

ONE EARTH FUTURE
FORUM

THE CENTURY OF PEACE?

EMPIRICAL TRENDS IN PEACE AND CONFLICT

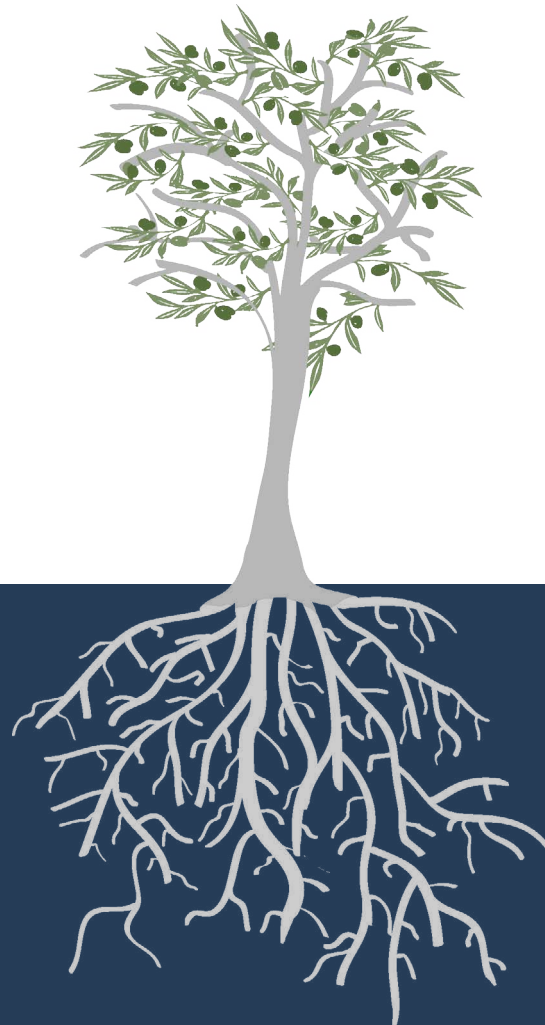


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The fundamental question of this report, succinctly phrased, can be framed as: Is peace possible? The answer is not nearly as brief, but is largely surprising—peace is more possible than you may think.

That is the inescapable conclusion of measured and insightful analysis, a burgeoning body of research, unmistakable historical trends, and a changing global landscape driven by geography, technology, and humanity. Remarkably, relatively recent and currently unfolding developments in peace and conflict resolution strongly suggest that a world without war is a distinct possibility.

While the world surely must navigate substantial complexities, including many of relatively recent vintage and arguably more challenging than those of past generations, this is a viable, reasonable policy-driven discussion that reflects the very real prospects for achieving and sustaining peace.

A Peaceful World is Realistic and Achievable

Four overarching findings provide perspective going forward:

- Humanity as a whole is enjoying one of the most peaceful times in all of human history. Organized armed conflict has been on the decline throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, and while these trends are in danger of reversing, in general the movement towards peace is still strong when compared to history. If these trends continue, a peaceful world is possible.

Achieving a peaceful world will require extending the current gains that have been made in the area of peace and security. Three entry points provide next steps for moving the world toward peace:

- The world must **continue the gains in human security**. The decline in conflict is in large part because the world has made great strides in reducing poverty and supporting human development, with a resulting decline in war and violence. These trends must be reinforced and continued by extending the current structures in place for development and security.
- The world must **increase women’s engagement in economic and political life internationally**. Research and the lived experience of women internationally show that as women become more visible in public life, peace is more likely.
- Achieving peace will require the world to **confront beliefs that legitimize violence** as a tool of conflict resolution, an area that has been largely underdeveloped to date.

If these goals are accomplished, then the idea of a world without war may be not only possible but achievable.

Peace will be earned incrementally, with a series of decisions made intentionally, deliberately, and purposefully at critical junctures—choosing the more productive path at each fork in the road and successfully navigating each twist and turn as they are approached.

Peace becomes an achievable goal when it is considered as the sum of countless plausible policy decisions, made in differing jurisdictions, with varied impetuses and diverse drivers, but nonetheless consistent with an overarching goal of moving toward peace and turning away from potential violent conflict.

Sustained effort will be required, as conscious choices are considered and decided. The path to peace may be long and winding, constricted and challenging, but it is navigable. Greater understanding can be achieved through common interest, future behavior can be influenced by current circumstances, and changing imperatives can lead to changed priorities.

Alliances and allies, forged by new realities such as global health, disarming poverty, and interdependent technology, can break with the past and submit to a more fruitful and less destructive future. The politics of necessity can simultaneously become the politics of possibility, unalterably on the path to peace. Our opportunity is to encourage it, cultivate it, and inspire its growth.



At this juncture, the global focus on all three of these tracks to peace seems positive. In human development, the process for developing “Sustainable Development Goals” in the United Nations is ongoing. While there are complaints and criticisms of the process, the UN remains committed to setting and tracking goals for human development internationally in a variety of areas. Women’s engagement and empowerment internationally remains a focus of many governments and NGOs, and continued pressure on expanding these programs may continue to develop women’s equality. In regard to violence-supporting beliefs, there is less direct focus on these issues currently, other than programs specifically directed toward “countering violent extremism,” suggesting that this is a particularly valuable area for future initiatives.

Encouraging Trends

A developing body of research on the causes and trends of violence has begun to undermine past premises. Increasingly, scholars of violence are arguing that the story of human history as a narrative of constant and unchanging conflict is incorrect. As our scientific understanding of the causes of violence and the trajectories of armed conflict at the inter- and intra-state levels continues to develop, there is a growing argument that the world is getting more peaceful over time as the elements associated with long-term peace become more established.

While this is relatively uncontroversial in the research community, there is an unmistakable disconnect outside of those confines. This may be attributable to the disposition of mass media, which tend to focus on the armed conflicts. Wars that end quietly are less newsworthy than new wars beginning, regardless of their number or import.

There is strong research that highlights clear pressures leading towards peace. Among them:

A documented decline in the number of battle-related deaths since World War II is seen as evidence of the relative success of the United Nations peacebuilding and peacekeeping systems. While some question whether warfare is the appropriate measure in a time of terrorism, organized crime, and refugees and displaced people, the overall statistical trend in warfare over time remains positive.



Tom Crick, William Ury, and Patrice Martin at the Forum; photo by Jill Leonard

Changing views on the appropriate use of violence in the context of human rights, as well as greater education, are seen to be influencing attitudes toward the use of military force. One study found, for example, that US support for the use of the military was in general high when the goal was restraining aggression, but low when the goal was intervening in civil war.

Studies also indicate that increasing education reduces most forms of political violence. As global attitudes toward the use of force shift, governments may be less likely to use military force. High rates of education can help prevent the outbreak of conflict—and literacy and primary school enrollment throughout the developing world have been increasing significantly since 2000.

The degree of global economic integration has increased, and there is some evidence that economic ties support peace. It has also been noted that

countries that have higher GDPs are significantly less likely to experience violence within the state. Additionally, democracies are less likely to engage in interstate war with other democracies, less likely to use repression within the state, and may have fewer civil wars. The proliferation of democracies may therefore be an important element in supporting global peace.

Women's equality supports peace both directly and indirectly, political science research reflects. When women are allowed to fully participate in the economic and political life of a country, that country is less likely to use violence. Women remain a largely untapped force for peace, as women's equality appears to impact many of the elements of human development that have been identified as supporting peace.

Moderating Concerns

There are also flags of concern raised that are noteworthy in any equation evaluating the prospects for enduring peace.

A view held by some in regard to climate change is that extreme weather conditions could lead to reduced crop yields and reduced availability of water, leading to structural stressors and conflict over increasingly scarce resources. Possible resulting changes in human migration could also contribute to increasing stress on governance systems that may in turn create conditions more likely to lead to violent conflict. Empirical research on this topic is divided, and additional analysis is recommended in order to be adequately prepared to address any potential for conflict driven by climate change. Vastly increasing population numbers could also trigger similar food chain disruptions or shortfalls, and increased pressure on energy and transportation systems due to increasing population levels could also foster instability that could induce conflict.

In these instances, optimism continues to reign while recognizing that the world faces significant challenges. The prevailing view is that such potential threats, now or in the future, are no more severe or disruptive than those currently being resolved by the global system without resorting to war. When all of this data and evidence is taken together, it becomes apparent that

peacemaking and peacebuilding in this 21st century is not a challenge of breaking down systems, but a challenge of building them up.

Progress can be tenuous and unpredictable. It is not inevitable that the current trends in peace will continue, or that the current focus on elements associated with peace will be maintained. It is possible that the global community will retreat from international engagement and development, shifting to an emphasis on security above development. Even if the focus is maintained on international development, there may be a dilution or diminishment of indicators associated with peace.

The significant gains made in recent decades in human development and indicators associated with peace may be fleeting. Certainly, there will continue to be occasional missteps and lapses from time to time. There will be violent aberrations, as there have always been. These will gain considerable attention, but should not obscure the greater context of progress. Conflicts tenaciously resolved, and longstanding disputes surmounted, can with persistence be sustained, strengthened, and fortified.

The rise of political extremism, domestically and internationally, will require unwavering systems that engage with the drivers of extremism and defuse them. The movement towards polarized and conflict-generating positions and social movements that justify violence can be intensified by a changing media technology landscape that often supports, affirms, and encourages political polarization.

Nuclear proliferation is another source of concern because of the potential for great harm to large numbers of people, and the serious challenges posed for peace and security because of the likely international reaction should such weapons be employed.

All of this must be tackled head-on, and purposefully. The encouraging truth is that in doing so, the possibility of advancing the prospects for peace is, perhaps to an unprecedented degree, real. The dominant trends are moving in the right direction, and even obstacles are seen as surmountable. As never before, sustainable peace may reasonably be within reach. It is certainly within our sights, and clearly visible. We can get there from here, if we act wisely and take confident and definitive steps forward.

There can be an end to war. We can live in a time of peace.



Deborah Prothrow-Stith and Charles Stith at the Forum; photo by Jill Leonard

INTRODUCTION: IS PEACE POSSIBLE?

Is peace possible? Many historians, political scientists, and philosophers have argued that it isn't. One reading of the 10,000-year history of humanity is as a story of ongoing violence at almost every level. This interpretation of history is common—the poet Lord Tennyson described the basic state of nature as “red in tooth and claw,”¹ and the 17th-century political theorist Thomas Hobbes famously said that without political institutions to protect humanity, the natural state of humankind was to be in “continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”² From

this point of view, armed violence is part of the basic way that people interact with each other, and only the threat of more severe violence can force people to interact with each other peacefully. Such a view would argue that war is inherently present in political interaction, and that the idea of reaching a world without war is foundationally impossible.

On the other side of the argument, peace activists in the 20th century and earlier have claimed that war is a decision that people make. In 1969, John Lennon and Yoko Ono launched an advertising campaign in cities throughout the world, on billboards and in newspapers, carrying the message “War is over, if you want it.” This ad campaign both reflected the attitude of the peace movement of the '60s and influenced it: it was a call for social change, based on the idea that peace was a goal that could be willed into being by people who believed enough. This call was seen by many as being an unrealistic and unachievable end—the purview of “dreamers,” in Lennon's own description.



photo by William Sauro, New York Times photo archives

The debate between these points of view is frequently framed as a debate between these “dreamers” and hard-nosed realists. In fact, one theoretical approach to understanding international relations assumes that military power is central to all interstate engagement, and is called the “realist” approach to international relations.³ However, a developing body of research into the causes and trends of violence has begun to undermine this basic distinction. Increasingly, scholars of violence are beginning to argue that the story of human history as a narrative of constant and unchanging conflict is incorrect. As our scientific understanding of the causes of violence and the trajectories of armed conflict at the inter- and intra-state levels continues to develop, there is a growing argument that in fact the world is getting more peaceful over time as the elements associated with long-term peace become more established. Peace scholars and scientists researching violence have increasingly begun to claim that global systems for peacekeeping and the prevention of violence work;⁴ that war is, on balance, becoming less common than it was;⁵ and that human society as a whole may in fact be becoming more peaceful over time.⁶

This analysis represents a third way between the realist argument that conflict is foundational to international relations and the activist argument that war is a moral choice. By focusing on the science of peace and the close analysis of changes in the predictors associated with conflict, a peace-sciences approach to the study of conflict can allow for a technical, dispassionate assessment of the likelihood of conflict. In this report, we discuss these trends and the result of one such discussion that took place in October of 2014. The conclusion of this review is that if these trends continue, it would follow that a world without war is not merely possible, it is likely. That may be too quick a leap, but it is not a misstep.

While the idea of a pragmatic, policy-oriented, analytical and technical discussion that advances the notion that the world may be made peaceful will sound odd and unrealistic to many, the data would suggest that it isn't. The reality is that mounting data on conflict and developing scientific literature on trends and the causes of war collectively demonstrate that such a conversation is perfectly plausible. And that peace is undeniably possible and even within our reach, if not yet our grasp.

Convening a Conversation

The assertion that peace is possible is based on a review of the existing research on peace and trends in violence, but also on the results of a three-day-long discussion convened in Aspen, Colorado. In October 2014, One Earth Future convened the inaugural “One Earth Future Forum” with the goal of bringing together high-level researchers and practitioners interested in peace and security to see whether the group could develop a consensus on the implications of existing research on trends in peace for the future of war. The objective was to discover what happens when researchers, business leaders, political figures, and members of civil society and the military come together to discuss what can be done to support peace.

The tripartite goals of this discussion were:

- To consider whether world peace, defined as a world without war, is possible;
- To identify what elements of the current international system need to be expanded or strengthened to help overcome global challenges in the 21st century; and
- To develop initial steps toward a “plan for peace” that would identify how the world can chart a course and proceed toward achieving that objective.

Twelve participants met for a three-day discussion held on the grounds of the Aspen Meadows Resort in Aspen, Colorado. In preparation, the participants and an additional ten contributors were interviewed about their thoughts on whether the world was becoming more peaceful, and what challenges may disrupt any positive trends that exist. Under Chatham House Rule, participants engaged in a substantive and practical discussion. By the end, initial points of consensus had been developed, providing the basis for a renewed and broadened conversation ahead.

The preeminent conclusion was that while surely a difficult goal, a world without war is possible. Based on the existing trends in peace and conflict, participants reached the realization that if the global system stabilizes and supports the existing gains made and extends them to address the remaining causes of violence, then it is possible that the 21st century could see the end of war.

This report takes the existing research on peace and violence and this three-day discussion as a starting point to argue that, as participants concluded, peace is possible—if the world, as a whole, continues to develop the nascent system for security. This claim is informed by the discussion of the 2014 Forum, but the arguments in this report are developed by OEF and should not be attributed to the participants in the OEF Forum, either individually or collectively.



Paul Collier and Swanee Hunt at the Forum; photo by Jill Leonard

Concurrence on an Agenda

While peace is possible, it is not guaranteed. The road ahead is strewn with obstacles and alternate pathways that would undermine progress. For peace to be fully realized, the world will need to continue to develop the institutional and social structures that have led to increased human and economic development internationally. That was the inescapable conclusion of the convened participants, consistent with facts on the ground and historical research. Three overarching findings provide perspective going forward:

- The world has made great strides in reducing poverty and in supporting human flourishing, with a resulting decline in war and violence. These trends must be reinforced and continued.
- Increasing women’s engagement in economic and political life internationally must continue: the data and the lived experience of women internationally show that when women are more engaged in the life of a nation, peace is more likely.
- The world must directly confront beliefs and norms that legitimize violence as a tool of conflict resolution.

This conclusion is challenged by a number of limitations. The existing trends in conflict data suggest that the goal of a world without war is achievable, but the data are historical and by themselves do not necessarily suggest that the trends will continue. To extend those trends and realize a world at peace, incremental and pivotal choices will need to be made at various and varied junctures amidst a range of interconnected global systems. The 21st century faces some significant challenges that previous eras did not, resulting from the dramatic growth of globalization and interconnection at the global level as well as continuing population growth, resource exploitation, and the possibility of climate change and other novel issues.



Violence is partly a function of dysfunctional beliefs and partly a function of deteriorating objective circumstances... Broadly, the global trends on objective circumstances seem to be pushing us into more favorable situations... Whereas, if you like the sort of psychology of how would we change beliefs to be more functional, [there] hasn't really been anything like this much explored.



Even if the underlying trends in the data suggest that the world is becoming more peaceful, in the face of challenges in the 21st century these trends may not continue. Since the discussion in 2014, conflict has gotten worse in troubling ways that may undermine the existing trends.⁷ Based on the existing research and the discussions at the 2014 Forum, however, OEF argues that the possibility of peace or war is not inevitable as previously considered by some, but instead is increasingly a choice that is within our collective power to make.

SECTION 1: HISTORIC AND CURRENT TRENDS IN PEACE AND WAR

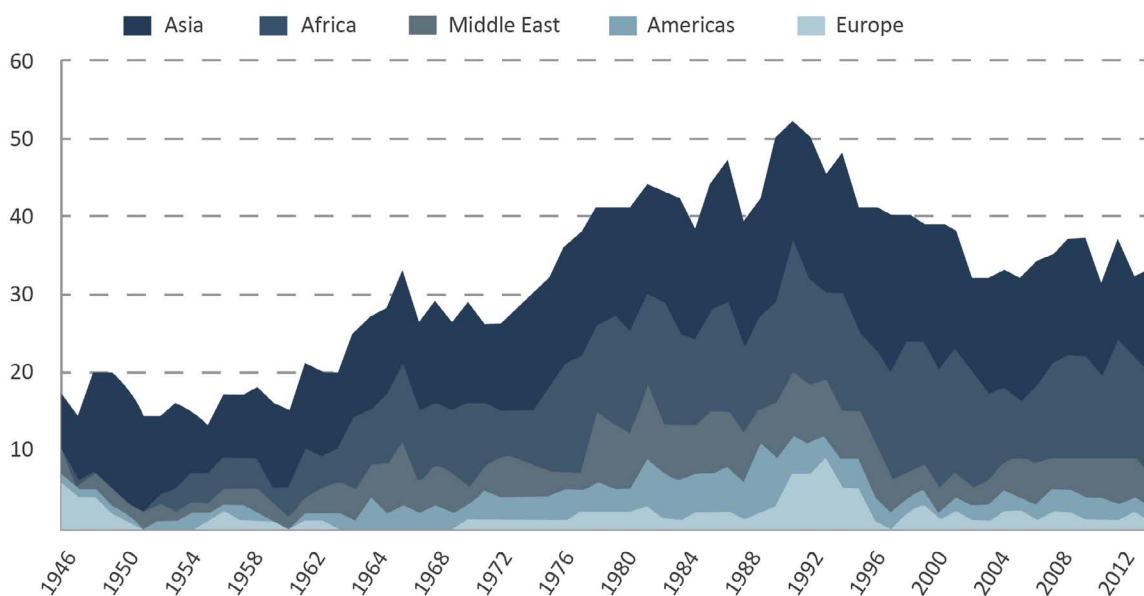
There is a developing consensus among political scientists and those who study trends in armed conflict that the world is becoming more peaceful over time.⁸ This fact, while relatively uncontroversial in the research community, is astonishing to many people whose information about conflict comes from other sources. It is easy to understand why people may have a hard time believing the claim that the world is more peaceful than it has ever been: speeches and public claims by policymakers, NGO advocates, and leaders of IGOs more often focus on the risks of future conflict than on conflicts that have been delayed, diffused, or resolved.

A recent article in the journal *Global Governance*, “Is the World Deteriorating?” by Peter Tikuisis and David R. Mandel, questions the International Crisis Group’s portrayal of the world as much less peaceful in recent years. The authors argue that this picture is inconsistent with available data and highlights a potential for bias in advocacy organizations with policy agendas.⁹ Mass media, as well, tend to focus on the armed conflicts that currently exist, and there are absolutely clear examples of violence and armed conflict for them to report on. Wars that end quietly—or that are resolved relatively amicably before they can ignite—are far less newsworthy than new wars beginning.

Despite the dominance of pessimistic language in the popular discourse, the data on peace and conflict show a clear trend toward the world getting more peaceful throughout human history. Several researchers, including some participants in the Forum, have published research analyzing this shift and arguing that the world is becoming more peaceful overall.

Joshua Goldstein’s *Winning the War on War* documents the decline in the number of new wars beginning as well as the decline in the number of battle-related deaths that have occurred since World War II.¹⁰ His primary argument is that the success the UN has had in establishing peacebuilding and peacekeeping systems is responsible for this decline, an argument supported by several additional researchers who agree that peacekeeping missions by the UN are largely successful.¹¹ The Human Security Report, a regular series tracking shifts in overall human security over time, has also concluded that the balance of the empirical literature supports the claim that the world is becoming more peaceful.¹²

ARMED CONFLICT BY REGION, 1946-2013



Adapted from UCDP

Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* argues a slightly more controversial point. Rather than limiting the focus of his analysis to organized armed conflict, as many researchers on war and armed violence do, he argues that there has been a trend towards a reduction of violence in all forms over the last 10,000 years. Drawing from various literature, Pinker argues that war and the deadliness of war have declined over the millennia and that there has been an overall decline in violence over the past 10,000 years. He draws from battle-death data from historical archives and a dataset developed by Matthew White to make his case. In addition, Pinker cites evidence from archaeological findings to argue that the percentage of people who died violently in pre-state societies was significantly more than in state-based societies. Rates of death from violence decreased significantly following the development of states as the predominant unit of political order.

These claims are not universally accepted. Many are skeptical of claims that the world is becoming more peaceful. One source of contention is the claims made by the Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Peace Index (GPI). The 2013 GPI measured a seven-year decline in peacefulness, claiming higher levels of terrorism,^a a higher number of conflicts, and a higher number of refugees and displaced people.¹³ On one hand, it is important to note the distinction in the scales of these claims. The Global Peace Index has tracked a list of 22 indicators by country on a yearly basis since 2007; whereas, for instance, the Pinker thesis covers millennia. Some point out that the index may do more to confuse than clarify, and that many of the indicators' relationships with peace or warfare are complicated and can move in either direction.¹⁴

Some question whether the focus on warfare is the appropriate measure to judge whether or not the world has become more peaceful. As the 2013 Human Security Report noted, "the violent death toll from drug-related organized criminal violence [in Mexico in 2011] was higher than the battle-death toll of the war in Afghanistan or Sudan or Iraq."¹⁵ Furthermore, Mexico's homicide rate is overshadowed by the homicide rates from organized criminal violence in neighboring Central American countries including Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Belize. However, there is also a problem with missing data. Many developing countries have either just started collecting data on homicides or do not differentiate between homicides from organized criminal violence and "individual" homicides.¹⁶

It may also be important to question what relevance the broad trends have for people in specific conflict zones. If the large-scale trends in peace are not replicated in specific regions, then the prospects for global peace may be limited. In pre-conference interviews, some participants and contributors suggested that global trends may obscure regional problems: one potential interpretation of the data is that Western and developed countries are experiencing a movement towards peace that is not shared globally. The chart above shows the number of armed conflicts by region from 1946–2013.

Despite these concerns, at minimum it appears that the data on wars specifically show a significant downturn over longer periods of time, and that while there are regular perturbations in this overall statistical trend, the change over time remains positive.



A century or two ago, big cities all across the world used to burn down; the whole city would burn down. I remember looking and people said, 'Oh, it's an act of nature. There's nothing you can do about it.' Then, gradually people began the great fire departments, well not just fire departments but prevention; fire safe materials. You can look at any room right now. Fire prevention is built into this room and we just take it for granted.



a The Human Security Report, however, contends that there has been a decrease in levels of terrorism.

Future Challenges

One problem with historical analysis is that many trends may appear sustainable and solid, but change rapidly when the underlying pressures change. Based purely on the current trends in peace, one may be tempted to conclude that battle deaths will continue to decline until the world reaches a peaceful state. This may not be the case, however: the decline in violence is the result of a combination of trends and pressures encouraging peace that are the result of a complex tangle of decisions made at the state and international levels by a variety of different institutions with varying motivations. They are affected strongly by global economic trends, environmental systems, and other elements outside the global political system.

The trends in peace are not immutable: in fact, since the 2014 discussion took place there have been several reversals in trends in peace. Blanket statements such as “there is no violent conflict in Europe” have had to be revised,¹⁷ and some analysts have posited that the fundamental claim that violence is declining has been disproven.¹⁸ These reversals underscore an important caveat when considering trends in conflict. When predicting what may happen in the 21st century, analysts must consider not only positive trends but also the disruptors—and several potential disruptors are evident.

Economic Development and Inequality

Some of the most significant predictors of war are ultimately questions of the economic experiences of individuals and groups in society. One of the most important predictors of conflict yet identified is GDP per capita.¹⁹ On balance, the trends in global economic development have been positive, but issues about how this development continues and the degree to which it creates group-based inequities may lead to increases in conflict.

One serious concern is the possibility of economic instability at the global level. Given the degree of economic integration, the potential for economic shocks to have an impact on multiple countries is significant. As the US debt-to-GDP ratio climbs, one concern is that US economic stability is not going to continue into the 21st century. In addition, signs of a potential economic bubble in China as well as concerns about Eurozone countries demonstrate potential future problems. Economic instability could foment conflict: poverty is strongly associated with an increased risk of civil war, and if economic instability leads to interstate tension around trade or reduced international engagement then the pacifying effects of such engagement may go away.

Even if development continues, development which creates group-based inequity can contribute to violence.²⁰ There is a debate taking place within the political science sphere that is reflected in this report and in the discussion about trends in conflict, focusing on the degree to which “greed vs. grievance” is likely to affect conflict. This framing looks at whether economic advantage or social beliefs are more likely to cause conflict. There is a fairly strong finding that economic benefit is strongly associated with armed violence: several studies using large datasets to test the different explanations have found that when individuals or groups can benefit economically from violence, the risk of conflict is much higher.²¹ This research also underscores the potential for inter-group grievances (which may be associated with economic inequality), which can also lead to conflict: follow-up studies using different data have reached more nuanced findings, suggesting that group-based complaints can motivate groups into a state where they are willing to fight, but the final movement into open conflict requires a perception of economic resources accruing to the group.²²

Trends in Human Development Internationally

One proposed argument for why war is declining has to do with the improvements in social services and human development internationally. Research on human development and existing objective circumstances has tended to focus on several key areas, including education, healthcare, water and sanitation access, and the umbrella issue of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. The provision of these services has been linked to peace and stability: there is some evidence that states can, as Taydas and Peksen said, “buy peace” by providing services that increase citizens’ trust in the government and reduce the scope of issues that lead to conflict.²³ In addition, there is some evidence that human underdevelopment contributes to violence through psychological mechanisms: people who have more environmental stress and who believe that they are likely to die relatively young are more likely to use violence than those who can reasonably expect longer lives.²⁴



photo by woodleywonderworks, Flickr

In the first case, education—universal primary education—is one of the stated Millennium Developmental Goals (MDG) of the UN,²⁵ and the world has made significant progress towards this goal. However, the speed of change has declined. The UN’s 2013 MDG report suggested that there was a 50% decline in the number of children who were not in school between 2000 and 2011, but that the remaining 57 million children were proving to be more difficult to enroll. In particular, the poorest countries and the poorest regions within countries are now the focus of education activities, and there are gender-based disparities.²⁶

A similar pattern is found for access to healthcare and sanitation: for sanitation in particular, access to safe drinking water has improved dramatically but remains a persistent challenge in the poorest regions of the world.²⁷ With healthcare, a global focus on specific diseases including AIDS/HIV and tuberculosis has contributed to an increase in access to treatment for these diseases. However, enormous gaps in access more generally to

healthcare practitioners persist: in 2014, the density of physicians per 10,000 people ranged from less than one in some of the poorest countries to 40 or more in developed and higher-income countries.²⁸ This gap is complicated by the fact that in poorer countries the healthcare force is not evenly distributed, but concentrated in urban areas.

In general, the world has done an excellent job of closing gaps in access to basic elements of human development: the late 20th century and early 21st century were characterized by unprecedented gains in human development. At no point in human history have humans internationally had better opportunity to access education, sanitation, and health. However, these gains have in many ways represented the “low-hanging fruit” of development, and following 2010 the rate of gains appears to have slowed as the world confronts the problems posed by the poorest and least-developed countries internationally.

The Pareto principle may be in effect when it comes to human development: it’s possible that the remaining issues may prove to be more intractable than the gains made to date, and solving them may be extremely expensive. To the extent that such human development is in fact related to the decline in violence to date, if the global community retreats from addressing human development then it’s possible that a baseline level of conflict will remain.

Democratization and Instability

One major predictor of peace is the degree of democracy of the state in question, although this finding is only true for mature democracies. Weak states or countries that are transitioning to democracy are extremely unstable; they are more likely to have internal conflicts and these conflicts are more likely to reoccur.²⁹ They are more likely than mature democracies to use violent repression, and also may be more likely to engage in interstate war.³⁰

This is a potential issue in the 21st century as the number of autocratic states shrinks.³¹ Remaining non-democracies include major military powers such as North Korea and China, as well as smaller but still significant states such as Saudi Arabia. The research suggests that the potential for the democratization of these states to generate significant conflict is real: democratization movements could degenerate into civil war, as happened recently in Syria, or could generate unstable states more prone to future civil war or interstate conflict.

The increasing number of democracies, however, also offers improved prospects for a lessening of conflict and increasing movement towards peace. In democratic systems, there is an assumption that the political system reflects the demands and opinions of the population as a whole. Given this assumption, individual attitudes about the use of violence and war may be an important predictor of war and organized political violence.

International Peacekeeping

One key element of the global system that is supporting peace, as participants in the Forum and other researchers have effectively argued, is the development of active peacekeeping missions by the UN and other international governmental organizations. This is one key claim in Joshua Goldstein's *Winning the War on War*,³² which documents the successes of UN peacekeeping forces.

The empirical evidence does support the claim that multinational peacekeeping forces are largely effective in supporting peace: an early analysis by Page Fortna of the success of peacekeeping missions argued that when potential confounds were eliminated, peacekeeping missions were largely successful.³³ Fortna's analysis was supported by later work, including an analysis of 20th-century peacekeeping missions that found that in addition to negotiated peace agreements, the presence of UN peacekeepers was an important predictor of peace³⁴. In addition, there is some evidence that peacekeeping missions contribute to the development of stable states: one analysis of multinational peacekeeping interventions found that such interventions appeared to have an impact on the likelihood of stable democratic systems emerging post-conflict.³⁵

Importantly, these successes appear to be related to the approach taken by multinational organizations such as the UN rather than just the presence of military peacekeepers: in contrast to single-nation interventions or interventions associated with military-driven forced regime change, UN peacekeeping missions have historically been lightly armed, forbidden from proactively engaging in conflict, and coupled with programs designed to engage in supporting state institutions.



photo by Jayel Aheram, Flickr

Perhaps because of these characteristics, the successes of the UN peacekeeping missions do not appear to be as evident in single-country military missions designed to support regime change: such foreign incursions are not highly likely to result in stable and well-governed states.³⁶ This does not mean that peacekeeping missions are beyond criticism: a recent UN analysis of peacekeeping missions concluded that they have not been as effective as intended in their mission of protecting civilians.³⁷

Peacekeeping missions are politically contentious, also, and the bureaucracy of the UN may be calling their use into question. The major conflicts in 2014 that have pushed battle deaths upward include the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria and associated conflicts. The geopolitics of both make the likelihood that the UN Security Council will approve peacekeeping missions fairly remote. In addition, since the Libyan conflict, several members of the UNSC who have veto authority have expressed concern about the possibility that peacekeeping could be a cover for regime change. If the global system retreats from the use of peacekeeping, trends in conflict may rebound.

Global Extremism

One of the significant challenges for peace currently facing the world is the spread of political extremism. Political discourse in the late 20th and early 21st century has been marked by polarization and the proliferation of extremist groups. Examples include right-wing extremism and the associated violence in the United States in the late 20th century (e.g., the bombing of the Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma City).³⁸ Examples also include the rise of violent Islamist movements in the early years of the 21st century as well as potentially violent right-wing movements in Europe.³⁹

Such extremist groups contribute to polarization that reduces the ability of political groups to talk to each other and collectively resolve social problems.⁴⁰ They also contribute to the emergence of violent conflict: even a small extremist movement can provoke violent reprisals.



It's very easy for a 14-year-old girl in the UK to suddenly become interested in a conflict that's thousands of miles away from her home and the life that she ostensibly leads. Probably what that points to is the fact that there are different interest groups that are out there, and people have ready access to those interest groups and the ideologies that go with them.



When asked why they think that extremism is growing throughout the world, some Forum participants pointed to the media as one important factor. New media support political polarization by allowing a tight association of people with shared opinions to selectively emphasize news that confirms their beliefs or promotes shared perspectives.⁴¹ Globally, extremist organizations advocating violence have been very effective at using online and new media sources to promote their agendas and recruit supporters.⁴²

Nuclear Proliferation and Control

Another source of concern—conceivably intertwined with global extremism—is the potential for nuclear proliferation. Participants raised specific concerns around the uncertain control and tracking of the nuclear arsenal of the former Soviet Union⁴³ and the potential for unsecured nuclear weapons to be accessed by non-state actors. Other concerns included an arms race in the Middle East if Iran moves ahead with nuclear weapons development.⁴⁴ While the threat of a major nuclear exchange appears to be less pressing today, interviewees raised concerns about the potential for nuclear terrorism or a limited nuclear exchange. Such events would certainly cause great harm to their victims. They would also pose serious challenges for peace and security because of the likely international reaction.

Addressing these challenges will require strengthening systems for global resilience and supporting institutions and social structures that will prevent the development of armed conflict and nuclear attacks. As participants pointed out, the increasing capacity for destruction available to small groups means that stronger systems to prevent the formation and development of these groups become more important.



I wouldn't overestimate our current resilience. I think that's our job to think about. I think the trends are all good, but the system is more fragile than we may think. We were talking about cybersecurity, nuclear terrorism, biological terrorism. There are a lot of ways in which small groups will have access to increasingly sophisticated technology for disruption. I think the question, to me, is how do you mobilize the large majority, the communities, both locally, regionally, nationally, and globally, to be able to contain them.



Global Climate Change

Most participants in the Aspen conversations in 2014 had an opinion on climate change; although all agreed that it is a serious challenge, not everyone believes that it heightens the risk for war. Estimates from the 2014 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report found that climate change has already led to significant changes in wildlife, water, and other environmental elements, and that the weight of the existing science finds that in the future such trends are likely to lead to impacts on crop production and disruption to social systems.⁴⁵

The fundamental argument made by proponents of the conflict-climate change link is that climate change will lead to reduced crop yields and reduced availability of water, leading to structural stressors and conflict over increasingly scarce resources.⁴⁶ In addition, the impact on human migration and increasing stress on governance systems are likely to create conditions that are more likely to lead to violent conflict.⁴⁷

Some participants want to add the growth of the world population to 9.6 billion people in the middle of the century as a risk for conflict.⁴⁸ Estimates are that feeding a population of 9 billion will require a global 10% increase in the amount of water devoted to agricultural use.⁴⁹ A related concern is the pressure that a growing global population will put on energy sources and energy use. If increasing demand does lead to depletion rates greater than production rates, then the price of oil and oil-generated products is likely to rise, leading to increasing pressure on food chains and systems that rely on fuel and transportation.

Arguments against this link point out that there is little empirical evidence linking the conditions discussed above with violent conflict. Nordås and Gleditsch’s review of existing literature claiming a link between climate change and conflict argued that “While the hard science in the climate change debate is backed up by peer-reviewed studies, this is not the case for the literature relating climate change to conflict.”⁵⁰ This review argues that to the extent that research literature exists on questions relating to climate change and conflict, there is either no research linking issues related to climate change to conflict or contrary findings. In the case of water, for instance, there is some evidence that conflict over water is not likely to lead to violence, and may in fact be more likely than other sources of political conflict to end in peaceful resolution.⁵¹

In general, the empirical research on this topic is divided, and interviews with participants showed a similar division. This was resolved with an agreement that this issue needs more and better research to address the likely long-term impact.

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I think it’s probably the one problem that’s actually more serious than war and may actually refocus everybody. It’s just incredibly hard to solve on so many levels.

Sustainability of Agriculture and Energy

The global population is expected to reach 10.9 billion at the end of the century.⁵² Such an increase has the potential to put significant pressure on water and food sources. Leaving aside the potential impact of climate change discussed above, one analyst has argued that a global 10% increase in the amount of water devoted to agricultural use⁵³ will only be achievable if the global proportion of calories attained from meat rather than vegetables drops from 20% to 5%.⁵⁴

A related concern is the pressure that a growing global population will put on energy sources and energy use. While claims that “peak oil” production has been reached have largely been seen as unsubstantiated and ideologically driven, the basic argument that nonrenewable energy sources pose potential issues in a context of increasing consumption is hard to escape.⁵⁵ If increasing demand does lead to depletion rates greater than production rates, then the price of oil and oil-generated products is likely to rise, leading to increasing pressure on food chains and systems that rely on fuel and transportation.



photo by calibas, Wikimedia commons

SECTION 2: WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Our review of the existing research in trends in peace suggests that there is reason for cautious and rational optimism. It is possible to argue that the 21st century will be the century of peace, and back this argument up with evidence. Serious challenges remain, though. It's possible that the gains in peace in the second half of the 20th century represent a significant step forward that will stall, or even lose ground, in the face of the serious challenges to peace in the 21st century. On balance the trends are positive, but under threat.

This conclusion raises an obvious next question. If peace is possible, but the likelihood of peace is questionable, then what can be done to push the globe towards the end of war? This question is an enormous one: there are many organizations internationally working on that question from a variety of viewpoints, and a comprehensive review of the proposed pathways to peace would be a hundred-page volume, at a minimum. Based on the existing research, however, several obvious starting points emerge.

The current trends in peace appear to be the result of a confluence of positive trends—in some ways, a “perfect storm” of potentially pacifying elements. Globally, the dramatic increase in GDP per capita, education, and human development has reduced the pressures that lead people to engage in violence, while the spread of international trade has reduced the risk of interstate violence. The developing human security system of peacemaking and peacebuilding has contributed to peace, as has the spread of democracy. These social changes have been linked to peace, and a review of the research suggests that they provide good entry points to supporting peace in the future. However, when compared with the existing research on what we know about trends in peace—and also the gaps in the research—our review of the research suggests that these social changes also provide good flags for areas in which the global system has not done as well.

Participants in the October 2014 discussion sifted the existing research from the point of view of what we know about the causes of conflict and the pressures towards peace. Based on this review, three points of entry were identified:

1. **Continue the gains in human security.** The world knows the structural predictors of violence. Economic development, social service provision, and good governance are strong contributors to stability, and in particular this is true when these are paired with systems for peacekeeping interventions as needed. There is an enormous international community of state institutions, intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs working to increase human security. Reinforcing trends in peace should start with acknowledging the gains already made and recommitting the global system to these priorities.
2. **Increase women's engagement in economic and political life internationally.** Research findings in social science are quite clear that as women become more active in a country, peace becomes more likely. Women who participate in economic life can contribute to a country's GDP development, and women who have access to education and other social services support human development. More than that, there is a direct link between women's participation in political systems and the likelihood of peace: women parliamentarians are, on balance, less likely to use military force than men are. To date much of the discourse around women's engagement has focused on this as an issue of human rights, which of course it is. However, the research would also suggest that this is a part of a pragmatic movement towards global peace.
3. **Confront beliefs that legitimize violence.** Participants in the 2014 Forum identified a large gap in the current research around conflict. Political violence requires people who are willing to choose to use violence. In particular, in the modern world much of the ongoing violence involves sub-state groups composed of volunteers. In order for these groups to survive, they must convince potential recruits that the use of violence is legitimate and appropriate. More than this, military force used by democratic states is subject to democratic approval... meaning that if public opinion rejects the use of military force then military force should be less likely. The discussion in the Forum identified this as a significant gap: with the exception of programs focused specifically on violent extremism as an extension of counter-terrorism work, there has not been systemic research on or practice in how changes in social opinions about violence can happen. Addressing global violence may require a change in this approach.

These three starting points, identified by Forum participants, represent key points of entry into the debate around the future of peace.

Extend the Current Human Security System



The data on trends in conflict are unequivocal: over the 20th century and the early years of the 21st, battle deaths declined. This strongly suggests that the global community did something right. Some aspects of the international system were working to reduce violence. While the details are debated, there is a developing consensus among political scientists and those who study trends in armed conflict that research shows a range of strong pressures leading towards peace. Because of this, there is an obvious starting point for increasing international peace and stability: focusing on resourcing and extending the global system for human security and human development internationally.

This is an active, and expanding, area of research with new findings released every month. Several findings are well-established, however, and there is sufficient evidence for a number of basic causes of peace to claim that we do have a foundation for understanding what can lead to peace.

The “Capitalist Peace” and Economic Development

One of the strongest predictors of peace is economic development, and the related issue of international trade.

As legal and technical barriers to international trade declined in the 20th century, the degree of global economic integration



GDP is one of the strongest predictors of conflict. It’s not so much about inequality. As long as people have their basic needs met it doesn’t really matter ‘how big the McMansions are in the United States and Britain.’ At the very bottom, the risks of poverty vastly increase the risk of civil war. It does kind of level off.



increased. There is some evidence that at the interstate level, economic ties support peace: Erik Gartzke’s statistical analysis of interstate conflict argued that one of the primary predictors of whether two states will engage in armed conflict is the degree to which they engage in economic trade⁵⁶, a finding supported by Patrick McDonald’s analysis linking free trade indicators with reduced likelihood of interstate conflict.⁵⁷

If appropriately structured, such trade may also support economic development, one of the strongest predictors of conflict identified in the empirical literature. As discussed by Paul Collier and others, increasing development internationally is likely to be one key factor in the trends in global peace: countries that have higher GDPs are significantly less likely to experience violence within the state.

Economic development and the support of international trade have been a focus of international systems since before the development of the state as the primary international structure. In just one example, the Hanseatic League of the 14th century was formed as a confederation of powerful merchant towns to promote trade and defend the monopoly of league traders. In more modern examples, international institutions including the World Trade Organization exist to facilitate international trade among states, and a plethora of state, international, and civil society organizations exist to support development within states.

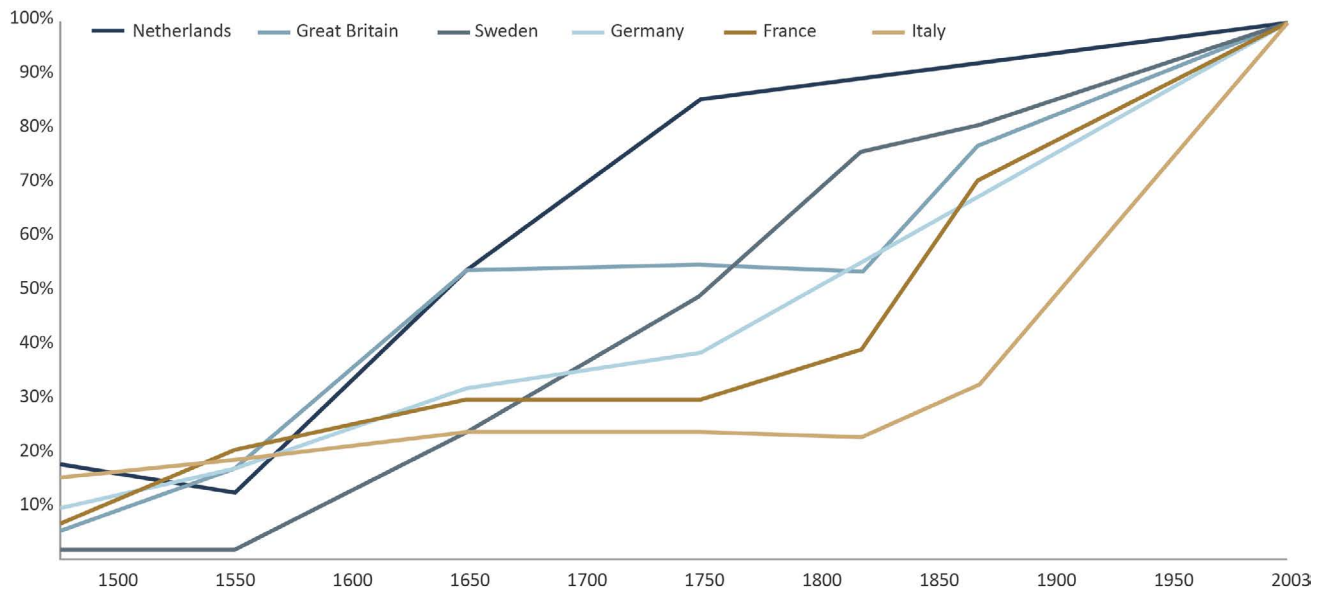
On balance, the global effort to focus on development has been successful, although not without critics. There is some evidence that while GDP per capita is an important predictor of peace, a too-heavy focus on deregulation and economic growth without a focus specifically on job growth and a careful monitoring of the trickle-down benefits of growth can actually impede employment and human development.⁵⁸ Extending the current work in this area may largely be a question of maintaining the current systems and structures while monitoring economic development and changing practices as new research develops more and better understanding of what actually supports economic growth.

Education and Human Development

The 20th and 21st centuries have been characterized by remarkable improvements in the lived experience of individuals internationally. An average human being today is more likely to live longer, with more education and a higher quality of life, than at any other time in human history. The decline in conflict internationally can be directly attributed, at least in part, to these changes: education and the provision of better social services are significant predictors of peace. One of the most profound ways to contribute to the development of a more peaceful world is to simply extend these existing gains.

In education the trend has been towards more systematic education internationally. The figure below details improvements in literacy rates in Western Europe from 1500–2003. Similar trends on a different time scale are apparent across the globe. Today, some developing countries still lag behind on literacy rates, and globally, women’s literacy rates lag behind men’s literacy rates. High rates of primary education—and perhaps even higher rates of secondary education for males—can help prevent the outbreak of conflict. In part thanks to the Millennium Development Goals, literacy and primary school enrollment throughout the developing world have also increased significantly since 2000. This increase in education is directly linked to increases in peace, and in some studies has been found to be the most important social service a state can provide to support peace.⁵⁹

LITERACY RATES IN WESTERN EUROPE FROM THE 15TH CENTURY TO NOW



Adapted from Max Roser, *Our World in Data*

Internationally, states, NGOs, and IGOs have all acknowledged the need for better systems of human development in support of peace. The UN’s Millennium Development Goals were a striking commitment to increasing human development made by the UN General Assembly. As a part of this process, the UN and UN Member States committed to eight goals covering a variety of international development areas, including eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, improving education and healthcare, supporting women’s equality, and improving development. While the MDGs have attracted their share of criticism, particularly around the process by which the numerical goals were set,⁶⁰ it appears hard to argue with the claim that they have been effective at mobilizing support and contributing to enormous gains in human development internationally. Enormous improvements have been made internationally in each of the eight goals targeted by the MDG process, with Sub-Saharan Africa in particular often leading the way in proportional improvement.⁶¹

As with economic development, the international system for supporting human development is large and is composed of state, international, and civil society organizations. Extending the global system for supporting human development is in many ways a question of ensuring that these institutions have sufficient funding and political support for their ongoing work,

and increasing the focus on good research and practice to make sure that their operations are as effective as possible. In particular, the ongoing (as of this writing) debate about the content and structure of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represents an opportunity for the UN and the international system to formally recommit to a focus on human development. The link between human development and peace strongly suggests that the SDGs, and other processes for coordinating development aid internationally, may have a strong impact on peace if they are effective.

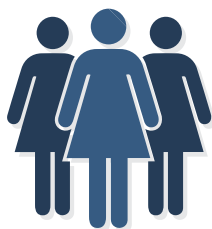
International Peacekeeping

As discussed, international peacekeeping appears to be an important part of the long-term trends in peace. There is good statistical evidence that despite the criticism of the UN and the occasional highly visible failure of a peacekeeping effort, UN peacekeeping missions on balance tend to work.⁶² These peacekeeping missions appear to also ease a transition to stable and effective post-conflict governments in a way that single-country or less globally authorized interventions do not.⁶³ Peacekeeping missions can act—and have acted—to separate combatants and provide external validation of the terms of negotiated agreements, acting as a guarantee in a way that can help the long-term success of peace agreements.⁶⁴

Despite its record of success, UN peacekeeping remains somewhat controversial. UN peacekeeping operations have been criticized for a lack of transparency,⁶⁵ for negligence in contributing to health problems,⁶⁶ and for corruption.⁶⁷ Concurrent with these debates, changes have also taken place in the mandate extended to peacekeeping operations. One historical criticism of UN peacekeeping operations has been that their limited and defensive mandate has meant that they were forced to be reactive and has limited their ability to protect civilians. In 2013, for the first time, the UN authorized a peacekeeping mission to engage in offensive operations to attack armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo. While highly controversial, this authorization has been seen as a success and was extended in 2014.⁶⁸

The ongoing debate about the appropriate use of peacekeeping forces raises the potential concern that the international system may retreat from their use. This is particularly troubling in the context of the “return of geopolitics”⁶⁹ that characterizes some of the conflicts of the 21st century: the violence in Syria and Ukraine involves competing interests among Security Council members, and it is possible that for that reason alone peacekeeping may be off the table in some of the most active modern conflicts.

Extending and expanding the current system for peacekeeping will require the international system to recommit to the use of peacekeeping forces in all cases where they may contribute to peace, and to address the issues identified by critics of peacekeeping forces. This will require sustained political action at the level of the UN, a prescription that is easier to make than to execute.



More Women's Engagement

The different predictors and pressures that lead to peace are complicated, and often tightly inter-related. Supporting economic development can in turn impact social services and other elements of peace. Given this, is there some way that actors interested in peace can work in one limited way but have impacts across multiple different predictors? The evidence suggests that there may be. A variety of studies on the impact of women's engagement in economic and political life have suggested that increasing women's equality internationally can be a relatively small change that has huge impacts across a variety of elements.

There is a direct link between women's engagement in politics and the likelihood of peace. Governments with more women in legislature are less likely to use military force,⁷⁰ and spend less on the military⁷¹ and more on development assistance⁷² than governments with fewer women. Countries with more women in government are also less likely to abuse human rights within the country.⁷³ Of course, nothing is perfect: the link between women's engagement in politics and human rights abuses only applies to democracies,⁷⁴ and there is no such link between women and peace when considering women executives.⁷⁵

More broadly, there is increasing evidence that systems that are better at engaging women in the social and economic life of society support peace. As discussed above, more-educated populations are less likely to support conflict, and as women are allowed to access education the number of educated people in a country rises. Increasing women's education appears to be one element that contributes to the formation of stable democracies.⁷⁶ Similarly, as more women enter the workforce the potential productive capacity of a country rises, and women gain more economic independence. All of these pressures can support the elements of human development and security discussed above.

In addition to this, women are frequently active on the ground in conflict, both as combatants and in particular as peacemakers. In grass-roots movements in Northern Ireland, in Afghanistan, and in many other conflict areas, women are visible as leaders in the movement or in fact form specific organizations of women working for peace.⁷⁷ Former US Ambassador to Austria Swane Hunt has documented the role that women played during the conflict in Bosnia, where she worked to facilitate peace following the conflicts in the 1990s. As the violence developed in Bosnia, society was torn apart by the conflict. Ambassador Hunt's book *This Was Not Our War* documents the stories of how women responded, ranging from joining armed groups, to forming local networks to provide both social and practical support for their neighbors, to organizing for peace and reconciliation.⁷⁸

Despite the role that women play as peacemakers, they are often left out of formal negotiations and the processes that end wars. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, in her book *Women Building Peace: What They Do, Why it Matters*, documents this problem.⁷⁹ Frequently, peace negotiations and peace processes focus on negotiations with the armed actors rather than the civil society groups that have created the conditions for the negotiations to exist. As a result, peace processes privilege the voices and perspectives of the typically male armed actors. The voice of women peacemakers may be left out of the discussion.

Strengthening and extending women's equality internationally will require extending both systems that support women's access to political and economic power and increasing the formal inclusion of women in peace processes and as actors in conflict. The former is a significant focus of a great deal of development work internationally, including the Millennium Development Goals. The latter goal has less formal engagement. Although the UN has established a formal resolution calling for the integration of women into security institutions, in general movement towards an inclusive security system that incorporates women as agents and actors has been somewhat spotty.⁸⁰



If you look across time and geography around the world, when women organize collectively as women's movements fighting for basic self-determination, they have never used violence as a tool. They've used destruction. Individuals may go off, but women when they organize collectively do not use violence.



Increasing peace through a focus on women will require, as with human development more broadly, a re-commitment by the UN and international organizations to the idea that supporting women's equality is not only an issue of universal human rights, but also an important step towards peace and human development. More than that, it will require a deepened appreciation for the role that women play in conflict internationally and the benefits to bringing them into security institutions and procedures. While there has been some action in both of these areas, more work is needed to extend the gains made in peace.

Directly Confront Violence-Supporting Beliefs



It's easy to see violence and armed conflict as a fundamental part of the world in the same way that weather is: sweeping global pressures create irresistible trends towards violence. This framing ignores a basic truth about violence and in fact any political movement: at the end of the day, the use of military force is the result of social and political trends and pressures, but it is also the result of conscious decisions by the individuals who make up these armed groups to accept violence as a tool for political change.

Political movements are made up of human beings, and the decision of these groups to use violence requires that the human beings who make up these movements accept violence as a legitimate tool for their movements to use. In some ways, John and Yoko were correct: if all members of government internationally, and members of potentially armed groups, were to decide to forego the use of violence as a tool of politics, then the world would probably be peaceful. The practical difficulty lies in two issues: one is that the actual behavior of people is in general affected much more strongly by situational pressures than by individual beliefs,⁸¹ and the second is the fact that in the modern world there remain widely accepted norms that support or legitimize the use of violence.



If you're the leader of a poor country, now you've got a potential toolkit, an enormous amount of advice on how to improve your objective circumstances. We have got the IMF and the World Bank there to provide advice, loads of it. I've come to the view that actually what matters more, what is under-analyzed, is the dysfunctional beliefs. If a good leader is inheriting dysfunctional beliefs, what should he do? The answer is there's no international advice.



Some of these norms are based on a rational assessment of the relative costs and benefits of the use of military force; as discussed above there is certainly good evidence that peacekeeping missions, for example, can contribute to long-term peace and stability. Other norms that legitimize violence are built more on pre-existing prejudices and ideologies that legitimize violence or hold up military force as a tool that can accomplish more than the evidence suggests that it actually does.

In general, international institutions have largely shied away from directly confronting norms and beliefs that support violence, with the exception of the developing focus on “countering violent extremism” that has come out of counterterrorism operations.⁸² In part, this reflects the fact that the balance of the empirical literature has focused on structural and institutional pressures towards conflict rather than the role of norms and beliefs, and in part it may reflect a rejection or a turning away from the mass-movement calls to attitude change that characterized the peace movements of the 20th century. Because of this, there may still be a great deal of value to be gained by increasing focus on the norms and beliefs as a part of a larger structural move to peace: particularly if this focus is done with a close eye to the limited but developing empirical literature on how large-scale normative shifts can be accomplished. This is particularly important as the center of gravity of conflict shifts away from major state-to-state conflict and towards sub-state actors and terrorist groups.

One of the significant challenges for peace currently facing the world is the spread of political extremism. This includes the rise of violent Islamist movements in the early years of the 21st century and violent right-wing movements in Europe.⁸³ Such extremist groups contribute to polarization that reduces the ability of political groups to talk to each other and collectively resolve social problems.⁸⁴ They also contribute to the emergence of violent conflict: even a small extremist movement can provoke violent reprisals. Getting to peace in the 21st century will likely require more systematic engagement with the norms and beliefs that support conflict than there has been to date.

Psychologists and political scientists interested in peace and violence have identified some common elements that tend to appear again and again in the narratives of political groups that legitimize or endorse violence against others. These same issues were identified again in discussion by participants in the Forum, suggesting that they may be a useful starting point for thinking about what can be done to extend trends in peace. In particular, three important elements came out of the discussion as being pernicious beliefs that may contribute to conflict:

- Exclusionary beliefs that elevate one group or identity as fundamentally better than others.
- Perceptions of humiliation and group-based resentments.
- Beliefs that condone violence as an appropriate response to disagreements or international disputes.

Exclusionary Beliefs

One dangerous source of violence-supporting belief is cultural narratives that emphasize that one group is inherently superior to others, or that other groups are foundationally less human or moral.

When people feel that a group that they belong to is superior to other groups, it is easier to motivate them to commit violent acts in service of that group. This type of self-adopted moral high ground makes members of these groups more likely to see outgroups as acting in bad faith,⁸⁵ and appears to lead members of these groups to endorse violence more readily than those with other forms of belief. One study found that self-identified white supremacists are more likely to advocate the use of violence against other races in situations where the identity and membership of the group is being threatened than they are in cases of economic conflict,⁸⁶ and other research has shown that terrorist groups are more likely to use language of moral superiority than non-terrorist groups of the same basic political orientation.⁸⁷

“
A really bad set of norms would be vilification of the other: ‘It’s okay to murder the other, because they’re subhuman and they are the cause of our problems anyway.’ A really good norm will be human flourishing. Then the question is how do you get away from ‘The bad culture is likely to produce violence.’ So, how do you get from that bad culture to a good one?
 ”

These exclusionary beliefs can be organized around a variety of social identities. Nationalities, religions, and racial identification have all in the past produced some groups that have served as the basis for exclusionary claims. Combating these narratives may be difficult, as the perception that an in-group is superior to other groups can be a seductive belief. However, there is some evidence that they can be undermined by changes in the social context: when members of different ethnic or religious groups interact together in conditions that emphasize interdependence and equality, intergroup stereotyping can be reduced.⁸⁸ Importantly, these conditions are closely related to the actual structure and relationships of groups in society: while programs increasing intergroup contact can be valuable, there is fairly strong evidence that the actual social status and interdependence of ethnic or identity groups in a population can shape the development of stereotypes.⁸⁹

Humiliation and Group-Based Resentments

A closely related issue is the issue of humiliation and group-based resentments. In the same way that perceptions of group-based superiority can be an important motivator for endorsing the use of violence, perceptions of group-based humiliation can also be important. There is some evidence that perceptions of group-based mistreatment can be important for mobilizing groups to support violence,⁹⁰ although in that case there is also evidence that economic benefit needs to be added to the mix. Participants pointed out that frequently, nationalist movements were associated with groups that had been disadvantaged historically. One issue flagged by participants is the fact that the emotional assessment of groups that may potentially be

“
I think there is a lot of elasticity as to what you experience as humiliation. The culture can change so that your definition of dignity can hinge not necessarily on retaliating to a loss but being able to absorb it for some other value.
 ”

“
There’s one word I want to introduce to the conversation. To me it’s kind of a key word. It’s an underappreciated concept, which is the word ‘humiliation.’ The underlying motive [in murders] often, the most common, was the perceived sense that that person had been humiliated. They’re using violence as a way to cleanse humiliation.
 ”

motivated to endorse violence is often not appreciated by members of the dominant group, creating a dangerous cycle where people who feel that their group is excluded are not given an opportunity to express it.

There is some evidence that improving representation leads to more peace. Without directly assessing perceptions of humiliation or exclusion, there is good research suggesting that groups that are truly excluded or disadvantaged by society are more likely to use violence. When ethnic groups are excluded from participating in political decision-making, the risk for war is higher,⁹¹ and there is developing evidence that when some ethnic groups are reaping less benefit from the economy of a country there's more risk of war.⁹² There are also positive examples in history and internationally where perceptions of individual or group humiliation have shifted. In America and Europe, for example, historically a public insult would require a violent duel to “satisfy honor”—an idea that is today seen as absurd. At the intergroup level, many post-colonial movements internationally have started with the idea of rehabilitating ethnic or religious identities that were historically abused and humiliated, and doing so in ways that have led to national pride instead of large-scale conflict.

In the 2014 Forum, participants were optimistic, raising a range of historical examples of positive changes in the treatment of people who differ, and the manner in which issues of supposed humiliation, and the reaction to it, have evolved. One example cited was the reaction to individuals with disabilities: “It used to be that if you were blind or deaf, or had physical handicaps, you were treated as subhuman. We have evolved in many cultures and in many contexts to recognize that...they have rights; we are all human.”



Step outside, and you've got all sorts of people who could give you very good advice on what's happening and understand both sides of the story and the nuances. Yet, they're not tapping into it. I imagine that happens with every single country or context or issue. That the people sitting around the table making the decisions very often come from only one point of view. We're missing out on the talent that sits outside.



There is some evidence that other ideologies exist which acknowledge the group-based resentment, but don't support violence. Some approaches to supporting peace, such as Jean-Paul Lederach's approach to peacebuilding, have been based directly on recognizing and validating the pre-existing complaints, group-based resentments, and histories of conflict in conflict areas.⁹³ Such approaches have been the basis of a variety of different practices internationally. While there is some debate over whether such approaches are valuable in stopping ongoing violence compared to other models that are focused on targeted disruption of violence pathways, it's nevertheless the case that many organizations have strong histories of working to support cultural narratives which acknowledge group-based concerns without supporting violence.

Beliefs Supporting Violence

The final element to addressing violence-supporting beliefs is the issue of beliefs or norms that legitimize violence as a tool of dispute resolution at the individual or group level. Military force can be used by states as part of a rational and calculated strategy for accomplishing national self-interests. However, it is also the case that citizens or policymakers can support military action out of non-rational calculations arising from normative beliefs. One example of this is a simple overconfidence in what military force can achieve. Even states that are able to accomplish military goals may be in danger of “losing the peace” if the larger state interests the military action was intended to support can't be accomplished. Overconfidence in a military force's ability to defeat opponents, or to move beyond military objectives to accomplish political ones without appropriate resources, can undermine peace and stability. One study of US military operations since 2003 illustrated how political overconfidence in military capacity to accomplish political goals rebounded, resulting in significantly more conflict than expected.⁹⁴ Endorsement of military force can also come from less rational reactions, such as fear or a perceived threat: there is some evidence that as people feel more threatened by an out-group, their willingness to use military force increases.⁹⁵

This topic has been significantly under-studied. There is little existing systematic research into the conditions at the individual level that would lead citizens and policymakers to support military force when it may not be in the best interests of the state

or its citizens. There is some evidence that there are individual-level differences: men are more likely to support military force than women across the world,⁹⁶ and people with “authoritarian” personalities who are more comfortable with established hierarchies supported by governments are more willing to see their governments use military force.⁹⁷ There is also some evidence that education can reduce a blanket willingness to use military force: while the findings are somewhat mixed, a review of the research on education and conflict found that overall there appears to be a relationship where lower education predicts more support for the use of military force in political conflict.⁹⁸ At the non-cognitive level the role of perceived threat appears to have a significant impact on endorsement of military force,⁹⁹ leaving open the possibility of a cycle of escalation between groups as one group’s perceived threat from another leads to open consideration of military force, triggering perceived threats in the other group.

Extending work in this area will require a more systematic appreciation of the causes of support for military action and violence as a tool of conflict resolution, and a deeper willingness by political institutions to treat this as a problem. In some ways this issue is a circular problem: if there is a widespread belief that normalizes and legitimizes the use of military force in situations where it may not actually accomplish the national goal, there is likely to be little interest from political institutions or society as a whole in putting resources into changing this. On the other hand, this also means that this area may be one of the most fruitful for future steps towards peace: as a deeper appreciation spreads about the role that beliefs can play in shaping a country’s willingness to use military force and the potential problems this can cause for countries and the world, the discourse may change rapidly as people are exposed to other ideas.

Conclusion

Much of the international discussion around addressing violence-supporting beliefs is coming through the lens of counterterrorism operations and a sense that the problematic beliefs supporting violence are found purely within extremist groups. Participants in the Forum noted that this is not entirely the case: most of the armed conflict in the modern world includes major powers in some form or another as combatants or as supporters of combatants. In some cases this may be part of a larger trend towards peace and stability, as in the case of multilateral interventions, but in others it is likely to be part of a continuing cycle of violence. In addition to the issues of extremism and the support for terrorist violence, a consideration of the norms that support violence has to look at what elements support the larger military actions that can lead to long-term conflict as well. One participant discussing major-power militarism rather pointedly concluded: “It’s really hard to make a case of wanting people to disarm and not be about violence as a way of dealing with their problems when half of your budget is spent on bombs and bullets.”

Addressing violent extremism and the social structures that support it, as well as larger social support for violence and military action, will be a long-term process and one that research and practice is only starting to address. In some ways this underscores the challenges of supporting peace, but in other ways the fact that international institutions are only beginning to seriously address these issues may be a source of optimism. Unlike the issues of human development, where many of the easy gains have already been accomplished and only the harder problems remain, it’s possible that if the international system begins to more systematically resource and study issues of the normative underpinning of conflict then we may make bigger strides in this area fairly quickly.

SECTION 3: WAR IS OVER, IF YOU WANT IT

Is a peaceful world possible? The idea seems audacious, but a review of the empirical trends in conflict suggests that it's entirely reasonable to argue that the world can be more peaceful. If the trends in peace continue, then a world without war may not only be achievable, it may in fact be likely.

This assessment assumes that the trends continue, and that they're not disrupted by upcoming global challenges. Making this a reality will require identifying and supporting the underlying causes of the global increase in peace, and committing as a global community to reinforcing those causal drivers.

It is useful, but not sufficient, to identify that the world can be made more peaceful by supporting human development and women's equality, and by countering violence-supporting beliefs. Actually putting these practices into play will require significantly more refinement. If the global community continues to support these three elements, then it's entirely possible that trends in peace will continue.

The consensus in the Forum was one of cautious optimism: a belief that the world may have a peaceful future. This was based on an agreement that state and international actors have, over the past several hundred years, developed ways to address the underlying causes of conflict and ways of resolving developing conflict without the use of force. Such a system is patently imperfect: the existence of armed conflict in Syria, Ukraine, and elsewhere demonstrates that the global system is limited and, at times, inadequate. However, participants in the Forum argued that the successes of global counter-violence efforts outweigh the failures, and the possibility of a future without war is real if the gains made in the past are reinforced.

Violence occurs when individuals or groups are faced with “deteriorating objective circumstances”—situations in which their lives are bad or getting worse, and they believe that violence may bring about some improvement. Actually moving to support or engage in violence, however, requires the additional step of believing that violence is an appropriate way to resolve disputes.

One theme of the discussion at the Forum revolved around breaking that connection: in the opinion of participants, the result is that outbreaks of war and organized violence are a function of both strategic decisions by the people involved and a normative framework that allows them to see violence as a legitimate tool in their strategic toolbox. Accomplishing peace will require addressing both issues.

As of the writing of this report, the global focus on the central elements identified seems positive.

- In the case of human development, the post-MDG process for developing “Sustainable Development Goals” in the UN is ongoing. While there are a horde of complaints and criticisms of the process, it is a fact that the United Nations remains committed to setting and tracking goals for human development internationally in a variety of areas.
- Women's engagement and empowerment internationally remains a focus of many governments and NGOs, and continued pressure on expanding these programs may continue to develop women's equality.
- In the case of violence-supporting beliefs, there is little direct focus on these issues currently other than programs specifically focused on “countering violent extremism,” suggesting that this is a particularly valuable area for future work.



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It is not inevitable that the current trends in peace will continue, or that the current focus on elements associated with peace will be maintained. It is possible that the global community will retreat from international engagement and development: one possible reaction to recent global events such as the conflict in Ukraine is a retreat to a realpolitik world focused more on security than development. Even if the focus on international development is maintained, there may be a flat-lining of indicators associated with peace.

It is possible that the significant gains made in human development and indicators associated with peace in the 20th century may be an example of the Pareto principle: the rapid gains made in peace and development may reflect the changing face of relatively stable countries, while the issues of the remaining small percent of truly problematic countries may prove much harder to address. If this is the case, then even with a continued focus on support, the effectiveness of global development may decrease as the problem areas become more and more concentrated into truly difficult challenges.

Participants in the OEF Forum identified potential starting points, as well as areas where additional research and practice may have the most impact, to help advance the goals they identified. One of the primary ideas was engaging with violence-supporting beliefs by supporting globalistic humanitarian values. A second idea was focusing on American policy and practice as a method for supporting peace.

In the first case, participants focused on the idea of countering violence-supporting beliefs through supporting cultural narratives and social beliefs that emphasize the commonalities of humanity and creating discussions that help to identify core beliefs shared across cultures. In part, this can be accomplished through increased engagement internationally: there is some evidence that it's much easier to motivate a sense of superiority against groups where there is little contact, and inter-group contact has been identified as an important element in reducing prejudice.

Participants suggested that institutions interested in supporting peace may be interested in supporting services that will bring together youth from a broad swath of society who will work together to create positive outcomes for others. The idea of the program is to focus on developing inclusive, shared understandings about how people can work together to resolve conflicts in a non-zero-sum way and to create a culture in which others are not demonized or seen as the source of one group's problems. The end goal would be to emphasize a resolution where conflicts will be viewed as problems for which technical solutions exist. In this culture, positive stories and nonviolent actors will be celebrated and promoted and self-restraint will be seen as a heroic characteristic.

In the second scenario, it was suggested that there could be a focus on American policy and practice. This is for pragmatic reasons: America's engagement internationally means that many international institutions and individuals are in positions to shape American influence and attitudes, and America's military dominance means that American attitudes about war and conflict can be very influential. Participants working in this area identified the following as a goal:

“

We want an America that provides leadership but also legitimately partners with other states to help them to build their place in the world so that together states can engage in peacemaking diplomacy. An example of this kind of partnering and empowering of other states can be seen in George W. Bush's initiatives in Africa, which helped African democracies show that democracy could deliver goods and services.

”

This approach would emphasize shaping American foreign policy to support global engagement and multilateral institutions as an approach to peace.

Other ideas included programs designed to bring diverse groups together to learn from each other, increase connections, and identify underlying shared values. One suggestion framed these as “world peace games”: iterated, ongoing engagement with diverse participants from multiple countries (e.g., pop stars, world leaders, military members, educators, artists, corporate executives, religious leaders, youth, laypeople) who could engage with developing or ongoing global problems and show alternate ways of thinking about them.

As these issues or others materialize in the 21st century, and ideas are generated on how best to approach and achieve progress in these areas, supporting trends in peace will require both a conscious decision by international institutions and the commitment of sufficient resources to stay the course.

These are ultimately political decisions, but choices that are plausible and possible. Incremental steps, individual decisions, and forward-looking policies will not make all the difference in one giant leap, but do have the power to achieve progress in small but discernable steps. This evokes echoes of John and Yoko's "War is over, if you want it." What may previously have been an ideological claim is now a purely factual one: if we, as political actors in the 21st century, choose to support programs that reinforce and continue the existing trends in peace, then it may actually be possible that we will see the end of war. There is more—much more—than merely a chance for peace.

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BACKGROUND

In October 2014, One Earth Future convened the inaugural “One Earth Future Forum” with the goal of bringing together high-level researchers and practitioners interested in peace and security to see whether the group could develop a consensus on the implications of existing research on trends in peace for the future of war. The objective was to discover what happens when researchers, business leaders, political figures, and members of civil society and the military come together to discuss what can be done to support peace.

Participants included:

Sir Paul Collier

David Cortright

Tom Crick

Ruth DeFries

Joshua S. Goldstein

Ambassador Swanee Hunt

Patrice Martin

Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini

Steven Pinker

Deborah Prothrow-Stith

Ambassador Charles Stith

William Ury



One Earth Future (OEF) is a private foundation founded to help catalyze systems that identify and eliminate the root causes of war. OEF is committed to improving governance structures by acting at the intersection of theory and practice, helping stakeholders solve specific problems in real time, contributing to research literature, and working to detect patterns and lessons about governance as they emerge. Instilled within OEF’s work are values of excellence, empiricism, long-term thinking, and active stakeholder engagement.



www.oneearthfuture.org