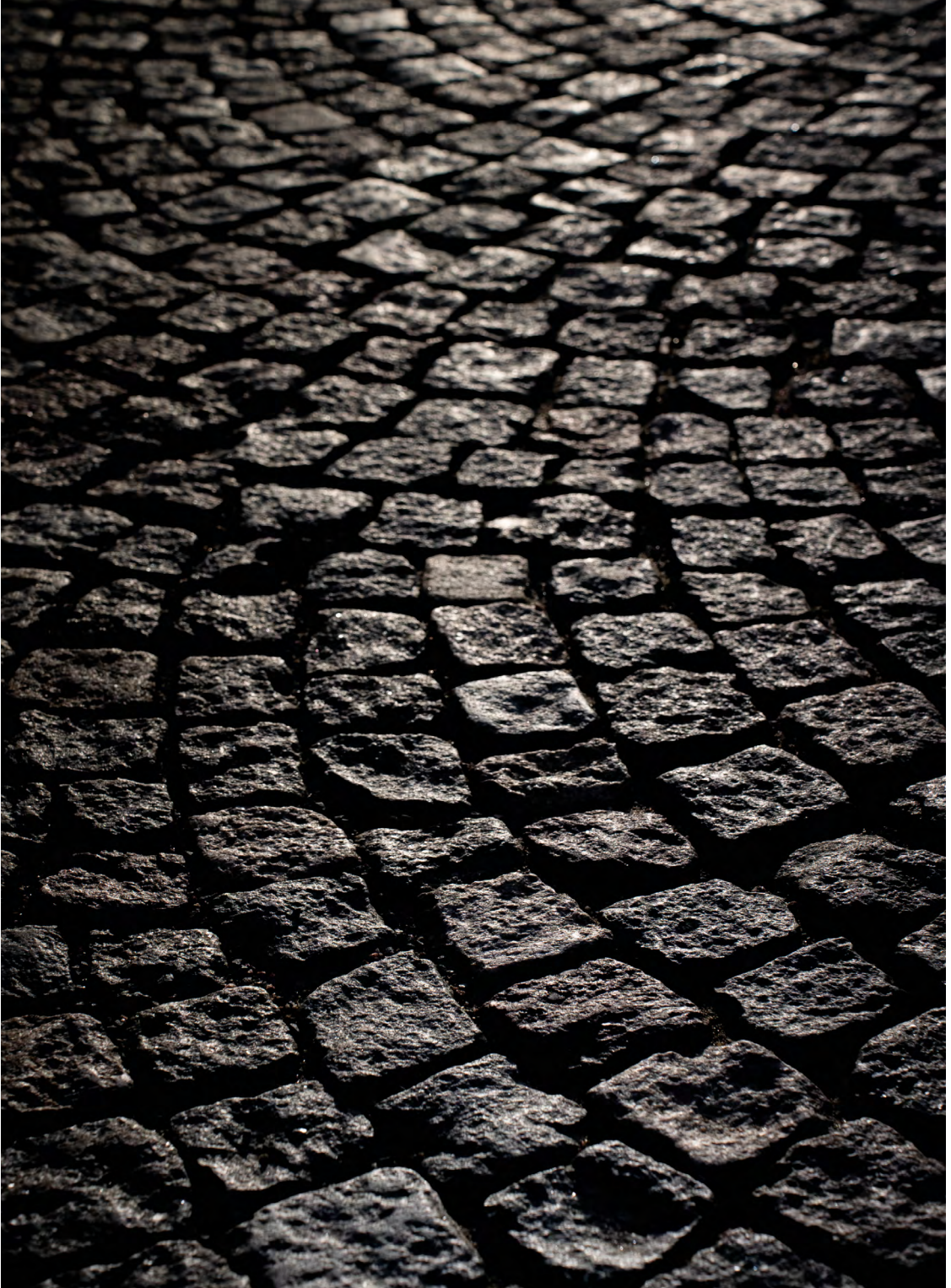




#6

Learning From the Global Experience in Conflict Prevention

Timo Kivimäki



Abstract

This inaugural essay identifies some of the central blind spots in Western understanding of conflict prevention. Given that this essay is inaugural, and thus also intended to reveal my personal intellectual history and development in the field of peace research, the selection of blind spots is not determined by a focus on the main characteristics of Western practice or theory of conflict prevention, but rather, the focus is on those blind spots where I have my fingerprints in the collective body of criticism of Western ideas.

On the one hand, this identification of blind spots is done by means of research that contrasts elements of Western conflict prevention approaches with more successful non-Western methods. On the other hand, the article summarizes research indicating which framings and social realities predict conflict onset and escalation, exposing intellectual approaches that are detrimental to conflict prevention.



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1. Introduction

There is a complaint that our academic understanding of international conflict prevention draws a disproportionate share of its lessons from Western experience (Acharya 2014). I see my own work belonging to the research program that aims to integrate lessons from areas and scholarship from outside Europe and North America into our West-centric global generalizations on peace and war (Acharya 2014; Bilgin 2008; Ling 2002; Takashi Inoguchi 2009). I use the East Asian experience of conflict prevention as a vehicle of criticism of the naturalised Western ways to prevent the onset and escalation of conflicts. This is mainly because the East Asian way of dealing with questions of peace and war has been very different from the Western way, and after the 1970s, Europe and North America have lost substantially greater numbers of lives per population in organized violence than East Asia has (Kivimäki 2010). In addition to learning from the East Asian solutions, I have used the UN as another successful case, where conflict prevention differs in some crucial ways from the ways of conflict prevention especially in the unilateral Western interventions. The UN, too, has been vastly more successful in its peacekeeping than have unilateral great powers with the support of smaller allies (Kivimäki 2021; 2024b). Yet, aside from my recent work (Kivimäki 2014; 2023), East Asian experience and wisdom have not substantially enriched the accumulated knowledge we have in the field of conflict prevention research. There is already some research on the East Asian peaceful change (Tønnesson 2017), but not much on how to learn from it in global conflict preven-

tion. At the same time, global lessons from the UN experience have been more common, even if the UN consistently gets more negative publicity in the media and political debate than its record in conflict prevention would warrant.

This inaugural article will explore some of the core lessons that we should learn from non-Western understanding of international relations and conflict prevention. I interpret conflict prevention broadly as focusing on all types of organized violence: state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts and one-sided violence (see Gleditsch et al., 2002), and using methods of containment/management of violent behaviour, resolving disputes and transforming conflict structures. Prevention in my vocabulary focuses on the prevention of the onset and intensification of conflicts, but also on the efforts to terminate conflicts. Blind spots here mean assumptions that some approaches of conflict prevention are "natural", and only ways of handling things that could be handled better in an alternative manner. My focus on blind spots covers only those naturalized ways of preventing conflicts which I have in my own research found as not the only ways and not even the best ways of reducing violence. After all, the intention of this inaugural essay is also to present my own intellectual development and research.

The main idea that I will focus on is the idea of transforming the international into domestic, by enforcing common norms with supranational power, much like the police does in functioning states. This I claim is the European experience after the challenge of extreme nationalism during the Second World War, when Europe started developing a peaceful

regional community by means of supranational institution, norm, and identity creation. Related to this idea, I will investigate an agent-centric, rather than a relational focus in much of Western practice and especially policy-relevant scholarship, power-centricity in conflict prevention and theory, as well as the primary focus on the perpetrator of violence that needs to be made accountable to stop organized violence.

While I focus on these questions as Western blind spots, I do acknowledge that Western scholarship and practice have also made great contributions to the practice and theory of conflict prevention, and that there is not just one West, but a great number of Western approaches. The blind spots that I identify are often such that the mainstream of Western (often Anglo-American) tradition represents, certainly not all Western scholars or practitioners. Nor do I imply with my focus on my own work, due to the nature of this essay, that I alone have discovered these problems in Western conflict prevention.

In addition to focusing selectively on Western conflict prevention, I am also selective of the theories I integrate my findings into. There is a wealth of theoretical literature critically focusing on the Western hegemonic liberal order and liberal peace thinking that I will disregard simply because my own research has not engaged with it. Scholars such as Roger Mac Ginty, Oliver Richmond, Edmond Newman, Roland Paris, and David Chandler (Chandler 2002; Mac Ginty 2008; Newman, Paris, and Richmond 2009) have derived their critique from a broader analysis of naturalized Western ways of understanding peaceful order in

terms of liberalism. Since my own work has not focused on broader liberal (including economic) realities but is narrowly focused on the realities of safety from violence, the broader critique of liberal peacebuilding has not been relevant for my own research. Thus, it is also lacking from this essay. While the liberal approach that Mac Ginty and others are talking about is becoming fragmented after the rise of illiberal Western leaders, the blind spots I am talking about here are still with us.

2. State Sovereignty, Local Solution, Representative Legitimacy and Peace

The history of Western Europe has warned us about ultra-nationalism while revealing the possibilities of peaceful development through lowering borders and integrating economies and people. This has been what has made a conflict between Germany and France as impossible as one between Tampere and Helsinki. Avoiding the over-generalization of our European experience does not mean that we cannot appreciate this process that pacified Europe or that we cannot offer this experience as a partial truth and a possible pathway to more peaceful global opportunities. In Europe, what used to be interstate anarchy has become regulated by institutions that resemble institutions inside states. The peoples of the European Union have a feeling of common security identity, and the idea of war between two EU member states has become unimaginable. The zone of order among people with

common norms, identities, and institutions, which used to be typical for nation-states, has expanded into the European region. This is, as Ibn Khaldun had already in the 14th century suggested, how community feeling and community integration can expand (bin Syed Jaafar Albar 2023; Wazir et al. 2022).

"The idea of war between two EU member states has become unimaginable."

Yet, there is a difference between the joint lowering of borders in a union, as exemplified by the creation of the European Union, and the experience in other regions. There empires undermined the state sovereignty of other countries by lowering their borders without compromising their own full sovereignty. The cosmopolitan interventionism (Appiah 2006; Beck 2006) that emphasizes human security and the rights of individuals disregarding borders and draws from an interventionist treatment of the theory of democratic peace (Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller 1996; Chih-Mao Tang 2011; Parmar 2014) globalizes the European experience. The assumption is that since European countries have managed to create a peaceful EU by subjecting their intrastate rule to some kind of supranational control, international peace should also be created

by subjecting conflict countries into international rule.¹ Only when atrocity criminals can be made accountable for their intrastate violence by means of international enforcement of humanitarian law using overwhelming force (Kaldor 2012, 128–29), can we achieve peace. And if the UN is too weak to enforce such Europeanization of the world, then democracies, or cosmopolitan powers (such as Canada, Norway, Amnesty International, and the EU, according to Kaldor, 2012, p. 139) must do this unilaterally. One of the architects of such policies, the UK's former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has said that the diplomacy of democracies must offer humanitarian solutions, and military power must back up this diplomacy (Blair 2010, chap. 8). The West must be prepared to fight "over the values of civilization" (Blair 1999, 15). While the end result of such cosmopolitan interventionism could be imagined to be similar to that in Europe, the process is different, and thus the end result lacks local ownership. Humanitarian interventions have tended to kill the people they have tried to protect. On average, humanitarian interventions of the post-Cold War era have increased the number of fatalities of organized violence by 720% (Kivimäki 2019, 82)! For peace, the process to solutions is also important not only the

1 Here the difference, though, is that many Western countries want to participate in the production of accountability for others, yet, themselves only willing to be accountable to fellow EU members, and unwilling to subject themselves unconditionally to humanitarian laws such as the Genocide Convention or all the elements of international humanitarian institutions, including the International Criminal Court.

end result: peace is a product of local solutions in specific historical processes, and thus, different historical experiences of different regions may lead to different formulas for peace (Wiryo, 2008). What comes out of the imposition of international accountability is an empire, not a union.

Empires, rather than supra-national unions, are what most other regions have experienced. The deadliest conflicts in East Asia – the Vietnam War and the Korean War – are both examples of hegemonic outsiders, the US, the Soviet Union and China, interfering in domestic efforts to create their own systems of governance. Two-thirds of East Asia’s post-World War II fatalities of conflict come from intrastate conflicts in which other powers have participated. Only a very small fraction of these fatalities was produced before the interference of outside powers in intrastate conflicts (Kivimäki 2019, 114–20). As a result, it is understandable that the lessons East Asians have derived from their own histories do not prescribe the lowering of borders as a recipe for peace. On the contrary, lowering of borders has meant for East Asians the escalating interference of outsiders in otherwise limited intrastate conflicts. Thus, when East Asia reformed its international norms half a century ago, with the emergence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1967, and with the change in China in 1978-1979, the conclusion went in favour of stronger state sovereignty and the rejection of external influence in intrastate disputes. This worked for East Asia. While in 1946-1980 East Asia “contributed” more than 80% of global fatalities of conflict, since 1980, this share has fallen to under 5 percent (Kivimäki 2023, 57)! The miracle of

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pacification in East Asia started with the pacification of interstate relations in Southeast Asia (Kivimäki 2001), and this progress was later joined by the Chinese Northeast Asia (Kivimäki 2014). Furthermore, since intrastate disputants no longer invited foreign military support to their conflicts, authoritarian violence against domestic groups became much less severe: opposition to the government is no longer a serious security issue, and consequently, governments have no justifications for dealing with such opposition with military means, except in some exceptional cases (Kivimäki 2010, 518–21). The genocidal violence of Pol Pot’s Kampuchea or China’s Cultural Revolution are now just nightmares of the past.

Thus, it seems that Europe and the West could learn from the East Asian peacemaking here. The principle that UN peacekeeping has adopted of only facilitating the emergence of local solutions while keeping conflicting parties apart from each other, rather than imposing solutions, has worked much better (Kivimäki 2021, chap. 3). Clearly, we in the West should also learn from the UN experience rather than reducing UN resources and operating outside the organisation.

3. Criticising Western Biases by Studying the Social Realities that Authoritative Speech Acts Create

The discovery of the success of non-Western conflict prevention and its recipes which deviate from our “global” prescriptions has led me to systematically suspect the biases that conflict research and Western international politics have in conflict prevention. I have tried to see which of our naturalized collective interpretations constitute social realities that are conducive to peace. This exploration in search of pragmatic social constructs has been guided by my perhaps eccentric constructivist pragmatist understanding of knowledge as a pragmatic epistemic orientation to the world, as explicated in my book *Paradigms of Peace* (Kivimäki 2016). Comparisons of discursive developments with conflict developments not only reveal how speech acts create social realities and affect conflict developments, but also how the relationship between rhetoric and conflict developments is mutually constitutive. If we consider certain ways as natural ways of reacting to threats, it is to be expected that the intensification of violence makes us assume those ways.

The first, typically Western framing that constitutes problematic social realities in international relations is the focus on agents – actors that run world affairs – as independently existing entities. The idea that Finland has a consistent identity, rather than seeing “Finland” defined in relation to the other international entities,

leads to policies in which we can focus on the security of Finland as a thing, rather than focusing on peace between Finland and others. In such an agent-centric view, we assume Russian behaviour as emanating from the independent characteristics of Russia, not from Russia’s and Finland’s interaction: “Putin’s threats against Sweden and Finland, coup attempt against Montenegro, attack on Georgia, and two invasions of Ukraine show that he feels entitled to dominate and use violence against other countries” (Benitez 2022, 1). Yet, Russia’s attitude towards its neighbours or NATO’s enlargement during the Baltic round of enlargement, when the relationship between NATO and Russia was good, was very different from the Russian attitude towards the enlargement of NATO to Ukraine. This agent-centric framing has political implications, and it may not be the only way of treating world politics.

Galtung saw this distinction between agent-centric security thinking and relation-focused peace framing, and the greater funding, attention, and access to politicians with a security mindset as one of the reasons why peace research is critical and oppositional to mainstream political thinking (Galtung 1969). It is already in the grammar of the word “security” that there is a need to define the agent whose security we are talking about, whereas the grammar of “peace” requires us to define the relationship that is characterized by peacefulness. The lack of peace framing and focus on interactive relational processes are often missing in the Western mainstream IR theory that focuses on calculative individual rationality (Wendt 1998). According to relational sociology, this may follow from the tendency of

Western European languages to be biased towards substantialist thinking (Elias 1970, 111–12; Emirbayer 1997, 283; Jackson and Nexon 1999, 293).

In an alternative framing, such as in relationalist sociology, we cannot focus on things as ontologically independent of the relationships they are embedded in. The idea of viewing world politics relationally has been elucidated recently in the so-called Chinese School of International Relations (Yaqing Qin 2016; 2018). In a

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relational analysis of international relations, the world is "a universe of interrelatedness"; it is "composed of continuous events and ongoing relations rather than substantial objects and discrete entities" (Hall and Ames 1987, 12–17; Yaqing Qin 2016, 35). "Actors are and can only be 'actors-in-relations'" (King 1985, 16; Yaqing Qin 2016, 36), and processes are "defined in terms of relations in motion" (Qin, 2016, p. 37).

The constructivist idea of the mutual constitution of structure and actor (Wendt 1987) has aligned with the notion of considering agents at least partly as products of their relationships and interactions with others. If authoritative speeches then constitute realities in which the common framing of international relations is focused on the peacefulness of relationships rather than understandings in which the action of our potential enemies is derived from an independent identity of that agent, this must have measurable consequences on the amount of organized violence. My recent research shows that this is the case. Relational language, as spoken by the president of the United States, with high frequencies of words such as "peace," without which one cannot frame international politics relationally, is statistically very significantly associated with a decline in fatalities of organized violence in American wars. By contrast, agent-centric language, with a high frequency of words like "security" and references to and characterizations of fixed identities, even positive ones, such as "innocent," are statistically very significantly associated with increasing numbers of fatalities in wars of the speaking nation (in my research, the United States, see Kivimäki, forthcoming): when presidents speak relational world politics into being, this is when peace has a chance.

Closely related to the actor-centric framing of world politics is the idea of power as the necessary instrument in realistically dealing with security and peace. "[W]hat is needed is not peacekeeping but the enforcement of cosmopolitan norms, i.e., the enforcement of international humanitarian and human rights law" (Kaldor 2012, 124–25). Kaldor, who

often represents the liberal Anglo-American humanitarian interventionist consensus, supports the Weinberger/Powell doctrine of overwhelming force in the production of security (Kaldor, 2012, pp. 128–129). Such law enforcement cannot be done neutrally: predatory actors and illegitimate representatives of groups simply must be made accountable (Kaldor, 2012, p. 128). Yet, the UN focuses on peaceful relations rather than the enforcement of its interpretations of norms. It acts in a neutral way between conflicting parties, without choosing sides. And of the 36 peacekeeping operations the UN has had in the post-Cold War era, it has failed only four times. In three of these cases its operation was eclipsed by a unilateral great power operation. In these four cases its operation has increased fatalities of violence both during and after its operation compared to the situation before its operation. Western great powers have failed in most of their unilateral humanitarian operations in the way in which the UN has failed only four times (Kivimäki, 2021, 88–114; 2024). However, the counter-productivity of power-centricity is not only visible if one compares power-centric Western operations with less power-centric UN operations. In Western humanitarian interventions the variation in the level of power-centrality also supports this. When US presidential speech is more power centric in US operations for protecting people from atrocity criminals, this is statistically significantly associated with the rise of fatalities in US war operations. Also, the number of fatalities increases in countries that the US president talks about in a power-centric manner, as I could find by comparing

coded texts of US presidential papers and conflict statistics (Kivimäki 2024a).

Close to the idea of power-centricity and agent-centricity is the idea of seeing accountability in international relations as something that brings perpetrators of violence to justice. This is another variant of the model of making the international realm like domestic order with the police and punishments for crimes. An alternative to such an idea of international retributive justice is the idea of seeing the mission for peace as something that focuses on the victims rather than the perpetrators. While the needs of justice for victims do oblige the perpetrator to compensations and measures to guarantee victims' safety in the future, the idea in such a framing is not to bring accountability by means of punishment to the perpetrator but rather by defining fairness after violent actions based on the needs of the victim of violence (Zehr 2002). While there have been efforts in Western criminology to adopt these ideas from many non-Western (Canadian First Nation, New Zealand Maori and many African traditional) communal practices, Western international relations, just as Western criminal administration, are still very much based on a focus on the punishment of the perpetrators. As Mamdani says, our responsibility to protect should not be treated simply as responsibility to punish, as has been, according to him, the Western way (Mamdani, 2010). There is some evidence in support of such an approach in crime control (Kathleen Daly 2004; Kathleen Daly and Stubbs 2006; Sharpe 1998; Zehr 2002), but recently, new evidence is emerging in favour of restorative, victim-centric approaches also in the prevention of conflict and conflict relapse

after peace agreements. Recent research on the impact of International Criminal Court's (ICC) investigations on the development of the numbers of fatalities of organized violence suggests that whenever the ICC is not able to deter future violence but justice focuses on more dialogical practices aiming at ending interactive spirals of violence against its victims, this is when the ICC investigation is associated with reduced levels of organized violence (Cacciatori and Kivimäki, forthcoming). Again, retributive justice requires an institutional setting in which the perpetrator of violence acknowledges the norms which their violence violates. In the absence of such an institutional setting, i.e., in the absence of a context of a well-functioning state, a more dialogical approach works better than enforcement of norms by means of retribution.

4. Conclusion

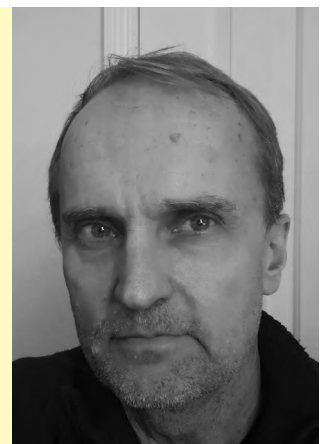
My personal intellectual path has revealed to me some blind spots in mainstream (Western) thinking of conflict prevention and peace. It started with discoveries of unexplored non-Western recipes for peace and continued towards a systematic, pragmatic exploration of what kinds of knowledge and interpretative social realities work for peace. By comparing authoritative speech acts with conflict developments, I have revealed some of the problematic social realities that hegemonic collective interpretations of conflict realities constitute. The results of this research encourage extreme humility: some of the mainstream premises of conflict prevention may be fundamentally flawed. Consequently, some of our great efforts at peace may turn out to be sources of a lot of organized violence. Peace practice requires humility and the recognition that our strongest norms and understandings of the only natural ways of conflict prevention may very well be problematic.

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