place within the partial agreements format.

Potential areas for partial agreements

There are multiple areas in which conflict parties can work towards partial agreements. Each has its own dynamic and requires its own methodology.

Common areas of partial agreement include:

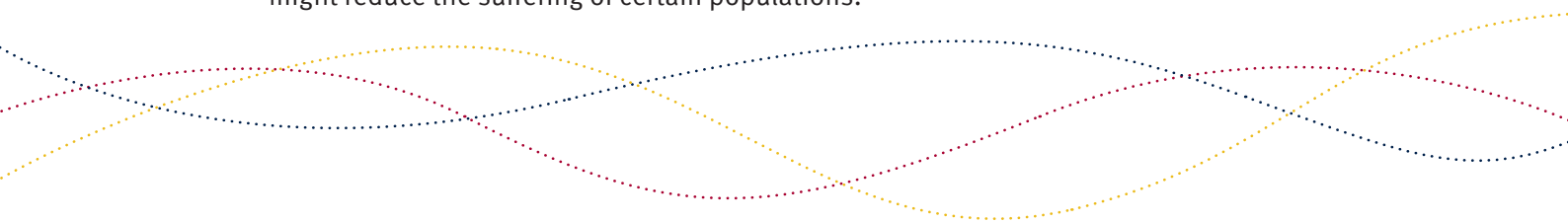
- **Ceasefires.** As noted earlier, a ceasefire agreement is a classic example of a partial agreement (e.g., local truces and ceasefires in [Syria](#) between 2011 and 2014). Ceasefires are not only about halting the hostilities between belligerents, but are often preconditions to facilitate humanitarian access to conflict-affected populations. Typically, ceasefires are understood – and can serve – as a gateway or foundation for more comprehensive conflict resolution, but they must be structured in a way to avoid perversely incentivising the wind-down rather than wind-up of next stages of negotiation and compromise (e.g., [Colombia’s unsuccessful negotiations in the 1990s with the FARC and ELN](#)).
- **Electoral conditions and reforms.** Partial agreements on electoral reforms and improved electoral conditions may help avert typical pre- and post-electoral violence and intimidation that commonly afflict populations in authoritarian and conflict-affected contexts. The agreements may cover, for example, voter eligibility and registration laws; the appointment processes for officials in key bodies (e.g., electoral commissions and courts); and international observation missions. An initial partial agreement on a less contentious electoral issue may pave the way for agreements on more contentious ones.
- **Humanitarian aid.** Humanitarian organisations often use and promote dialogue as a means to facilitate the entry and operation of humanitarian aid and thus mitigate the suffering of vulnerable and conflict-affected populations. Such agreements, including when reached between armed actors or between government and opposition (e.g., [Venezuela’s partial agreement in November 2022](#)), must respect well-established humanitarian principles of independence and impartiality of delivery. Extreme health crises, such as pandemics, may provide further opportunities for partial agreements among conflict parties.
- **Infrastructure development and public service delivery.** Wars and political conflicts tend to have a grave impact on public infrastructure and service delivery. Fixing some of the problems (e.g., water or waste management crises; lack of roads and schools) through partial agreements in a series of cities or regions could alleviate the suffering of the population and contribute to further agreements in other areas. The key is to avoid overly-ambitious fixes that could delay or complicate, rather than accelerate and facilitate, further negotiations.

- **Resource management.** Partial agreements may be reached on measures or cooperation schemes that serve to restore labour productivity or macroeconomic balance in key sectors affected by a political conflict or war economy (e.g., energy and mining sectors, central bank governance). Such measures, which can sometimes be approached in more technocratic terms, may indirectly serve to unblock parallel political discussions on more sensitive matters.
- **Local reconstruction and recovery.** Lost property and livelihoods, local land disputes, and community safety guarantees for the return of IDPs are just some of the areas that can be the subject of partial agreements in fragile and conflict-affected states. This is happening in places like Libya, Yemen, and Syria, where tribal leaders, civil society groups and municipal councils are initiating dialogue processes and agreements rather than extending the already-long wait for an elusive comprehensive national solution.
- **Institutional reforms.** Long-term institutional reform is a frequent element, and ambition, of comprehensive peace accords and political settlements. In the case of partial agreements, more case-specific institutional reforms tend to be apposite (including in the security and judicial sectors where the agreements may deal with reforms to appointment processes, powers, functions, conditions of service, accountability, and more). Such agreements, and the processes that bring them about, can mark a confidence-inducing first step towards future agreements and more comprehensive reforms.

Conclusion

A comprehensive peace deal or political settlement is not a necessary precondition for the construction of a school or a hospital, the delivery of humanitarian aid for a suffering population, or the improvement of conditions for elections and public safety. In some contexts, a series of partial agreements on pressing issues could – if part of a broader negotiation strategy and multi-track method – help reach substantially the same result over time.

However, a methodology of incremental partial agreements involves many risks. None of these is to be taken lightly. Yet, the greater risk would be to ignore the option of partial agreements altogether, since the conditions required to reach a comprehensive deal through a single process rarely exist. In that regard, to bypass consideration of what partial agreements can offer is to arbitrarily reduce the range of potential pathways that might reduce the suffering of certain populations.



Acknowledgements

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Founded in 2012, the [Institute for Integrated Transitions](#) (IFIT) is an independent, international, non-governmental organisation offering comprehensive analysis and technical advice to national actors involved in negotiations and transitions in fragile and conflict-affected societies. IFIT has supported negotiations and transitions in countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Gambia, Libya, Nigeria, Syria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.