

Anticipating the Future of Peace and War

Opening remarks

Workshop in cooperation with Geneva Science and Diplomacy
Anticipator and Columbia University | SIPA

Speech by
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Dear participants, dear colleagues and friends,

Good morning!

On behalf of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, the GCSP, I am pleased to welcome you to the "Anticipating the Future of Peace and War" workshop.

Thank you for joining us from afar to participate in this important discussion. I am particularly grateful to the experts travelling from different parts of the world. I know that even travelling to such meetings is not such an easy task these days.

At the outset, I would like to express my gratitude towards our partners at Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipator (GESDA) and Columbia University for their efforts and support in co-organising this workshop with us.

I also thank our dedicated organising GCSP team under the leadership of Tobias Vestner, who has worked tirelessly to set the stage for this workshop.

I should mention here as well Fabrizio Hochschild, whose intellectual contribution and commitment greatly contributed to making this happen.

Allow me to share a few words on the GCSP before delving into my welcome remarks. We were founded almost 30 years ago by the Swiss Confederation. Today we are an international foundation with 53 member states.

We undertake research on security-related topics and offer executive training for policymakers, diplomats and armed forces members on questions regarding international security. We also offer safe space for dialogue, i.e., we conduct track 2 and track 1.5 diplomacy.

Today, we are delighted and grateful to have you all at GCSP.

I will now say a few brief words about what makes this initiative unique and what its objectives are.

The idea for working on the future of peace and war was born during a lunch I had a bit less than one and a half years ago with the ICRC President Peter Maurer. We were both impressed by GESDA and its methodology and asked ourselves how we could better use it for the benefit of our own institutions, big ICRC and small GCSP. We concluded that we should try to apply the GESDA approach to the future conduct of war and violent conflict and how to better anticipate it and become better at preventing and mitigating it.

Work on this initiative and building the exceptional partnership behind it with GESDA and Columbia's SIPA dates back a year. We intend it to be a multi-year effort that will build up to an annual or bi-annual high-level meeting of diverse stakeholders on the topic and produce a regularly revised landmark report for use by policymakers.

Beyond this unique partnership, there are at least five points that make this exercise different from similar initiatives:

1. **Timeframe:** Unlike ICG, the WEF or others, we are not trying to predict what will happen in specific conflicts over the next year or two. The intention is to anticipate trends, counter-trends, and ruptures in this domain over the next 5-25 years.
2. **Anticipation:** Again, we are not trying to predict. We want to anticipate. We aim to identify what may be coming, including contemplating various scenarios to better prepare for the present. In this sense, the exercise is akin to strategic foresight, except we are not looking at how any specific organisation should adapt to prepare for the future but rather at how policymakers, business leaders, and civil society

should be better prepared, be more aware of the trends to try and advance and which to try and contain.

3. **Nexuses:** We are not looking at the relevant trends in isolation. We are interested in the intersections and compounding effects of different trends and counter-trends. We won't look at geopolitics, peace and conflict in isolation or climate change and conflict alone. We will look at interactions between geopolitics, macro-economic developments and new technologies. We will look at the intersections between demographic changes, migration, transnational organised crime, international terrorism, climate change and other trends, ruptures and counter-trends. We will also try and consider the unpredictable, namely how to handle inevitable Black Swan events.
4. **Peace and War:** There is much academic focus on the future of conflict, much less on the future of peace. We can all identify current vectors of conflict. What are the current vectors of peace? What are new developments in prevention, peace-making and peacebuilding? There is much less research in these fields, and yet if we want our work to have useful, real-world applications, we have to focus on both domains.
5. **Science:** As various authors have pointed out, prediction in this domain beyond the short term has often been left to fiction writers. GESDA has developed a more scientific methodology to anticipate breakthroughs in new technologies. We want to explore to what extent we can do the same in the field of peace and conflict. That is a key methodological question we hope to gain greater insight into in this first workshop.

We are fortunate to have brought together today such an exceptional, cross-regional interdisciplinary group to tackle these challenges. We have no delusions about the difficulty of the task we have set ourselves.

Professor Freedman of King's College – quoted in the background paper which was circulated – has shown that over the past centuries, most predictions of the future of conflict have turned out to be wrong.

As hard as anticipation is in this field, with the reconfiguration of domestic- and geopolitics in a manner which brings with it a large degree of uncertainty and volatility, with the vastly increased pace of technological change, with the pressing threats to planetary security, we cannot afford not to try and anticipate better. Not doing so will leave us less prepared and less able to promote peace.

Freedman makes the point that the continuities in the conduct of war should not be underestimated. This was echoed by a Red Cross colleague at last October's GESDA summit. What we are seeing, he argued, was a layering of new elements on traditional means of pursuing war.

Many academics until recently had pointed towards the post-Cold War rise in intra-state conflict and the end of inter-state conflict. The Russian aggression against Ukraine has proven us wrong.

Ukraine has also illustrated that means of pursuing conflict that dates back to the first world war are still very much with us, the use of infantry, tanks, trenches, artillery, sieges of cities, propaganda and misinformation.

But there has been layering on top of traditional instruments of pursuing conflict with new ones: The capacity for the dissemination of propaganda and

misinformation has been exponentially enhanced and reduced in cost through digital media. The technology has also been placed in the hands of any individual anywhere on the globe with an internet connection, the means to become part of the war effort by disseminating misinformation or promoting recruitment or mobilising funding.

The interface between new technologies and war has at least two sides. New technologies can transform how conflict is nurtured and executed. At the same time, there are few better laboratories than war for advancing new technologies for bad and good. The biggest advances in aeroplane development came about during the second world war. Advances in the development of nuclear power were also greatly accelerated by the war.

The Ukraine war has advanced drone technology, accelerated our capacity for cyber defence and had many other unforeseen knock-on effects: It has brought greater unity to the European Union and led to significant and most likely irreversible changes in domestic energy policies. Has the war in Ukraine accelerated the green transition in energy policies? These are the sorts of interactions we need to understand better.

Beyond the threat of more inter-state conflict, another global trend is the growth in political violence in middle-income and developed countries. We are also seeing ruptures in social cohesion with the rise of populism.

But is this universal? Among more autocratic powers and civilisations, in particular, those that once felt humiliated and marginalised from global decision-making by the West, are we not seeing greater unity and coherence?

A global move to deglobalisation fostered by the pandemic has led to a risk-loaded decoupling of economic interdependence between major powers.

The digital age paradoxically has enhanced this. Referring to the "splinternet", a recent edition of the Berggruen's Institutes publication, Noema suggested, and I quote:

"The tribal character of digital connectivity has transmuted the information age into an age of non-communication". In February, GCSP published a brief Research essay on a related aspect: Digital authoritarianism.

The critical emergence of new technologies, the impact of which we don't yet fully understand, also raises questions about the role of the state, the role of private sector and civil society.

We also have to ask ourselves what their impact is on the traditional drivers of violence and conflict: competition for resources, inequality, discrimination, organised crime and the absence of the rule of law.

And then the key question is, where are efforts going in conflict prevention, containment, resolution, and peacebuilding?

There are also counter-trends to what I have described. Perhaps most notable is the emergence of national and transnational civil society movements, also made possible by the internet, that address root causes of violence and conflict: For example, inaction on climate change and insufficient action on gender equality.

Digital tools can also make peace negotiations far more inclusive, hence more legitimate, hence more likely to contribute to durable peace.

AI is critical to the development of lethal autonomous weapons, but will it also make conflict and violence more predictable and hence more preventable?

We have better tools than ever to see conflict and what nurtures it in real time. We may have better tools to predict it, but how do we use these tools to

increase political will for conflict prevention and resolution? The best knowledge in the world helps little where the political will to apply it for good is lacking.

According to Statista, almost 90 per cent of people on Earth have smartphones. This means immediate access to real-time information on the conduct of conflict as well as on trends that nurture violence. This has raised global awareness of conflict and violence, but has it also led to a numbing of our concern for violence? How can global access to the internet – even if it is fragmenting – be better used to spur domestic and transnational efforts at peace?

But none of that is what we should talk about today! That is context, and we will get to those questions in future workshops.

The objective of today's and tomorrow's discussions is to come up with ideas about the method, how to best anticipate, how to read trends and counter-trends, and how to anticipate ruptures and the unpredictable. What are the most fruitful avenues and methodologies for anticipation, and what are the limits? How can we use science better in this domain? In the next two days, we want to gather insights that will lay a foundation for future exploration of some of the substances I have alluded to.

The future is not entirely predetermined. We have agency, and we need to better equip ourselves to maximise that agency. That is the purpose of anticipation and of this project.

We are grateful to have all your expertise and experience to tackle this task.

Thank you.