

Negative Peace, Positive Illusion: Why the Absence of War is Not Peace

Nabib Bin Zahid¹



Introduction

In mainstream discourse, whether in diplomatic communiqués, media headlines, or public opinion—peace is often narrated as the absence of war. When governments announce ceasefires, when armies withdraw, when headline violence ebbs, commentators hastily declare: “peace at last.” Yet this surface-level applause obscures a critical analytical failure. The cessation of armed hostilities is not synonymous with peace; it is, at best, a temporary quiet. This distinction was recognized half a century ago by peace theorist Johan Galtung, who separated negative peace (absence of direct violence) from positive peace (the presence of justice, equity, and structural integration). The failure to operationalize this distinction produces a *positive illusion*—a belief that peace exists where only war’s symptoms have paused. In this commentary, I argue that the absence of war neither ensures societal well-being nor addresses structural and cultural violences that undermine genuine peace.

¹ Nabib Bin Zahid is a Research Assistant at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). He has completed his B.S.S in International Relations from the University of Rajshahi.



Source: Britannica²

Defining Peace: Negative vs. Positive

The modern distinction between negative and positive peace traces back to foundational peace research, particularly the work of Johan Galtung. Negative peace refers to the absence of direct physical violence and war, a condition that can result from ceasefires or balance-of-power stability. Positive peace, by contrast, entails structural and institutional conditions that remove the underlying causes of violence, such as inequality, discrimination, and injustice. It includes societal habits and institutions that nurture cooperation and human flourishing, not merely stop bullets.³

Negative peace might be the default definition in policy arenas because it is observable and immediate - guns stop firing, troops withdraw, boundaries hold. Yet peace as the mere absence of war says nothing about whether people are free from fear, deprivation, or systemic oppression. Galtung's framework deliberately distinguishes these forms of peace to reveal that direct violence (war) can be halted even as indirect patterns of violence persist.⁴

As a practical example, ceasefires in protracted civil wars may halt shootings but not the political exclusion or economic marginalization that fueled conflict in the first place. These unresolved structural conditions are forms of structural violence - systems embedded in society that deny basic human needs. When such systems remain intact, peace remains superficial.

² <https://cdn.britannica.com/31/195531-050-A58B8486/Illustration-peace-sign.jpg>

³ Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91; see also definitions of negative and positive peace in peace literature.

⁴ Sumit Mukerji, "From Negative to Positive Peace: Meeting of Two Seminal Minds," *Environment and Society* (2025).

Historical Roots of the Illusion

Throughout international history, peace has often been synonymous with a lull in open conflict. Post-World War I Europe, for example, was described as “at peace” after the Treaty of Versailles, even as punitive reparations, political disenfranchisement, and economic instability brewed new antagonisms. This narrow view assumes war and peace are dichotomous and mutually exclusive states, rather than complex social processes with overlapping dynamics.

This conception was challenged by scholars who argued that peace is more than a form opposite to war. As early critics observed, defining peace only as the absence of war is misguided because it assumes a simplistic binary that overlooks the quality and justice of social relations. Peace and war are not symmetrical mirrors; peace cannot merely be the negation of war’s attributes.⁵ Galtung’s intervention in the 1960s thus reframed peace studies: to understand violence and peace, analysts must start with a broader conception of violence that includes social structures entrenching harm.

The Illusion in Practice: Where “Peace” Masks Instability

The most dangerous manifestation of negative peace is not theoretical - it is empirical. Across regions, the international system repeatedly celebrates “peace” in contexts where violence has merely changed form. Ceasefires, frozen conflicts, and authoritarian stability are routinely framed as success stories, even as the underlying drivers of conflict remain untouched. In these cases, peace does not resolve instability; it manages it, often postponing rather than preventing future violence.

Frozen conflicts offer the clearest illustration of this illusion. Prolonged ceasefires in places such as Kashmir, Western Sahara, or the Korean Peninsula have dramatically reduced large-scale warfare, yet they have failed to generate political reconciliation or durable settlements. These situations are often described as stable, but stability here is deceptive. The absence of active combat coexists with militarization, political exclusion, and unresolved sovereignty disputes. As scholars of peace processes have noted, such “no war, no peace” conditions institutionalize insecurity rather than eliminate it, making renewed escalation a perpetual risk.⁶ The international community’s tolerance for these arrangements reflects a preference for predictability over justice.

A second and more troubling manifestation of negative peace is authoritarian stability. Many regimes maintain internal order by suppressing dissent, curtailing civil liberties, and monopolizing political power. From a narrow security perspective, these states appear peaceful: protests are rare, violence is limited, and borders are controlled. Yet this calm is produced through coercion rather than consent. Political repression, economic exclusion, and systemic corruption generate latent grievances that are merely contained, not resolved. As peacebuilding

⁵ Exploring Peace: Looking Beyond War and Negative Peace,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2016).

⁶ Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–191.

research demonstrates, repression can delay conflict but often increases its eventual intensity when control weakens.⁷ In such contexts, negative peace becomes indistinguishable from enforced silence.



Source: The Guardian⁸

At the international level, the illusion of peace is equally pronounced. Periods of great-power détente are frequently interpreted as global stability, despite the persistence of proxy wars, coercive economic practices, and structural inequalities embedded in the international system. The Cold War itself was often described as “long peace” because direct conflict between superpowers was avoided. Yet this framing obscured the devastating violence experienced across the Global South, where proxy wars, coups, and external interventions were routine.⁹ The absence of war among major powers did not translate into peace for much of the world; it merely displaced violence geographically.

What unites these cases is a metric failure. Peace is measured by what is absent - battle deaths, troop movements, open warfare - rather than by what is present: political legitimacy, social trust, and equitable access to resources. As Roland Paris has argued, peacebuilding strategies that prioritize stability over transformation often produce “institutionalized fragility,” where societies appear calm but remain structurally vulnerable to crisis.¹⁰ Negative peace thus functions as a governance shortcut: it reduces immediate risk while leaving deeper insecurities intact.

In practice, then, negative peace is not a neutral condition. It actively shapes political incentives, encouraging elites - both domestic and international - to accept surface-level calm as success. The result is a global order that mistakes managed insecurity for peace, and silence for stability.

⁷ Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/01/ethiopia-unrest-abi-ahmed-jawar-mohammed-nobel-peace-prize>

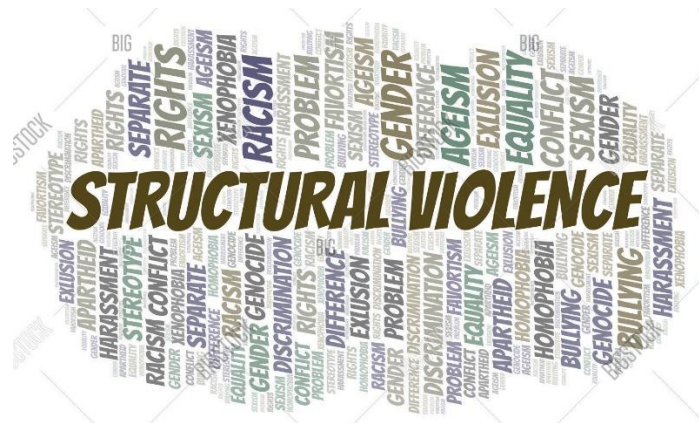
⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁰ Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Until peace is assessed by the quality of social and political relations rather than the absence of violence alone, the illusion will persist - often until it collapses.

Structural and Cultural Violence: Invisible Barriers to Peace

Galtung's conceptualization of peace extends beyond physical hostility to include structural violence, harm built into social, economic, and political systems and cultural violence, the legitimizing frameworks that make inequality seem normal. Structural violence manifests in poverty, lack of access to basic services, and systemic discrimination. Cultural violence is embedded in ideologies, narratives, and prejudices that justify the status quo.



Source: Big Stock¹¹

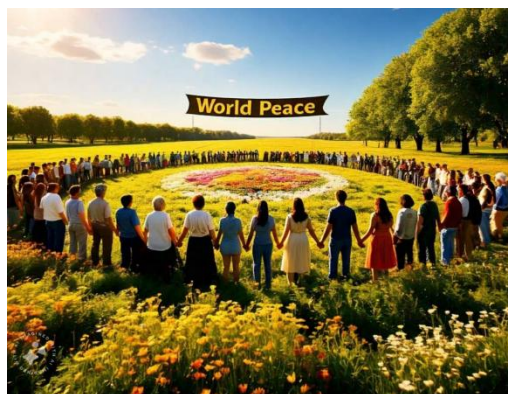
For example, in societies emerging from civil conflict, economic inequality may persist, leading to malnutrition, poor health outcomes, and limited opportunities. These outcomes are not caused by direct violence but by institutional arrangements that leave certain populations marginalized. Without addressing these conditions, a cessation of war does not equate to genuine peace.

Positive peace requires transforming the conditions that reproduce inequality and harm. Societies with high levels of education, equitable economic opportunities, inclusive political systems, and recognition of minority rights are better positioned to sustain peace because they reduce the structural drivers of violence.

The Illusion of Peace in International Relations

In international relations, negative peace often surfaces in discourses about great-power détente. After the Cold War, the absence of direct conflict between superpowers was celebrated as peace. Yet ideological rivalries, proxy wars, and geopolitical competition continued under the surface. Negative peace here functioned as a minimalist benchmark - it prevented nuclear confrontation while leaving geopolitical friction unresolved.

¹¹ <https://www.bigstockphoto.com/image-286871206/stock-photo-structural-violence-type-of-discrimination-word-cloud-wordcloud-made-with-text-only>



Source: Vanguard¹²

Scholars have cautioned against conflating the absence of interstate war with peace because it diverts attention from persistent forms of violence and insecurity that do not fit the conventional definition of war. Research shows that focusing on war alone leads to “an inverted research agenda” where peace is an afterthought, studied only when violence ceases, rather than as a distinct social process requiring independent inquiry.

Toward Positive Peace: A Transformative Agenda

The challenge of building positive peace requires reorienting policy from conflict suppression to transformation. Peacebuilding must engage institutions, norms, and actors to address justice, inclusivity, and equitable opportunity. This supports not only stability but human development.

Positive peace involves substantive social change: democratization of political systems, economic policies that reduce inequality, and educational programs fostering intergroup understanding. These elements contribute to societal resilience, reducing the likelihood of relapse into violence.

For example, after high-intensity civil wars, successful peacebuilding efforts often combine ceasefires with transitional justice mechanisms, reconstruction of civic infrastructure, and inclusive governance reforms. These approaches recognize that peace is not merely the absence of bullets but the presence of justice and normalcy.

Positive Peace as Strategic Necessity

Positive peace is frequently dismissed as aspirational - an ethical add-on to the “real work” of security. This framing is analytically flawed. Positive peace is not a moral luxury; it is a strategic necessity. Societies that invest in justice, inclusion, and institutional legitimacy are not merely more humane - they are more stable, resilient, and secure. The evidence from peace and conflict research is unambiguous: where positive peace is weak, negative peace is brittle.

¹² <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2024/12/the-illusion-of-international-law-and-world-peace/>

At its core, positive peace refers to the conditions that make violence unnecessary. These include inclusive political institutions, equitable economic systems, social trust, and mechanisms for non-violent conflict resolution. Johan Galtung's original formulation emphasized that peace requires the elimination of structural violence - systems that systematically deny groups access to power, resources, or dignity. When such systems persist, the absence of war becomes contingent and temporary. Violence may pause, but grievances accumulate.

From a strategic perspective, positive peace directly addresses the recurrence problem in conflict. Empirical studies show that societies emerging from civil war face a high risk of relapse, particularly when peace settlements prioritize elite bargains over social transformation. Roland Paris demonstrates that peacebuilding strategies focused narrowly on institutional sequencing or rapid stabilization often entrench fragile orders that collapse under stress. By contrast, political inclusion, credible rule of law, and distributive fairness significantly reduce the likelihood of renewed violence.

Positive peace also functions as a force multiplier for state capacity. Governments perceived as legitimate can govern at lower coercive cost. Social trust reduces the need for surveillance and repression, while inclusive institutions channel grievances into political processes rather than armed mobilization. Research from the Institute for Economics and Peace identifies strong correlations between positive peace indicators—such as low corruption, equitable resource distribution, and free information flows - and long-term security outcomes.¹³ These factors are not abstract ideals; they are measurable predictors of stability.

Critically, positive peace reframes security away from reactive control toward preventive governance. Traditional security paradigms treat violence as an episodic threat to be suppressed. Positive peace treats violence as a systemic failure to be corrected. This shift has profound implications for policy design. Investments in education, social protection, and accountable governance are often sidelined as “developmental” concerns, yet they consistently outperform militarized responses in preventing conflict escalation. As Amartya Sen argues, freedom, justice, and development are not separate from security - they constitute it.¹⁴

Moreover, positive peace is strategically cheaper over time. Managing instability through repression, peacekeeping, or repeated interventions imposes long-term financial and political costs. Transformative peacebuilding requires upfront investment, but it reduces the need for perpetual crisis management. The choice, therefore, is not between idealism and realism; it is between short-term calm and durable order.

The persistence of negative peace reflects a failure of imagination as much as policy. By treating peace as the absence of disruption rather than the presence of justice, decision-makers normalize fragile stability and institutionalize risk. Positive peace offers a different logic - one in which

¹³ Institute for Economics and Peace, *Positive Peace Report 2020* (Sydney: IEP, 2020).

¹⁴ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

security emerges not from silence enforced, but from societies organized to resolve conflict without violence. In a world marked by protracted crises and recurring wars, this is not an ethical aspiration; it is strategic common sense.

Implications for Policy and Peacebuilding Practice

Recognizing that the absence of war does not constitute peace demands a fundamental recalibration of policy and peacebuilding practice. First, policymakers must move beyond ceasefire-centric metrics and adopt broader indicators of peace that capture political legitimacy, social cohesion, and equitable access to resources. Measuring peace solely through reductions in violence obscures the structural conditions that make societies vulnerable to relapse. Peace assessments should therefore integrate indicators of governance quality, inequality, and public trust alongside traditional security benchmarks.

Second, peacebuilding strategies must shift from short-term stabilization to long-term political transformation. Elite-driven agreements that prioritize order over inclusion may deliver immediate calm but often entrench fragility. Sustainable peace requires inclusive political settlements, credible rule of law, and mechanisms that allow grievances to be addressed non-violently. Transitional justice, decentralization, and meaningful civic participation should be treated as core security investments rather than auxiliary reforms.

Finally, international actors must abandon the false dichotomy between security and development. Structural violence thrives where social protection, education, and economic opportunity are neglected. Integrating development policy into peace and security planning is therefore not an act of idealism but of strategic foresight. Peace that rests on justice and legitimacy reduces the long-term costs of repression, peacekeeping, and crisis response. In this sense, building positive peace is not merely about preventing war - it is about constructing durable political orders capable of sustaining stability without coercion.

Conclusion

Peace understood solely as the absence of war is a dangerously incomplete achievement. Negative peace may suppress open violence, but it does little to address the structural inequalities, political exclusions, and cultural narratives that sustain insecurity beneath the surface. When ceasefires, authoritarian stability, or frozen conflicts are treated as endpoints rather than interim conditions, they produce a positive illusion—the mistaken belief that silence signifies security. This illusion allows policymakers to declare success while societies remain deeply fractured, grievances unresolved, and institutions devoid of legitimacy. In such contexts, calm is maintained not through consent or justice, but through containment, coercion, or exhaustion, rendering peace inherently fragile.

Positive peace offers a fundamentally different and strategically superior framework. By prioritizing inclusive governance, social equity, and institutional legitimacy, it transforms peace

from a temporary pause in violence into a durable political and social condition. This is not an exercise in idealism but an investment in long-term stability: societies that resolve conflict through accountable institutions and equitable systems are less prone to relapse into violence and better equipped to manage dissent without coercion. The critical task, therefore, is to move beyond measuring peace by what is absent and to begin evaluating it by what is present. Until peace is built on justice rather than quiet, the world will continue to mistake managed instability for order - and pay the price when the illusion inevitably fractures.