

Introduction: Taking World Peace Seriously

Alex J. Bellamy

After years of apparent decline, war has staged something of a revival, driven by conflicts principally in the Middle East, North and sub-Saharan Africa, and Eastern Europe. Over the past decade, civilians in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen have been subjected to mass atrocities, whether by their own government or by non-state armed groups. The increased incidence of war has fed a sense of deep crisis. Whereas a few years ago, books proclaimed that humanity was “winning the war on war,” that major war had become an “anachronism,” and that the contemporary era was more peaceful than any that had come before it, scholarship today has taken a more somber turn.¹ Now, writers lament America’s “endless war” against terror; warn of the return of major power conflict; and condemn as a “delusion” the idea that international institutions, human rights, and democracy might make the world more peaceful. In the global battle of ideas, the forces that give rise to war—authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, populism, protectionism, and militarism—appear to be on the march across much of the world.² The fact that in the second decade of the twenty-first century the major powers show increasing disdain for shared morals, laws, and institutions only serves to fuel these anxieties. This, it would seem, is no time to be talking about world peace.

World peace was once an important subject of debate and discussion. Throughout history, some of the most prominent leaders, activists, philosophers, economists, psychologists, and even mathematicians and physicists turned their attention to the question of peace at some time in their careers. Yet nowadays, the subject has been largely consigned to the realm of intellectual history, commonly treated as, at best, an intellectual fantasy. But it is precisely because

Ethics & International Affairs, 34, no. 1 (2020), pp. 43–45.
© 2020 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs
doi:10.1017/S0892679420000039

international politics stands at the precipice, seemingly poised to unravel much that was achieved by the order established after 1945, that it is important to think about, and debate, world peace. In my recent book *World Peace (And How We Can Achieve It)*, I set out a case for thinking that world peace might be possible—possible, not likely or imminent—and identified some ways in which the world might be nudged toward greater peacefulness.³ The book's broader ambition is to ignite research, thought, and debate about world peace itself—about what we mean when we talk about world peace, about the conditions of its possibility, about the forces that pull world politics in the other direction, and about the types of politics needed to navigate future instability. This round-table aims to start just such a debate. The essays introduce different perspectives on world peace and debate the contours of what world peace means, what it ought to mean, and how it might be achieved.

In the opening essay, I outline a relatively narrow conception of world peace and explain why I think world peace is possible, though neither inevitable nor irreversible. The possibility of peace rests on the fact that war and peace are social practices that can be made and unmade. By striving to find and build the ideas, social structures, and practices—at every level—that make peace possible, states and societies can become more peaceful. But, of course, that can work in the other direction, too.

“Building world peace,” Pamina Firchow reminds us in her essay, “has always required local peace.” For all our concern about great power war, it remains the case that most contemporary wars are not interstate wars of the traditional variety but complex civil and transnational wars that have exhibited an immense proclivity for spreading across borders. While international institutions and great powers remain important, resolving these wars and building peace afterward is a job mainly undertaken by local actors and states. How we understand—and practice—world peace therefore needs to shift to better include local entities.

Nils Petter Gleditsch emphasizes the importance of what happens within states and points to a variety of theories, among them the democratic peace, liberal peace, capitalist peace, developmental peace, organized peace, quality of government peace, feminist peace, and civil society peace, each of which bear more than a few family resemblances to the others. Taking account of these different theories, Gleditsch makes the case for a social-democratic peace; a peace that includes democracy, but also a market economy, an active and competent state, close international cooperation, and the reduction of discrimination and group-based inequality.

A. C. Grayling widens the discussion by categorizing different types of peace, ranging from negative peace—the absence of war—to different varieties of positive peace. “Ideal peace,” or what others might call comprehensive “positive peace,” requires not just the absence of violence but also the absence of the *means* of violent conflict—something, Grayling argues, that no state or society can achieve unilaterally since there are always likely to be others eager to retain the means to use violence. In such conditions, the best one can hope for, Grayling argues, is a “weak positive peace”—a condition where states build firm alliances based on “mutual cultural acceptance.”

Finally, Jacqui True argues for a more expansive concept of peace based on feminist approaches. True maintains that peace must be understood as comprising more than simply the absence of war and should instead include the absence of all forms of violence, including violence in the home and community and in “the public spaces of international relations.” War and peace are better understood as intimately related, not as a dichotomy, since violence and harm exist within both conditions. Sustaining peace involves addressing the harmful identities, ideologies, and practices that facilitate violence regardless of their context. A narrow understanding of peace, she concludes, contains neither the intellectual nor the political instruments needed to address the continuum of violence.

Although each essay adopts a different approach, they all agree that thinking about and debating world peace is not only possible but vital: a topic that should be moved to the core of study and practice in international affairs.

NOTES

¹ Respectively, Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York: Dutton, 2011); John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007); and Stephen Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* (London: Penguin, 2012).

² For example, John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019); and Michael Mandelbaum, *The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

³ Alex J. Bellamy, *World Peace (And How We Can Achieve It)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).