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Expert Perspectives on New Paths to Peace

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Editor's Introduction

At a time when violent conflicts persist across multiple regions and established approaches to peacemaking are under considerable strain, there is a need to reflect on innovative, realistic, and context-sensitive pathways toward peace. Negotiation and conflict management research has generated substantial knowledge about mediation, conflict dynamics, process design, dispute resolution, and peace implementation. Yet the persistence, recurrence, and intensity of violent conflict suggest that important conceptual, institutional, and practical challenges remain insufficiently addressed.

For this edition of Expert Perspectives, we asked contributors to examine emerging opportunities, overlooked strategies, and new forms of engagement that may help move conflict parties toward dialogue, de-escalation, and sustainable settlement. The aim was not to identify universal solutions, but to advance a scholarly conversation about how research, practice, technology, and institutional design can expand the repertoire of approaches available to conflict managers, mediators, policymakers, and affected communities.

The contributions collected here approach this question from different but complementary perspectives. We examine the potential of artificial intelligence to move beyond isolated applications and become public-interest infrastructure for conflict management. Joshua Weiss and William Ury offer a practice-based account of the Design Shop for Peace, showing how prototyping and the BB3 method (Balcony, Bridge, and Third Side) can support the generation of possible off-ramps in high-stakes crises. Fredrike Bannink, Felix Merks, and Martin Euwema

propose a solution-focused architecture for peacebuilding, emphasizing preferred futures, stakeholder legitimacy, and incremental progress. Siniša Vuković cautions against material quick fixes, arguing that durable peace depends less on transactional incentives than on procedural justice, cognitive reframing, and interdependence. William Donohue applies a cultural identity perspective to the conflict with Iran, highlighting how identity needs may both constrain and enable negotiated outcomes.

These contributions suggest that new paths to peace require more than renewed commitment to existing diplomatic practices. They call for attention to the infrastructures, processes, narratives, and institutional arrangements through which conflict parties come to understand their options, recognize one another's concerns, and build the legitimacy needed for sustainable agreements. In this sense, the edition reflects the purpose of Expert Perspectives: to connect scholarly expertise with timely analysis of pressing negotiation and conflict management challenges, and to stimulate further dialogue across research, policy, and practice.

From Tools to Public-Interest Infrastructure: Rethinking AI for Conflict Management

By Remigiusz Smolinski and Peter Kesting

Artificial intelligence is no longer peripheral to conflict management. It is already used in early warning, mediation support, and online dispute resolution, with growing evidence of its ability to detect escalation risks, structure negotiations, and support decision-making (Aydoğan et al., 2021; Joshi, 2025). AI is beginning to reshape how conflicts are analyzed and managed.

Yet its current use remains fragmented and uneven. Most tools are application-specific, embedded in proprietary systems, and accessible primarily to well-resourced actors (Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017). This creates structural inequalities in access to conflict management capabilities. At the same time, neutrality is often lacking: privately developed systems reflect commercial incentives, while state-linked tools may be shaped by political interests. More broadly, AI systems reproduce biases embedded in their data and design, raising concerns about their legitimacy as impartial instruments (O'Neil, 2016).

This article proposes AI-based conflict management as public-interest infrastructure governed by a universal-access principle: wherever the system is offered, it should be available to all user groups without discriminatory restriction, while remaining collectively governed and protected from capture. Rather than existing as a fragmented collection of tools, it should be organized as neutral infrastructure capable of providing a common analytical baseline. Its purpose is not to replace human judgment, but to support and strengthen it by offering an accessible foundation for more informed, equitable, and constructive conflict management.

Functional Capabilities of the Infrastructure

The proposed infrastructure supports conflict management by helping actors prevent, structure, de-escalate, and, where possible, resolve conflicts (Ramsbotham et al., 2016). It strengthens human judgment by helping individuals, organizations, communities, and governments manage conflict more effectively. At its core, AI can integrate dispersed information, help structure complexity, and make patterns visible that might otherwise remain overlooked. Together, these functions form a non-linear system in which different users can access different layers at any stage of conflict,

depending on their needs.

A first core function is early warning and risk analysis. Rather than predicting conflict with certainty, such an infrastructure would support the identification and organization of existing signals of tension across fragmented information environments. By aggregating dispersed data and highlighting emerging patterns, AI can help human actors prioritize attention and respond earlier (Mancini et al., 2013).

Beyond early warning, the infrastructure can assist in structuring complex conflict situations. Conflict management, particularly in negotiation, is fundamentally a problem-solving process that requires understanding both factual conditions and underlying interests (Fisher et al., 1991). AI can support this by organizing information, mapping positions and interests, and making implicit assumptions explicit, thereby complementing practices such as active listening and analytical reframing.

A further function lies in broadening the scope of consideration. Many conflicts are shaped by stakeholders who are not directly represented in formal processes and whose interests remain invisible. This may include incorporating input from civil society and affected communities, where appropriate. By incorporating a wider range of perspectives, the system can help ensure that relevant actors and concerns are not systematically overlooked, extending the conventional focus on directly involved parties toward a more systemic understanding of conflict (Ganson et al., 2022).

The infrastructure can also draw attention to potential negative consequences that are often underestimated in conflict dynamics. Escalation frequently results from what can be described as unethical myopia, a tendency to focus on short-term gains while neglecting longer-term costs and broader impacts (Kesting et al., 2025). By making such consequences more explicit, the system can support more reflective decision-making and help counteract escalation dynamics.

In addition, the system can assist in identifying possible solutions. Rather than focusing narrowly on compromise, it can help generate and structure alternative options, highlighting opportunities for integrative outcomes and problem-solving approaches that may not be immediately apparent. In this sense, it supports the principle of "inventing options" by expanding the range of possible solutions beyond fixed positions (Fisher et al., 1991).

Finally, the infrastructure can support process navigation and professional referral. This includes clarifying relevant legal or institutional pathways, outlining possible routes for formal or informal dispute resolution, and suggesting appropriate next steps. Where necessary, the system can also connect users to qualified professionals, such as mediators, facilitators, legal aid providers, or community conflict specialists, ensuring that analytical insights translate into informed action. Referral systems should be based on transparent criteria, regular vetting, conflict-of-interest checks, and mechanisms for appeal or correction.

Across all these functions, the boundary remains clear: the system supports understanding, structuring, navigation, and referral, but does not make decisions. In this sense, it follows the logic of classic negotiation support systems, which are designed to assist human decision-makers without replacing them (Kersten & Noronha, 1999). It is not an autonomous agent. Its purpose is to strengthen the process of conflict management, not to exercise authority over outcomes.

Use Across User Groups

The value of the proposed infrastructure depends not only on its capabilities, but also on how different user groups use it. Its potential lies in supporting actors with diverse needs, while

maintaining a consistent logic: enhancing understanding, broadening perspective, and encouraging constructive engagement.

For individual users, the system primarily functions as a directly accessible, self-guided conflict navigation tool. It can lower barriers to conflict management and reduce pressure on formal institutions such as courts or mediation services. It helps users assess their situation more realistically, identify constructive options, and reflect on the consequences of escalation. By making risks and limited prospects of confrontational strategies more visible, the system can encourage more peaceful and solution-oriented approaches. To be effective in this role, it must be accessible to all users where offered, intuitive, and easy to use.

For organizations, including companies, nonprofits, and public institutions, and for communities, the infrastructure operates as a form of mediation and process support. The primary value lies in managing complexity, since such conflicts often involve multiple stakeholders, overlapping interests, reputational risks, and evolving dynamics. The system can address this by organizing information, clarifying interests, identifying possible trade-offs, and incorporating perspectives that might otherwise remain invisible, including those of actors who are not formally represented but nonetheless shape outcomes. Here, the emphasis lies not only on access, but also on analytical depth, process design, and connection to qualified professionals.

For governments and political leaders, the infrastructure functions as a form of leadership advisory. Its potential impact is significant, but implementation is likely to be difficult, because leaders may resist external advice in moments where sovereignty, security, or political survival appear to be at stake. Its main contribution lies in making the consequences of escalation more explicit. Political conflicts are often driven by emotional dynamics, miscalculations, and short-term incentives, even when warnings are available. By systematically highlighting the social, economic, and human costs of escalation, the system can support more informed decision-making.

The infrastructure also holds significant potential as a teaching tool. In educational settings, it can function as an interactive and engaging learning environment, helping students understand conflict dynamics, explore alternative responses, and practice structured problem-solving. By simulating negotiation and mediation scenarios, it can develop practical skills while fostering early awareness of constructive approaches to conflict. Beyond formal education, it can contribute to broader conflict literacy, making core principles of negotiation and de-escalation more widely understood and applied.

Across all user groups, the system's role remains consistent: it supports reflection, expands the range of considered options, and highlights consequences, while leaving decisions firmly in human hands.

Public-Interest Infrastructure

The diversity of use cases suggests that AI-based conflict management can be developed as a set of tools, but its potential is far greater when organized in a shared form. We therefore propose the concept of public-interest infrastructure.

This concept builds on existing work on global public goods and digital infrastructure but extends it in an important way. Public goods emphasize broad benefit and non-excludability, while digital infrastructure scholarship highlights the systems, standards, and institutional arrangements that make digital services durable and widely usable. Yet neither concept fully captures systems that must combine universal access where offered with institutional safeguards. Public-interest infrastructure refers to systems designed for collective benefit, accessible to all relevant users

without discriminatory restriction, and deliberately governed to ensure neutrality, trust, and responsible use (Kaul et al., 1999; Plantin et al., 2018). It thus represents a distinct category: not proprietary, not state-controlled, and not simply open-access, but institutionally anchored in the public interest.

The defining requirement is neutrality. For conflict management support to be credible, it must be perceived as independent from political, commercial, and strategic interests. This places particular emphasis on the institutional anchoring of such infrastructure. At the national level, this requirement is comparatively easier to fulfill, as trusted, independent institutions with established reputations already exist, for example, organizations such as Stiftung Warentest in Germany, the UK consumer organization Which?, and UFC-Que Choisir in France, all of which operate at arm's length from both government and commercial actors.

At the international level, the challenge becomes significantly more complex. No single actor can plausibly claim neutrality across geopolitical contexts. While international organizations such as the United Nations might appear as natural candidates, their perceived neutrality is often contested. A viable approach therefore requires institutional anchoring that is not tied to any single geopolitical bloc. It must ensure broad, inclusive participation across regions, cultures, and political alignments, so that no perspective is structurally privileged. In practice, this points toward research-based or multi-stakeholder institutions that are globally representative and insulated from direct political or commercial control.

Awareness, usability, and low-threshold engagement are essential to ensure that public-interest infrastructure becomes part of how conflicts are actually managed. At the same time, conflict-related data requires strong protection. Confidentiality, data minimization, and safeguards against misuse are fundamental conditions for trust.

Several governance principles follow from this conception of public-interest infrastructure. First, access should be universal and non-discriminatory wherever the system is offered. Second, human decision authority must remain intact: the system may inform, guide, and refer, but it must not decide. Third, the system must be transparent and auditable, especially where it structures information or recommends professionals. Fourth, data governance must be conflict-sensitive, protecting vulnerable users and minimizing risks of surveillance, exposure, or misuse. Finally, clear red lines are needed against coercive uses, including repression, military targeting, or political manipulation.

Realizing the Potential of Public-Interest Infrastructure

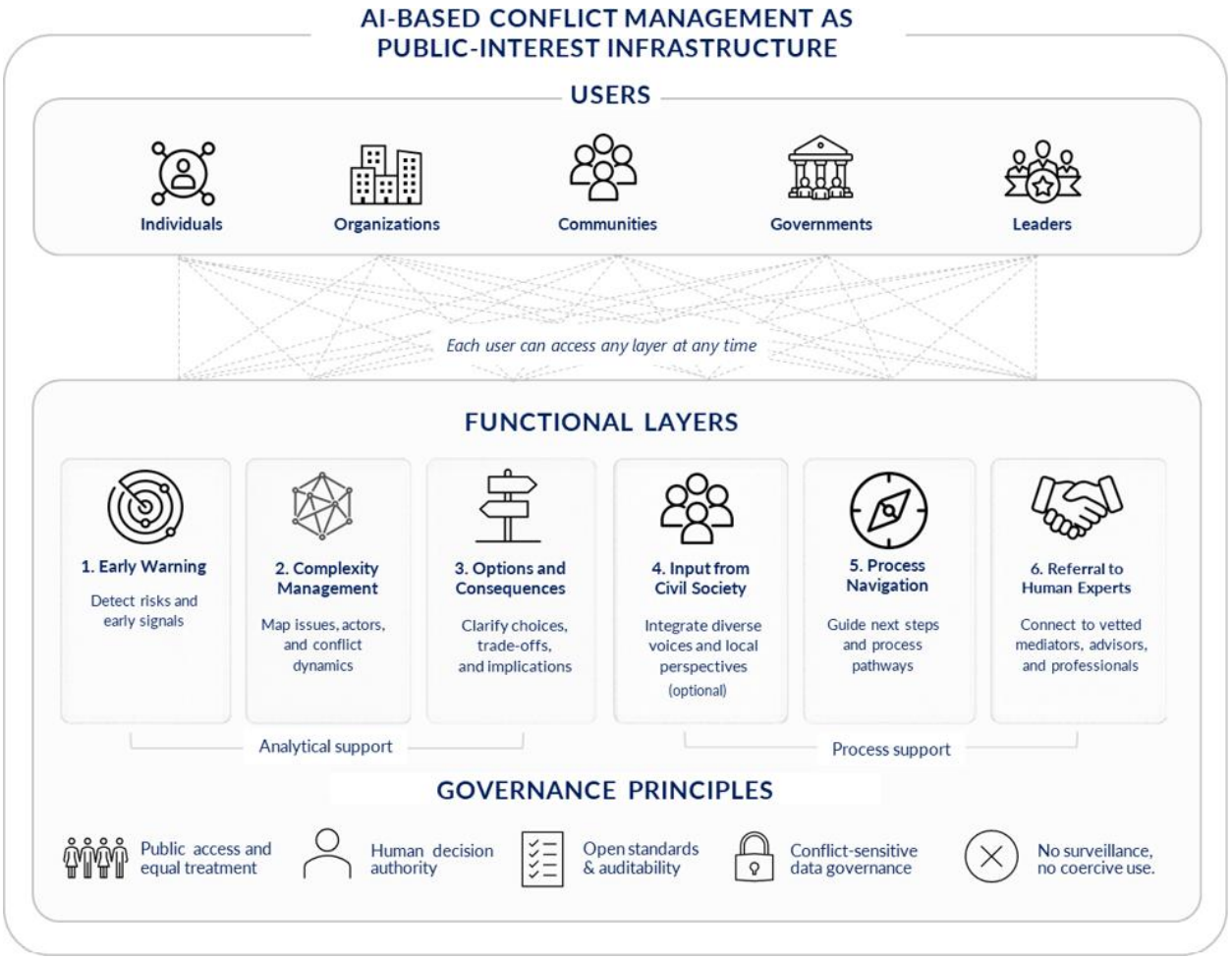
Figure 1 summarizes the model's core elements: diverse users, functional layers, and governance principles that enable public-interest conflict management infrastructure.

The proposed model raises important challenges. Most notably, any such infrastructure is vulnerable to influence and capture. As it becomes widely used and trusted, political, strategic, and commercial incentives to shape its outputs would be significant. While this risk cannot be eliminated, it can be mitigated through transparency, strong oversight, and effective accountability. Public scrutiny and institutional checks are essential to maintaining credibility.

Political feasibility presents a further challenge. At the international level, states may resist relying on external systems, even when those systems are designed to be neutral, especially in strategic or sovereignty-sensitive conflicts. A more viable path may therefore be gradual, beginning with trusted national or regional implementations that can later form the basis for broader coordination. This staged approach would allow the infrastructure to build legitimacy

through demonstrated usefulness, reliability, and neutrality.

Figure 1 AI-based conflict management as public-interest infrastructure: Functional architecture



A third concern is the potential displacement of human responsibility. Users may defer judgment to the system, treating its outputs as authoritative rather than supportive. This would undermine accountability and contradict the system's purpose. The boundary must remain clear: the system supports analysis, navigation, and referral, but does not decide. Responsibility remains with human actors.

Despite these challenges, the potential benefits are substantial. The technical capabilities largely exist, and many core functions are already implementable. The central challenge lies in institutionalization, trust, and equitable access. If successfully established and adopted, such infrastructure could improve access to conflict management, strengthen procedural fairness, support more informed decision-making, reduce unnecessary escalation, and improve quality of life for individuals and communities affected by conflict.

The real question is not whether such infrastructure is possible, but whether we are willing to build and govern it in the public interest.

The World's First Design Shop for Peace: Prototyping and the BB3 Method

By Joshua N. Weiss with an introduction by William L. Ury

"For the better part of fifty years, I have had the privilege of working to transform some of the most difficult conflicts on the planet. When people ask me whether I am an optimist or a pessimist, I like to say that I am a possibilist. I believe in the human potential to deal with our differences in creative and constructive ways. As I have experimented with innovative and effective ways to make peace, I have also sought to learn from our oldest human wisdom for resolving disputes. With that in mind, I designed the BB3 method to activate the Third Side, the power of the surrounding community, in order to help "swarm" challenging conflicts. What follows below, written by my old and cherished colleague Joshua N. Weiss, is an account of how my colleagues and I applied this approach, pairing it with design thinking, to help create breakthroughs in conflicts around the world. My hope is that it will help stimulate you to design your own experiments." - William L. Ury

A New Path to Peace

Toward the end of the summer of 2017, the global atmosphere was thick with a tension not felt in decades. The threat of nuclear war between the United States and North Korea was no longer a distant theoretical exercise; it was escalating daily. As William Ury closely monitored the situation, he was struck by a terrifying realization: the two nations seemed to be "sleepwalking toward a catastrophe". The rhetoric was sharpening, the military posturing was becoming more aggressive, and the traditional channels of diplomacy seemed insufficient to halt the momentum toward a kinetic, potentially nuclear, conflict.

Ury knew that acting was critical, but he was also a realist, or better stated, a *grounded possibilist* (meaning exploring what was possible, but supported by an honest and fact driven assessment of a situation). He began to wonder what a small, dedicated team of people could do that might be unique from bureaucratic efforts of governments and international entities. Could a nimble small group of people make a practical, tangible difference in such a high-stakes, intractable conflict?

At this pivotal moment, several ideas converged. For years, Ury had dreamed of a "peace swarm" – a small team inspired by the multi-disciplinary crisis negotiation units that descend upon hostage situations to find peaceful exits (Ury, 2024). He imagined a group of individuals who would wake up every morning with one singular, laser-focused question: "Who could do what tomorrow to avert war and create peace?".

This dream found its catalyst when Ury shared it with Patrice Martin, a friend and expert in design processes. Martin's perspective was refreshingly practical: as designers, when they want to understand how a complex system works, they prototype it. This meant "trying the idea out to see if it works without a significant up-front commitment". The goal was experimentation – to act, then step back, learn from the results, and iterate to do it better the next time.

This philosophy led to the birth of a two-week experiment in Boulder, Colorado. The small group gathered to prototype ways to assist the parties and de-escalate the North Korean and United States nuclear crisis. They called this experimental unit a "SWAT Team for Peace". To guide them, they enlisted Rob Evans, a master facilitator who would marry the Design Shop Method

originally developed by Matt Taylor with Ury's BB3 (Balcony, Bridge, Third Side) Method – a framework built on 40 years of negotiation expertise (Ury, 2024). This gathering would become the world's first Design Shop for Peace, a methodology that would eventually be deployed in other global flashpoints like Venezuela, Israel-Palestine, and Russia-Ukraine.

The BB3 Framework: The Core Engine of Peacebuilding

The Design Shop for Peace was powered by the BB3 framework, which represents Ury's three most crucial practices for unlocking possibilities in even the most stubborn conflicts.

The first step, or B in the BB3 framework, stands for Balcony (Heifetz, 1994). When one goes to the balcony, they do so to see the conflict differently and to gain perspective. It requires third parties and participants to step away from the heat of the conflict to view the stage the conflict is taking place on from a distance. This distance allows them to see the players, the patterns, and the larger context more clearly (Heifetz et al., 2009).

The second step, and second B in the framework, is Bridge – as in building a golden bridge for the other side to walk across (Ury, 1991). Once perspective is gained from going to the Balcony, the focus shifts to imagination and creativity. The goal is to design a bridge that might attract the opposing players toward a peaceful solution, making it easier for them to move from their entrenched positions.

The third and final step is the 3 or mobilizing what is called the Third Side (Ury, 2000). Conflict does not exist in a vacuum and, as such, this practice involves leveraging the community surrounding the conflict – i.e. the "Third Side" – to help prevent, resolve or contain the violence and ultimately transform the situation into something productive (Weiss, 2002; 2015).

In the North Korea and United States case study shared below, I dive deeply into how the small group of people engaged in the design sprint and applied these practices, with an intense initial focus on the "Balcony" work that set the stage for everything that followed.

1. Moving from Reactive to Creative: Designing the Space for Breakthroughs

When dealing with a crisis as volatile as a nuclear standoff, the natural human instinct is to react. The first objective of the Design Sprint was to break this cycle and establish a space that was intentionally creative and collaborative.

Establishing the Atmosphere

The logistics of the sprint were handled by the team who invited 12 people to Boulder for the two-week prototype. The choice of venue was deliberate: a secluded home where the team could focus and be away from distractions. They avoided typical conference rooms or corporate offices in favor of a home-like environment. This was done to ensure participants felt comfortable, fostering a sense of psychological safety that is necessary for radical creativity (Ury, 2024).

The team spent time eating and engaging in "serious play" together, which was deemed essential for building the trust required to tackle such a heavy subject. As Evans noted about the spirit, "If you can't play with a problem, you can't solve it".

The Multi-Disciplinary Team

The participants were selected for their diversity of thought. They hailed from backgrounds in strategic communications, innovation, storytelling, and conflict resolution. Notably, almost none of them were North Korea experts. This was a feature, not a bug; it allowed the group to look at the problem with "beginner's eyes," free from the baggage of traditional diplomatic thinking.

Defining the Focus

To ground the creative energy, Ury and his colleague Liza Hester defined a clear problem set. The group was provided with a briefing document that focused on the earliest stages of negotiation: the "Talks about Talks". The objectives were clear:

1. Find a breakthrough in the process to move the US and North Korea closer to "talks about talks".
2. Learn how a SWAT Team could be a possible model and methodology to support official negotiation processes.

2. Zoom Out: Seeing the Broader Situation

On the first day, the participants went to the balcony to scan the landscape and leverage their collective intelligence. To deepen this view, the team scheduled sessions with a wide array of experts to provide varied vantage points.

The diverse network of experts included diplomatic veteran perspectives, such as from Jonathan Powell and Glyn Ford, who had experience in North Korea. They shared that Kim Jong Un's primary desires were respect and recognition as part of the global community. They also noted his paralyzing fear for his regime's security, fueled by the fate of leaders like Muammar Gaddafi of Libya who had abandoned their nuclear programs and paid the ultimate price with his life.

The group also heard from a public health expert. Dr. Gary Slutkin, an MD who founded the organization Cure Violence, offered a radical perspective by treating violence as a health epidemic. He introduced the concept of "interruption" – stopping the spread of violence through disease control strategies. Slutkin's model emphasized that peace requires "Interrupters" who have ACT (Access, Credibility, and Trust) with the actors in the conflict.

Finally, the group also sought out-of-the-box thinkers, including an NBA Basketball Star who had gotten to know Kim, depth psychologists, collective trauma specialists, novelists, and even a reality TV producer who had worked with US President Donald Trump.

The Concept of the Intelligent Switchboard

The team began to view itself not as a group of experts, but as an "Intelligent Switchboard". Much like the manual telephone operators of old, their job was to "plug" the right experts into the right places at the right times to make the right connections. This required:

- Thinking Broadly – seeking nontraditional experts to push the limits of their own thinking.
- Valuing Local Knowledge – finding experts who combined deep situational understanding with a willingness to play with new possibilities.
- Weaving a Web – identifying experts who could open doors to further contacts, utilizing the six degrees of separation concept.

3. Zoom In: Building Strategic Empathy

By the second day, the sprint shifted from broad scanning to deep, focused analysis. The team was split into three specialized units: Team Trump, Team Kim, and Team Diplomatic History. Their mission was to employ “Strategic Empathy” to genuinely understand the parties involved.

Strategic Empathy is the difficult task of nonjudgmentally entering another person’s world – even if the people involved are perceived as an enemy or have "blood on their hands". It is not about agreement, but about understanding the world through their cultural lens and worldview. This analysis would lead to the development of the "Victory Speech" for each leader – a bullet-pointed list of what would constitute a "win" for them and how they would sell the agreement to their constituents.

Team Trump: The Art of the Plot Twist

Team Trump immersed themselves in his book *The Art of the Deal* and a "Twitter wall" of the President’s statements. They discovered that Trump viewed negotiation as highly personal and was driven by a need to think big, maximize options, and in the end do something nobody else had done before. Insights from reality TV producer Dave Kuba were revolutionary. Kuba explained that in the world of reality TV, there are three rules: never be boring, don't keep the same villain too long, and always aim for a surprising plot twist. This suggested that Trump might be open to a monumental shift – talking to his enemy – if it was framed as an epic "win" that kept him at the center of the world stage. The team realized Trump needed to be convinced that "No war is the win" and that he could achieve historic "bragging rights" as the ultimate dealmaker.

Team Kim: Seeking Triumph from Strength

Team Kim faced a harder task given the lack of public documentation, but they leveraged experts who had interacted with the regime. They learned that Kim was viewed as a god-like figure who could never appear to "bow down" or "surrender". However, he faced a massive economic problem and needed to satisfy his top 1% to stay in power.

The team concluded that for Kim to agree to a deal, he needed three things. First, he had to be able to claim triumph from a position of strength after having "stared down" the US. Second, he required the ability to announce a suspension of tests as a *quid pro quo* for talks. And third, he needed to pivot toward economic development while maintaining his "wall of safety".

4. Finding First Steps: Building a Bridge and Mobilizing the Third Side

The final phase of the sprint was to identify the "off-ramp" to war by shifting the rhetoric from insults to mutual respect. The team outlined practical steps for both sides (Ury, 2024). For Trump the strategy was to focus on his desire to make history. Recommended steps included de-escalating military exercises, proposing a state-of-the-art hotline, and identifying economic incentives to help North Korea transition from a nuclear focus to an economic one. For Kim the core idea for him was to reinforce that he had already "won" by legitimizing his regime at the table. Practical steps included improving communications to prevent accidental war and re-engaging with South Korea.

Concluding Thoughts: A Collaborative Formula for a Fractured World

The Design Shop for Peace represents a unique, human-centered approach to problem-solving in the world's most dangerous arenas. By moving from a reactive to a creative mindset, zooming out to gain a balcony view, zooming in with strategic empathy, and identifying concrete first steps, this methodology can transform destructive conflicts into productive dialogues.

This prototype proved that a small, multi-disciplinary team – working without massive upfront commitments – can generate the kind of nuanced, creative insights that traditional diplomacy often misses. It is a formula for peace that can, and should, be replicated across the myriad conflicts of the 21st century.

From Deadlock to Dialogue: A Solution-Focused Architecture for Peacebuilding

By Fredrike Bannink, Felix Merks, and Martin Euwema

The Systemic Crisis of Peace Negotiations

Over the past three decades, empirical research has exposed the profound fragility of negotiated settlements. Of the eleven armed conflicts reaching war-level intensity since 2021, only one has ended in a negotiated agreement, according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Davies et al., 2025). The World Bank (2011) underscores this instability, noting that the vast majority of civil wars in the first decade of this century occurred in countries that had already experienced a civil conflict. When agreements are reached, implementation remains elusive: the Peace Accords Matrix indicates that many agreements realize only a fraction of their provisions within a decade (Joshi et al., 2015, 2025). These patterns point to challenges that extend beyond spoilers or unfavorable timing. This article argues that process design and peacebuilding approach must also be taken seriously as explanatory and correctable factors in the persistence of negotiation failure.

Structural Limitations in the UN Process Design

Contemporary United Nations approaches to peace negotiations (United Nations, 2012) exhibit recurring structural limitations that point not to failures of political will, but to a design logic consolidated during an earlier era of conflict management – one increasingly misaligned with the far more complex, multi-party, and internationally entangled conflicts that have since become reality (Davies et al., 2023).

A first concern is that mediation remains largely top-down, centering on a single high-level mediator and presupposing externally derived solution frameworks. This tends to produce distributive processes focused on positional bargaining rather than collaboration. Compounding this, participation is typically elitist: Track I negotiations dominated by political and military leaders risk weakening legitimacy and undermining implementation through insufficient societal ownership (Paffenholz, 2021).

A further structural weakness lies in the assumption of linear sequencing, from pre-negotiation through agreement to implementation, which overlooks the need to build legitimacy and commitment before and throughout the process, rather than expecting these to emerge post-

agreement (Cuhadar & Druckman, 2024; Paffenholz, 2021). Finally, the prioritization of comprehensive settlement agreements, reinforced by the doctrine that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" tends to produce deadlock and prevents the incremental trust-building that resolving complex conflicts requires (Joshi et al., 2025).

Effective Peacebuilding Design: A Four-Phase Architecture

The architecture proposed here responds to these limitations through four integrated phases, each with a distinct analytical and political function.

Phase 1 establishes who must engage and in what configuration. Through structured stakeholder network analysis, it maps communication patterns, tie strength and betweenness centrality across all stakeholders to identify boundary spanners, who, by maintaining functional relationships with multiple actors, represent the network's latent mediation capacity (Prell et al., 2009; Wilcox, 2026).

Phase 2 establishes preferred futures. It addresses the uncertain readiness that characterizes the opening stages of peace processes: without knowing whether the other is genuinely committed, participants cannot develop the motivation and trust that peacebuilding requires (Arévalo, 2024). Transformative Scenario Planning (Kahane, 2026) brings a deliberately diverse stakeholder group into collaborative authorship of preferred futures, with three mutually reinforcing effects. The scenario narratives surface what each constituency genuinely values and why, not as positional demands, but as human stakes in a future they will all inhabit together. In doing so, they reveal that no party can bring a desired future into being alone, reframing adversaries as necessary partners. Perhaps most importantly, this process generates social legitimacy through substantive co-creation rather than procedural inclusion. Legitimacy that is subsequently extended through a co-designed constituent communication strategy.

Phase 3 establishes what works, defining progress and what can be agreed upon. Identifying what is already functioning, and therefore does not need to change, motivates participants to take the next steps forward, translating motivational and relational capital into binding commitments. A politically mandated subset of TSP participants then devises a framework agreement: not a comprehensive settlement, but a high-level statement of shared direction grounded in the scenario work. Paired with this is an implementation roadmap of sequenced responsibilities and milestones, treated as a living instrument rather than a fixed document. This incremental, step-by-step approach to commitment has been shown to produce more durable outcomes than comprehensive settlement attempted in a single move (Joshi et al., 2025).

Phase 4 ensures that commitments are sustained and deepened by returning to the full stakeholder community. Implementation failure is less often a matter of bad faith than of insufficient societal ownership, the exclusion of stakeholders, whose cooperation is operationally necessary. Systematic consultation across all relevant partners and experts ensures the process retains its social legitimacy, remains responsive to evolving constituency concerns, and maintains the adaptive capacity that implementation inevitably demands. This sustained, strategically inclusive engagement across all stages of peacebuilding is what most reliably produces durable peace (Cuhadar & Druckman, 2024).

Legitimacy is built, understanding is generated and agreement is reached by actors already transformed through collaborative scenario work - with implementation sustained by ownership established from the very foundation of the process. This architecture does not eliminate the difficulties of peacebuilding; it restructures them according to a design logic adequate to the complexity of contemporary conflicts.

Limitations and Safeguards

The framework's design substantially mitigates the risk of performative inclusion: stakeholder mapping ensures all relevant participants are identified from the outset, while Transformative Scenario Planning generates publicly endorsed consensus on preferred futures, a form of substantive co-creation that goes considerably further than procedural representation (Hirblinger & Landau, 2020; Paffenholz, 2021). Recognition of each constituency's values is moreover embedded in the scenario narratives themselves. Accountability and justice, however, cannot be reframed away: they require dedicated mechanisms explicitly incorporated into the framework agreement and implementation roadmap. Critically, reconciliation is understood here not as a substitute for accountability but as its necessary precondition, the relational foundation within which accountability mechanisms can function rather than deepen division. The South African transition illustrates this sequencing well: recognition and reconciliation were built through the negotiation process itself, creating the conditions under which a formally mandated Truth and Reconciliation Commission could address accountability as part of the agreed settlement (Niyitunga, 2024). A residual risk remains in participants whose interests are tied to the existing order, though inclusive co-authorship of shared futures can reduce this by making the costs of continued deadlock visible to all.

Table 1 Current UN process design and solution-focused process design

	UN Mediation Process Design *Guidance for Effective Mediation*	**Solution Focused Process Design** *Structured four-phase architecture*
Process logic	Top-down. Single mediator designs and drives the process, often with pre-conceived solution frameworks.	Distributed. Design agency shared across multiple actors; process co-created with stakeholders.
Starting point	Problem-saturated. Opens with contested histories, security demands, and positional claims.	Stakeholders. Maps relational architecture, communication patterns, and bridge actors before any substantive exchange.
Participation	Elitist. Dominated by political and military leaders; civil society and constituencies largely excluded.	Differentiated. Broad stakeholder group in scenario phase; politically mandated subset in framework negotiation.
Legitimacy	Delayed. Expected to emerge post-agreement through public ratification.	Built in. Generated through co-creation of scenarios; extended via constituent communication.
Agreement logic	Comprehensive settlement. All issues resolved in a single instrument; "nothing agreed until everything agreed."	Framework + roadmap. High-level shared direction paired with a living implementation instrument; incremental progress enabled.
Implementation	Execution of a fixed document. Societal ownership assumed rather than built; limited adaptive capacity.	Working Protocol for Cooperation. Systematic consultation sustains ownership; tangible results build constituency trust.
Typical outcome	Deadlock, implementation failure, or agreements that lack societal support and collapse at ratification or execution.	Durable agreements grounded in shared understanding, partner identity, and trust built progressively through delivery.

A Solution-Focused Architecture: The Cognitive Engine

The Four Phased Architecture described above requires a specific engine: Solution-Focused Mediation (SFM). Rooted in the synthesis paradigm (Bannink, 2007, 2010), SFM can be framed as an innovative, yet largely unknown strategic future-orientation approach for dealing with complex conflicts.

The *solution-focused approach* is competency-based, with as little emphasis as possible on failures and problems in the past and present, and as much emphasis as possible on competences, (past) successes and exceptions (moments when the problem could have arisen but somehow did not). The emphasis is on constructing solutions as a counterbalance to the traditional emphasis on analyzing problems. Four basic solution-focused questions illustrate this (Bannink, 2010). These are: what are your best hopes from this peace-building process, what difference will that make, what is working, and what will be next signs of progress?

To reduce the risk of exhaustive analysis of interests which can reinforce stalling tactics, SFM utilizes *cognitive reframing.* It invites parties to think differently, notice positive differences and make progress.

Parties often wish to discuss the past, however, the solution lies in the future. A future-oriented dialogue enables participants to imagine what life could look like beyond the conflict. By asking reflective, hypothetical and future-oriented questions, conversations can shift from judgment and blame to constructive co-creation.

The solution-focused approach does not suggest that historical data or technical analysis are irrelevant. Instead, it posits that analysis of the problem might not be the right engine for reaching the preferred outcome. Technical data (e.g., borders, resources) are essential tools, but the motivation to use those data cooperatively must come from a co-constructed preferred future.

Case Illustration: Possibility Stories in Cyprus

'Cyprus' is the longest ongoing UN peacekeeping mission, since 1964. The Cyprus problem exemplifies an identity-based stalemate where "impossibility stories" (blame and non-accountability) have dominated for decades (Ersözer & Sözen, 2025). However, Track II initiatives in Cyprus have successfully used SFM principles to create "possibility stories".

A first principle is designing a shared preferred future: Bicommunal committees on health, environment, and heritage preservation operate on the logic of a 'preferred future'. Instead of debating historical fault lines, they design shared environmental and health security protocols. This helps the transition to agency: These committees empower local actors to become architects of their future, creating a 'daily peace' that provides the psychological infrastructure for any eventual political settlement.

The Transformative Scenarios Process (TSP) (www.cyprusfutures.org) developed scenarios like "The World of Our Way in 2035" (resilient peace). This future-focus also allows for identity adaptation: from parties to partners.

Another principle, building on exceptions, can be seen in The Nicosia Master Plan (www.unece.org), a bicommunal sewage and urban project, has functioned for decades regardless of political stalemates.

For this to scale to Track I, the social legitimacy must be established first to move the constituency. When the public begins to envision their preferred future, the leaders gain the mandate to move from "problem-talk" to "solution-talk" without fearing political suicide.

Conclusions and a Path Forward

The persistent failure of peace negotiations indicates a systemic flaw in the current approach to peacebuilding. Traditional mediation is under pressure to move beyond position-based bargaining toward a more resilient, design-oriented methodology and architecture, based on three principles.

From document to protocol. A peace agreement should be a Working Protocol for Cooperation. The goal of Track I is the design of the process of living together, not just the division of what exists.

Managing asymmetry through differentiation. The Four Phase Architecture allows for the management of power imbalances by decoupling social legitimacy and technical expertise from the dynamics of the political framework discussions.

A Solution-Focused Approach. Mediators should be trained in SFM. This approach requires a disciplined mindset and skill to remain simple.

By adopting this integrated design approach, the position-based and power-driven approach of traditional negotiations is challenged, and a relational, creative, and long-term peacebuilding perspective is introduced. It transforms the concept of moral imagination (Lederach, 2005) - peacebuilders should have one foot in what is and one foot beyond what exists - into an innovative, concrete and structural reality, moving from the deadlock of the past toward the design of a sustainable future.

The Illusion of the Quick Fix: Reclaiming Mutually Enticing Opportunities in Peacemaking

By Siniša Vuković

Amidst the anxieties of an increasingly fragmented and volatile global disorder, the contemporary architecture of conflict management has retreated into a dangerously transactional paradigm. Driven by an urgent ambition to contain escalating crises and project measurable success, an emerging diplomatic practice increasingly seeks to engineer tangible political change primarily through quantifiable, material means. This prevailing heuristic suggests that the provision of massive economic incentives, reconstruction funds, or sanctions relief can effectively override deep-seated historical animosities and organically produce a sustainable social contract. Frequently, this materialist approach is justified by attempting to emulate the triumphs of past geopolitical stabilization efforts, most notably the Marshall Plan. However, invoking such historical archetypes relies on a profound misreading of sequence and context; the post-WWII European recovery program was not an upfront incentive offered to bring a sovereign adversary to the negotiating table, but rather a reconstruction initiative implemented only after a total military victory and a complete, unconditional restructuring of the political order.

By stubbornly pursuing these quantifiable interventions, the international community is blinding itself to a profound missed opportunity. In their seminal study on durable peace, Druckman and Wagner (2019) offer a stark warning against this purely transactional perspective, demonstrating that material recovery possesses almost no statistical correlation with whether a negotiated political settlement actually endures over time. Focusing obsessively on the diplomatic checkbook while marginalizing the psychological, ideological, and procedural dimensions of conflict termination is a grave strategic error. It squanders the crucial opportunity to develop and

deliberately design a negotiation process that can genuinely increase the chances of a durable solution.

While the field of conflict management possesses a robust understanding of the mechanisms required to bring parties to the negotiating table, a persistent theoretical and practical puzzle remains: agreeing to negotiate does not guarantee that constructive dialogue will take place, nor does it ensure the profound transformation of adversarial relations. To navigate the complexities of modern peacemaking, the field requires a conceptual elevation. This essay addresses a critical void in current theory and practice: the frequent conflation of a transactional incentive, which merely hooks parties into a superficial, easily fractured political arrangement, with a genuine Mutually Enticing Opportunity (MEO) that locks them into a durable resolution. Crucially, a genuine MEO can precede the recognition of an MHS or a Way Out, actively drawing parties toward the negotiating table by making the value of a shared, relational outcome visible before the pain of stalemate alone compels them there. By distinguishing the lure of diplomatically engineered, material quick-fixes from the deeper relational requirements of mutuality and interdependency, this article proposes that true peacemaking must seize the missed opportunity to pivot from material-centric diplomacy toward the deliberate design of procedural and relational justice.

The Transactional Hook

To deconstruct the illusion of the material quick fix, one must first critically examine the psychological and strategic architecture that initially draws adversaries to the negotiating table. Foundational ripeness theory (Zartman, 2000) posits that conflicting parties are compelled to seek alternatives when they confront a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS), a distinct "push" factor characterized by the painful realization that escalatory, confrontational strategies have plateaued into an unbearable status quo where unilateral victory is no longer a rational expectation. Yet, this stark realization alone is insufficient to manifest peace; it must be firmly coupled with the perception of a Way Out (WO), a "pull" factor indicating that engaging in negotiations represents a politically viable, cost-effective alternative to continued mutual destruction. Two of today's most visible conflicts illustrate this dynamic with particular clarity. In Ukraine, where the mutual exhaustion of a protracted MHS is now evident, dominant diplomatic efforts remain anchored in promises of massive reconstruction funds, EU accession, and sanctions relief, precisely the kind of transactional hooks that, without procedural justice and genuine mutuality, produce a fragile arrangement rather than a true MEO. Similarly, the January 2025 Gaza ceasefire agreement was deliberately structured around transactional exchanges of hostages, aid access, and reconstruction pledges, leaving the core questions of governance, political legitimacy, and a long-term political horizon entirely unresolved: a Way Out engineered without the relational foundations required for a genuine MEO to take hold (International Crisis Group, 2025).

However, contemporary conflict scholarship reveals a critical limitation within this initial dynamic. While a perceived WO may successfully pull exhausted parties toward a diplomatic process, its initial appeal is vastly inadequate to sustain the immense political capital required to forge and implement a comprehensive settlement. Negotiations undertaken solely under the oppressive shadow of an MHS are inherently brittle; they reflect a transient, tactical desire to cut the immediate, agonizing costs of conflict rather than a profound, strategic motivation to search for genuine systemic resolution. Recognizing this inherent instability necessitated the conceptual evolution of the Mutually Enticing Opportunity (MEO), a distinct, positive element designed not

merely to initiate dialogue, but to stabilize the diplomatic process and internally motivate a commitment to an enduring agreement (Zartman & Vuković, 2023; Vuković, 2022).

The transformative potential of a genuine MEO hinges heavily upon one of its defining characteristics: exclusivity. To effectively lock deeply entrenched parties into a peacemaking trajectory, an MEO must be presented and perceived as a highly contingent, "once in a lifetime opportunity" that, if cynically dismissed, cannot be seamlessly replicated or revived in any subsequent diplomatic engagements. It is precisely at this conceptual juncture, however, that the modern materialist paradigm corrupts the architecture of peacemaking. Eager to project immediate, measurable progress amidst global disorder, contemporary mediators frequently hijack the concept of exclusivity, reducing a profound relational requirement to crude transactional logic.

Operating under the assumption that financial liquidity can bridge political chasms, practitioners operationalize exclusivity almost entirely through the instruments of economic statecraft. They offer substantial development aid, promises of market integration, or sweeping political subsidies intended to abruptly manipulate the cost-benefit calculus of the conflicting leadership. This material operationalization creates a powerful but ultimately superficial transactional hook. By presenting a heavily subsidized, externally financed formula that appears temporarily vastly superior to the agonizing status quo, mediators can successfully alter the immediate trajectory of the conflict and entice formal diplomatic engagement.

Yet, this approach engineers a dangerous diplomatic mirage. It conflates the abrupt, externally financed alteration of a strategic calculus with the organic development of mutual trust and shared vision. The transactional hook may successfully secure diplomatic signatures and project the optics of peace, but it fails entirely to address the ontological roots of the dispute. By treating the symptoms of conflict with financial, security, or territorial leverage, the transactional hook leaves the deeper structural hostilities, existential fears, and historical grievances completely unexamined and fundamentally unresolved.

The Peace of Bribery

The fundamental flaw in this emerging diplomatic paradigm lies in the erroneous assumption that securing a transactional hook is synonymous with establishing a genuine MEO. When mediators rely heavily on the exclusivity of a material offer to alter the strategic calculus, they construct a perilous illusion. If conflicting parties accept the transactional hook but rigidly maintain a zero-sum, value-claiming mindset, a true MEO cannot exist. The theoretical prerequisite of mutuality dictates that all sides must be able to claim a gain derived from a genuine compromise, an outcome fundamentally contingent upon the willingness of actors to abandon exclusivist paradigms. When negotiated outcomes are cynically formulated to secure private material victories at the expense of an adversary, or when parties exhibit an ingrained inability to accept a scenario where the opponent achieves a legitimate win, it becomes evident that confrontational attitudes continue to dictate the political relationship.

In this transactional void, the profound relational requirements of interdependency and cooperation are entirely obfuscated by the allure of immediate capital. The adversarial parties may physically occupy the same negotiating space, artificially tethered by an exclusive material offer, yet their primary strategic objective remains the imposition of unilateral solutions and the monopolization of private goods. They navigate the architecture of the peace process not to resolve historical grievances or forge a shared future, but to maximize their share of newly injected resources while continuously and actively strategizing against their opponent. The diplomatic

dialogue devolves into competing monologues, masquerading as progress while the underlying animosities fester unchecked. This dynamic is most acute in conflicts rooted in questions of identity. Most civil conflicts are animated by collective sub-national identities, whether ethnic, religious, or regional, while interstate conflicts are shaped by competing national identities, as the Russian-Ukrainian war illustrates with stark clarity. Grounded in history, culture, and deeply held narratives of self and other, these identity-based grievances represent a non-material dimension of conflict that financial inducements are structurally incapable of resolving. No reconstruction package can answer the fundamental question of "who we are" in the shared political universe. Peacemaking processes must therefore create genuine space for that conversation, a serious engagement with identity, recognition, and dignity alongside material interests, or any agreement reached will remain suspended above an unresolved foundation.

Relying on these material hooks systematically degrades the diplomatic endeavor into what can tentatively be termed a "peace of bribery". Recent empirical scholarship offers a devastating critique of this material-first mindset, revealing that the broad development aid and public infrastructure projects frequently championed by international practitioners possess no statistically significant impact on preventing a society's return to war (D'Amico et al., 2025). Instead, immediate political stability is routinely purchased through targeted payoffs, elite co-optation, and guaranteed material benefits funneled directly to specific powerbrokers. South Sudan's 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement offers a stark contemporary illustration. International Crisis Group's analysis of its subsequent collapse in 2025 concluded that the country's political order had remained structurally brittle precisely because stability hinged on petrodollars sustaining a transactional power-sharing compromise among factious elites, rather than on any genuine reconciliation of underlying grievances. When oil revenues were interrupted by a pipeline rupture in 2024, the material foundation of the arrangement evaporated, and the agreement with it: peace purchased through resource distribution, rather than built through procedural justice, proved only as durable as the next revenue stream (International Crisis Group, 2026).

While this cynical model may temporarily pacify a region and establish a functioning administrative apparatus, it inherently breeds corruption and entrenches authoritarianism, leaving the underlying societal ruptures completely untreated. Recent study by Yousef and Sheldon (2026) reveals that trade liberalization and economic integration alone possess virtually no pacifying effect in the absence of a genuine peace agreement. When policymakers attempt to bypass intractable political incompatibilities by deploying Free Trade Agreements as standalone transactional hooks, they consistently fail to reduce the likelihood of militarized conflict. Instead, the data demonstrates that economic interdependence only restrains violence when it is embedded within a broader political settlement that directly addresses the core of the dispute. In short, trade cannot purchase a resolution; it can only reinforce a peace that has already been politically negotiated.

Ultimately, this approach reduces the profound moral and political endeavor of peacemaking to a shallow market transaction. It fatally ignores the reality that identity groups and nations rarely operate on purely transactional logic when their fundamental survival, political identity, and human dignity are at stake. By attempting to purchase compliance, transactional diplomacy fails to build the necessary social contract required for an enduring peace.

The Procedural Bridge

If financial incentives and exclusive material offers function merely as superficial bait, what serves as the actual ontological engine of a durable, self-sustaining peace? To navigate the perilous conceptual gap between a fragile transactional arrangement and a fully realized MEO, peacemaking practice must transcend the limitations of distributive bargaining and embrace a relational diplomacy anchored firmly in procedural justice. The most robust scholarly predictor of post-conflict stability is not the absolute monetary value of a reconstruction fund, but rather the perceived fairness, dignity, and transparency of the negotiation process itself (Wagner & Druckman, 2017; Cuhadar and Druckman, 2024).

Stability cannot be purchased; it must be meticulously constructed through a delicate, cumulative sequence of trust. If negotiating parties feel that a settlement is being coercively imposed by external powers eager to stabilize global markets or secure a rapid diplomatic victory through financial leverage, the resulting agreement is fatally tainted from its inception. It is viewed not as a historic reconciliation, but as an instrument of hegemonic control. Conversely, when the procedure is perceived as intrinsically just and affords a legitimate, unfiltered voice to the affected stakeholders, it cultivates the essential cognitive and relational conditions necessary for equitable outcomes. Procedural fairness, however, is not an end in itself: what matters is that fair procedures generate outcomes that parties perceive as substantively just, reflective of their core needs, and respectful of their fundamental values, since it is this dual quality of process and outcome that transforms a negotiated agreement into a durable settlement. The admission of a divided Cyprus into the EU illustrates this danger directly: intended to catalyze reunification, it instead removed the urgency for a negotiated settlement and froze the conflict for decades, a precedent that exposes the limits of any framework that mistakes market access for reconciliation (Lefteratos, 2025).

Crossing this conceptual chasm requires more than just inclusive dialogue; it necessitates deliberate and profound cognitive reframing at the negotiating table (Hopmann & Vuković, 2026). The transition from an adversarial deadlock to a relational partnership requires mediators to actively deconstruct the zero-sum narratives that fuel violent conflict. New conceptual frames demand established reference points that delineate the precise prospects of gaining or losing through a proposed negotiated agreement (McDermott, 2009). When a negotiated outcome is presented to conflicting parties through a “loss-frame”, negotiators naturally exhibit risk-seeking, highly distributive behavior. Parties in conflict consistently value losses inflicted on the “enemy” more highly than equal gains that are mutually beneficial; they become psychologically entrenched and defensive, focused entirely on claiming value, and are significantly less likely to achieve mutually beneficial agreements (Stein, 1992; Bottom & Studt, 1993). The transactional hook inherently exacerbates this loss-frame, as adversaries obsessively guard their share of the newly introduced material pie, viewing any concession as a catastrophic defeat, while discounting the value of agreements with their adversaries.

However, when a just procedure assists parties in fundamentally viewing the outcome through a “gain-frame”, the psychological dynamic transforms. Negotiators begin to display risk-averse behavior, becoming inherently more inclined to cooperate, build inter-party trust, and locate efficient, integrative agreements that recognize the humanity and political legitimacy of the other side (Murray, 1986; Albin, 2012). This psychological pivot is the vital architecture of the procedural bridge. It is the exact mechanism that moves parties away from the hostile defense of private goods and toward the collaborative generation of shared political value, preparing the ground for a true MEO to take root.

Actualizing Interdependency

It is only through an unwavering commitment to procedural justice and cognitive reframing that the transactional hook can be genuinely transformed into a fully actualized MEO. Once negotiating parties cross this conceptual gap, the MEO operates as a true structural lock-in factor, keeping adversaries deeply and internally committed to the peacemaking process and the subsequent, often arduous, implementation of the agreement. An actualized MEO entirely transcends the superficial allure of material exclusivity. It requires the genuine manifestation of mutuality, where the negotiated outcome is formulated in a manner that intrinsically refuses to favor one side over the other. This allows all parties to claim a legitimate political gain derived from a shared solution that upgrades shared values and interests, moving decisively away from zero-sum assumptions to discover genuine compatibility in their interests and human needs.

Furthermore, this actualization demands authentic cooperation, defined by a deliberate willingness to work collaboratively to shape an outcome that is structurally unattainable by unilateral action. This must be intrinsically linked to a profound sense of interdependency, which implies a forward-looking realization that expected gains can only be achieved if there is a shared perception of common values and interests extending far beyond immediate, transactional tradeoffs. In this relational paradigm, adversaries recognize that their post-conflict survival and prosperity are fundamentally bound together.

The procedural operationalization of this actualized MEO unfolds through a dynamic sequence of specific turning points, conceptually itemized as the four Cs: concessions, convergence, coalescence, and coaction (Vuković, 2022). Through the incremental, respectful exchange of mutual concessions, parties foster a sense of reciprocity and avoid the psychological deadlock associated with concession aversion. This reciprocal behavior naturally leads to a profound convergence, where parties establish a tangible sense of coming together and recognize the expanding parameters of their shared interests. This expanding trust subsequently moves the parties toward coalescence, allowing them to gather around a more comprehensive, inclusive, and politically legitimate outcome. Ultimately, enticed by the prospects of a genuinely shared and just future rather than a fleeting financial payout, the parties engage in coaction. They develop a clear, coordinated framework for their subsequent collaborative action that radically reduces post-conflict uncertainty and replaces the extreme fragility of a material quick fix with the deep predictability of an interdependent peace.

Conclusion

As the international community grapples with the persistence and evolving complexity of global conflicts, a critical reconciliation between emerging diplomatic paradigms and empirical scholarship is urgently required. The prevailing practitioner's ambition to engineer tangible political change by aggressively wielding financial, and other forms of material, leverage represents a profound misdiagnosis of how civil and interstate ruptures are actually healed. Tying the success of a peace agreement to the perpetual infusion of reconstruction aid or the transactional purchasing of elite political compliance is a fundamentally precarious strategy that actively undermines long-term durability, the ultimate goal of any peace process. By anchoring the architecture of peace primarily to material outcomes and global market incentives, mediators recklessly gamble the fate of fragile societies on macroeconomic forces that reside entirely beyond

the scope of local diplomatic control.

While material reconstruction remains an undeniable, moral necessity for societies shattered by violence, empirical history dictates that financial liquidity simply cannot fill the chasms of a broken political foundation. Economic recovery and transactional agreements are, at best, the passengers of peace, not its engine. The true, enduring engine of conflict resolution is justice. To build realistic, context-sensitive pathways out of violent conflict, contemporary diplomacy must recognize that MEOs are not tangible commodities to be engineered or purchased. Rather, they are profound relational achievements that must be meticulously constructed at the negotiating table through procedural fairness, cognitive reframing, and the deliberate, patient cultivation of genuine human interdependency. What future studies need to assess is if a dignified poverty is more durable than a humiliating prosperity.

Understanding the Conflict with Iran from a Cultural Identity Perspective

By William Donohue

Scholars have known for some time that choices in managing conflict reflect cultural biases (see Cai, 2025, for a review). As a result, it might be useful to explore the recent conflict with Iran from a cultural perspective focusing on Iranian, American and Israeli identity self-construals given their primary roles in the conflict. This exploration may help understand the context in which the current conflict is unfolding and the negotiations that are ongoing. The question this paper seeks to address is whether the cultural identities of these three nations are likely to hinder or facilitate a negotiated agreement.

As this paper is written in early May, 2026, the U.S., Israel and Iran are engaged in some form of cease-fire agreement that has moved away from the early stages of intense bombing to a protracted contest that involves a U.S. blockade of Iranian ships and safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz. The conflict remains intense and has broader global impacts given the markets for oil and related products. To better understand the conflict and the context for the negotiations it might be useful to begin by exploring the foreign-policy related Iranian, American and Israeli cultural identities and how they are likely to influence negotiations.

Iranian Cultural Priorities

Literature addressing Iranian cultural identity needs that impact their approach to conflict is quite extensive. For example, Abrahamian (1982, 2013) provides several important insights about Iranian political identity linking nationalism, populism, and anti-imperialism to foreign interference from Britain and the United States. This account helps understand why resistance to U.S. influence has achieved deep legitimacy across Iranian factions while also providing an identity-based explanation of Iranian mistrust toward the U.S. Similarly, Ansari (2012) and Keddie (2006) explore how Iranian nationalism, Shi'a symbolism and state narratives merge into a distinctive Iranian political identity that leaders use to legitimize confrontation with Israel and the U.S.

Underlying this distinctive political identity is the need to maintain the Islamic Revolution which provides the legitimacy, authority and revolutionary identity that is central to the leadership (Arjomand, 1988). This identity provides the ideological foundation for resistance. Litvak (2018)

argues that the focus on Israel as the Palestinian "invader" provides a moral Islamic cause that further legitimizes this resistance ideology. Dabashi (2007) contends that this cause provides a cultural self-understanding that dignifies any and all assistance to the Palestinian cause. Iran believes that this legitimate resistance excludes it from global criticism because revolution is the ultimate cause and cannot be questioned. Of course, Israel understands this Iranian obsession and sustains a narrative that requires eliminating this threat (Ram, 2009).

These studies indicate that Iranian identity vis-à-vis the U.S. and Israel is typically framed around four important features. First, Iran feels historically wounded. The once proud, dominant Persian culture was compromised by European and Ottoman colonialism for hundreds of years and then more recently by the 1953 coup fomented by the U.S. that put the Shah in place. When the Islamic Revolution deposed the Shah in 1979, the U.S. led the charge to impose sanctions and conduct various military interventions to continue pressing for change in Iran. Iran views itself as a sovereign nation with the inherent obligation to resist these persistent forms of historical humiliation. Second, Iran is morally charged by Shi'a martyrdom and resistance to injustice; they must act to protect their identity and their revolution, which is particularly important to the hardline elites. Third, Iran is status-defensive which requires them to uphold their dignity, honor, and their recognition as a mighty nation capable of impacting world events. They can take on the archetypal oppressor, the Great Satan (the U.S.) who is morally inferior to Iran given their support for the Shah and their backing of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. Fourth, these themes are narratively maintained through speeches, rituals, symbolic causes and through support for its Palestine resistance axis (e.g., Hamas, Hezbollah, and militias in Iraq).

These four themes have created an acute sensitivity to sanctions, inspections, and "conditional diplomacy" or any agreement that is imposed or even seen as a submissive compromise. Pragmatism is often a lower priority in an ideologically driven culture. Western powers denying or threatening this identity intensifies Iranian resistance and discourages compliance with demands for the cessation of support for terror groups or the building of nuclear weapons (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). Iran often escalates the conflict symbolically (missile tests, rhetoric, regional assertiveness) during negotiations largely to assert their status.

From this identity-driven cultural perspective, what kinds of proposals are likely to threaten Iran? Unfavorably received proposals will be those that signal asymmetry of power, reinforce a narrative of Western control over Iran's choices, or hint at any kind of symbolic subordination and renewed humiliation. Favorably received proposals would require recognizing Iran as a regional power with an accomplished civilization and not a pariah state. Iran seeks acceptance as an independent pole, not a U.S. client, a "problem state" or a rogue, irrational nuclear power. Conflict with the U.S. and Israel likely unifies elite factions against an external enemy and may even delegitimize internal dissent by associating it with foreign influence. It also frames economic hardship as the price of dignity rather than mismanagement. In contrast, periods of détente tend to expose elite fragmentation, raise public expectations, and reduce the regime's ability to invoke emergency measures. Thus, confrontation is often identity-stabilizing, even when economically costly.

From a communication perspective, Iranian leaders also seek identity coherence over time. The goal is to avoid any identity inconsistency and narrative collapse which might signal an abrupt shift toward the U.S. Such a shift would risk contradicting decades of official discourse and undermine clerical authority, while exposing leaders to accusations of hypocrisy or betrayal. Pursuing this goal explains why Iranian leaders seek to frame engagement as resistance diplomacy. For example, agreements (e.g., JCPOA) are presented as victories over U.S. pressure, not

concessions. The rhetoric remains confrontational even when the behavior is pragmatic. To satisfy identity needs leaders must learn to change tactics without changing who they claim to be. As a result, the pressure tactics such as sanctions often harden Iranian resistance. In essence, conflict with the United States is not just a strategic contest for Iranian leaders, it is a test of who they are allowed to be.

United States Cultural Priorities

The U.S. also maintains clear identity needs. Ereli (2024) argues that U.S. identity, particularly among conservatives, is driven by the concept of American Exceptionalism. He indicates that several conservative political candidates tout this moniker in campaign materials. The idea is that the U.S. has the moral duty to be the liberal international leader, rules-setter and architect of international order. America is the defender of global norms, and the enforcer against rule-breaking states. Their legitimacy is tied to upholding the system, not opposing it. Accommodation that appears to reward defiance of this international order threatens this self-image. The U.S. expects others to demonstrate "responsible behavior" and compliance with norms that are defined largely by Western institutions. Status is hierarchical in the sense that some states judge, others are judged. It is the right and responsibility of the U.S. to enforce global norms and thus, to view sanctions as legitimate tools to achieve these normative objectives.

In this sense, inspections are routine safeguards to compel behavioral change. Failure to enforce these kinds of enforcement measures undermines credibility at home and abroad. Moral leadership is asserted through responsibility and restraint. The argument is that the U.S. sees itself as preventing proliferation, protecting allies, preserving stability, safeguarding human dignity, and building alliances to achieve these goals. If they don't do it, world order will dissolve into the kind of chaos that precipitated in the World Wars. The U.S. must demonstrate resolve, particularly to domestic audiences, and to defend allies, especially Israel, to deter aggression. Perceived softness invites not only attack from enemies that threaten this order but also domestic criticism that the U.S. is retreating from its obligation to enforce order. Thus, engagement with threats from countries like Iran is framed as discipline, not reconciliation.

Israeli Cultural Priorities

Intertwined with Iranian and American identities is the Israeli cultural identity as it interacts with both their American ally, and their Iranian enemy. The Israeli approach to international conflict is deeply shaped by a distinctive cultural–historical identity that combines religious tradition, collective memory of persecution, Zionist nationalism, and a security-centered strategic culture (Siniver, 2012). Scholars in international relations and political psychology frequently analyze Israel through a constructivist lens, arguing that identity—rather than material power alone—plays a critical role in shaping its behavior. Specifically, Israeli cultural identity is embedded in the long historical experience of Jewish persecution, culminating in the Holocaust. This creates a persistent perception of existential vulnerability and discourse that often frames threats in existential terms because the state of Israel emerged after centuries of statelessness and genocide (Bani Salameh & Ishakat, 2022).

As a result, leaders and citizens are more likely to interpret international crises through a "never again" lens, prioritizing survival over risk-taking that is founded psychologically on a low tolerance for uncertainty and a willingness to act decisively—even preemptively—against

perceived threats. Consistent with this self-construal is a sense of exceptionalism with existential anxiety that results in a sort of "siege mentality," (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992) because Israel has faced "almost continuous enmity" since 1948, reinforcing a worldview of persistent danger. This leads to prioritization of qualitative military superiority and rapid response strategies (Kopeć, 2016).

From a negotiation perspective, this siege mentality encourages zero-sum thinking in negotiations, particularly when security is perceived to be at stake. Negotiated (i.e., diplomatic) solutions are weighed against whether they maintain or weaken deterrence credibility. Negotiation tactics often follow Israeli political culture which emphasizes informality, improvisation, innovation, and a focus on practical outcomes rather than adhering to a rigid hierarchy of issues and proposals (Shapira, 2023). Decision-making is typically flexible and adaptive, allowing rapid shifts in tactics. Policies are not just strategic but also symbolic with the goal of reinforcing national identity. Leaders may face domestic pressure to maintain tough security postures, even when alternatives exist. Of course, there are tensions between religious and secular groups, Jewish and Arab citizens, and political factions, shaping policy debates (Katz, 2024). This often causes competing visions (e.g., territorial compromise vs. maximalism) that can influence negotiation strategies.

The Core Identity Clash

These three entrenched identities have created a core clash. Specifically, Iran needs the U.S. to appear imperial; the U.S. and Israel need Iran to appear threatening and noncompliant. Iran seeks horizontal recognition and wants to be seen as a worthy, respected international player. In contrast, the U.S. operates vertically in the sense that it wants to be viewed as the enforcer of international order. Israel also wants to operate vertically in concert with the U.S. to control Mideast affairs and to demonstrate its strength and determination as a nation that can't be controlled. What Iran sees as coercion, the U.S. and Israel see as governance. Iran's actions are framed as reckless or destabilizing, particularly around the core nuclear issue. All sides see themselves as morally righteous—and the enemies see each other as dangerous. All three regimes use one another to stabilize their domestic legitimacy. The challenge is that any rapid shift toward accommodation of Iran by the U.S. and Israel could be perceived domestically and internationally as setting a precedent that other rivals, such as China and Russia, might seek to exploit economically or militarily. Certainly, any forgiveness would create accusations of inconsistency with foreign policy priorities. From a negotiation perspective, each side needs to change without appearing to change.

This creates a tragic loop. While U.S. pressure confirms Iran's revolutionary narrative, Iranian defiance of U.S. demands confirms the U.S. enforcement narrative, and Israel's siege mentality. All participants view one another as "irrational"; yet all are identity-rational. Why this matters for a negotiated political solution is that agreements succeed only when all identities are symbolically protected. Material concessions without identity recognition fail, because public rhetoric matters as much as private diplomacy. Sustainable détente requires mutual face-saving.

As this is written the U.S. appears to be implementing a blockade of Iranian oil in an attempt to starve the country of its financial lifeline. Perhaps the goal of this initiative is to give greater voice to the Iranian pragmatic factions so they can gain leverage over the more extreme factions who appear intent on maintaining staunch opposition to capitulation of any kind. Is it possible that Iran's support of Hamas and similar groups has been directed toward goading the U.S. into war as an attempt to bolster their identity as a legitimate international power? Does Iran feel that they are

judged by the quality of their enemies? My obligation as a conflict scholar is to focus on the kinds of issues that parties might address to achieve a sustainable agreement toward peace. Since I have spoken often in my research about the prominence of identity in the formulation of conflict strategies and outcomes, I thought it would be useful to explore the role of identity in this conflict.

Negotiation Opportunities

Given these cultural identities what negotiation strategies might afford opportunities for an agreement framework, and perhaps some concrete, sustainable agreements. The assumption is that parties want to craft an agreement that creates some path to peace. Unfortunately, that's not necessarily clear since the conflict is not clearly ripe for agreement in the Zartman (2022) sense. At first glance this conflict appears intractable given the core identity clash referenced above. Both the U.S. and Iran can hold out for some time albeit at significant political cost, but it appears both sides are prepared for a protracted engagement. That being said, this is a negotiation journal, and readers likely wonder what a serious negotiation process might look like if the parties were to engage in a serious attempt to forge a meaningful agreement. Since the purpose of this essay is not to address the substantive issues and their potential solutions, a more useful approach might be to explore how the negotiations might establish a productive context for a review of grievances and issues. To achieve this goal, I will list a series of cultural identity needs that might create a context conducive to negotiation.

Cultural Need 1: Sovereign Respect

Iran has a long history of confronting hegemonic invaders and others meddling in their affairs. They have endured centuries of colonial rule and foreign interference and have only recently become a sovereign nation. Should parties in the negotiation begin by showing an awareness of this history and the identity trauma it has brought to the country. Dignity and honor are essential to the Iranian identity, suggesting that the negotiators are probably unwilling to talk unless the U.S. demonstrates some respect for their culture, history and their right to exist as a sovereign nation, free from colonial rule. This demonstration of respect would come at a high political cost to the U.S., given longstanding concerns about Iran's domestic repression and support for armed groups designated by the U.S. and others as terrorist organizations. Nevertheless, Iran is not likely to want to negotiate with a nation that won't respect its history and sovereignty.

Similarly, the U.S. is proud of its role as the defender of global norms and its substantial role in creating a global economy of which Iran has been a big benefactor. Can Iran show some respect for this role and its commitment to build a more stable world order. After all, many of Iran's Arab neighbors have embraced American bases and culture. Is showing some form of sovereign respect possible?

Cultural Need 2: Mutual Recognition

One of the pillars of Transformative Mediation (Bush & Folger, 2004) is asking parties to understand the conflict from the other's perspective. The theory is that this exercise will result in some more fundamental understanding of what drives the conflict. Typically, the mediator will ask the first party to reflect on the second party's experiences associated with the conflict, so each understands the impact of the conflict on each. This strategy is more appropriate in interpersonal

relationship context such as divorce or community mediation where the relationship between the parties is a key issue and parties need to repair it before they can trust one another to implement a deal. But this mutual recognition need is at the center of the cultural divide between the Western powers of the U.S. and Israel and the Middle Eastern Iranians. It's not clear parties understand one another's cultural values and priorities. So, showing some recognition of these differences shows interest in respecting one another.

Cultural Need 3: Underlying Interests

International negotiations typically revolve around positions focusing on specific security solutions or economic policies. The question is what problems are these positions aiming to solve? For example, the position of no nuclear weapons seeks to address a security problem. What is the security problem and what various options are available to address the problem? Without exploring the specific problems that must be solved for each side the parties are unable to expand their options. Of course, stating a position well in advance and labeling it as non-negotiable creates a quick path toward impasse.

Since parties in this Iranian/U.S./Israeli conflict retain very different cultural identities, parties would benefit from spending some time before negotiations reflecting on these differences. The purpose of this essay is to point out these differences, the dangers they present, but also the opportunities that can emerge if these differences are explored. At this point, I suspect that serious negotiations aimed at substantive agreements are not imminent and may not emerge for some time. If a serious negotiation process does emerge its success will likely hinge on setting it up properly with a meaningful cultural identity exchange.

Editor's Conclusions

The contributions in this edition converge on a central insight: new paths to peace are unlikely to emerge from a single innovation, technique, incentive, or institutional reform. Rather, they require a broader rethinking of the conditions under which conflict parties can move from confrontation to engagement, from positional defense to problem solving, and from short-term de-escalation to sustainable cooperation.

Across the contributions, three themes stand out. The first is the **importance of infrastructure and process**. Whether the focus is on AI-supported conflict management, design-based prototyping, or solution-focused mediation, the authors emphasize that peace depends not only on the substance of agreements but also on the systems and procedures that make constructive engagement possible. Access, neutrality, legitimacy, sequencing, and implementation are not secondary concerns; they shape whether parties are able to recognize viable alternatives to continued conflict.

The second theme is the **need to move beyond transactional understandings of peacemaking**. Material incentives, diplomatic pressure, and negotiated packages may be necessary in some contexts, but they are rarely sufficient. Several contributions point instead to the importance of procedural justice, mutual recognition, interdependence, and the construction of shared or at least compatible futures. Sustainable peace requires parties to see more than a temporary reduction in costs; they must perceive a politically and socially meaningful basis for continued cooperation.

The third theme is the centrality of **identity, dignity, and narrative**. Violent conflicts are not

only disputes over territory, security, resources, or institutional arrangements. They are also struggles over recognition, status, historical memory, and collective self-understanding. This implies that negotiation processes must allow parties to change course without appearing to surrender core identities. Face-saving, sovereign respect, and narrative continuity are therefore not merely symbolic; they may be necessary conditions for agreement and implementation.

These themes suggest several directions for further research. First, scholars should examine how emerging technologies can support conflict management without reproducing existing inequalities, biases, or power asymmetries. This requires closer attention to governance models, accountability mechanisms, and the institutional conditions under which AI-based systems may be trusted by diverse conflict actors. Second, design-based and experimental approaches to peacemaking warrant more systematic study. We need to better understand when informal prototypes, multidisciplinary teams, and scenario-based methods can complement, inform, or influence formal diplomatic processes. Third, further research is needed on the relationship between process design and durability. The contributions in this edition suggest that legitimacy, inclusion, sequencing, and implementation should be studied as integral parts of peace processes rather than as issues that arise only after an agreement is signed. Fourth, more work is needed on the interaction between identity and negotiation design. In particular, scholars should examine how recognition, dignity, and narrative framing can be incorporated into peace processes without avoiding accountability or reinforcing exclusionary claims.

The value of the contributions lies in expanding the analytical and practical repertoire available to scholars and practitioners. They suggest that the search for new paths to peace should focus less on finding decisive breakthroughs and more on designing the conditions under which constructive movement becomes possible. For negotiation and conflict management research, this is both a practical challenge and an important agenda for future inquiry.

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