Towards a long-term peace approach: A phenomenological analysis of contemporary and emerging conflicts

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In today's multilateral and conflict-ridden world, the proliferation of nuclear weapons gives humanity the means to bring about its extinction. The war in Ukraine and other tensions around the world have made the deployment of nuclear weapons more likely than ever. Given these unprecedented threats, a conscious effort towards building long-term peace is crucial. This study follows four levels of inquiry. First, it explores the theoretical views of armed conflicts, analysing their causes and their consequences. Second, it conceptualises peace initiatives in the context of peace and conflict studies, exploring these definitions in relation to their significance for future generations. Third, it reviews existing peacebuilding approaches from different perspectives and re-emphasises their strengths and shortcomings in the face of emerging conflicts. Fourth and crucially, it proposes three levels of global priority for achieving long-term peace, ultimately arguing for the central role of the UN in peacebuilding initiatives. This study justifies how eliminating nuclear weapons and encouraging proactive diplomacy are crucial steps for achieving long-term peace.

Keywords: *long-term peace; peacebuilding initiatives; global priority; conflict*

Introduction

As conflicts persist and evolve in our rapidly changing world, the need for an approach to building long-term peace is increasingly recognised. Unilateral methods of peacebuilding which appeal to either side of a Global North-South dichotomy often fall short of addressing the complexities of contemporary and emerging conflicts. These conflicts encompass a range of ongoing and protracted disputes, some of which have lasted a long time. Some conflicts persist into the present day and are often rooted in longstanding grievances, power struggles, and identity-based tensions. Many of these conflicts – in Bosnia, Ethiopia, Sudan, the South China Sea, El Salvador, Guatemala, on the border between Peru and Ecuador, involving the Rohingya people, and now perhaps the conflict in the Sahel – present unique challenges to global sustainable peace. Such conflicts delegitimise the Westphalian treaty of sovereignty and the territorial integrity of states. Moreover, even in the cases of perennial conflicts – Israel-Palestine, Russia-Ukraine –all attempts at resolution between the warring parties may seem to be off the table. Therefore, there is a burgeoning interest in exploring peacebuilding approaches from a range of systems and methodologies, as we seek to construct a peace which lasts for the long term. However, given the parlous state of our world today and in the recent past, what are the prospects for enduring peace in an era threatened by the potential of global war with weapons of mass destruction?

In response to this challenge, this article aims to develop a long-term peace approach grounded in a phenomenological analysis of contemporary and emerging conflicts. It pays particular attention to conflicts that could escalate to nuclear wars. The need for such a long-term peace approach stems from the recognition that peacebuilding interventions must be adaptable and contextually relevant to effectively address the complexities of diverse conflict settings (Berdal / Malone 2000). To do this, this research integrates insights from two key approaches to peacebuilding: namely, liberal Western approaches (see Paris 2004) such as conflict prevention (Licklider 1995), traditional approaches which encourage reconciliation and justice, such as Ubuntu (Auyero 2018), and those which encourage cultural and social cohesion (Galtung 1996). In doing so, this article develops a long-term approach to creating sustainable peace.

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The study undertakes a phenomenological analysis of emerging conflicts and the perceptions of peacebuilding approaches. As Smith et al. argue, "phenomenology offers a unique lens to uncover the subjective realities and meanings underpinning conflict dynamics, providing valuable insights into violence's root causes and drivers" (Smith et al. 2009). By synthesising theoretical insights with empirical evidence from case studies of conflicts, we aim to propose a non-reductionist approach to long-term peace.

Hence, the study follows four levels of inquiry, each equally important. First, it explores the theoretical and empirical views of contemporary and emerging conflicts, analysing their causes and their consequences. Second, it conceptualises peace initiatives in the context of peace and conflict study, exploring the significance of these definitions for present and future generations. Third, it reviews existing peacebuilding approaches from two perspectives, Western and traditional, re-emphasising their strengths and shortcomings in the face of global conflicts. Fourth and most crucially, it proposes a long-term peace approach, arguing that building trust and collaboration, whilst dealing with the nuances of global power imbalances, are crucial steps for creating a lasting peace.

Phenomenological review of contemporary and emerging conflicts

Conflicts reveal intricate layers of human interaction, power dynamics, and moral considerations when examined through a philosophical lens. At its core, conflict can be conceptualised as a manifestation of divergent interests, values, or beliefs, resulting in tension, discord, or antagonism between individuals, groups, or entities (Galtung 1969). In other words, one might say that conflicts are inherent to the human condition, stemming from the plurality of perspectives, desires, and aspirations characterising human existence (Arendt 1958). In this sense, conflicts are

catalysts for competing claims to truth, justice, and power. They are sites of moral contestation, where individuals and groups confront ethical dilemmas and grapple with questions of right and wrong, good and evil (Rawls 1971).

Let us take two conflict scenarios, the Russian war in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war, as examples. In each of these cases, the causal factors are inextricably tied to ethical dilemmas, territoriality, and aggression. While the former conflict stems from Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support for separatist movements in eastern Ukraine, leading to military clashes and diplomatic tensions, the latter is rooted in longstanding territorial disputes and religious tensions. These conflicts have resulted in significant casualties and humanitarian crises, with both sides resorting to military force and retaliatory attacks. The fear of escalation, including the use of nuclear weapons, is a constant concern given the volatility of the regions and the potential consequences for global security and stability (Rynhold 2014).

In today's global landscape, conflicts take on multifaceted forms, reflecting the intricate interplay of political, social, economic, and technological factors. From traditional territorial disputes to emerging wars: the spectrum of conflict is diverse and complex. Proxy wars fuelled by geopolitical rivalries, ethnic and religious tensions, and civil unrest underscore the dynamic nature of contemporary conflicts further. Moreover, the pervasive effects of nuclear warfare and the destabilising impacts of climate change add additional layers of complexity to the ever-evolving landscape of global conflicts. "They create a foundation on which the divisions of society 'us' and 'them') and measures to define the object of disputes (i.e. the problem of the incompatibility of aims and interests) are built" (Żakowska 2020: 50).

Scholars have distinguished international conflicts from civil wars and interstate wars from imperial and colonial conflicts, and from other conflicts that involve non-state actors. Until recently, they devoted a disproportionate amount of attention to great power wars, including 'hegemonic wars'. This bias in conflict studies is decreasing; however, there has also been a shift in warfare away from the great powers and a rise of 'low-intensity wars' and 'identity wars' since the end of the Cold War (Holsti 1996). The question of what causes armed conflict can mean several different things (Suganami 1996); it can refer to what makes war possible or to the permissive or logically necessary conditions (Levy 1989: 141). In reviewing the causes of war, we shall see conflict in its generic sense as any phenomenon that threatens global peace (whether such conflicts are violent conflicts, militarised wars, or nuclear escalations).

The causal factors of armed conflicts

Individual level

Kenneth Waltz provides a good foundation for understanding the causes of armed conflicts. He proposes three levels for analysing the causes of conflict: (1) the individual level, (2) the state level, and (3) the international level (Waltz 2001). We choose to begin with this approach as it offers a multi-level framework. Moreover, Waltz's analytical categories align with three main understandings of the 'actors' in security studies – individuals, states, and the international system. At the individual level, Waltz (2001: 16-79) argues that "conflicts are often caused by human nature and the nature of particular political leaders, such as the leaders of states". That means the causes of conflict are inextricably linked to innate instincts, imperfections of human nature, and psychological factors – such as aggression and frustration. Here, Waltz emphasises the philosophy of human nature, which is prominent in the works of Hobbes, Cicero and Plautus. For instance, Hobbes argues that the origins of war lie in the traits of human nature, i.e. 'rivalry', 'distrust', and 'lust for fame', and these, in turn, inevitably lead to a war of all against all (*bellum omnium contra omnes*). The desire for fame is the cause of wars that aim to achieve or reinforce social status (Hobbes 1954: 109).

On the other hand, Cicero was one of the first scholars to point to an insatiable human desire as the root of conflict; namely, the desire to accumulate wealth and fame, which is satisfied by war (Zwoliński 2003: 18). Similarly, Plautus, who believed that human nature is hostile since "man is wolf to man" (*homo homini lupus*), stated that the intensification of this hostility across a lifetime can lead to the outbreak of a conflict (Zwoliński 2003: 18-19). Human nature, especially the negative aspects of greed, grievance, and aggression, are causal factors of conflict. Collier / Hoeffler (2004) state in their 'greed vs grievance' hypothesis that economic motivations ('greed'), such as controlling valuable resources, often drive conflicts alongside ideological and social grievances. Their empirical analysis indicates that countries rich in natural resources are particularly vulnerable to conflict due to the lucrative nature of controlling these assets. Allen / Anderson (2017) tie the causes of conflict to aggression and frustration, which includes a wide taxonomy of aggression, e.g. verbal, physical, postural, relational, direct and indirect, psychological, transient, and lasting. Hence, individuals experience a sense of frustration when they realise that their aspirations, goals, and desires are being suppressed (Dollard et al. 2017). The growing frustration seeks an outlet; thus, the tension is released through aggressive behaviour, relieving the frustrated person. Sometimes, individuals project their suppressed desires and aspirations onto substitutes, e.g. a group, tribe, or state (Żakowska 2020: 52).

State level

At the state level, Waltz (2001: 80-159) notes that the causes of armed conflicts are often very related to the nature of the state (i.e. the political systems of states, the structure of the society, and factors such as history, strategic location, culture, and ethnic conflict). Every tribe within the state has its own fundamental principles interwoven in ethnic and cultural beliefs. Violations of these principles by another tribe, often referred to as 'the other', pose a threat to the existence of the tribe. When these threats are not managed, they result in armed conflict. Horwitz (2000), Gurr (2000) and other scholars also underscore the role of 'ethnic heterogeneity' in fomenting conflict, as group identity becomes a source of division and competition for power. Marginalised ethnic groups often resort to violence when they perceive systemic discrimination and exclusion from political processes. As one group threaten the other on ethnic grounds, it creates a system of inclusion and exclusion, which results in a security dilemma in the state. Kaufman (1996) explains how this security dilemma manifests. The lack of a sense of security among the group may arise when the threat to the group from another depends exclusively on imagining the group as an enemy. Such a dilemma allows for a self-perpetuating mechanism of violence, which takes the form of retaliatory action.

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A similar process occurs between clashing civilisations as between clashing ethnic groups. Huntington (1993) refers to 'civilisation' as a large cultural unit characterised by various value systems resulting from religious and cultural differences over the centuries. Most of the conventional armed conflicts in our generation can be traced back to clashes between the 'West' and the 'Muslim world'; Islam and Christianity; capitalism and communism; as well as conservativism and liberalism. The confrontation takes place on two levels: the micro-level (neighbouring groups engaging in territorial struggle, e.g. the insurgency in the Sahel) and the macro-level (different states fighting for military power and control of international institutions). In such a civilisation clash, some factors take pre-eminence. Dougherty / Pfaltzgraff (2001: 167) identify factors such as religious differences, increasing interactions within civilisations, globalisation, and the growth of economic regionalism as weakening the function of the nation-state as the basis for group identification. This results in an increasing identification with a religious group.
One should also mention the factors fundamentalism and extremism (Smuniewski 2016: 438). Extremism has been a prominent driver of conflict in recent years, particularly in the Middle East and parts of Africa. Extreme religious ideologies provide both a justification and a framework for violent actions, as seen with groups like ISIS and Boko Haram (see Juergensmeyer 2003; Abumbe et al. 2018).

International level
The third level, and perhaps the most significant for our context, is the international system. Here, Waltz notes that armed conflicts are generated by the nature of the international system, where the conflict-causing factor is its anarchic nature, which compels states to fight for their survival (2001: 159-224). In this context, anarchy refers to the lack of a central governing authority in the international system, where sovereign states operate in a self-help environment. Waltz emphasises that anarchy does not imply chaos but rather a structured lack of hierarchy, through which all states are functionally equivalent regarding their sovereignty. However, the absence of overarching authority leads to a situation whereby states must rely on their capabilities to ensure their security and survival, driving the dynamics of power balancing. Morgenthau argued that the balance of power operates as a stabilising mechanism, through which the distribution of power among states prevents any single entity from achieving hegemony, thereby maintaining international order (1948: 170). Even though his balance of power theory oversimplifies the complexity of international relations, by focusing predominantly on material power and military capabilities and neglecting other factors such as economic power, ideology, and international institutions, it provides an insight into the perpetual state of caution and competition among states. For Morgenthau, this makes it necessary to prevent any one state from achieving overwhelming dominance.
In contrast, Cashman has argued more recently that the international system is less 'anarchic' but more 'hierarchically' organised (2014: 411-414). The dominant states create the rules regarding trade, diplomacy, and the use of force. The state takes the central position and leads the rest to form an alliance to preserve the system's status quo. In such an arrangement, conflict may break out when the challenger is dissatisfied with the 'world order' or rules established by the dominant state and, therefore, wishes to revise that system's rules to suit his interests better (see Münkler 2023 for more details on the emergence of a multipolar world order). Hence, as the challenger or rising power develops, it conflicts with the dominant or hegemonic state in the global order. The ensuing struggle between these two states and their respective allies leads to a polarisation of the system, which increases global instability. In this case, even a minor event may spark a crisis and finally cause a hegemonic war (Gilpin 1998: 592; Cashman 2014: 429; Gryz 2011: 7; Żakowska 2020: 52).

International conflict and the potential for a nuclear war
Consequently, the international system is confronted with geopolitical rivalries between major powers. Hence, as power shifts, states are more likely to assert dominance and challenge existing norms, leading to instability and conflict (Kagan 2018: 44). For example, the competition and often disagreeing relations between the United States, Russia, and China are central to the geopolitical rivalry. The quest for global dominance and influence usually leads to proxy wars and military build-ups, increasing the risk of confrontations that could escalate to nuclear warfare (Mearsheimer 2014: 29). Of course, the nuclear states (Russia, United States, China, France, United Kingdom, Pakistan, India, Israel, North Korea) are not exactly the same states that we would consider major powers. However, the re-emergence of a multipolar world order has exacerbated global tensions and increased the likelihood of nuclear states being involved in conflict. Regional disputes, particularly in volatile areas like Southeast Asia (the Korean Peninsula, China and Taiwan) and Eastern Europe (Russia and Ukraine, see Wulf 2024), also pose significant nuclear risks. The longstanding conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, for instance, has repeatedly brought the two nuclear-armed neighbours to the brink of war. Ganguly (2016: 108) emphasises that "historical grievances", "territorial disputes", and "nationalistic fervour" contribute to the persistent volatility in the region. Similarly, North Korea's nuclear ambitions have created a persistent threat to regional and global security. Cha / Kang (2018: 67) argue that North Korea's pursuit of nuclear capabilities is driven by a desire for regime survival and international leverage, making diplomatic resolutions challenging.

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Contemporary and emerging conflicts present a significant threat to international stability, especially those with the likelihood of nuclear escalation. Technological advancements in warfare, including developments in cyber capabilities, complicate the security landscape further. Integrating artificial intelligence in military applications raises the stakes, as miscalculations or malfunctions could inadvertently trigger nuclear responses (see Akah 2023: 34; Reuter 2019).
Schelling (1966: 91) highlights the dangers of 'strategic gamesmanship'; a strategy through which countries use the threat of nuclear force to achieve political objectives, potentially leading to unintended escalations. At the same time, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, by both states and potentially by non-state actors, amplifies the risk of nuclear conflict. Such nuclear proliferation destabilises international security and increases the chances of nuclear war due to misperceptions, accidents, or irrational decision-making (Sagan 1996: 79). The end of treaties such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty undermines strategic stability and opens the door for renewed arms races. Scholars have

discussed the threat of nuclear proliferation as an existential risk and the arms control in preventing nuclear war (see Smetana et al. 2023: 64; Kattan 2022: 4; Allison 2004: 32).
Finally, contemporary emerging conflict at the international level can occur as (1) a hybrid warfare which blurs the lines between conventional and unconventional warfare, creating complex and unpredictable conflict environments (Hoffman 2007: 37), or (2) an asymmetric Warfare, where state actors face non-state actors or weaker states. Kaldor (2012: 25) describes these conflicts as "new wars", characterised by high civilian casualties, irregular combatants, and the use of unconventional tactics. Finally, they can occur as (3) a cyber warfare which can disable critical infrastructure, disrupt communications, and undermine national security, potentially triggering military responses (Clarke / Knake 2010: 47). Figure 1 below shows that the total number of nuclear warheads as of 2024 is 12,121 with Russia possessing most of the warheads. The number of warheads is projected to double, given the rapid development of nukes and the tension around the globe. Our generation has never been so threatened as it is now.

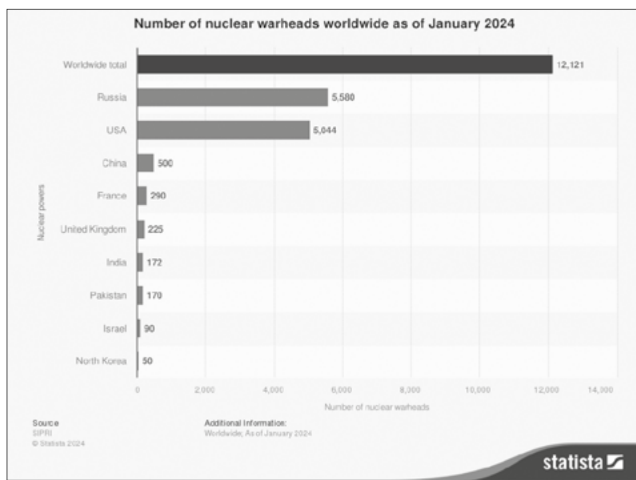

Figure 1: *Number of nuclear warheads worldwide as of January 2023, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) (2023).*

The likely consequences of emerging conflicts with a nuclear potential

As such a risk is increasing in probability, it is important that we understand its potential consequences. A nuclear war would have severe consequences for our civilisation and future generations, with far-reaching impacts on humanity, health, the environment, and global security. The immediate effects of a nuclear explosion include immense heat, blast waves, and radiation, leading to widespread destruction of infrastructure, loss of life, and injuries (see Toon et al. 2007). On the other hand, the long-term concerns are even more catastrophic, as radioactive fallout contaminates the air, soil, and water, posing serious health risks for survivors and future generations (see Apsley 2011). In essence, the release of radioactive isotopes into the atmosphere can cause radiation sickness, cancer, genetic mutations, and other health problems, leading to increased mortality rates and reduced life expectancy (Miller 2012). Moreover, this would lead to a profound psychological effect and trauma. At the same time, it can fuel global tensions, arms races, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, heightening the risk of further escalation and catastrophe (Rhodes 2010). It would further disrupt and deplete the ozone layer and damage the ecosystem, which is already significantly impacted by human and industrial activities. It could have lasting effects on biodiversity, exacerbating existing environmental challenges and threatening the sustainability of life on Earth (see Turco et al. 1983). In short, a nuclear explosion would invariably release acute radiation, which can cause skin diseases, sickness and long-term health issues such as cancer. The radioactive particles would contaminate air, water, and soil, leading to widespread ecological damage.

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There is a further concern with a nuclear winter, as large-scale nuclear war could inject vast amounts of soot and smoke into the stratosphere, blocking sunlight and drastically lowering temperatures worldwide. Robock et al. (2007: 450) suggest that even a limited regional nuclear war could disrupt global climate patterns, causing widespread crop failures and food shortages. Consequently, toxic radiation, including nitrogen oxides, can severely damage the ozone layer. This depletion would increase the Earth's exposure to harmful ultraviolet radiation, leading to higher rates of cancerous cells and other health issues and negatively impacting ecosystems and crop and livestock production (see Toon et al. 2007: 236). More disturbing is the fact that future generations would suffer from the long-term health effects arising from the toxic radiation, including genetic mutations and increased cancer rates. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings provide historical and phenomenological evidence of the intergenerational health impacts of nuclear weapons (see Yamashita / Schull 1990: 1171). How about the psychosocial trauma of nuclear war? Survivors of nuclear attacks would experience severe trauma, which could be devastating. Becker (2001: 28) argues that the fear of radiation and the loss of family members, homes, and livelihoods would have lasting impacts on mental health and societal stability. Apart from such trauma, infrastructure destruction and human capital loss would weaken economies, creating long-term poverty, instability, and food shortages. According to Helfand (2013: 70), food shortages could lead to widespread famine, exacerbating malnutrition and causing additional deaths long after the initial conflict. The recovery from such an event would take decades, with substantial economic resources diverted towards rebuilding rather than development (Nordhaus 2011: 1). As we see then, the potential impacts of nuclear war are profound and far-reaching; we must do everything to avoid such a disastrous outcome.

Conceptualising peace initiatives

Given the consequences of emerging conflicts and the potential impacts of detonating a nuclear bomb, we find it appropriate to see any effort at achieving sustainable peace as a global public good. "If we begin with the need to survive, we immediately see that peace is a primary requirement of the human condition itself" (Galtung 1995: 110). However, what is 'peace' in the context of global sustainability, and how should it be designed to fit into the framework for resolving contemporary/emerging conflicts? In examining peace initiatives, we face two paradoxes: (1) How is it that we all desire peace but it remains unattainable in the long term? (2) Why do existing peace initiatives look comprehensive and well thought out, and yet cannot bring about long-term

peace? In other words, is long-term peace possible? If yes, how should it be approached? The present article will now definitively respond to these questions and explain the proposed peace approach.

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For millennia, philosophers, religious thinkers and political activists have written about and demonstrated for 'peace' and decried war – yet a 'philosophy' of peace is still in its infancy (Webel 2007: 4). Conceptualising peace, like many theoretical concepts such as 'freedom', 'happiness', and 'justice', is challenging, but the absence of these concepts in the real world foregrounds the relevance of such conceptualisations. Accordingly, Charles Webel likens peace to light, arguing that it is intangible but discernible either by its absence or sporadic and often startling appearances (like a flash of lightning against a black sky). Peace is a background condition for the perception of everything else, a physical phenomenon affecting all sentient beings, something whose presence or absence is best measured on a continuum or spectrum (Webel 2007:10). Etymologically, 'peace' has roots in various languages and historical contexts, each of which shed light on its very essence. Merriam-Webster traces the word 'peace' back to the Middle English 'pes,' ultimately derived from the Anglo-French 'pais,' which also stems from the Latin 'pax' (Merriam-Webster n.d.). The etymology of 'peace' reflects its historical associations with notions of tranquillity, harmony, and the absence of conflict.

The dictionary definitions of the term 'peace' can only get us so far, but they are a productive starting point. Perhaps, as Webel (2007) would maintain, peace is both a historical ideal and a term whose meaning is in flux, sometimes seemingly constant (as in 'inner peace of mind') but also noteworthy for its relative absence in the field of history (as in 'world peace'). In our case, the latter (world peace) is our point of departure. Against this backdrop, peace in the world is neither a timeless essence – an unchanging ideal substance – nor a mere name without a reference, a form without content (Webel 2007). Peace is both a means of personal and collective ethical transformation and an aspiration to cleanse the planet of human-inflicted destruction. That means that the goal is in continual, dialectical evolution, sometimes regressing during periods of acute violent conflict and sometimes progressing non-violently and less violently to actualise political justice and social equity (Webel 2007). In this sense, we argue that global peace extends beyond mere tranquillity or compliance within a subdued populace, maintained through a dominant power's provision of necessities. Instead, sustainable world peace – or long-term peace – especially in its forward-thinking or dialectical form, embodies the proactive pursuit of individual and collective self-determination and emancipation regardless of status and nationality. As Koffi Annan aptly states, "it is our job to ensure that […] peace and security hold, not only for a few, but for the many; that opportunities exist, not merely for the privileged, but for every human being everywhere" (Annan 2000: 13).

In essence, global peace is a state where all people live in security, without fear or threat of violence, and enjoy equal rights and opportunities. Peace transcends the absence of war within a Hobbesian realm characterised by perpetual violence. It represents a condition of our individual and collective beings that evolves, influenced by historical contexts and societal dynamics. Therefore, we argue that peace, like any worthy human aspiration, resides as a latent potential within us, albeit challenging to perceive and seemingly unattainable. As we embark on the journey towards long-term peace, it becomes the heroic endeavour of this age – indispensable for our survival.

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Categorising peace and peacebuilding process

Conceptual understandings of 'peace' and 'traditional' peacebuilding methods

While unlikely to be flawless or eternal, sustainable peace remains a significant pursuit – particularly within the confines of the present global state of affairs. Consequently, there is an increasing interest in peace and conflict research. In the following section we outline a few different conceptualisations of peace and peacebuilding processes, to provide an academic foundation. Johan Galtung, for instance, emphasised the importance of reducing structural violence and promoting social justice in achieving global peace (Galtung 1969). He categorised peacebuilding into negative and positive processes. 'Negative peace' refers to the absence of direct violence or overt conflict; it entails the cessation of hostilities through mechanisms such as ceasefire agreements or peace treaties (Galtung 1964: 167). This peacebuilding process focuses on resolving immediate conflicts but less on the underlying societal issues or causal of conflict.

In contrast, 'positive peace' encompasses broader notions of social justice, equity, and human well-being (Galtung 1969: 171). In other words, positive peace involves addressing structural violence, such as poverty, discrimination, and oppression, which perpetuate conflict (Galtung 1969: 170). Positive peace seeks to create inclusive societies where individuals can access basic needs, political participation, and socio-economic opportunities, fostering long-term stability and resilience (Galtung 1969: 174). Thus, negative and positive peace are essential for sustainable peacebuilding (Galtung 1996: 80).

In a similar but even more conceptual way, Michael Banks (1987) categorises peacebuilding processes into four distinct definitions:

1 Peace as harmony, referring to the state of tranquillity among individuals and societies – that is, the presence of interpersonal and international harmony, where conflicts are minimised, and cooperation flourishes.

2 Peace as order, emphasising the need to maintain stability and predictability within societies and the international system. Peacebuilding initiatives in this sense entail the establishing of governance structures, laws, and institutions that regulate behaviour and prevent the emergence of conflict.

3 Peace as justice, involves promoting fairness, equality, and human rights. Here, peace is intrinsically linked to social justice, where individuals have equal opportunities, rights, and access to resources.

4 Peace as conflict management, focusing on resolving conflicts through negotiation, mediation, and diplomacy. This conceptual category of peace recognises that conflicts are inevitable but seeks to manage them accordingly.

Bank's four categories are mutually co-related and contingent, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of peacebuilding initiatives.

One of the peacebuilding initiatives that have received much attention in peace and conflict study for the past three decades is the 'Agenda for Peace', introduced in 1992 by then UN. At this time, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali categorised the peacebuilding process into three layers: preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and post-conflict peacebuilding. Ghali would refer to peacebuilding as "actions to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace to avoid a relapse into conflict" (Boutros-Ghali 1992: 1). Preventive diplomacy stresses the importance of dialogue in averting conflict escalation. That is, the need for timely and decisive action by the international community to address the root causes of conflict (Boulden 2003: 14). On the other hand, peacemaking and peacekeeping focus on negotiation and mediation in achieving peace. According to Bellamy et al. (2010: 68), these two concepts underscore the need for a robust international mechanism to mediate conflicts and deploy peacekeeping forces where necessary.

Meanwhile, post-conflict peacebuilding involves reconstructing war-torn societies, promoting justice, and fostering sustainable development. In emphasising Ghali's concept of post-conflict peacebuilding, Paris admits that this aspect of the agenda has influenced the development of comprehensive peacebuilding frameworks that address both immediate security concerns and long-term socio-economic stability (2004: 56). Even though the agenda for peace remains crucial for the United Nations' multifunctional peacekeeping missions, the models still need to catch up in the face of emerging conflicts.

Critics contend that such top-down approaches often overlook indigenous practices and can lead to resistance or failure (Richmond 2011: 27). The logistics gaps and political constraints usually render the agenda ineffective (see Fortna 2004:171). Moreover, given the present state of contemporary conflicts, characterised by non-state actors, asymmetric warfare, cyber threats, terrorism and climate change-induced conflicts, the agenda for peace needs to be updated to go beyond the traditional state-centric focus (Chandler 2017: 45).

As the global landscape continues to evolve, there is also a need to liberalise the principles outlined in the Agenda for Peace further, to remain effective in promoting global peace and stability. Hence, the 'Liberal Peace Initiative' was developed. The liberal peace initiative is a framework for peacebuilding that combines political, economic, and social reforms rooted in liberal democratic principles. This approach advocates for establishing democratic governance, the rule of law, free markets, and human rights as foundational components for achieving sustainable peace in post-conflict societies. The liberal peace approach aims to transform war-torn societies into stable, democratic, and economically viable states. One of the proponents, Roland Paris, argues, "the international peacebuilding efforts should focus on the establishment of liberal democratic institutions and market-oriented economic policies – such democratic elements are essential for achieving long-term stability and peace" (Paris 2004: 5).

Similarly, while theorising democratic peace, Doyle alludes to the notion that liberal democracies are less likely to go to war with each other, providing a theoretical underpinning for the liberal peace approach (1986: 1152). That means the promotion of liberal values and institutions can help to create conditions for peace and stability. Such conditions have led to a focus on building democratic institutions, promoting human rights, and supporting economic liberalisation in post-conflict countries (see Newman et al. 2009).

John Paul Lederach's 'comprehensive approach' to the peacebuilding process is equally significant in peace and conflict study. While working as a scholar-practitioner, John Paul Lederach has formulated the approach to conflict that encompasses "the full array of stages and approaches needed to transform conflict towards sustainable, peaceful relations and outcomes" (Matijević / Ćorić 2015: 157). See also Ramsbotham Oliver's reflections on UN post-settlement peacebuilding (Ramsbotham 2000). Lederach's comprehensive approach entails building an infrastructure for peace, which should involve all levels of the affected population:

"*The principle of indigenous empowerment suggests that conflict transformation must actively envision, include, respect, and promote the human and cultural resources within a given setting. That involves a new set of lenses through which we do not primarily 'see' the setting and the people in it as the 'problem' and the outsider as the 'answer'. Rather, we understand the long-term goal of transformation as validating and building on people and resources within the setting"* (Lederach 1995: 212).

Sustainable peace requires addressing the underlying social and relational factors that fuel conflict (Lederach 1997: 24). In that understanding, Lederach introduces the concept of the 'peacebuilding pyramid', which includes three levels of leadership: (1) top leadership, comprising political and military leaders, (2) middle-range leadership, involving respected leaders from various sectors such as education, business, and religion, (3) grassroots leadership, including community leaders and local activists (see Lederach 1997: 38). In essence, Lederach emphasised the need for coordinating peacebuilding strategies at all three pyramid levels. In doing so, the different types of actors (levels) have to be matched with the different peacebuilding methodologies (Lederach 1997: 44-54). Here, reconciliation becomes central to peacebuilding. For that reason, Lederach suggests a move away from "a concern with the resolution of issues […] toward a frame of reference that focuses on the restoration and rebuilding of relationship [by using] the relational aspect of reconciliation as the central component of peacebuilding" (Lederach 1997: 24). Only this can provide "a set of lenses and a long-term, lifetime perspective, which sharpens and informs short-term decisions" (Lederach / Sampson 2000: 55). In Lederach's later works he focuses on the dynamic and constructive nature of dealing with conflicts, emphasising relationship building, cultural sensitivity, sustainability, and exploring the creative dimension of peacebuilding. That is the capacity to imagine a world beyond our current, conflict-ridden one, the art of sustaining paradoxical curiosity and the ability to take courageous actions in the face of uncertainty. Lederach's model combines a problem-solving approach to conflict

resolution with a process-oriented approach to peacebuilding to address the multidimensional nature of protracted social conflicts. The approach points to a qualitative way of categorising and appreciating all types of peacebuilding initiatives bringing an immense shift in the peacebuilding process.

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From a traditional point of view, conflict is perceived as an unwelcome disturbance of the relationships within the community (Faure 2000: 163). Conflict transformation or the 'peacebuilding process' in the traditional context aims to restore order and harmony in the community (which does not necessarily mean the return to the status quo but can also imply some transition to new arrangements). Like in Lederach's view, reconciliation is seen as necessary for restoring social harmony and social relationships between conflicting parties. The traditional approach is often associated with mythical entities and a spiritual aspect to reconciliation; indeed, in this traditional view, peacebuilding and restoring order are impossible without including the spiritual dimension (Huyse 2008: 10-12). Scholars such as Sarkin (2000), Rotberg (2000), Fischer (2011), and Battle (2009) have all argued that traditional peacebuilding approaches have been implemented successfully in several countries in the Global South, particularly in South Africa (apathy regime), Rwanda (post-genocide experience), Nigeria (civil war). The effectiveness of such methods can thus not be overlooked. Take examples of two popular peacebuilding initiatives in Africa: Ubuntu and Gacaca. These two initiatives are rooted in traditional African practices and philosophies, focusing on communal reconciliation, restorative justice, and healing relationships after conflict. 'Ubuntu' emphasises community interconnectedness, shared humanity, and justice. This philosophy is perhaps best exemplified by the phrase 'I am because we are'; a relational form of personhood which highlights the belief that an individual's well-being is intrinsically linked to the well-being of others. According to Desmond Tutu, 'Ubuntu' fosters forgiveness and collective healing by recognising the humanity of all individuals involved in a conflict (Tutu 1999: 35).
Meanwhile, the 'Gacaca' is a community-based court system where local people participate in the justice process to address genocide. As Ingelaere states, "the 'Gacaca' courts successfully processed a large number of genocide cases, thus alleviating the burden on the formal judicial system and fostering a sense of local ownership over the peacebuilding process" (Ingalaere 2009: 40). Phil Clark has extensively studied the 'Gacaca' courts, highlighting their role in promoting justice and reconciliation in Rwanda by providing a platform for truth-telling, accountability, and community healing (Clark 2010: 21).

How sustainable are existing peacebuilding initiatives in dealing with emerging conflicts?

Having reviewed some of the most dominant peacebuilding initiatives, it becomes clear that several authors have devoted much time and resources to categorising the peacebuilding process and advocating for harmony, order, justice, and effective conflict management. The various initiatives detailed above have transformed conflicts so as to promote and solidify stability and peace (Boutros-Ghali 1992). These peace efforts have helped host national authorities and populations end widespread violence, re-establish security, promote economic development, and organise democratic elections in Cambodia, Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, and Timor-Leste, among many other places (Autesserre 2017). However, despite the success achieved by existing peacebuilding approaches, these approaches are still somewhat limited. We must ask the question: are these initiatives context-specific or are they generally effective in tackling conflicts today and in the future? In particular, we must consider whether such initiatives deal with conflicts with nuclear potential.
The criticisms against existing peacebuilding initiatives often point to the implementation gap, the lack of an all-inclusive mechanism for pursuing lasting peace, and the world's multi-polarity. The UN is often pulled into the latter argument, being an organisation, whose flagship activity is peacebuilding. After the end of the Cold War, hopes were raised that armed conflicts would be ended permanently. The UN Agenda for Peace became the main reference document, defining peacebuilding as an outside intervention supporting national peace processes in conflict countries, to end violence and rebuild states after wars (see Ljungkvist / Jarstad 2021: 2210). Many scholars were dissatisfied with the peacebuilding process that followed and after a short period of successful UN peace-keeping missions in the early 1990s, the UN and the international community failed considerably to maintain peace in Rwanda, Somalia and the Balkans (Paffenholz 2015). These failures were blamed on peace being too centralised or because the local context was neglected (see Leonardsson / Rudd 2015; Höglund / Fjelde 2011). As of August 2022 alone, the UN deployed 12 peace-keeping operations and 24 field missions as special envoys or special political missions worldwide. And yet tensions persist. Hence, there is an increasing discussion among scholars about the future of UN peace operations in the nascent multipolar world order (Cassin / Zyla 2021; Coleman / Williams 2021; de Coning 2021; de Coning / Peter 2019; Kenkel / Foley 2021; Osland / Peter 2021).
More diffused power structures characterise multi-polarity. States like China and Russia have become competitors to the US dominance (Paris 2014). Other powers, such as Brazil, India, South Africa, and Turkey, also play increasingly important roles in world politics (Call / de Coning 2017; Paul 2018). These states may have different views on UN peacebuilding from the ones promoted by the United States and its allies in the unipolar early post-Cold War years (Badache et al. 2022: 548).
Moreover, there are questions regarding the actions and characteristics of the international interveners such as (and primarily) the UN. Both the mandate of such organisations (Doyle / Sambanis 2006; Van der Lijn 2009) and their vested interests (Adebajo 2011; Stedman 1997; Zartman 1989) have been called into questioned. Consequently, international peacebuilding interventions usually proceed top-down, focusing on assuaging national and international sources of conflict (Autesserre 2010; Richmond 2005). At the community level, peacebuilding programs such as the reconstruction projects and disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration have failed to reach many of their intended goals (see Gilligan et al. 2012; Humphreys et al. 2012; Humphreys / Weinstein 2007). Some foreign peace efforts have even increased the number and severity of human rights violations in Uganda (Branch 2011), hampered democracy in Malawi and Tajikistan (Englund 2006; Heathershaw 2009), and amplified gender disparities and sexual abuse in Bosnia, Congo, Liberia, and Sierra

Leone (Simm 2013). They have arguably also disrupted local economies in Congo, Liberia, and South Sudan and fuelled violence in Congo and Afghanistan (Autesserre 2012; Martin 2014). Even the surest foundation of liberal peace, which foregrounds most of the democratic ways for resolving conflicts, is far from being a 'force for good'. The push toward political liberalisation often fuels violence (Autesserre 2010; Barnett 2006; Newman et al. 2009; Paris 2004), while the promotion of market liberalisation aggravates socio-economic problems (Richmond / Franks 2009; Paris 2004; Pugh 2005; Tadjbakhsh 2011).
Despite the criticisms levied against the UN, we believe the UN remains a crucial institution in global governance because member states collectively entrust it with significant authority, reflecting its continued relevance in managing international conflicts and advancing global peace. This delegation of sovereignty underscores the UN's unique position as the primary body for addressing issues that transcend national borders, such as mediating disputes and leading disarmament efforts, including the global initiative to eliminate nuclear weapons. The UN's universal membership allows it to facilitate global dialogue and consensus in a way no other organisation can match. As Dag Hammarskjöld, the second UN Secretary-General, famously said, "the UN was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell" (Hammarskjöld 1954). This quote encapsulates the significance of the UN in sustainable peace, even as it adapts to new challenges. Thus, our proposed global priorities for peacebuilding emphasises the vital role of the UN in building long-term peace for the present and future generations.

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It is clear that much is still needed to develop a long-term peacebuilding approach that can achieve long-term objectives. Both Traditional and Western approaches are limited. Traditional and Western approaches differ in their conceptions of peacebuilding in that the latter emphasises national sovereignty and ownership, prefers technical cooperation over aid and mainly works with national governments rather than directly with civil society actors (see Call / de Coning 2017; Peter / Rice 2022). Such efforts towards achieving global peace will remain futile. The fact that non-Western states' conceptions have often been framed as illiberal, leading to all countries being grouped as either liberal and Western or illiberal and non-Western (Jütersonke et al. 2021; Yuan 2022), will limit the ability of the UN to contain conflict (see Osland / Peter 2021). The shortcomings of the approaches reviewed here can rather be seen as either Western and liberal (imposing external models, top-down critique, reinforcing power imbalances) or traditional (lacking universality, limiting the sphere of applicability, and potential to entrench tyranny).
Given these limitations, we now return to our initial question: Is long-term peace possible? If yes, how should it be approached? Can universal approaches to peacebuilding deal with emerging and future conflicts effectively? In the next section, we contribute to the debates by shedding light on an often overlooked but important question in peace studies: How can long-term peacebuilding be conceptualised and how the roles of major stakeholders, including the UN, be understood in the peacebuilding process? We adopt a broad approach to peacebuilding, defining it as all actions that could minimise nuclear threats and future warfare. Hence, we argue that by concurrently pursuing a long-term approach to peace, states can work towards building sustainable peace structures that address the root causes of conflict and promote a more just, equitable world for the present and future generations.

Towards long-term peacebuilding approach

In the face of growing competition at the global level and threats that are increasingly transnational, there is no longer any doubt that the peacekeeping structures which created a nuclear cataclysm during the Cold War have eroded in the past decades. Such approaches no longer keep pace in today's shifting world. We thus require a long-term peace strategy, especially among nuclear-armed states, to avoid any potential threat leading to escalation. Enhancing the transparency of military stances and doctrines, including those concerning emerging technologies, is essential. Achieving long-term peace in a world of interlocking threats demands that all regions, states, and the international system find new ways to act cooperatively and in solidarity for future generations. Cooperation does not require states to forgo their national interest but to recognise that they have shared goals. To achieve this approach to peace, we propose a series of significant steps which, if implemented by the UN and all *de facto* stakeholders in the peacebuilding process, would create the momentum currently lacking in collective action for peace. We call the following steps for creating long-term peace 'global priorities'.

Global priority one: Solidarity for peace and commitment to eliminate nuclear weapons

The world's nations must recognise every mutual and collective effort to achieve long-term peace as a global good. The asymmetries between states and the barriers that sustain them are obstacles to long-term peace, as they are to global cooperation and sustainability. Hence, redressing the pervasive historical power imbalances that characterise the international system – from the legacies of colonialism and hegemony to today's deeply unequal global status – must be a priority. Moreover, the UN should be at the centre of the commitment to eliminate nuclear weapons, prevent nuclear war between major powers, and manage the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which regulated nuclear disarmament and arms control, is near dead as states continue to reinforce their nuclear arsenals and new nuclear technologies. We should reaffirm the commitment made by the permanent members of the Security Council in January 2022, which emphasised that a nuclear war cannot be won. The existential threat that nuclear weapons pose to humanity must motivate us to engage with this issue. Reiterating the commitment not to use nuclear weapons will be a good step towards lasting peace, if the end goal is their total elimination pending the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. We recommend prohibiting lethal autonomous weapons systems that have the potential to change warfare significantly and can function without human control or oversight. Also, the UN should ensure that non-complying states face some punitive measures and sanctions at all levels (political, economic, etc).

Global priority two: Rethink the prevention approach and shift the peace enforcement paradigm

In today's interlocking global risk environment, prevention cannot apply to conflict-prone or 'fragile' states alone. To achieve long-term peace, prevention first requires an urgent shift in approach, whereby all states agree to recognise prevention and lasting peace as a moral commitment. In essence, universalising the approach to prevention means tackling all kinds of violent conflicts and tensions in conflict-prone settings and beyond. As all emerging conflicts have sources of origin, efforts towards minimising or preventing these sources from gaining momentum are crucial. Such commitment must start with trust among states and investment in conflict prevention capacities and infrastructures for peace. They should be multidimensional, people-centred, and inclusive of all the different components of society. On the other hand, there is a need for multinational peace enforcement coupled with counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations. The UN should direct member states to consider improving such operations and provide further response to emerging threats. We recommend that all-inclusive political efforts enforce peace and advance non-military actions such as demobilisation and reintegration. Advancing these actions for peace must comply with the Charter of the United Nations and international humanitarian and human rights law and involve effective and transparent accountability measures. In doing that, the UN can reinforce state institutions and strengthen civil society and social cohesion. These efforts should be financed to achieve sustainable goals. Hence, the Peacebuilding Fund should be expanded to support these efforts as a matter of urgency.

Global priority three: Engage in proactive diplomacy and intensify efforts to end the weaponisation of rogue technologies

One of the significant contemporary global concerns is the deterioration of state relations. This concern raises the spectre of possibility inter-state armed conflicts and possible nuclear escalation. All sides must prioritise proactive diplomacy to bridge these growing divides and ensure that humanity is safe. In this sense, diplomatic engagement should be a strategy not only for minimising the risks of armed conflicts but also for managing the tensions that mark the geopolitical order and creating a fruitful ground for cooperation based on shared interests.

Diplomatic tools are detailed in Article 33 of the UN Charter. However, this article often falls short when the will of member states is lacking. Engaging in proactive diplomacy to de-escalate tensions and reduce the chances for future conflict is essential to transcend this limitation. A similar approach was used during moments of high geopolitical tension in recent history. From Suez to the Cuban missile crisis, diplomatic engagement averted a nuclear war. The Black Sea Initiative shows that diplomatic engagement and innovative use of multilateral instruments can help find common ground even in the most complex situations. At the international level, proactive diplomacy can bolster cooperation. Achieving such a level of global cooperation will pave the way for controlling and preventing the weaponisation of rogue technologies that aid the development of nuclear warheads and have the potential to transform the nature of warfare. Regulating rogue technologies is critical; such technologies may have data and algorithmic biases and can be dangerous, especially if allowed in the hands of a dictatorial regime. Therefore, we recommend that all stakeholders commit to a responsible technological development, so as to address risks posed by rogue technologies, including their intersection with other threats such as nuclear weapons. Also, the UN must intensify its capacities to undertake diplomatic initiatives for peace, bringing together global and regional actors to design new diplomatic engagement models that can address all states' interests and deliver mutual benefits. In doing that, the UN must work with regional organisations such as the European Union and African Union, to repair regional security architectures where they are in danger of collapsing, build them where they do not exist, and enhance them where they can require further development.

> Achieving such a level of global cooperation will pave the way for controlling and preventing the weaponisation of rogue technologies that aid the development of nuclear warheads and have the potential to transform the nature of warfare, putting present and future civilisations at risk.

The quest for long-term peace in the face of nuclear threats and emerging conflicts is an arduous task. While we cannot claim that the three levels of global priority proposed here are exhaustive, they are valuable action plans for building long-term peace. As peace is a call to action, a noble vision and a rallying cry – we must pursue peace in all its dimensions.

To effectively enforce global priorities for long-term peace, a multifaceted approach is essential. Sanctions are a key tool, particularly against states violating nuclear disarmament treaties, but must be applied carefully to avoid harm to humanity. Multilateral punitive measures, such as political isolation, can reinforce compliance, while conditional support and incentives can encourage positive behaviour. The United Nations must be strengthened to play a central role in these efforts, with the Security Council proactively authorising sanctions and enforcement actions. Additionally, regional organisations should be integrated into enforcement strategies to ensure coordinated and effective responses to emerging threats. The success of these measures depends on the collective will of the international community to prioritise global peace and security.

Conclusion

As conflicts intensify and geopolitical divisions widen, states are now competing to enhance their nuclear warheads, making them stealthier and more precise. New weaponry is being developed without sufficient safeguards, introducing new methods of warfare and increasing the risk of human annihilation. The UN and all stakeholders need to prioritise and renew the pursuit of long-term peace to deal with the complexities of today's multipolar world. The global priority for peace addresses strategic action plans, a recommitment to eliminating nuclear weapons, and stepped-up efforts towards proactive diplomacy and conflict reduction. It presents a view of prevention that addresses armed conflicts, especially those that threaten future generations, and it recommends regulating the weaponisation of rogue technologies. Despite the difficulty of achieving long-term peace given the global state of affairs, we expect the UN and all stakeholders to rise to the challenge. We must be clear about the magnitude of the threats before us. The possibility of a global cataclysm, whether from nuclear wars or future conflicts, is no longer in doubt. Hence, states must find new ways of cooperating in solidarity for the common good. They have the primary responsibility and more capacities than any other actor to enact the changes needed to transform peace and security. Therefore, states must partner

with the UN to re-intensify peacebuilding efforts. On the other hand, the UN must strive to reforge its commitment to lasting peace grounded in trust and solidarity.

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