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Alliance for
Peacebuilding



KROC INSTITUTE
FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE STUDIES
KEOUGH SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS





The War Prevention Initiative focuses on transforming the global security paradigm to promote alternatives to violence and militarism. We research, advocate for, and advance knowledge on proven peacebuilding practices to create a world beyond war.

Our mission is to transform the global peace and security paradigm to one that is built around viable alternatives to war and all forms of political violence. To achieve this we research, advocate for and advance knowledge on practices that demonstrate the effectiveness of nonviolence and challenge militarism.

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The editors of the Peace Science Digest do not claim their analysis is, or should be, the only way to approach any given issue. Our aim is to provide a responsible and ethical analysis of the research conducted by Peace and Conflict Studies academics through the operational lens of the War Prevention Initiative.



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DEAR READERS



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The peacebuilding field is at a crossroads in the United States and beyond. The field has been devastated by sweeping, sudden cuts to overseas aid budgets, the dismantling of institutions dedicated to resolving conflict, and the subsequent displacement of a skilled peacebuilding workforce. At the same time, the world continues to experience record-high numbers of violent conflicts, with those conflicts becoming increasingly internationalized and interstate in nature.¹ The Global Peace Index for 2026 reported that global peacefulness declined further for the 12th straight year and estimated that the global economic impact of violence increased by 3.2 percent from the previous year.²

To support the peacebuilding field in meeting this challenging moment, the Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP)—a network of nearly 300 member organizations, headquartered in Washington,

D.C.—recently launched the Future of Peace and Security Project. We believe our field must widen its aperture to address broader challenges, expand partnerships across fields, and renew grassroots engagement, as we recently explained in an article for *Peace Policy*, a publication of the University of Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies.³ Through this project, we hope to bring forth new ideas and a broader-based coalition that can make the case to political leaders for renewed investments in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

In March 2026, AfP partnered with the Kroc Institute and former leaders of the U.S. Institute of Peace to convene a conference entitled “American Peacebuilding at a Crossroads: Lessons, Risks, and the Road Ahead.”⁴ Some 400 advocates, former diplomatic

and military leaders, practitioners, and scholars came together to reaffirm that the United States has a strategic and moral imperative to invest deliberately in peace capacities, expertise, and institutions for the future. We began discussions about how to rebuild, innovate, and transform peace work for the future to achieve better results and meet new challenges, including those involving artificial intelligence (AI) and political polarization. We continue to facilitate those discussions toward the goal of articulating a bold peace policy agenda for future political leaders.

As part of that ongoing project, we are delighted to collaborate with the Peace Science Digest, a project of the War Prevention Initiative of the Jubitz Family Foundation, on this special issue on the “Future of Peace.” This issue includes eight essays that elevate research, ideas, and perspectives on how the landscape for peace work is evolving and opportunities to marshal innovation, partnerships, and connections. The essays highlight evolving challenges for the future of peace, including the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), environmental degradation, and

1. Siri Aas Rustad, “Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2025,” *PRIO Paper*, 2026. <https://www.prio.org/publications/14802>.

2. Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Peace Index 2026: Identifying and Measuring the Factors that Drive Peace,” June 2026. <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>.

3. Liz Hume and Peter J. Quaranto, “The Opportunity: Can the Peacebuilding Field Meet the Moment?” *Peace Policy: Solutions to Violent Conflict*, No. 63 (March 2026). <https://doi.org/10.7274/31843000>.

4. Keough School of Global Affairs, “American Peacebuilding at a Crossroads: Lessons, Risks, and the Road Ahead: March 2026 Conference Summary Report,” University of Notre Dame, March 2026. https://keough.nd.edu/assets/654988/american_peacebuilding_at_a_crossroads_conference_report.pdf.



global power shifts. Essays highlight concrete ways that a wider swath of non-governmental actors can help shape future peace agendas, including those from the private sector, civil society, and historically marginalized communities.

Peace research has become more sophisticated than ever in recent decades, yet it is still too often diffused and disconnected from the practical needs of practitioners, policymakers, grassroots activists, and communities in war-torn societies at all levels. We must bridge those gaps if the collective field is to grow and adapt to meet the challenges ahead. We need more intentional spaces for all stakeholders in the peace ecosystem to engage, challenge each other, and build shared agendas. This special issue models the diversity of voices and range of dialogue we need for the future of peace and security.

Despite the mounting challenges we face, the mood at the March conference was surprisingly positive and forward-looking. Peacebuilding advocates are already beginning to forge new connections and initiatives. There is a clear recognition among some bipartisan leaders in the U.S. Congress that dedicated structures for building peace will be essential for the future of the United States—both abroad and at home. It is easy to be cynical, but we must use this moment of acute disruption as an opportunity to come

together to reimagine, reenergize, and reorient peace work for the future we want. The future is now, and together we can shape it.

Onward,

Liz Hume

Executive Director, Alliance for Peacebuilding
& Advisory Board Member, Kroc Institute for
International Peace Studies

Peter J. Quaranto

Senior Fellow for the Future of Peace and Security,
Alliance for Peacebuilding & Visiting Professor
at the Keough School of Global Affairs.



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DEAR READERS

The Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies is pleased to partner with the War Prevention Initiative of the Jubitz Family Foundation and the Alliance for Peacebuilding on this special Peace Science Digest issue.

Today, it is hard to imagine a future of peace. The entire international system is under a significant amount of stress. Many of us are deeply worried about what the future portends: shifting global power dynamics, persisting wars in the Middle East, new arms races, internationalized wars, and disruptions fueled by artificial intelligence, climate change, and political fragmentation. New conflicts are mounting worldwide as our old systems for managing them are declining. Amid these dynamics, those of us who study and work for peace have an urgent responsibility—and an opportunity—to ask ourselves tough questions and reconsider our strategies.

I'm grateful to the authors in this issue, especially my Notre Dame colleagues, for offering fresh perspectives and ideas for adapting peacebuilding to address current challenges. We have

advanced a great deal in our understanding of the causes and conditions of peace over recent decades, which can provide a basis for crafting new solutions. The work done by the Peace Accords Matrix at Notre Dame, as described in one of the articles, provides one great example. Now is precisely the moment to elevate and scale this learning, at the same time as we reimagine the global institutions and systems for promoting peace.

The Kroc Institute is marking its 40th anniversary on our journey to being one of the world's leading centers for research, teaching, training, and service to build sustainable peace. Our founders, the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., and philanthropist Joan B. Kroc, believed that averting war (especially nuclear war) and transforming cycles of conflict required dynamic collaborations among scholars, visionaries, and practitioners. Those kinds of collaborations are needed more than ever to face our current challenges. We at the Kroc Institute and the broader Keough School of Global Affairs remain committed to doing what we can to support that collaboration.

A future of peace is still possible.
Together, we can help forge it.

Sincerely,

Asher Kaufman

John M. Regan, Jr. Director

Kroc Institute for International Peace
Studies

RETHINKING THE MILITARIZED FUTURE WE'RE BUILDING

WRITTEN BY THE WAR PREVENTION INITIATIVE OF THE JUBITZ FAMILY FOUNDATION



After gutting USAID, the Department of State, and the U.S. Institute of Peace in early 2025, the Trump Administration requested a \$1.5 trillion-dollar defense budget (Kosiak 2026) for fiscal year 2027. The reduction in support for diplomacy and peacebuilding amid a sharp increase in spending for war is not a coincidence, nor is it limited to the United States: other countries in Europe and beyond are following suit and increasing military spending. Leaders are citing paradigms of “peace through strength” to justify these shifts. Yet, history has shown that more militarism does not lead to more peace. Increased military spending offsets funds that

could go to diplomatic efforts to manage conflicts as well as to other critical efforts to mitigate climate change and natural disasters, strengthen public health, and support broader social and economic well-being.

The challenges associated with militarism are not new and did not begin with the second Trump administration. The primacy accorded to military “solutions” to conflict has meant that diplomacy, global cooperation, and peacebuilding have been overshadowed. Militarism—a system where military priorities fuel violence and insecurity, benefiting elites while oppressing and endangering the vulnerable and the planet—has long

undercut our ability to build peace and prevent wars. In considering the future of peace, the peacebuilding field must contend with militarism as a primary driver of political violence and ecological harm, not simply as background to them, and offer alternative models for achieving collective safety and security. Militarism makes peace more difficult to achieve.

Militarism Explained

Besides actual warfighting, one of the most direct experiences of militarism is the collection of trade-offs between military spending and social spending (healthcare, food assistance, housing, education, etc.)—illustrated with the so-called “guns vs. butter” model. It’s a simplistic model to demonstrate how governments are forced to make budget choices with finite resources. It is more complicated and contested in academic literature, but the trade-offs are real. The additional \$200 billion requested for the war in Iran could cover all Medicaid and SNAP benefits for at-risk individuals (\$118 billion) and expand Medicaid to

of war (Erlanger 2026) in the Middle East, domestic surveillance infrastructure (Toomey and Robinson 2024), the militarization of immigration enforcement (Johnson 2026), and the use of military equipment and weaponry by domestic police throughout the United States (Abou-Elias, et al. 2024). These examples show a gradual move away from civilian oversight, transparency, and accountability inherent in democratic processes.

The logic underpinning militarism is that security is attained using violence, control, and domination. Decades of research on peace and war (Davenport, Melander and Regan 2018) have shown that this logic is simply not true. Indeed, the most durable and sustainable security is achieved through peacebuilding, which includes practices like building mutual trust (Kelman 2005) and understanding across differences, ensuring that basic human needs are met (Bashur 2023), and turning to nonviolent mechanisms (Kivimaki 2024) to settle emergent conflict or

“ THE ADDITIONAL \$200 BILLION REQUESTED FOR THE WAR IN IRAN COULD COVER ALL MEDICAID AND SNAP BENEFITS FOR AT-RISK INDIVIDUALS (\$118 BILLION) AND EXPAND MEDICAID TO 10.3 MILLION PEOPLE.

10.3 million people (\$82 billion), according to the Institute for Policy Studies (National Priorities Project 2026).

President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of the dangers of the military-industrial complex (Eisenhower n.d.) in his farewell address in 1961. He raised concerns over how a close relationship between arms producers, the government, and the military would create incentives to deepen militarization and produce corporate profit at the expense of democratic processes. This complex creates perverse incentives to pursue wars more recklessly and militarize domestic security operations—as we are seeing today with the scourge

of war (Erlanger 2026) in the Middle East, domestic surveillance infrastructure (Toomey and Robinson 2024), the militarization of immigration enforcement (Johnson 2026), and the use of military equipment and weaponry by domestic police throughout the United States (Abou-Elias, et al. 2024). These examples show a gradual move away from civilian oversight, transparency, and accountability inherent in democratic processes.

Disrupting a Militarized Future

The peacebuilding field can be a powerful influence for challenging militarism by explaining the harms and limits of military approaches while showing the possibilities for diplomacy and global cooperation. John Paul Lederach calls on peacebuilders to develop a moral imagination (Lederach 2005) to identify pathways through which the impossible becomes possible. Elevating peace research and innovative practices can help show that alternative approaches are avail-

able to obtain collective safety and security without the use of violence.

This special issue offers a snapshot of what the peacebuilding field offers in this moment of extraordinary militarism: how we might sustain long-established, tested practices amid escalating tensions and diminished support; how involving new technologies, approaches, or sectors can help revive peacebuilding practice for the future; or how this moment calls on us to more fundamentally question, re-think, and approach peacebuilding from a radically different point of view.

Building a future of peace requires noticing and then diverting ourselves from the current path that the United States and other countries are on toward more militarism, including by offering viable alternatives for fostering collective security. The 10% for All campaign (10% for All n.d.) calls on governments to reduce global military spending by 10% and reallocate those funds to social, environmental, and peacebuilding initiatives. A *global* campaign to reduce military spending can help build confidence and unlock needed diplomatic power to achieve global cooperation on proliferating challenges, including those related to nuclear weapons and artificial intelligence.

For the future of peace, government budgets need to meaningfully support peacebuilding and diplomacy efforts and prioritize socio-economic needs over larger military systems and capabilities. Re-balancing the budget in this way is critical for creating the space for alternative, demilitarized approaches to security to gain traction—ultimately moving us away from the militarized future that currently looms ahead. On a deeper level, the future of peace requires questioning what fundamentally makes us secure and re-configuring how decisions about peace and security are made. Peacebuilding offers paths that—guided by moral imagination—can make new futures of peace possible and attainable.

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SHAPING FUTURE PEACE MEDIATION IN A WORLD WITHOUT A CENTER

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In 2024, my last full year in government, I sat in a room with mediators of increasing relevance from the Gulf, Türkiye, and Africa.¹ The agenda called in part for a discussion about norms like human rights, principles that the Western-led peace architecture had long insisted were the foundation of durable agreements. The representatives scoffed. They had not come to talk about norms. They had come to talk about realism and peace. Given what the “rules-based international order” was failing to prevent in Gaza and elsewhere, it was hard to argue with them. In fact,

1. Author’s note: This account is drawn from a closed convening. Specific attendees and the convener are not named here.

the system that claimed universal principles had always applied them selectively (Carney 2026). The populations and governments on the receiving end of that selectivity noticed long ago.

Looking to the future, international peacemakers and diplomats must grapple with a changing mediation space in which post-war norms and frameworks are being ignored and discredited. No single country will likely be able to set the terms for how peace is achieved. Yet, international peacemakers and diplomats can still help shape conflict incentives toward peace by using coalition pressure to weaken war economies, raise the cost of ruling without legitimacy, and press for

settlements that have wider public backing.

An Increasingly Crowded, Challenging Mediation Environment

In the post-Cold War era, U.S.- and Western-mediated or enforced peace initiatives produced real successes, including the Dayton Accords, the Good Friday Agreement, and Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement (Dalay 2026). But those outcomes depended on a combination of U.S. primacy, coherent external leverage, and favorable political windows shaped by world events. Western peacemaking was never neutral: it was tied to stabilizing regions, extending a market-based order, and reinforcing institutions aligned with Western strategic and economic interests. Norms mattered, but they were applied selectively and used to legitimate hegemonic power, never to constrain it. In the last 20 years, however, the United States and its allies have become less convinced about the geo-strategic value of long-term peacebuilding projects.

multiple overlapping mediation processes" (Bell 2024) and new mediators can choose relevance over resolution (Adhikari, et al. 2025). A fragile ceasefire may be more useful to a broker than a comprehensive settlement that ends the conflict and removes their influence.

To be clear, transactional and limited agreements can still unlock real progress. Ceasefires save lives, prisoner exchanges bring people home. However, the transactional approach often reinforces and sustains the conflict parties' efforts of exclusion, extraction, or domination, which are not compatible with more sustainable and just peace. The laws of war, human rights, and self-determination norms emerged out of universal experience. Whether or not they are explicitly named, durable peace depends on whether the substance of those norms is upheld (Kaufman 2022).

“WHAT HAPPENS AT THE MEDIATION TABLE IS DOWNSTREAM OF WHO HOLDS POWER OUTSIDE IT.”

Over time, Western selectivity hollowed the norms out. In a multipolar world, there is no longer a single actor able or willing to enforce them consistently. Peacebuilders should neither hope for nor expect one to emerge. They have to work within the constellation of power as it is.

The mediators filling the space are less pretentious than the old guard was about their interests. They seek regional influence, economic leverage, strategic positioning, and the prestige that comes from brokering a deal. There is no longer the expectation of a single process. This “multi-mediation” environment is what Christine Bell has called the “accidental and deliberate use of

Furthermore, this crowded and challenging mediation environment is more easily manipulated by conflict parties. Multiple processes let parties cherry-pick gains across venues without ever making the tradeoffs that resolution requires (Chughtai and Murphy 2023). Why commit to one process when you can play three off against each other?

An even harder problem is the weakened role of legitimacy: when foreign subsidies, illicit finance, and resource extraction can sustain a belligerent indefinitely, the cost of losing popular support drops. The people who bear the highest cost of conflict end up with the least voice in how

it ends, especially when they must chase multiple processes.

Working with Power as It Is to Create Incentives for Peace

There is no way back to norms-based conflict mediation and resolution through insistence on norms. Norms come from consistent application in practice, and we are no longer in a unipolar world where any hegemon can impose that consistency. Western peacemakers and diplomats need to forge better connections with emerging mediators and pay greater attention to effective coalition management. At the same time, they can still take important actions to create conditions and incentives for more durable peace processes. Specifically:

1. Target the war machine. States with the power to do so should focus on the resources that allow parties to wage war without popular support or legitimacy: arms flows, foreign subsidies, illicit finance, and conflict commodities.² That means following the money, identifying the state patrons and commercial enablers who profit from war, and blocking these channels. The goal is not to reclaim old mediation centrality but to use what influence remains to disrupt the networks that sustain violence and impede viable mediated solutions.

2. Convert popular energy into power. Unarmed populations hold a deeper source of legitimacy than armed groups but turning it into leverage requires organizing and collective action. Traditional mediators tried to contain that energy inside process and programming. Emerging mediators often ignore it altogether. The better approach is to find where popular energy already exists, resource it flexibly without burdensome restrictions, and let it unfold on people's terms. What happens at the mediation table is downstream of who holds power outside it. Building popular leverage changes both what belligerents can credibly refuse and whom mediators must include—not out of altruism but because of where the power is (Chenoweth 2025).

3. Push multimediation toward population-backed settlements. International peace actors should emphasize the practical importance of securing public buy-in for mediated processes and agreements to make them durable. The

task is to identify where elite survival, political control, or security interests overlap with legitimacy, governance, and civilian protection, then structure inducements, pressure, and sequencing around those overlaps. International actors can work to shape fragmented mediation space so that the available bargains move closer to popular needs.

The United States and Western powers will be nursing the hangover from norm destruction for a long time. The field should be less concerned with who is convening and what performative moral foundations they apply and more concerned with using its resources to influence the flow of power and the capacity to wage war. Weaken the economies that let belligerents fight against their populations' will; build the leverage those populations need to be heard; and push multimediation toward settlements with a real constituency. The peacemakers who do that work will shape the next era of practice. The ones who do not will keep designing better tables for rooms where the outcome has already been decided.

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2. For an example of investigative work targeting the financial networks that sustain armed conflict, see The Sentry: <https://thesentry.org>. Following illicit money through global financial centers and blocking the enablers illustrates the kind of disruption possible when political will exists.



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SUSTAINING FUTURE PEACE PROCESSES AMID GLOBAL INSTITUTIONAL AUSTERITY

WRITTEN BY JOSEFINA ECHAVARRÍA ÁLVAREZ, PHD, DIRECTOR OF THE PEACE ACCORDS MATRIX (PAM), PROFESSOR OF PRACTICE, KEOUGH SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME



The global landscape of peacemaking is navigating a severe political and institutional crisis. As world leaders seek frameworks and “deals” to end high-intensity wars, the traditional international architectures designed to safeguard peace agreements face systematic rollbacks, funding starvation, and political skepticism. Many agreements, especially partial ceasefires, fall apart in a short period of time. Refined approaches for monitoring and facilitating a sustained process of implementation and adaptation are needed if future agreements are to translate into durable peace. Research shows that built-in conflict resolution mechanisms and third-party monitoring and verification can

increase success rates in peace agreements by over 29 percent (Joshi et al. 2016).

In the current climate of global institutional austerity and geopolitical fragmentation, contemporary peace practice must contend with an additional critical vulnerability: the lack of a shared, transparent, and mutually accepted understanding of implementation progress among signatory parties. Ambiguous language and divergent interpretations often enable political actors to instrumentalize delays in peace agreement implementation, fueling polarization and heightening the risk of conflict recurrence (Echavarría Álvarez et al. 2025). In a vicious circle, the

absence of third-party monitors, which provide the public with transparent communication about the status of implementation, adds to the lack of knowledge about the challenges of implementation. The lack of clarity and transparency on the implementation of peace agreements contributes to an already volatile political scenario that favors lean peace agreements, with much content focused on security provisions with little regard for the inclusion of civil society and larger dynamics of conflict.

Innovative Frontiers and Best Practices from Colombia

In direct response to these destabilizing dynamics, an important innovation in contemporary peace practice is the shift toward independent, empirical, data-driven, third-party monitoring mechanisms. A notable example among these is the Peace Accords Matrix (PAM) developed by the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies

track 578 specific stipulations across six core pillars and three intersectional approaches: gender, ethnicity, and territory. In real time, the Barometer's reports have firmly become part of the national and international conversation about the achievements and gaps in implementation of the Colombian peace accord (Cooper et al. 2026; Castillo 2026).

Drawing on nearly a decade of data, a forthcoming study outlines three critical best practices and insights for effective peace accord implementation, derived from the Colombian case (Echavarría Álvarez and Murphy Forthcoming):

- **Differentiate high-overhead vs. structural commitments:** Barometer data reveal a stark discrepancy in implementation patterns. High-overhead, short-term measures such as the bilateral ceasefire and disarmament and the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms achieve rapid compliance due to concentrated international aid and political focus. Conversely, long-term structural transformations—such as “rural

“RESEARCH SHOWS THAT BUILT-IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISMS AND THIRD-PARTY MONITORING AND VERIFICATION CAN INCREASE SUCCESS RATES IN PEACE AGREEMENTS BY OVER 29 PERCENT.

at the University of Notre Dame. By establishing a replicable methodology that translates complex, comprehensive peace accords into observable, traceable, and empirically verifiable commitments (“stipulations”), PAM has transformed peace verification from a closed-door deal into a rigorous, impartial, and transparent peacebuilding accompaniment exercise (Joshi 2026).

The operationalization of this tool is vividly illustrated by the Kroc Institute's official role as part of the International Verification Component in Colombia's 2016 Final Agreement. Through the Colombia Barometer Initiative, a team of local and international researchers systematically

reform” and “political participation”—routinely lag behind due to institutional pushback, gaps in data governance, and shifting administrative priorities.

- **Protect intersectional and inclusive cross-cutting approaches:** Colombia pioneered the inclusion of specific “gender” and “ethnic” approaches. However, best practices dictate that inclusion at the design phase must be rigorously sustained through implementation; currently, only 14 percent of gender-related stipulations are fully complete compared to 36 percent of stipulations overall. Failing to prioritize intersectional stipulations undercuts overall accord durability.

• **Shift from forced control to rights-based frameworks:** Concerning “illicit drugs,”

Colombia’s recent strategic shift away from control-based forced eradication toward UN-supported, human-rights-focused drug policies demonstrates how national policy can be realigned to sustainably tackle the structural root causes of conflict. With a stagnant full implementation rate of 29 percent, the hope of communities on the ground is that this new approach moves the needle forward in crop substitution and coca eradication.

Future Adaptation, Innovation, and Research Needed

To ensure the durability of future agreements under continuous funding constraints and geopolitical tensions, the peacemaking and peacebuilding community must systematically institutionalize these impartial verification mechanisms. Robust third-party oversight acts as a vital insurance policy for international investments in peace (Echavarría Álvarez et al. 2025). From this monitoring practice, forward-looking lessons emerge:

First, peace design must move toward explicit **design-to-verification integration**. Future peace processes should embed clear, unambiguous compliance understandings and implementation metrics directly into the text of peace deals while they are being designed—and *not a posteriori*. This prevents interpretive ambiguities that disappoint civil society organizations (who are mostly victims of the conflict) while denying spoilers ample opportunities to weaponize delays. Rather than depending on multi-billion-dollar enforcement structures, agreements should be designed as adaptive, iterative, and modular frameworks. These frameworks can prioritize easily verifiable milestones first, allowing implementation to scale incrementally based on real-time data.

Second, future research must focus heavily on **intersectional implementation dynamics**. As the Colombia Barometer Initiative’s analysis underscores, peace cannot be durable if the structural transformations promised to marginalized populations remain unfulfilled. We need deeper empirical research into how delays in structural pillars—such as rural reform and gender equality—undermine progress in security and political participation.

Ultimately, the promises of peacemaking need to deliver for affected populations if we are to turn the page in the current state of global affairs and move towards a more secure, just, and peaceful

future for communities on the ground. An essential new challenge emerging for the international community is how to show progress, create trust, and start delivering on the promises of partial peace accords so that the parties move closer towards solutions that are systemic and involve many more actors than those sitting at the negotiation table. By pursuing more intentionality in how peace processes are monitored, sustained, and adapted after agreements are signed, we can increase the chances for such success—even in an age of global austerity and disruption.

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SCALING FUTURE PEACEMAKING THROUGH AI-POWERED PUBLIC DELIBERATION

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The peacemaking landscape is shifting with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). The “small-room,” elite-driven processes of the past are ill-equipped for the digital-age complexities of a media sphere rife with false and deceptive information. To remain effective, peacemaking practice must confront new AI-driven realities and evolve from a closed-door art into a transparent, data-informed science of deliberation and public sensemaking.

Networked communities and technologies are playing significant roles in conflicts shaping information environments and deepening divisions. For example, AI fakes in the U.S. and Israel war

on Iran can cause people to react emotionally and on the basis of inaccurate information. This might push governments to act based on fake evidence. AI fakes can also copy or oppose official statements, making officials respond to prove the fake content—like fake videos of officials—wrong (Thompson and Cardia 2026).

The surge of disjointed information on partisan news outlets and social media, rife with AI-generated fabrications and misinformation, results in “cognitive overload.” Social media algorithms, designed to maximize attention, amplify extreme voices while muting the moderate majority. In an age of digital surveillance and “cancel culture,”

individuals often fear that genuine engagement might lead to backlash or danger. Many find digital spaces unsafe, exposing them to harmful comments and attacks. This can immobilize public participation and erode trust in intermediaries (Schirch 2021).

Peacemaking in the AI age requires an ability to understand and engage widely across the information environment. Traditional peacemaking excels at depth but lacks the kind of breadth necessary to engage digital spaces (Schirch 2022). While conflict impacts millions, most peace processes only involve dozens of elite participants. Consequently, agreements often lack the broad social backing necessary for long-term sustainability.

To counter these digital threats and challenges, as well as the limitations of traditional peacemaking, some peacemakers are turning toward deliberative technologies. Public-minded engineers are designing digital platforms to support inclusive and constructive public reasoning. For example,

social media, fostering collective sensemaking and problem-solving (Schirch 2026b).

First, deliberative platforms focus on one policy issue at a time. This is distinct from social media platforms that collapse all communication into a single, undifferentiated feed. Deliberative tech allows users to orient themselves cognitively and emotionally, reducing the friction that occurs when people rush from one toxic conversation to the next.

Second, on deliberative platforms, the focus is on the issues, not the identities of the participants. Most deliberative tools do not have a reply button. The reply button often facilitates personal attacks. By removing direct replies, this lowers the risk for “silent observers” to contribute. It ensures that disagreement remains focused on substance rather than status.

Third, standard emojis like “likes,” “hearts,” or “angry” on social media show how people feel about something. These emojis often highlight

“ AS WE HAVE LEARNED OVER TIME, PEACE IS MADE NOT JUST IN SMALL MEETINGS BUT ULTIMATELY BY THE COMMUNITIES WHO WILL LIVE WITH IT.

the UN Innovation Unit used the deliberative platform Remesh in peace processes in Yemen, Libya, and Iraq (United Nations 2022). AI-enhanced deliberative tools allow peacemakers to engage tens of thousands of participants simultaneously, helping both the public and diplomats understand the diversity of public opinion (Masood Alavi et al. 2022; Wählich and Kufus 2025).

The Digital Architecture of Peace: Prosocial Design Affordances

Digital deliberative tools are distinct from social media in important ways (Schirch 2026a). They utilize “prosocial design affordances” to shift away from toxic and polarizing discussions on

content that causes strong, often negative, emotions. In contrast to engagement-oriented social media, deliberative tools encourage listening at scale and use structured voting on ideas (Agree/Disagree/Pass). This approach views engagement as a group decision, helping platforms see patterns of agreement and mixed feelings, not just what is popular.

Fourth, while conventional algorithms amplify outrage to maximize time spent on a platform, some deliberative tools use bridging algorithms to identify and elevate ideas that receive support across ideological, geographic, or demographic divides. By rewarding bridge-building rather than

conflict, these algorithms make common ground visible and compromise socially legitimate.

Fifth, deliberative tools counter the illusion of binary “us vs. them” attitudes in divided societies. AI-assisted analysis synthesizes thousands of open-ended responses, identifying patterns that would take facilitators days to produce. These tools can produce visual opinion maps by grouping similar ideas together, illustrating common ground and opinion diversity. This can show participants that most conflict issues involve three to seven thought clusters, not just two. This can minimize perception gaps that lead to toxic polarization.

Sixth, some deliberative tools help participants navigate the truth decay resulting from disinformation and build the shared reality necessary for peacemaking. Deliberative tools help participants with “fact-building” by organizing and grouping cited sources of information. Participants can produce logic trees that compare different points of view and different sources of evidence.

Finally, AI-enabled translation breaks down structural language barriers, allowing participants to contribute in their native tongues while others receive real-time translations. AI translation is constantly improving, although humans still need to check important or cultural terms. Participants are able to engage with others in their preferred language, which may also boost participation and clarity in a deliberation.

The Path Forward: Adaptation, Research, and Ethics

New deliberative tools are helpful, but they are not a perfect solution. They require strong human oversight and adaptation. Peacemakers need a hybrid mix of face-to-face trust-building and AI-enhanced deliberative tools to understand public opinions on a large scale. We need more research to learn with real communities how best to use these tools.

Further, we cannot ignore how the impact of AI on energy and water threatens wider ecosystems. We must use AI conservatively to limit these negative impacts. In addition, we must be careful of inherent biases in most AI systems. Deliberative tools must be designed in a way to protect data privacy and prevent surveillance. These tools should help everyone, not just those in power (Schirch 2025).

In our connected world, doing nothing is riskier than trying new things. We must begin to adapt

to a world where AI is fueling and shaping conflicts. Peacebuilding organizations like Search for Common Ground and Build Up are already integrating deliberative technologies in their peace efforts. By confronting these new dynamics and advancing new deliberative tools, peacemakers can create peace that includes more people, is more accepted, and lasts longer. As we have learned over time, peace is made not just in small meetings but ultimately by the communities who will live with it.

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UNLOCKING FINANCING FOR FUTURE PEACE: BUILDING BRIDGES WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

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Today, global violent conflict is at record levels and rising, hampering many businesses that benefit from predictable environments for long-term planning and investment. The World Economic Report found that geoeconomic confrontation and state-based armed conflict are the top risks most likely to trigger a global crisis in 2026. Despite this, governments are dramatically reducing spending in programs that prevent conflict and build peace. U.S. foreign assistance levels fell a staggering 56.9 percent in 2025, and official development assistance (ODA) by OECD Development Assistance Committee members decreased by 23.1 percent (World Economic Forum 2026).

In the wake of cuts to both peacebuilding and countering violent extremism programs, ISIS is surging in mineral-rich Mozambique (Paton et al. 2025). In Colombia (Barber 2025), the cuts are now emboldening violent cartels to steer at-risk populations towards gang recruitment and participation in illicit economies (Pannell 2026).

To meet this moment and begin tackling conflict and instability, more robust engagement with the private sector is vital. Companies that adopt conflict-sensitive practices achieve better returns on investment by reducing operational disruptions, lowering security costs, and maintaining their social license to operate, ultimately resulting

in more peaceful and stable regions. Fostering greater collaboration between the peacebuilding field and private-sector actors will require establishing a common language, a shared evidence base, and standards that enable scalable best practices, demonstrate a profitable return on investment, and result in the building of peace and security.

Peace Is Good for Business, but...

The case for linking peace and economic stability is clear. But for the private sector to engage with peacebuilding, investors first need to see how peace benefits their investment decisions, and there needs to be mutual trust. Violence costs the world economy an estimated \$19.97 trillion annually,¹ and countries that are more stable and peaceful have stronger economic indicators, including better economic output, more robust consumption, higher rates of foreign direct investment, increased trade, higher levels of new businesses, and lower risk premiums (Institute for Economics & Peace 2024).

providing pivotal private capital. Especially at a time of funding cuts, these resources are vital for post-conflict reconstruction and community development, enabling the peacebuilding sector to manage and mitigate conflict and break the dependency on foreign assistance. Peacebuilding organizations working with the private sector ensure that businesses better manage risk and do not contribute to conflict.

Needed Scalable Partnership

The Alliance for Peacebuilding's (AfP) Building Peace Economies at Scale initiative is working to build bridges between peacebuilders and private sector actors with stakes in conflict-affected environments and issues (Alliance for Peacebuilding 2025). AfP is curating intentional spaces and bringing together peacebuilding organizations and practitioners with impact investors, development finance institutions, multilateral development banks, corporations, venture capitalists, and policymakers. The goal is to explore how we

“THERE ARE NUMEROUS EXAMPLES WHERE THE PRIVATE SECTOR HAS FUELED CONFLICTS, USED CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR) LABELS TO LEGITIMIZE HARMFUL OPERATIONS, AND LEVERAGED COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS FOR REPUTATION MANAGEMENT.

Many in the peacebuilding field are reluctant to partner with the private sector because they fear that, when corporations expand their supply chains into resource-rich but unstable regions, they may exacerbate instability and conflict—and even profit from conflict (Bennett 2002). There are numerous examples where the private sector has fueled conflicts, used corporate social responsibility (CSR) labels to legitimize harmful operations, and leveraged community partnerships for reputation management (Alcadipani et al. 2020). However, the private sector cannot be ignored because they are vital for building an economic environment conducive to peace by

can reconcile the fears, languages, and cultures of peacebuilding and business communities to align for-profit investments with peace process outcomes.

In recent years, a growing field of “peace finance” has emerged to facilitate mutually reinforcing efforts between private capital investments and peacebuilding, and quantitative and qualitative data demonstrate how peacebuilding and private sector partnerships have worked in conflict-affected countries.

- One initiative, Finance for Peace (Finance for Peace N.d.), establishes a framework for

peace-positive investment and peace bonds (Interpeace and SEB 2022), and advocates for blended finance vehicles that combine philanthropic and commercial capital (German Federal Foreign Office 2021). Finance for Peace and other initiatives are demonstrating how peace approaches can help private-sector actors manage risk and make more sustainable investments in conflict-affected areas.

- The African Development Bank (AfDB) is leading with its Strategy for Addressing Fragility and Building Resilience (2022-2026) and Private Sector Development Strategy to address conflict drivers, emphasizing conflict-sensitive recruitment and supply chain management and supporting localized investments in small and medium-sized enterprises in conflict-affected regions.
- In Colombia, the Footprints of Peace initiative (2011-2015) showed that leveraging the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia brand allowed risk-taking that improved the supply chain and built community trust among former combatants, civil society, and coffee growers in conflict-affected areas, resulting in better social and economic outcomes at a critical time of militia demobilization (Peace Science Digest 2020).

While there are examples of private sector partnerships in conflict-affected countries, much more could be done to minimize the risk associated with working in these contexts. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), the U.S. Development Finance Institution (DFI) that bridges the gap between foreign aid and commercial investing, is driving economic development in emerging markets while supporting U.S. foreign policy and national security. These programs leverage private investment through political risk insurance, direct loans, equity investments, and loan guarantees to achieve concrete strategic and developmental goals. Unfortunately, the foreign assistance cuts in 2025 and the gutting of conflict-expertise staff in the U.S. government paused mandated conflict prevention and private sector investments under the bipartisan Global Fragility Act, which required the private sector to be included in the U.S. government's conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategy in five priority countries and regions (Robinson 2025).

With funding for peacebuilding programs being drastically cut and the private sector facing mounting risks from rising conflict and insta-

bility in its operating and investment areas, it is critical to build stronger partnerships between these sectors and build better data and standards. While there is emerging quantitative and qualitative data to make the case for robustly integrating the peacebuilding and private sectors, we need more evidence from diverse geographies, industries, and investment contexts demonstrating how integrating peacebuilding approaches with private sector initiatives can yield specific returns or cost savings.

It is critical to create standardized frameworks that demonstrate and enable best practices to inform investment decisions globally at scale (Miklian et al. 2025). We need to strengthen our coalition of experts across finance, government, venture capital, impact investment, philanthropy, and civil society who can identify leverage points, shared interests, complementary strengths, and opportunities for collective action. To enable broader adoption of peace economy principles, we need to develop and disseminate standardized language, peace indicators, and metrics that can guide conflict-sensitive and peace-positive investments. At the same time, we need to strengthen peacebuilders' financial literacy skills so we can embed peacebuilding principles into the private sector.



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REGENERATIVE ADAPTATION: A PATH FOR FUTURE ENVIRON- MENTAL PEACEBUILDING?

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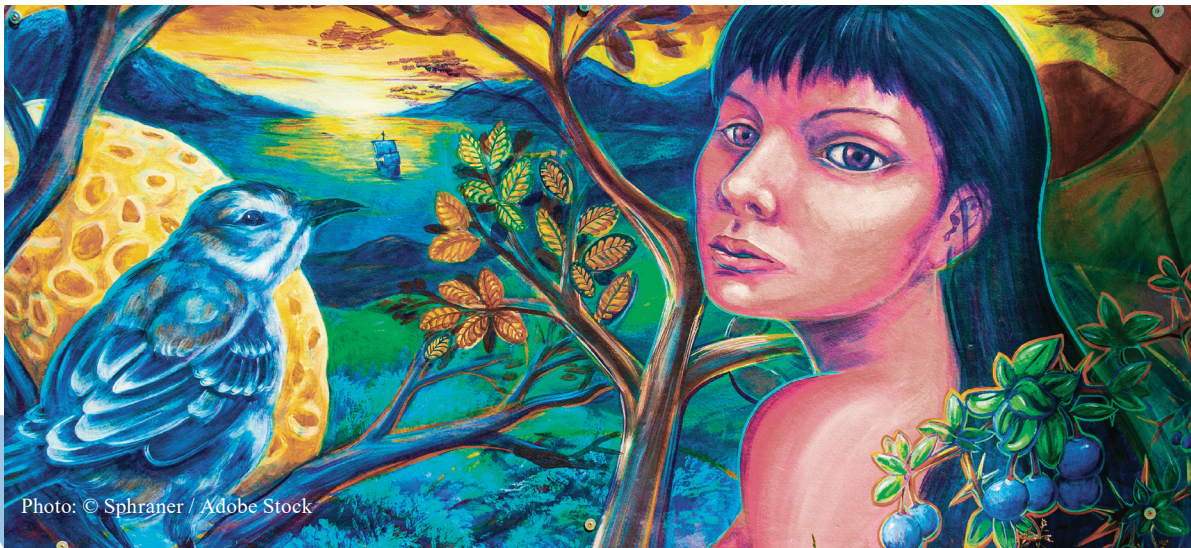


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Violent conflicts are becoming more frequent and more intense in parallel with growing global environmental change, extreme weather events, and corresponding risks to human health and social systems. Both phenomena and their effects are shaped by the relative vulnerability of regions, communities, and individuals. Recent scholarship has identified the high spatial coincidence of multiple environmental risks—climate stressors, resource extraction, and toxic pollution—with human conflict and migration (Cabanillas et al., forthcoming). Such situations can be conceptualized as *polycrisis*: the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems whose

cumulative effects at the local level significantly degrade humanity's prospects. Framing and evaluating complex environment-conflict-peace problems through a polycrisis lens underscores the imperative for more effective environmental peacebuilding responses.

One promising response is regenerative adaptation: livelihood production methods that promote ecosystem functioning while harvesting natural resources, including agroforestry, agroecology, aquaculture, and contaminant remediation. The promise of regenerative production is that, through managed use, the quality of an ecosystem is promoted rather than degraded as goods

are produced, the value of the land regenerated rather than extracted. Such systems can include restoring depleted soil, removing toxic substances like mercury through phytoremediation, or deploying permaculture designs that mimic natural systems while amplifying resource output. The research and technical engagements required for these practices have opened opportunities for communication, trust-building, and shared identity—fostering what has been described as environmental peacebuilding.

Promising Cases

Emerging empirical cases illustrate the potential of regenerative adaptation in support of environmental peacebuilding. In the Madre de Dios river valley of Peru, where toxic environmental degradation and climate risks intersect with emerging land disputes involving mining and narcotics production, the Amazonian Scientific Innovation Institute (CINCIA) is using regenerative agroforestry to remove toxins, regenerate soil and forests, and provide enduring livelihoods

In northern Colombia, former combatants of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are leading a regenerative agriculture cooperative called COOMPAZCOL, forming alliances with the very community members once threatened by their operations. In Luwero District of Uganda, an area heavily affected by violent conflict during the 1980s, the Bethany Land Institute is training young adults in regenerative agroforestry as a way to earn a living while reconnecting with and regenerating land from which their families were displaced. In each of these cases, producers are voluntarily making decisions that reduce their total potential revenue but create a different form of value, guided by ethics beyond economic gain alone.

The Challenges Ahead

Despite its promise, regenerative adaptation for peacebuilding faces important challenges requiring further innovation and research. First, there are risks: if regenerative practice adds

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(Cabanillas et al., forthcoming). CINCIA's approach focuses on developing locally appropriate, non-materially intensive production systems that decrease fragility by reducing producer investments, allowing communities to be more adaptable rather than locked into singular production methods and cycles. In Madre de Dios that has resulted in the formation of supportive networks of cooperative action and solidarity, such as the Women's Mining Network Madre de Dios Chapter, where many members have noted the essentialness of shared experience and the ability to coordinate with others when facing growing threats from organized crime groups.

value to land, it can create competition and new conflict over that land. At the Bethany Land Institute, this is precisely what occurred when their agroforestry process yielded a new forest that landowners sought to reclaim, leading to a legal dispute. Land tenure systems and regulatory enforcement thus become even more essential. In Peru, illicit miners and organized crime groups have repeatedly threatened organizations supporting responsible mining and regenerative restoration, highlighting the need for improved governance through policy reform and consistent implementation of regulations (Cabanillas et al., forthcoming).

Second, the empirical evidence base remains thin. Evidence of regenerative production as an intentional vehicle for peacebuilding in conflict contexts is not yet developed, and there is not yet decisive empirical evidence to confirm its broad effectiveness. Longitudinal evaluation is needed to establish the probabilities of success and failure across all three essential pillars—ecological, economic, and social. This further empirical investigation is necessary to explore the potential of regenerative adaptation for addressing polycrises globally and in significantly different circumstances than those explored so far.

Finally, regenerative adaptation must be durable enough to sustain itself without permanent external support. A key indicator of success is whether it could continue if technical assistance were removed. In Peru, regenerative farmers report they could and would continue their systems independently, though responsible mining operations are still transitioning to self-sustainability. A threshold of diffusion and establishment must be attained for regenerative adaptation to firmly take root—requiring diversification of assistance, local capacity development, and scaling out rather than up.

The world urgently needs tools for simultaneously building peace and restoring ecosystems in our increasingly conflicted and environmentally imperiled world. Regenerative adaptation could be among the most potent tools in this regard. Our challenge ahead is to marshal the financing, research, and support needed to test and scale these tools. Our planet and our civilization's future may well depend on it.

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FEMINIST PEACE APPROACHES FOR THE FUTURE

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At a moment of overlapping crises—expanding wars, democratic erosion, ecological breakdown—it is widely recognized (Kobayashi et al. 2025) that dominant frameworks for building peace and security need transformation. Over the past decades, the Women, Peace, and Security agenda (United Nations Security Council 2000) and related efforts have broadened those frameworks and sparked important reforms but have ultimately been insufficient in the face of contemporary polycrisis (Lawrence et al. 2024). Dynamic and community-based feminist peace approaches, which understand the interwoven dimensions of (in)security, are urgently needed to

expand the peacebuilding toolkit for the future.

Feminist peace approaches (Inclusive Global Leadership Initiative and Feminist Peace Initiative 2025) begin by asking who bears the greatest costs of political, economic, or environmental upheaval. Then, these approaches ask what security would look like if it were organized around the needs of these communities—the poor, marginalized, LGBTQIA, and/or racialized people, women, and others. Such approaches define security not as military capacity or state stability but as the conditions that create flourishing communities for all people: freedom from violence, access to care, a clean environment, economic

security, and the ability to shape decisions that impact one's life.

Feminist peace approaches are neither utopian nor impractical. Instead, our work with feminist activists has made clear that, across vastly different contexts, communities on the front lines of violence, disenfranchisement, and environmental suffering are already building feminist peace in practice, largely outside the view of traditional peacebuilding efforts. Drawing on examples from feminist activists in our network, we argue that the peacebuilding field does not need to design something new. Instead, we need to look more broadly at what already exists and is working, connect with it, and resource it at the scale the moment demands.

Feminist Peacebuilding Work Already Underway

The Inclusive Global Leadership Initiative is a transnational network of women activists and community leaders who are organizing movements for more peaceful, democratic, and

In a poor neighborhood in Nairobi, a group of survivors of gender-based violence run Mama's Kitchen—simultaneously a social enterprise, a healing space, and a base for feminist political organizing. It is one of many initiatives launched by Women Collective Kenya, which is also co-designing an eco-village and engaged in extensive survivor accompaniment. Care work and political power are not separated here; they are understood as the same project.

In Jordan, Takatoat was founded in 2020 by young feminist activists responding to structural violence against women. Linking caregiving and maternity support to violence prevention, Takatoat has launched feminist schools, research projects, clubs, and more, all aimed at strengthening and supporting movements in the region.

In the United States, similar efforts are visible in movements advocating for peace, rights, and justice and investing in alternative caring and regenerative economies. For instance, Grassroots

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just futures. Our network spans more than 50 countries and includes over 120 women leaders. The following examples from our network demonstrate that essential feminist peacebuilding work is actively occurring outside the traditional peacebuilding spheres.

In South Sudan, Ma'Mara Sakit Village builds feminist community through storytelling, ancestral knowledge, art, and multimedia, cultivating collective agency in one of the world's most protracted conflict environments. Working closely with those who grew up during war, they see the reclamation of voice and memory as preconditions for any durable peace.

Global Justice Alliance is supporting grassroots feminist peacebuilders through its Feminist Organizing Schools, and Muslims for Just Futures supports Muslim women-led grassroots organizations working for justice through its Muslim Women's Organizing Institute.

What Is Required to Scale Feminist Peace Approaches?

These examples are among thousands that bring feminist language and demands to traditional state-centered understandings of “security.” But rarely is this work considered peacebuilding: feminist organizing in Amman is marked as

“women’s empowerment” work, while a community kitchen in Nairobi is classified as a social enterprise. Yet each is actively interrupting cycles of violence, healing and repairing the embodied experience of past harms, and building social infrastructure that makes future violence less likely. Until the peacebuilding field categorizes such initiatives as vital peace work, we will miss the chance to deeply engage and learn from them.

The Feminist Peace Playbook, produced by IGLI and the Feminist Peace Initiative, distills some lessons from feminist peace practitioners that can help the peacebuilding field embrace feminist peace approaches and create more equitable systems of safety and security. The Playbook offers four strategies: (1) Educating the public on systems of militarism to divest from them and build alternatives; (2) Redefining security through community safety, dignity, and wellbeing; (3) Bridging divides to build power across movements; and (4) Grounding policymaking in movements.

One core lesson from this work is that, for people across the globe, security is felt not only with the absence of violence but also through access to community safety, dignity, and wellbeing. Another is that movements should not be seen as peripheral to policymaking; instead, policymaking should be grounded in the wisdom and knowledge of movements comprised of people on the receiving end of such policies.

With greater recognition, learning, and integration, feminist peace approaches can help us to look beyond mainstream efforts to what communities on the margins are already doing to forge safety and security on their own terms. These approaches can help us think differently about how to address the current polycrisis and build peace for the future. We have an opportunity to build differently in this moment—to connect, resource, and scale creative and transformative feminist peacebuilding work where it is already thriving.

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THE FUTURE OF PEACE IS DECOLONIAL

“ WE CAN BE POWERFUL WITHOUT
BEING COERCIVE.

— KARINA HIGA



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Introduction

This essay emerges from recorded conversations among members of the Community of Practice on the Environment, Climate, Conflict, & Peace's Decolonization Discussion Group held in March and April 2026. Rather than distilling our exchange into a single, synthesized argument, we have chosen to preserve the dialogue itself as the primary text. This choice is deliberate: if decolonial peace demands plural ways of knowing, relational approaches, and non-hierarchical forms of knowledge production, then the form of this essay should reflect those commitments.

We are a group of scholars and practitioners working across environmental peacebuilding, conflict transformation, feminist peace research, and community-based development. We are positioned across the global majority and minority, different generations of scholarship, and both diasporic and rooted relationships to place.

What follows is a curated and thematically organized dialogue. Contributions have been lightly edited for clarity, but the voices, ideas, and language belong to each participant. We invite readers to sit with the texture of conversation—its tangents, tensions, and returns—as itself a form of knowledge.

The conversation began with a deceptively simple question: What inspires us about decolonization? What surfaced was a rich discussion about hope, transformation, and the relationship between peace and the creative power of reimagining what is possible.

Hope as Praxis

Karina: I'm drawn to decolonial thinking because of the power of transformation through narrative change: a collective reflection and (re) imagination. When we can change the narrative, we are able to change power, people's behavior, and systems.

Amanda: I really like that. It's a way of being encouraged to think creatively about what could be different and how what currently exists doesn't have to be that way. There are other ways of being and being in relationship.

Elaine: Recently, there was a paper presentation that I was a discussant for that talked about evidence-based hope and resistance. The author framed hope as "white hope," "red hope," and "black hope." White hope is liberal hope, while red hope is about alternatives that have long existed. It's the pluriverse and we can see it manifested across our universe in so many ways. Black hope doesn't know what the future world looks like or how to get there, but it wants to hold open futures and the possibilities for change. It's kind of the most undefined type of hope, according to this author.¹ So, I think when we talk about decolonization and peace and attach it to imagining what's possible, I think it does give us hope. It's somewhere there in that space of red hope and black hope. That's where I find excitement.

Barbara: It is so important that you brought in hope, because it's also something that I think about constantly in my work and my teaching. When you have a more critical reading of the state of the world and of the state of the different types of violence that exist, it can feel paralyzing. My students and I have had to work through this together: the overwhelm, the climate anxiety, the sense that we are too small to change anything.

But I've come to see that anxiety as, in some ways, a privileged response. When I am in the field working alongside people on the front lines of climate breakdown and conflict like Indigenous communities, small farmers, or peasant movements, they are not paralyzed. They have

nothing but hope. They carry an extraordinary certainty that what they're doing matters, and that it will one day bear fruit. They don't start from this position of despair.

I'm often reaffirming to myself that, *if they are the ones at the forefront of climate and conflict and they just have this much hope in the work that they're doing...who am I to sit in my little office and feel so much despair in the world?* Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who developed the "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," also talked about hope as a verb. Not sitting around hoping for the best but mobilizing hope and putting it into motion. Doing the things that need to be done today so that a more peaceful future remains possible.

Jesse: Certainly, hope resonates with me and talking about it as different forms of hope. I feel like what's inspiring in decolonization is the theoretical aspects of hope and a feeling like there's opening (but also constraints) in the right way. There are some easy steps forward, like maybe we don't pollute so much, for example. Or destroy our non-human world. Maybe we're dismantling colonial structures within governments when we address stuff like that. I feel like that's where it gets into more concrete, inspirational actions.

When land is repatriated and legal battles are won by Indigenous groups, I feel like those stories bring more hope for me. When I hear stories of Indigenous people, especially people who've gone through residential schools in Canada or who've gone through multi-generations of violence against their people, connecting with their land and connecting with their family and their community to connect with the land, but also rediscovering the places that they were denied by colonialism—that is the most inspiring.

Conflict, Power, and Peace

Kelsey: I really liked what Barbara shared about hope being a verb. I was in a conversation with a parent group where we asked, "What brings you hope?" I thought it was interesting that most of the folks who responded were talking about the past. My response was that hope is a futuristic thing and not necessarily something in the past. We look to the past for hope, but that's limiting our ability to envision what the future could be if we're only thinking about what has already existed.

What I find inspirational about decolonization is that it stands in friction with existing ideas and structures. Elaine and I have had conversations about how conflicting with existing systems and structures that are extremely harmful and unjust is a necessary component for peace work. Also, conflict doesn't necessarily mean violence.

Elaine: Since you brought that up, Kelsey, when we had those conversations, a lot of what we were talking about was specifically nonviolent conflict escalation—one of the things in environmental peacebuilding that is underexplored territory in terms of "how do we do peacebuilding?"

1. See "Hope: A Worldly Politics in an Uncertain World" by David Chandler in References.

Yet, nonviolent direct action is de facto happening widely across the planet to defend territories and cultures and relationships to land and place, and to reconcile relations with non-human kin.

In this moment, a lot of people are returning to strategies of nonviolence or learning new strategies of nonviolence. I haven't seen this many trainings being offered virtually and in-person in my own region ever. I think people are being reminded of something more powerful than violent conflict and violent oppression. I think of Erica Chenoweth's work as evidence that nonviolence is more effective to transform oppressive regimes.

To clarify, if we're thinking about decolonization, it's decolonization of knowledge, power, identity, and being. That means resistance to all things—capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. I think this is another exciting space. I think it's so much more creative than military strategy and the use of violence.

Karina: Yeah, we call it soft power. We can be powerful without being coercive. For example, some countries project power through militarism. There are other options and strategies to become a powerful nation.

Barbara: Coming from Brazil and growing up understanding how the world works in the global periphery and then moving to Sweden to study peace and conflict has been very challenging because the definitions of peace and conflict I encountered at the university did not match my lived experience, the reality of my community, of the people around me, the people in my country, in my whole continent. So, it became an imperative for me to investigate: What does peace actually mean? Who is suffering from conflict? Who is benefiting from peace? As it is not the same for everybody.

Feminists and decolonial scholars have argued that peace and violence do not sit in opposition, but they are better understood as a continuum. There are sliding scales of different types of violence and different types of peace that coexist. You can have pockets of peace during a very violent time, or pockets of violence in peacetime, which is, in fact, how most of us live everyday life, right?

When we collapse everything into a dichotomy in which conflict is bad and peace is good, you end up with strategies of conflict management, pacification, and peacekeeping that are not transformative. It's suppressing grievances instead of addressing the root causes of conflict and inequality. It's impossible for us to have a holistic peace if that is the way that peace is understood.

One important thing to note when we're talking about non-violence is that there has been a recent study by Manekin and Mitts using the same data as Erica Chenoweth that found that the positive effect of nonviolence is moderated by ethnicity, as this strategy works better for privileged and

dominant classes in society. But for other groups, it wasn't as reliably effective. So, I think there's so many issues that we still need to dive deeper into and really look at the question of power more broadly as well.

Kelsey: There's a lot to say on how decisions on what peace and violence are made and how that correlates with dominant groups or non-dominant groups. In that, "what's your perspective to experience something as violence or not?" It's very humbling for me to think from the perspective of Indigenous communities on what their view of violence is. It's often something that I wouldn't have considered violence, namely in the destruction of natural resources as a form of cultural and structural violence for Indigenous peoples on their traditional homelands.

Jesse: There are people interested in maintaining violent structures, or who are conflict-avoidant and are using that as a synonym for peace. If you are perpetuating a structure of colonial peace, like if your idea of peace assumes rights to and exploitation of Indigenous land, for example, then that's not peace. That's a form of colonialism which uses "peace" as a metaphor and tool for exploitation. Decolonial peace would be at least naming that form of peace as a continuation of injustice.

Adam: For context, I identify as being from the Global South, specifically from Malaysia. We've been colonized by four powers since the 1500s. So, we're very familiar with the rise and fall of empires because we have dealt with various imperialists and colonizers in our lands. Resistance in that context exists in many interdependent forms, from nonviolence to violence.

So, when people ask, "What does decolonization look like?," for me, it is supporting resistance in whatever form that manifests, as the colonized understand the very brute and pervasive nature of what colonialism is. Those narratives we emphasize are important, as within the global structure of capitalism nothing is ever "neutral." Hence, the bare minimum for those of us who are situated in the Global North is to amplify and embody these narratives as part of a wider struggle for humanity in collective solidarity.

Amanda: In thinking about what you said, Kelsey, about not looking back, I agree because if you look back, you're only basing your ideas on what's happened before and you can get trapped in the same patterns versus innovating and thinking creatively and differently. I think what's important about decolonization is to allow room for different perspectives.

I've had several conversations recently about Everyday Peace Indicators as community-developed indicators of peace [...] that are people-centric and based on lived experiences. We still need to know about what we all think about peace to make progress.

An essential part of decolonization to me is the creativity,

the innovation, the transformation based on having space for everyone to share and contribute and to be in relationship with one another versus the violence that is caused when someone has and uses power over others.

Barbara: I think that's so true that it feels like we can't do things otherwise because we've never done it before. We've only done things in one way, so there's no alternative. Once we started with this system, with this world, we can't move away from it. I think that's totally true when we're looking at it in this direct, unidirectional, linear way. When you talk to other communities that have other understandings of time and space, they talk about the past all the time. And the past and the present and the future, and they're all together because they build on each other. It is a circular understanding of time and of processes.

The mainstream view of peace and conflict is that it moves linearly from conflict to peace. But the actual timeline is a lot more complicated and complex than that. There're spirals and there's ups and downs, and we're going to go back to conflict and we're going to have peace for a little while, etc.

It's also very important that we demystify the straightforwardness of building peace. I think it's important that we work with the contradictions and with the different conflicts, the different cycles, the different people, which is what I have learned in trying to understand this from a feminist and anti-colonial perspective. This topic always brings me back to the idea of the Zapatistas in Mexico: that we should build the world where many worlds fit in. That we should be able to exist without this colonial impulse to homogenize everything and everyone.

Karina: Decolonization work is counter-cultural to the present status-quo and is hopeful. Through deep collective decolonial reflection, I believe we can create a better future for everyone.

Conclusion

This conversation does not end with a set of policy recommendations or a theoretical framework. It ends, as decolonial work often does, in motion—with more questions opened, more relationships deepened, and more futures imagined than when we began. Two follow-up conversations will be available on the Peace Science Digest website that explore (1) Where are we in decolonial peace? and (2) What is the future of decolonial peace?

Contributors

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Organizations

Everyday Peace Indicators: <https://everydaypeaceindicators.org/>



Alliance for
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