Peace and conflict

THEMATIC STUDIES

Concepts

Peace, Negative peace, Positive Peace, Violence, Conflict, War, Genocide, Terrorism, Resolution, Non-violence

Learning outcomes

In this chapter, you will learn about:

- peace and conflict as contested and interrelated concepts essential for a full understanding of global politics
- the idea of peace as more than the absence of violence, and the close connection between peace and other global challenges (such as development, poverty, equality, respect for human rights, the environment, etc.)
- the difference between negative and positive peace, and how this relates to the existence of conflict
- the nature and transformation of conflicts as part of human nature, emphasizing that armed conflict can be avoided
- armed conflict may seem to be necessary or even desirable in certain cases
- the complexity of conflicts, by analyzing the sources of violence, the range of possible actors within a conflict, and the possible causes that can trigger, escalate and intensify a conflict
- the existence of conflicts other than armed conflict
- important concepts in peace and conflict studies such as war, genocide and terrorism
- why global politics always seem to be plagued by conflict
- why conflicts are so hard to address, by examining the complex dynamics through which conflicts and actors relate to one another across time
- different paths toward resolution and their strengths and limitations, allowing critical evaluation of why some conflicts have been solved successfully while others have not
- why peace is so frail and hard to achieve, yet important to work on in order to cease conflict and violence, and achieve global development.

Contested meanings: peace

Conceptual question

What is peace?

Power is at the core of all conflicts and peace efforts. In every armed conflict, humanitarian damage is widespread and human rights are often violated. Conflict also affects development. Positive peace seeks to halt the violence and to provide adequate conditions in which global development can exist.

Peace means different things to different people. In some societies, peace refers to the absence of an armed conflict or war, while for those in which armed conflict has been absent for long periods of time, peace refers to the absence of other forms of non-violent conflict and the existence of lasting security (human and national security). Measuring a state of peace depends on the context, and on a much deeper assessment of the absence of violence, and the levels of harmony, equity and justice that exist within a society.

Despite this lack of agreement on defining peace, it is clear that peace is underfunded, and often undervalued. Even though a state of peace is what most humans desire, it is conflict and war that demand enormous amounts of money, resources, energy and attention. People have different ideas about how peace can be achieved. For some, the path is through non-violent means, but for others, it is through violence.

Activity

Peace is often defined as the absence of violence, or the absence of the threat of violence. It is seen as a state of harmony in which the actors involved enjoy relative equity, and where justice rules. Yet, peace means different things to different people. When we talk about peace, do we mean world peace, peace between and among communities, an 'outer peace'? Or do we mean individual or 'inner peace'? When trying to understand peace, it is important to consider that its meaning is contested and depends on context. Write down your own definition of peace and compare it to that of a classmate or an organization that works for peace. Analyse how the definitions are different or similar and evaluate what the reasons behind any differences could be.

If peace is something we all desire as humans, why do we keep engaging in armed conflicts and going to war?

In 2001, American author and journalist, Chris Hedges, wrote *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*[1]. He declares that war gives states and individuals adrenaline, a significance, a *raison d'etre* that cannot be found elsewhere. But, in 2022, he said that 'The Greatest Evil is War.' Throughout history, people and states have recognized the horrors of war, and at times even its absurdity, but we keep engaging in armed conflicts.

Proposals on how to solve war are abundant and many have been implemented (at times with success). Perhaps, as David Barash and Charles Webel[2] state, some less successful solutions have not been creative, forward thinking or feasible enough, or they have not been attempted in the right combinations, or are not strong enough. This may be because war is a business, and a very lucrative one, while peace is not. Whatever the reasons, peace, at least in some form, is possible and we must keep thinking that way for life to persist.

Presenting peace and war as opposite points may not be helpful in achieving peace. Instead, we can look at peace and war as a continuum, in which peace is not just the absence of war, but a range of states and possible scenarios.

Norwegian sociologist, mathematician and peace theorist, Johan Galtung, founder of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, referred to peace in a binary way. According to Galtung, peace could be either negative or positive. These labels did not make reference to whether peace could be seen as something positive or negative, but to how deep, stable and sustainable the state of peace actually is.

Negative peace

Negative peace refers to the absence of direct, physical or immediate violence between people, clans, tribes, ethnic groups, states or other non-state actors. This is

The difference between a war and an armed conflict is debatable. An armed conflict often refers to a fight between armed troops, existing with or without an official declaration by governments or states, as fights can also occur between non-state actors (NSAs). War is an intentional, disclosed, widespread and long duration armed conflict between countries. War is governed by the law of armed conflict, also called international humanitarian law. International law, which uses the term 'armed conflict' instead of 'war', applies whether states are fighting each other or against NSAs. Wars have evolved in many ways.

TOK Why is it that, in spite of the increasing information and knowledge we have about the evils of war, we can become less and less emotionally affected by it?

the most common understanding of peace in the context of international relations. It is a realist view that considers that peace exists when there is no war or other direct forms of violence. This type of peace is labelled as 'negative' due to the fact that the absence of physical violence does not necessarily mean the absence of an underlying, or even a structural conflict. For example, a **ceasefire** or a declared cease of hostilities does not mean the conflict is over, but it can be a temporary pause in direct violence in order to attend to the wounded, evacuate civilians, or deliver humanitarian assistance. A ceasefire can be used to regroup and reorganize the fighting forces.

Negative peace does not look deeper into the causes of conflict, or how to resolve it, nor does it address the consequences that previous violence may have had (on infrastructure, the economy, the population or diplomatic relations). Negative peace provides a first step toward possible future conflict resolution, but it can only provide a weak and artificial state of peace that can lead to further escalation.

Positive peace

Positive peace refers to the absence of physical direct violence, and it also considers the absence of cultural and structural violence (for example, xenophobia among the population and institutional discrimination in the educational system). It looks beyond reducing or stopping immediate physical violence. It identifies a deeper level of harmony by addressing the cultural and structural violence that may play a role in conflict. With positive peace, the causes of potential conflict are addressed, and ideally, solved. This type of peace refers to a social condition in the presence of social harmony that is equitable and just. It focuses on peacebuilding, political and social structures.

Positive peace exists when enemies agree to a cease of physical hostilities, but also to formally *make* peace, while addressing the social, political, cultural, economic, and institutional causes of those hostilities. It takes into account the grievances that led to the conflict in the first place, and it makes the effort to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate the former combatants in order to contribute to a stable and sustainable peace. All societies should and must aim for positive peace.

Culturally, positive peace has long been something wished for by humans. Barash and Webel present examples of this.

> The ancient Greek concept of *eireinei*… denotes harmony and justice as well as peace. Similarly, the Arabic *salaam* and the Hebrew *shalom* connote not only the absence of violence but also the presence of wellbeing, wholeness, and harmony within oneself, a community, and among all nations and people. The Sanskrit word *shanti* refers not only to peace but also to spiritual tranquility, an integration of outward and inward modes of being, just as the Chinese noun *ping* denotes harmony and the achievement of unity from diversity.[3]

> **(!)** Understanding that peace is more than the absence of war, but a range of different scenarios, can help us engage in critical analysis when trying to achieve peace in different contexts.

> **TOK** How can we be certain that today's peace will be still enjoyed tomorrow? Can we make sure peace will be long-lasting?

Activity

Work in a group of three. Look for other examples where negative peace exists, without positive peace being in place. Argue why you think positive peace has not been achieved.

Measuring peace

Internationally speaking, there are few efforts to measure peace because of the difficulties encountered when defining and approaching peace. The Institute for Economics and Peace in Australia created the Global Peace Index (GPI) in order to try to measure the absence of violence in connection to other factors (23 qualitative and quantitative indicators) that can correlate to a state of peace. The GPI measures peace in three broad aspects:

- a country's level of societal safety and security
- the extent of ongoing domestic or international conflict
- the degree of militarization.

The results are presented annually with countries located on a scale of 1–5, where the lower the number, the higher the level of peace.

The GPI 2023 results showed the average level of global peace deteriorating by 0.42 percent compared to the previous year (84 countries improved and 79 deteriorated). Factors that contributed to the deterioration were tensions between Russia and Ukraine, the increasing costs of food and other goods, a growth in political instability in Africa, South Asia and the Middle East, and the increasing number of refugees and **internally displaced persons (IDPs)**. The 2023 report also reported a decreasing trend in demilitarization, terrorism impact, nuclear and heavy weapons, incarceration rates and perceptions of criminality.

Activity

Access the GPI latest results on the Internet. Based on the level of global peace presented and the main figures, assess what these tell you about global peace and what they do not say. Find the results of the GPI concerning your own country. Would you consider the GPI accurate, or do you have a different perception of peace as a citizen?

As of 2023, Iceland has held the position as the most peaceful country since 2008, with Afghanistan being the least peaceful country for eight consecutive years. Out of the top ten countries in the peace index, seven are in Europe.

Table 4.1 Top ten peaceful countries, GPI 2023

Rank	Region (country)	Score
1	Iceland	1.124
2	Denmark	1.31
3	Ireland	1.312
4	New Zealand	1.313
5	Austria	1.316
6	Singapore	1.332
7	Portugal	1.333
8	Slovenia	1.334
9	Japan	1.336
10	Switzerland	1.339

Violence can be categorized into direct, cultural and structural violence. Direct violence refers to the immediate action of hurting someone physically, emotionally, or psychologically. Cultural violence refers to emotional sources of violence, attitudes, feelings and values. Structural violence is an indirect form of violence inflicted through institutions, systems or established structures.

A ceasefire refers to a temporary stop in direct fighting between the parties to a conflict. It is a temporary period of truce that can serve as a preliminary step toward more permanent peace.

Resolution is the solution to a problem or conflict. In the context of conflict, resolution usually refers to the way in which two or more parties find a peaceful solution to their disagreements.

Peace is the absence of physical, cultural and structural violence that leads to a state of harmony, equity and justice.

To further analyze the results presented by the GPI, you can access the following website:

To what extent can peace be measured? How can we be sure peace measurements reflect the reality?

TOK

The largest deteriorations recorded in 2023 were in external conflicts fought, deaths from internal conflict, political instability indicators, violent demonstrations, and the number of refugees and IDPs. This was attributed mainly to:

- the war between Ukraine and Russia (which resulted in millions of Ukrainians having to flee the country or being forced to move internally)
- the war in Yemen
- the continuous conflict in Syria
- the withdrawal of US and other NATO forces from Afghanistan, which allowed the Taliban back into power
- the increasing number of environmentally-induced migrants
- and the ongoing conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Nigeria and Sudan, among others.

Within the GPI, there is a Positive Peace Index (PPI) that measures a society's resilience associated with socio-economic factors such as higher incomes and greater economic stability, and more efficient, transparent and inclusive governance.

Within the PPI, eight factors are considered as pillars:

- a well-functioning government
- sound business environment
- acceptance of the rights of others
- good relations with neighbors
- free flow of information
- high levels of **human capital** (the knowledge, skills and health that people invest in and accumulate throughout their lives, enabling them to realize their potential as productive members of society)
- low levels of corruption
- equal distribution of resources.

This means that positive peace is closely linked to opportunities, health, education and people's satisfaction with their access to basic services.

There is a direct correlation between PPI and Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the monetary value of final goods and services produced in a country over a period of time). Countries that improved their PPI also saw an increase of 3.1 percent on average in their GDP. Inflation is also less volatile in these countries, which results in less drastic increases in prices. Where PPI improves, there is an increase in household consumption (an increase in the amount spent by households to meet their everyday needs, such as food, clothing or housing). Countries with a decrease in their PPI also declined in the Global Peace Index (GPI).

The Institute for Economics and Peace defines positive peace 'as the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies. Positive peace is a gauge for societal resilience, or the ability to shield its citizens from shocks and to promote the recovery of the socioeconomic system in their aftermath.'[4] This means that the same factors that contribute to positive peace also contribute to socio-economic outcomes, such as greater income growth, better environmental conditions, higher levels of well-being, superior developmental outcomes and stronger resilience.

Positive peace, compared to negative peace, seeks a stable environment that allows all humans to be safe from physical harm, and to develop and fulfil a dignified life, with access to opportunities, equality and justice.

The road to peace

There are disagreements on how to avoid war, and people also disagree on how to achieve peace. Some notable people in history have approached the road to peace through non-violent means, while others have approached it through violence. Agreeing upon which means is the best is an almost impossible task. Peace studies do not aim to eliminate conflict in its entirety. We cannot expect to eliminate competition and rivalry considering the imperfections of humans and a world with finite resources. If possible, peace studies try to develop new roads of cooperation that can lead to a reduction of violence.

One way in which peace enthusiasts oppose war and militarism, while also aiming for the creation of structures and cultures oriented toward peace, is through **peace movements**. Peace movements are a type of social movement in which people organize and sustain support for a social goal, which looks for the implementation, or the prevention of, a change in the society's structure or values.

Peace movements are becoming more popular due to:

- the increasing potential for global destruction through war (with the development of increasingly destructive weapons)
- the social, economic and environmental effect of armed conflicts
- the interconnectedness brought by communications and transportation (demonstrating that we are all affected by the experiences of others)
- a general increase in political involvement (warfare is no longer seen as exclusive to governments but as an issue in which organizations and individuals can play a role).

Peace movements are inspired and supported by a belief in **universalism**, which sees a common interest in peace and in shared humanity.

Peace movements can be grouped into three different types:

- movements that aim to eliminate war in general (for example, the War Resisters League)
- movements that aim to stop aspects of war (such as the use of landmines or the use of torture for example, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN))
- movements that aim to stop specific wars (such as the war in Iraq or the war in Ukraine for example, the Peace in Ukraine Coalition).

Many peace movements have come under criticism for seeming to recede once the war is over. While this does happen, it is also true that opposition to war does continue, but that it is not covered by the media as much as it initially was, giving the false impression that the opposition is over.

Another anti-war response is through **civil disobedience**. American writer Henry David Thoreau argued that citizens have a higher obligation toward each other than to

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines environmental migrants as 'persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.' The United Nations (UN) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, (UNHCR) have recorded an average of 21.5 million people forcibly displaced by weather-related events since 2008. The Institute for Economics and Peace estimates that by 2050 there will be a total of 1.2 billion people displaced due to climate change and natural disasters.

Positive peace is closely related to human rights in that whenever positive peace exists, people enjoy a stable environment that provides the means to the fulfilment of their human rights. It is related to development as well. Positive peace increases people's capability to achieve the lives they want.

their own governments. Therefore, conscientious citizens are obliged to do what is right even when their defiance of governments results in prosecution by those governments. This has been observed in many countries in which citizens protest against their government's decision to conduct war even at the risk of being physically attacked, arrested or imprisoned. The anti-war protests in Russia after the invasion of Ukraine, resulted in over 1300 arrested on September 22, 2022 alone, according to the independent OVD-Info protest monitoring group. Another example is the 22,000 Iranians arrested, but later pardoned by the supreme leader in Iran, after anti-government protests following the death of Mahsa Amini (the 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman arrested by the morality police who later died in hospital under suspicious circumstances) in September 2022.

Anti-government protests
following the death of Mahsa
Amini in September 2022 ▶

Peace movements and civil disobedience have faced backlashes from opponents who are concerned about the consequences of breaking the law, or about the possibility of actions alienating the general population, resulting in counterproductive consequences.

Throughout history, war has been seen by many as a necessary evil. Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (b.1780) referred to war as the continuation of politics by other means. But many societies have condemned the evils of war. In

As seen in the Core chapter of this book, sovereignty refers to the state's ability to rule itself. A state is sovereign when it has full control over what happens inside its territory, without foreign interference.

global politics, efforts have been made by pacifists (those who believe war and violence are unjustifiable) to search for an alternative to the 'natural state' of anarchy in the world. For instance, the concept of sovereignty was thought to have the ability to limit power ambitions and the pursuit of these through violent means. Throughout the 19th century, pacifist organizations spread throughout Europe, leading to the creation in the 20th century of institutions such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the UN, as well as the signing of international treaties. Worldwide pacifist movements appeared, such as the anti-nuclear movement, the student movements in the USA and Europe in the 1960s and 70s, and the Indian independence movement led by Gandhi.

Pacifism has been presented as pragmatic and with a moral principle. The former sees peace as a useful and ideal policy through which conflicts can and should be resolved. The latter sees violence as morally wrong. Yet, pacifism is not exempt from criticism. Anti-pacifist views see the refusal to participate in war as a failure to carry out what can sometimes be a moral obligation (for example, carrying out a humanitarian intervention in a country at war to prevent worse outcomes). Critics of absolute pacifism are often referred to as 'pragmatic pacifists'[5] or relative pacifists, because they understand peace as a continuum in which, even though peace is the desired means and outcome, there is a range of options that do allow for a limited use of force under specific conditions.

Nowadays, most countries following neorealist thinking point to military strength as the most important way of maintaining peace. The argument is that weakness invites aggression. Therefore, the power of one (country or party) must be balanced. As Barash and Webel put it, 'peace through strength relies fundamentally on deterrence, the expectation that a would-be aggressor would refrain from attacking opponents who are more powerful than it or who are capable of inflicting unacceptable damage if attacked.' This leaves the balance of power, implying a continuous arms race to keep a symmetry in the international system.

According to some theorists, such as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, the existence of a balance of power deters wars, while a slight power imbalance can result in war because the status quo feels threatened. Defensive realists (Waltz) argue that the best way to safeguard the status quo and secure a state is by maintaining the power balance. Offensive realists (Mearsheimer) believe that great powers can only secure themselves by maximizing their own power. An example of this is Russia, feeling threatened by NATO's increasing influence in Ukraine, choosing to carry out an invasion instead of waiting for the opponent to become stronger. This does not mean that a shift in the power balance leads to war. Sometimes, actors prefer to lean toward the creation of alliances. The problem with a focus on the balance of power is when the pursuit of one's own security creates a security dilemma. A build-up in one country makes other countries seek to do the same, resulting in all actors being less secure.

The road to peace is neither easy nor simple. Proposals on how to achieve peace are many, yet it is much easier to express one's commitment to them than to carry them out. Perhaps one of the main reasons for this is not only the complexity of peace as a concept, as a means and as an end in itself, but it also has to do with the complexities of conflict.

TOK How can we be certain whether pacifism or force is the most adequate response?

Balance of power is the idea that states strive toward an equal distribution of power to avoid dominance by one, either consciously or unconsciously.

Exercises

1. Design a peace education program for your country. Include step-by-step suggestions.

2. Discuss with a partner whether the world would be safer with no nuclear weapons?

3. Analyze peace movements in Israel and Palestine. Compare them. Do they share any traits? Can any of them learn from the other?

4. Why do you think 'peace through strength' is still the most followed path to achieve peace? Write a paragraph to explain your opinion.

References

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