Thinking about World Peace

*Alex J. Bellamy**

Only a very few of us today believe that world peace is possible. Indeed, the very mention of the term "world peace" raises incredulity. Susan Sontag reckoned that not even pacifists believe in it nowadays.[1] It is not difficult to understand why. The grim persistence of war and the abysses of violence that characterized the twentieth century bequeathed a legacy of deep-seated skepticism toward world peace. It is a skepticism reinforced by the way that narratives of war and peace are fed to us.

News channels and websites feed us a steady stream of stories about human avarice, aggression, insecurity, and conflict while tending to downplay the everyday stories of cooperation, altruism, and innovation that have helped improve the overall human condition on most measurable fronts over the past century. The idea of war is fed to us and sustained in a way that peace is not. It is war-makers (typically, although not exclusively, the successful ones), not peace-makers, who are honored by national monuments. Even those who suffered "glorious defeats" tend to receive more accolades than the individuals and groups that stopped, prevented, or opposed wars. History, too, favors war over peace. We know far more about the disputes that ended in violence than we do about those that were resolved peacefully. More than fifty thousand books have been written about the U.S. Civil War alone; there are far fewer treatises on world peace. More than one writer has argued that war is simply more exciting than peace.[2] This essay makes the case for taking world peace more seriously. I argue that world peace is possible, though neither inevitable nor irreversible. World peace is something that every generation must strive for, because the ideas, social structures, and practices that make war possible are likely to remain with us.[3] The essay proceeds

*I am very grateful to A. C. Grayling, Pamina Firchow, Nils Petter Gleditsch, Jacqui True, and the editors of *Ethics & International Affairs* for their thoughts and feedback, which have contributed immensely to the ideas presented here.

Ethics & International Affairs, 34, no. 1 (2020), pp. 47–56.
© 2020 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs
doi:10.1017/S0892679420000027

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679420000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in three parts. First, I briefly set out what I mean by "peace" and "world peace." Second, I explain why I think that world peace is possible. Third, I examine how the world might be nudged in a more peaceful direction.[4]

Peace

There is little agreement about what peace actually means. In one sense, this does not matter since peace can be understood as an individual state of mind. Different people have radically different ideas about what makes them feel at peace. But that cannot tell us much about peace at the group level, let alone the intergroup level. Nor can it allow comparisons or conversations across communities, or the crafting of policies, practices, and campaigns to support peace. For that, we need a basic understanding of peace that can cut across different accounts and tell us something interesting and distinctive about societies and the relations between them.

Most would agree that peace is not merely the absence of war; that it is also the presence of norms, institutions, and practices that enable the peaceful management of disputes. But once we move beyond peace as the absence of war, substantive agreement quickly breaks down. For example, St. Augustine, Dante, and Marsilius of Padua agreed that peace meant not so much the absence of war as the presence of a just civic order. But they disagreed sharply about what actually constituted such an order. Over time, prominent definitions of peace have expanded to include the eradication of all forms of violence including "structural violence"; the presence of social and economic justice; cultural security; the achievement of racial, gender, and religious equality; and the achievement of environmental sustainability. While all these things are good in themselves, adding them to our concept of peace leaves us with a concept that is simultaneously underspecified and burdened with an "inexhaustible" list of demands.[5]

There are at least four reasons to prefer a narrower definition of peace. First, to avoid conflating what peace *is* with the factors that cause it. Second, because the problem of organized group-level violence (war) is a significant one that needs to be addressed directly and on its own terms. If we define peace so broadly as to include virtually every aspect of human wellbeing, the problem of organized violence slips from view. Third, because a broad definition of peace also erodes important normative, legal, and political distinctions between peace and war. In their colonial policies, European powers acted as if there was no meaningful distinction between war and peace in places they judged to be uncivilized. The result

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679420000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was untrammelled violence; the use of terror bombing as a means of policing, for instance.[6] Moreover, as Murad Idris points out, in both political theory and practice, ideals of peace have sometimes been used to facilitate war by, among other things, establishing hierarchies between a peaceful "us" and violent "them" and fostering antagonisms between groups with different sets of interests and values.[7] Fourth, because broader definitions of peace contain political commitments derived from the particular ideologies embedded within them. What we have, in effect, are the values of particular political groupings masquerading as a vision of peace. What is more, to elide peace with a particular concept of justice is to miss the point of most wars entirely, since most wars have some sort of justice-related disputes at their heart. Describing peace as "justice," or the absence of "structural violence," implies we agree on what justice or structural violence is and what it demands in given situations. It is precisely because we *disagree* about these things that we fight wars.

Broader conceptions of positive peace as social harmony or social justice are therefore problematic, as Michael Banks pointed out in 1987.[8] While "peace as harmony" ignores (or worse, represses) the fact that humans have different interests and values to argue over, "peace as justice" assumes that there is agreement on what justice is and how it should be achieved—neither of which exists. This is not to argue that human rights, justice, and development are not important social goods, but merely that they should not be treated as synonymous with peace. To be a distinct and identifiable social condition, peace should be understood as the absence and prevention of war—that is, of organized group-level violence—and the management of conflict through peaceful means, implying some form of legitimate civic order.

The Possibility of World Peace

If we accept the definition of peace just proffered, there are at least three main reasons for thinking that world peace might be possible.

First, because *peace is more common than we think*. Looking across the span of human history, it is evident there is immense variety in the human story and numerous examples of societies and civilizations enjoying long periods of peace. Indeed, for all the war and bloodshed, most societies have enjoyed peace most of the time. For example, the Ancient Minoan civilization on the Greek island of Crete was among the most advanced and wealthy of its time, yet as far as

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679420000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

historians and archaeologists can tell, it was not much—if at all—in the business of war. The Minoans had fortifications and weapons, yet there is no evidence that they fought battles or annexed territories. At around the same time in the Indus Valley, spanning parts of present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, the sophisticated Harappan civilization flourished. Evidence of peacefulness here is even stronger. Harappan settlements had no effective fortifications; they did not have weapons suitable for warfare; there was no artwork depicting war; there are no other sources of evidence or fossil remains pointing to war. Here, then, we have two major and advanced civilizations that had towns, large buildings, and roadways; that had flushing toilets and writing; and that endured for more than a millennium without, from what we can tell, getting into the business of war. Neither the Minoans nor the Harappans owed their existence to warriors. Neither did the ancient Phoenicians—the civilization credited with creating the alphabet. With the exception of the colony established at Carthage, theirs was a society based on commerce, not war, a society that thrived for more than a thousand years in arguably the most violent and war-ridden region on the planet at that time. And they did so without ever having an armed force.

Whatever we might think about the myriad crises facing our world today, it has been nearly forty years since the last interstate war in East Asia. Western Europe, a cauldron of violence for much of the past few centuries, has been at peace since 1945. Though it confronts a violent crisis of transnational organized crime, South America has been almost free of major war since the end of the Cold War. In many parts of the world, war between states has been almost eliminated and wars within them greatly reduced. So, if we look carefully at the historical record, we see that sustained peace has been achieved in many different times and places and that most people in most societies have had more experience of peacetime than wartime. Indeed, most people alive today have never experienced war and do not live in immediate fear of it.

The examples cited above are not extreme outliers. So-called warless societies have existed across human history. A cross-cultural sample of some 186 societies or language groups between the early sixteenth century and the late twentieth century pieced together by Carol and Melvin Ember labels more than a quarter of societies (28 percent) as ones where war was "absent or rare," with "absent" meaning not observed at all and "rare" meaning observed less than once a decade. Filtering out societies pacified by colonialism, the Embers' dataset identifies 9 percent of unpacified societies as ones where war was "absent or rare."[9]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679420000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Drawing on ethnographic data from fifty societies, Keith and Charlotte Otterbein found that warfare was entirely absent in 8 percent of societies.[10] Quincy Wright's magisterial study of 590 societies found that war was absent from 5 percent of them (no war, no weapons, no military organization). However, some 59 percent of the total are described as "unwarlike" or as having experienced only "mild warfare" since "no indication was found of fighting for definite economic or political purposes."[11] Today, well-known and much-studied warless societies include the !Kung of the Kalahari, the Semai of the Malay Peninsula, the Inuit of Greenland, and the Yolngu (Murngin) of Australia (Arnhem Land).

Second, world peace is possible because *war and peace are human creations*. Neither war nor peace are hardwired into human nature. Humanity has the potential for both. Wars happen, ultimately, because some people choose to make them happen. War and peace can be made and unmade. If this is true, then peace is possible. And if peace is possible in some times and places, there is no inherent reason why peace cannot be possible in all places. Peace is neither inevitable nor irreversible, of course—it is something that every generation has to strive for, because the forces that make war possible are likely to remain with us. But human nature is adaptable. Societies are not doomed to follow a predestined path characterized by repeated war. As Adam Hochschild shows, for example, in the space of a couple of generations, slavery was transformed from a near universal practice to a globally condemned institution.[12] Ultimately, it is our great capacity for adaptation and change that makes world peace possible.

Third, because—as Nils Petter Gleditsch points out in his contribution to this roundtable—*we already have many of the rules, institutions, and practices needed to build a more peaceful world.* States already have a legal obligation not to commit aggression as well not to seize territory by force, and states have collective responsibilities to uphold international peace and security globally and to protect basic civil and political rights at home. We have international organizations with all the legal authority, if not always the political will or consensus, they need to uphold the peace. Indeed, the idea that permanent members of the UN Security Council should show restraint in exercising their right to veto now enjoys the explicit support of more than 110 member states in the General Assembly. We know that many of the tools these institutions wield, including peacekeeping, have positive effects in reducing war and the incidence of civilian victimization. We have treaties banning indiscriminate weapons and the Arms Trade Treaty, which prohibits the sale of arms to those thought likely to use them to breach

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679420000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the peace.[13] The idea of individual criminal accountability for aggressive war, war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity is now a practical reality, albeit one unevenly performed.

A world in which the instruments we already have are used to their fullest extent in the service of peace would be a world where war was greatly diminished. In this world, weak states would receive the support they need to build institutions, deliver services, and improve the livelihoods of their populations—reinforcing the basic building blocks of peace and the sovereign state, and putting downward pressure on civil war. By criminalizing aggressive war and enforcing the law more consistently, making arms more difficult to acquire, increasing the prospect of individual legal accountability for crimes of aggression and atrocity, and heightening the opportunity costs of lost trade, war would become even more expensive, and peace still more profitable. The heightened prospect of collective action would weaken war's contagiousness. Stronger flows of goods, people, and ideas across borders would pluralize identities and build resistance to some of the emotional forces that give rise to war. All this we already have in the international sphere. Add to that the evidence we have about the conditions that make individual states and societies more, and less, prone to war, as described by Gleditsch in his contribution, and it is clear that we already have most of the building blocks we need for a more peaceful world.

Building Blocks of Peace

There is every indication that war is becoming less useful. Nowadays, wealth and wellbeing are better achieved through peaceful activities such as manufacturing, trade, and the provision of services than through the barrel of a gun. War is increasingly associated with economic decline and decay, with contemporary civil wars aptly described as "development in reverse."[14] Major powers also struggle to make gains from war. As Andrew Bacevich shows, the United States has spent much of the last three decades using military means to resolve political problems in the Middle East, but it has produced nothing but poor political outcomes and a massive financial bill.[15] Peace, on the other hand, is associated with dramatic improvements in human welfare. It is no coincidence that since the 1960s, East Asia has experienced not one but two miracles: the economic miracle that helped lift one billion people out of grinding poverty and the much-less-discussed peace miracle, through which one of the world's most war-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679420000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ridden regions became one of its most peaceful. The two miracles were mutually reinforcing.

But despite growing evidence of its inefficiency, war continues to beguile the human imagination. Enough of us continue to *believe* that war can be useful, that it can be used to refashion states and societies themselves. We have also created powerful institutions and myths that make war appear not just rational and moral, but heroic. War is sanitized in public discourse, its true nature and consequences often kept from view. This helps reinforce the myth of war's usefulness, encouraging those with no actual experience of it to think of it as a laudable and surgical instrument of national policy.[16] Sometimes, though, the myth is shattered by reality. For example, in 1982, Argentina's military rulers provoked war over the Falkland Islands in an ill-judged attempt to whip up nationalist fervor and undermine domestic opposition to its disastrous economic policies and human rights record. Initial euphoria turned to anger as casualties mounted and Argentine forces were defeated. The brutal costs of war ultimately galvanized the opposition and helped bring about the dictatorship's demise.

World peace will arise not out of a single blueprint but from myriad "minor utopias," like initiatives rooted in specific times and places that resist war, increase its costs, protect its victims, and resolve the disputes that give rise to war. World peace arises out of the accumulation of many different initiatives geared toward these utopias—including the bottom-up initiatives described by Pamina Firchow and the important role of education outlined by A. C. Grayling, as well as the top-down initiatives identified by Nils Petter Gleditsch. There are practices and institutional arrangements that can support these efforts, just as there are other types of practices and arrangements that can inhibit them. In particular, there are three critical building blocks necessary to support the type of work needed to build world peace. Without these, world peace would be unlikely.

The first is the modern state, the bedrock of everyday peace in most parts of the world. For all its imperfections, we have yet to find a better way of maintaining domestic peace. Certain types of states are of course more conducive to peace than others, as Gleditsch points out. In particular, states that control a monopoly of legitimate violence, are accountable to their people, protect their human rights, ensure a basic degree of economic justice, and promote and protect gender equality are more likely to contribute more to peace at home than those that do not. But at the same time, even the most ideal modern state exacerbates the problem of human division by institutionalizing it. In many ways, by largely resolving the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679420000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

problem of organized violence in the domestic sphere, we have created the problem of interstate war.

The second building block involves building peace in our minds. In recent decades, the balance has tilted decisively in favor of peace; modern war is costly in both blood and treasure, whereas peace opens up significant opportunities for human advancement. Some of this change was deliberate—the outlawing of conquest, for example, was a self-conscious attempt to make war less attractive as a policy option—but some of it coincidental. The explosion of world trade, for example, so critical to increasing prosperity, was not undertaken with the goal of peace in mind. But this change in outlook and understanding is not complete. There are still enough leaders who believe that the benefits of war outweigh the costs—enough to keep war in business. Part of the problem here is that the costs and benefits of war are unevenly distributed. There remain some people and industries for whom war remains highly profitable; while for many others war means nothing but loss and impoverishment. In Syria, for example, Bashar al-Assad believed it was worth destroying a country and killing hundreds of thousands of its people in order to keep himself in power. Nevertheless, overall the costs and payoffs of war have tilted in favor of peace. There is more that can be done, of course, to tilt them still further by increasing war's costs and investing more heavily in peace.[17]

The third building block relates to the need to build peace in our hearts, to reshape our emotional sensibilities away from nationalism and war, and toward more cosmopolitan, compassionate, and peaceful inclinations, as A. C. Grayling suggests in his contribution to this roundtable. Influencing human emotions has proven much more difficult than reframing the material costs and benefits of war. So powerful are the emotions that drive us to war that they continue to impel large numbers of people to support wars and policies that are demonstrably contrary to their own self-interests. Yet societies can be nudged in the right direction by efforts that open up free reporting and debate about the realities of war and measures that can allow individuals to follow their own consciences—such as a universal right to conscientious objection.

The history of the global anti-slavery movement shows that the principal vehicles for change are the political and moral sentiments of peoples and governments. Governments of all stripes can be moved to make quite fundamental changes when their publics demand it. Repressive governments can sometimes be toppled altogether by nonviolent resistance. Civil society actors can organize locally and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679420000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reach out across national boundaries, not only creating transnational movements for change but also challenging the forces that divide us by forging overlapping and cosmopolitan identities and interests, such as those pioneered by French economist and diplomat Jean Monnet and others in Europe after the Second World War. They can do this by fostering open and honest public deliberation about war, holding public institutions accountable, organizing and mobilizing to support peace, embodying peace in the everyday, and fostering a transnational public sphere.

All of this depends upon individuals assuming some personal responsibility for world peace. World peace must be sought after by each generation. Even if it were achieved for a moment, it could easily be lost. What is more, world peace cannot and will not be achieved by following a single path. There is no single path to gender equality, or to accountable government, or to the freedom of expression about war. We should be deeply skeptical of those who claim otherwise. If these goods are to be achieved at all, they will be achieved by individuals, communities, groups, and governments finding their own way and achieving their own minor utopias. World peace must be actualized by different types of actors, in different places, and in many different ways.

NOTES

[1] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Picador, 2004).
[2] See, for instance, Nigel Biggar, *In Defence of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 1; and Christopher Coker, *Can War Be Eliminated?* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity), p. 97.
[3] This is one of the principal messages delivered by Margaret MacMillan in her 2018 series of Reith Lectures (Margaret MacMillan, Reith Lectures, 2018, radio broadcast, BBC Radio 4, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00729d9/episodes/player). Also see Margaret MacMillan, "It Would Be Stupid to Think We Have Moved on from War: Look Around," *Guardian*, June 24, 2018.
[4] This essay draws on arguments advanced in my book *World Peace (And How We Can Achieve It)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
[5] Richard Caplan, *Measuring Peace: Principles, Practices, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); and John Keane, *Reflections on Violence* (London: Verso, 1996).
[6] See Thomas Hippler, *Governing From the Skies: A Global History of Aerial Bombing* (London: Verso, 2017), pp. 9, 62.
[7] Murad Idris, *War for Peace: Genealogies of a Violent Ideal in Western and Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
[8] Michael Banks, "Four Conceptions of Peace," in Dennis J. D. Sandole and Ingrid Sandole-Staroste, eds., *Conflict Management and Problem Solving: Interpersonal to International Applications* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), p. 269.
[9] Carol R. Ember and Mervin Ember, "Warfare, Aggression and Resource Problems: Cross-Cultural Codes," *Behavior Science Research* 26, nos. 1–4 (February 1992), pp. 169–226. See also, Carol R. Ember and Mervin Ember, "Resource Unpredictability, Mistrust, and War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no. 2 (June 1992), pp. 242–62; and Carol R. Ember and Mervin Ember, "War, Socialization, and Interpersonal Violence: A Cross-Cultural Study," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38, no. 4 (December 1994), pp. 620–46.
[10] Keith F. Otterbein and Charlotte Otterbein, "An Eye for an Eye, a Tooth for a Tooth: A Cross-Cultural Study of Feuding," *American Anthropologist* 67, no. 6 (December 1965), pp. 1470–82.
[11] Quincy Wright, *Study of War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 546.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679420000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[12] Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).
[13] The Arms Trade Treaty entered into force on December 24, 2014. At the time of writing (December 2019), the treaty had 130 signatories and 104 parties.
[14] Paul Collier, V. L. Elliott, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol, and Nicholas Sambanis, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2003), p. 13.
[15] Andrew J. Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016).
[16] Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning,* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2014), p. 23.
[17] Azar Gat, *The Causes of War and the Spread of Peace: But Will War Rebound?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Abstract: For as long as humans have fought wars, we have been beguiled and frustrated by the prospect of world peace. Only a very few of us today believe that world peace is possible. Indeed, the very mention of the term "world peace" raises incredulity. In contrast, as part of the roundtable "World Peace (And How We Can Achieve It)," this essay makes the case for taking world peace more seriously. It argues that world peace is possible, though neither inevitable nor irreversible. World peace, I argue, is something that every generation must strive for, because the ideas, social structures, and practices that make war possible are likely to remain with us. The essay proceeds in three parts. First, I briefly set out what I mean by peace and world peace. Second, I explain why I think that world peace is possible. Third, I examine how the world might be nudged in a more peaceful direction.

Keywords: world peace, war, violence, justice, world politics

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679420000027 Published online by Cambridge University Press