



Exploring post-normal peace: The Role of Hope in an Ever-Divided World

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Abstract

In an age marked by systemic upheaval, protracted conflict, and widening global divides, the concept of peace is being redefined. This reflective essay explores the idea of post-normal peace, “the in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have not yet emerged, and nothing makes sense” (Sardar, 2010). Utilizing the concept of a polylogue—dialogic spaces that provide for “multiple logics, perspectives, voices, and existences,” and bring people together to generate critical insights (Kristeva, 1977; Sardar & Sweeney, 2016)—the authors each examine how traditional paradigms of peacebuilding are being challenged and how new approaches, rooted in hope, trust, and inclusive dialogue, are emerging in response. The authors (i) propose a reimagining of both leadership and peace practice - one in which peace is not imposed but practiced, and leadership is redefined as relational, inclusive, and anchored in radical imagination; and (ii) offer a powerful framework: radical hope as the moral compass, non-formal education as the vehicle for change, and trust as the essential fuel for a more just and peaceful future.

Keywords: hope, polylogue, protracted conflict, trust,

Introduction

If the pandemic taught us anything, it is hard to keep faith or trust in what we previously considered normal, conventional, or orthodox. Recent global events—including ongoing and emerging conflicts and the disruption to global order following the return of the Trump administration in January 2025—confirm that we are in post-normal times, “the in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have not yet emerged, and nothing makes sense” (Sardar, 2010). Conventions about how society is supposed to function have been undermined, and the assumptions that served as the bedrock of the global order have also evaporated. Thus, the conventional and the orthodox do not work anymore; we find ourselves face-to-face with new and emerging realities that we have yet to grasp, and we must abandon the ideas of control and management and rethink cherished notions (Sardar, 2010).

In this space of peace being reimagined as being implemented through strength, we enter the realm of Post-normal Peace. The concept of building peace has been disrupted, from diplomacy and negotiation to using leverage and force to push through to results. For the first time on a global scale, we, as thinkers

and practitioners, are being challenged in how we approach these issues and ideas. Post-normal Peace offers a framework for making sense of how we navigate the perilous perspectives of building peace with each other during times of heightened uncertainty. Through this lens, we investigate the ethical (and practical) implications of the ‘peace through strength’ praxis, which increasingly dominates global dialogues.

We postulate that it is only through a diverse exchange of ideas that we can gain a shared understanding of our current context and the potential opportunities and develop an inclusive way forward; therefore, we deploy the concept of a polylogue in this essay. Envisaged as spaces that provide for “multiple logics, perspectives, voices, and existences,” polylogues bring people together to generate critical insights (Kristeva, 1977; Sardar & Sweeney, 2016). In a polylogue, questions are more important than answers. It enables us to focus on the dynamic interconnections amongst complexity, contradictions, and chaos of post-normal times and develop new approaches to navigate astonishing diversity, contradictory possibilities, and chaotic potentials. In writing this polylogue, we ask some questions for internal reflections:

1. What is the key thing that struck you in terms of peace practice and thought?
2. How have “post-normal times” shaped and reshaped peace thought and practice?
3. What are the most challenging parts of these experiences?
4. How can we approach things differently?
5. What alternative peace paradigms can be envisioned?

In addition to creating a space for reflection and sharing, it is our hope that our approach contributes toward a more robust theoretical and methodological approach to the polylogues concept when reflecting on building peace and understanding this within the broader context of post-normal times theory.

Peace Prize

This section delves into the machinations of geopolitical permutations since Donald Trump became President of the U.S, the inherited and new conflicts, and the modality and viability of attempting to orientate towards peace based on the U.S. foreign policy strategy of “*Peace through Strength.*” This is interspersed with analysis of the juxtaposition of Donald Trump’s quest to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize through the “*Peace Through Strength*” foreign policy strategic doctrine. Since President Donald Trump’s new administration assumed power,

it inherited two major conflicts between Israel-Hamas in Gaza, Russia-Ukraine, and others that have flared up between Pakistan-India and Israel-Iran which have caused ripple effects across multiple fronts in the Middle East, Europe, South Asia, and beyond.

As Trump was being inaugurated as President of the U.S. for the second time, the sound boards were being echoed that if Trump can establish peace in the two major conflicts of Israel-Hamas and Russia-Ukraine, he deserves to receive the Nobel Peace Prize which former President Barack Obama received in 2009. U.S. National Security Adviser Mike Waltz echoed the same sentiments in the CPAC Conference 2025 by exclaiming that Trump will receive a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end conflicts in Europe and the Middle East.

Steve Witkoff, Trump’s Middle East Envoy reiterated the U.S. administration new foreign and defence policy goal of “peace through strength” at the FII Priority Summit 2025, a term that Ronald Reagan also used during his tenure, where Witkoff stressed at the Summit that it was U.S. leverage that helped the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel to materialize at the time Trump was inaugurated as President of the U.S. for the second time on January 20, 2025. The Trump pressure tactic of “all hell will break out”

played a critical role in bringing the conflicting parties towards a tentative ceasefire and sticking to the fragile three stage Gaza ceasefire and hostage exchange deal for a limited period of time, until it ended on 18 March 2025 when Israel launched surprise attacks on Gaza and recommenced its onslaught in the war-torn strip.

The “peace through strength” policy also carries the risk of blowback if the contextual historical, heritage, cultural, and religious sensitivities of impacted communities are not considered as part of any agreement. We have witnessed early manifestations of this with Trump’s utopian “vision for Gaza” and the subsequent reactions from Arab countries of rejecting the displacement of Palestinians while not directly negating the Trump idea partially based on the geo-economic and political ties the Arab countries have with the U.S. This is in part in direct response to public statements made by Trump in which he said he hopes the U.S. financial assistance to many of the Arab countries does not have to be used as part of the conditionality and bargaining process for his grandiose Gaza plan.

When it comes to Russia-Ukraine, the Trump Administration has met with Putin, as well as the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, where the message was that Trump

wants the killing to stop, and that the U.S. wants peace and is using its strength around the world to bring countries together. Trump then applied the pressure tactic of calling Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky a “dictator” and accused Zelensky of “refusing to have elections” where Ukraine has been under martial law since Russia invaded in February 2022, meaning elections are in fact suspended.

We also witnessed the unprecedented, heated exchange when Zelensky met with Trump at the Oval Office and openly challenged Trump on his softer approach to Putin and urged him to make “no compromise with a killer” to which Trump responded “You’re gambling with the lives of millions of people. You’re gambling with World War III, and what you’re doing is very disrespectful to the country, this country that’s backed you for more than a lot of people say they should have.” It went on with Trump stating to Zelensky, “You’re right now not in a very good position... You don’t have the cards right now with us, you start having problems right now.” After the disastrous meeting at the White House, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was promptly escorted out with Trump affirming he can return when he’s “ready for peace.”

The “peace through strength” U.S. policy is intertwined with transactional diplomacy tactics to orientate conflicting parties towards a peace agreement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. At the World Economic Forum 2025, Trump told NATO members to spend 5% of GDP on defence where it currently hovers between 2%-2.5% of GDP. Trump also put pressure on Ukraine to agree to a minerals deal, which Zelensky deemed as unfavourable to Ukraine at the time where the U.S. is promising to co-invest with Ukraine in its economy and natural resources. This deal was subsequently agreed and finalized in April 2025. Similarly, transactional diplomacy was also at play between Russia and the U.S. when they discussed cooperation on energy projects in the Arctic at a meeting in Saudi Arabia.

There is no doubt, despite the changing balance of power dynamics that are affecting our global polity, that the U.S. still holds significant leverage on the international stage in pivoting and steering conflicts towards deconfliction and or escalation. British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has stated that the UK is “ready and willing” to put UK troops on the ground in Ukraine to help guarantee its security as part of a peace deal. At the same time, he reiterated to President Trump in February 2025 that a “U.S. security guarantee

is essential for a lasting peace, because only the U.S. can deter Putin from attacking again.”

We are entering a period where country-first doctrines and national economic and geopolitical interests will trump transnational and supra-national frameworks. The U.S. introduction of a 25% tariff on all steel and aluminum imports is an example, along with Indian Prime Minister Narinder Modi’s recent visit to Washington DC where he coined the phrase “MAGA plus MIGA becomes MEGA” in terms of India-US partnerships for future prosperity.

The counterbalance to the “peace through strength” foreign policy strategy the Trump 2.0 administration is deploying is that currently we are witnessing the “strength” arm of the strategy but there are very little modicums of “peace” to write home about. This dimension was visible during the heightened escalation of tensions between Israel and Iran, where Israel launched surprise attacks on key military and nuclear facilities in Iran on 13 June 2025 using the pre-text of pre-emptive strike in international law. These attacks by Israel into the sovereign territorial integrity of Iran, which led to many civilian casualties and eliminated a lot of the top brass of the Iran’s military and intelligence strata, are categorized as illegal in International

Humanitarian Law, as there was no credible evidence presented to justify the “imminent threat” that the Iranian nuclear enrichment program was having.

During the Israel-Iran commonly phrased Twelve-Day-War, there were multiple missile reprisal attacks carried out by Iran in Israel as a response to Israel’s first and subsequent attacks on Iranian territory. The War came to an abrupt halt, after the U.S. launched attacks on three nuclear facilities in Iran, Fordo and Isfahan on 22 June 2025 using “bunker buster” bombs and the Iranians launched missile attacks targeting Al Udeid US Air Base in Qatar as part of a forewarned retaliation on 23 June 2025.

The Trump factor and U.S. leverage was on display again when Benjamin Netanyahu announced that “in light of the achievement of the operation, and in full coordination with President Trump, Israel has agreed to the President's proposal for a bilateral ceasefire.” The “strength” of U.S. military muscle and diplomatic leverage was used to establish a modicum of “peace” between Israel-Iran in a situation of heightened escalation and tension.

May 2025 witnessed an unprecedented flare up in South Asia between two nuclear neighbours, Pakistan-India. The conflict which lasted between 6-10 May 2025 saw a series of military strikes which both countries

struck deep into the territory of the other, with military and civilian casualties in both countries and along the line of control in Kashmir.

As tensions had reached boiling point, Trump spontaneously announced on the Truth Social Platform: “After a long night of talks mediated by the United States, I am pleased to announce that India and Pakistan have agreed to a FULL AND IMMEDIATE CEASEFIRE: Congratulations to both countries on using Common Sense and Great Intelligence.”

Trump used the lure of economic and trade opportunities (transactional diplomacy) that can materialize for both countries in their deals with the U.S. to broker a ceasefire. The U.S. initial stance in the conflict between the two nuclear neighbours was that it is a bilateral issue and they would not be intervening. However, after reports started to circulate in the U.S. that JD Vance called Prime Minister Modi to encourage a ceasefire talks after receiving “alarming intelligence”, the door and pathway to brokering a peace subsequently materialized. Since the ceasefire that has been agreed between Pakistan-India in May 2025, Trump has been openly taking the credit in the U.S. role in brokering the peace and preventing these two nuclear neighbours going at loggerheads against each other.

The diplomatic dance and geo-politicking in attempting to appease Trump and his quest to receive the Nobel Peace Prize was notched up another level when Pakistan formally recommended Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize, citing his “decisive diplomatic intervention” following the spike in violence and worst regional conflagration between India and Pakistan since 1971. The Peace Prize appeasement of Trump did not stop with Pakistan’s formal recommendation. During a White House meeting in July 2025, Benjamin Netanyahu told Trump that he would nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize. At the beginning of the meeting, Netanyahu presented Trump with a letter that he said he had sent to a committee for the Nobel Peace Prize commending Trump’s efforts to end conflicts in the Middle East.

Many international observers have been perplexed by the irony of witnessing Netanyahu putting forward a recommendation for the Nobel Peace Prize when he himself is facing warrants of arrest from the International Criminal Court (ICC), including the war crime of starvation as a method of warfare and the crimes against humanity of murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts.

During Trump’s 2.0 tenure, at the time of writing this essay, the protracted wars of Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza have not

come to an end, with regular escalatory flare ups continuing via Israeli military interventions across multiple states in the Middle East and the diplomatic route still in a state of deadlock on the Russia-Ukraine brief.

The international rules-based order that was constructed after World War II is being dismantled, ignored, selectively applied and disappplied at the whim of nation states and their leaders based on their own vested interests. When attempts are made to bring perpetrators and protagonists to justice, we are witnessing a concerted campaign of “lawfare,” malicious maligning of individuals and organizations that work as part of the global institutional frameworks that are working and campaigning for peace, justice, human rights, and accountability for the victims of crimes.

This is evidenced in the recent U.S. sanctions on Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese via a U.S. Presidential Executive Order alleging that Ms. Albanese had “directly engaged with the ICC in efforts to investigate, arrest, detain, or prosecute nationals of the United States or Israel, without the consent of the two countries” which he called a “gross infringement on national sovereignty.” This Executive Order came shortly after a Human Rights Council report was published in July 2025 titled

“From Economy of Occupation to Economy of Genocide” on the situation of Human Rights in the Palestine territories occupied since 1967. The sanctions have drawn criticism from many, including UN Spokesperson, Stephane Dujaric, who called them unacceptable and emphasized that Special Rapporteurs are independent experts appointed by the Human Rights Council to monitor and report on human rights issues worldwide. They serve in their personal capacity; they are not UN staff and receive no financial remuneration for their work. Similar pressure tactics have also been used to sanction ICC Chief Prosecutor Karim Khan in February 2025 for seeking to investigate U.S. and Israeli nationals and has successfully sought arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant.

The quest for peace and indeed the drive to receive the Nobel Peace Prize by Trump cannot come about by dismantling the international rules-based order system and orchestrating it to dance to a tune based on illegal, misaligned personal and collective vested interests that are at odds with the virtues and principles of institutionalism, justice, peace, and humanity. The global polity is also witnessing a rebalancing exercise with many countries that are

conventionally coined to be from the Global South becoming apprehensive and disenchanted by the power imbalance and institutional structures that exist where there is a perceived pre-conceived bias to favour the countries who are from the Global North. We have begun to witness the emergence and unfolding of new power blocks based on geopolitical realities incorporating many countries from the Global South such as BRICS that seek to challenge these conventional global power structures. Many geopolitical and geoeconomic observers have opined on the process of de-dollarization where the new geopolitical landscape could affect the dollar’s future, including its worth and status.

However, the Trump administration has been quick to weaken its emergence by using the transactional diplomacy pressure tactics by threatening to impose 100% tariffs on a block of nine members of the BRICS group of developing nations if they were to create a rival currency to the U.S. dollar and stating “the group would end very quickly if they ever formed in a meaningful way.” For “peace through strength” strategic doctrine to succeed, it is imperative that the international rules-based order that champions the causes of justice, humanity, proportionality, equity, human rights, environmentalism, and the

responsibility to protect are universally adhered to and are not neglected at the whims of democratic, autocratic and undemocratic dictators.

If President Trump can establish a modicum of peace in the Middle East, Russia-Ukraine conflicts, a plausible case for receiving the Nobel Peace Prize is certainly in the offering. However, suppose the Nobel Peace Prize is received by adopting a top-down vertical carrot and stick, good cop, bad cop foreign policy-peace through strength approach dynamic that does not factor in or address the contextual root causes of the conflicts in the regions that have been spotlighted. In that case, the likelihood of achieving long-lasting sustainable peace shall diminish along with the glimmers of hope the innocent victims and parties of these protracted conflicts carry to see these conflicts come to an end.

Reassembling Peace: Trust, Hope, and Non-Formal Education in an Age of Flux

The world is experiencing a moment of **peace flux**—a state characterized by transitional peacefulness, pervasive conflict, and escalating structural violence. This flux reflects a broader global condition of fragility, complexity, and contradiction. Over the past decade, the nature of violent conflict and

peace has undergone dramatic evolution.

Challenges to the established order now arise from a multitude of interconnected drivers: political upheaval, climate stress, economic inequality, demographic shifts, faith-based and cultural identities, and demands for autonomy. These pressures generate instability that transcends borders and identities, producing complex vulnerabilities.

Today's communities are no longer defined merely by geography; they are ideological and aspirational. External crises mirror a deeper collective unrest. The geographies of conflict now include city streets, healthcare systems, schools, places of worship, and digital spaces. This societal and internal erosion of peace is evident in the rise of mental illness, non-communicable diseases, systemic exclusions, and intergenerational inequalities.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and exacerbated these fissures. While some states appear stable, many are fragmenting from within. Marginalized populations feel increasingly alienated, often lacking access to legitimate channels for redress—sometimes turning to radicalism or violence. In this landscape, violence is not merely political; it is psychological, cultural, environmental, and systemic.

These forms of conflict are not confined to traditional battlefields but spill into homes, streets, and minds—manifesting in fractured communities, declining well-being, and generational despair. In such a world, peace cannot be reduced to the absence of war. It must be redefined as the creation of conditions—social, emotional, structural—under which people can live with dignity and difference. Understanding and building such peace requires upstream strategies rooted not only in policy, but in practice, education, and hope.

To create sustainable peace, we must understand how these risks intersect. Crisis response alone is inadequate. We must invest upstream to build societies capable of addressing conflict without harm. This vision aligns with the concept of positive peace: societies where justice is fair, power is accountable, safety is assured, prosperity is equitable, and well-being is sustained. In such societies, conflict does not necessarily lead to violence.

This current peace flux is not only a sign of turbulence -it is also an opportunity. It opens a space to question, critically and collectively, what peace should mean in an unjust world. As global power dynamics regress into Cold War-era logics of securitization and deterrence, young people

find themselves both the inheritors of unresolved histories and the architects of emerging possibilities. In recent years, they have been called to navigate an interwoven crisis of violence, inequality, ecological collapse, and social fragmentation—with both vulnerability and extraordinary agency. Rather than waiting to inherit the future, many are already building it through community-led responses, cultural reimaginings, and deeply rooted forms of care.

The following section draws on the experiences of the Big Six Youth Organizations, particularly through the Global Youth Mobilization (GYM) initiative, and reflections from an intergenerational polylogue process. It explores how youth-led solutions, supported by non-formal education (NFE), constitute a form of radical hope in praxis: not abstract optimism, but grounded, intentional, and transformative action fit for post-normal times.

In this sense, peace must be radical, proactive, and inclusive. It demands a reimagining of educational systems, leadership models, and civic engagement strategies that are participatory, equitable, and rooted in human dignity. This is the foundation upon which young people around the world are building—not through formal

structures alone, but through a vibrant ecosystem of non-formal education and youth-led solutions that embody what we call radical hope. Together, these elements suggest a new ethic of peace—one that is dialogic, distributed, and grounded in lifelong learning.

Charting Peace: Radical Hope and Youth-Led Praxis

Radical hope, as Sardar (2010) describes it in post-normal times—an era marked by chaos, complexity, and contradiction—becomes a strategy, a goal, and an ethic. In such times, traditional policy responses and conventional peacebuilding paradigms often struggle. It is within these spaces of uncertainty that youth voices are not only heard but actively engaged as proactive forces for reimagining peace.

Drawing on Lear's (2006) conception, radical hope is the belief in a future goodness that transcends the current horizon of understanding. It endures even when the foundations of cultural life collapse—when the future becomes unimaginable in terms of present-day values, systems, or meanings. Through the story of Plenty Coups, the last great Chief of the Crow Nation, Lear illustrates how radical hope requires the courage to envisage a future that cannot yet be fully understood. Unlike passive optimism,

it is grounded in ethical resilience and openness to the emergence of new ways of being. It enables individuals and communities to move forward with integrity, even when the path ahead is uncertain. Hence, radical hope offers young people a framework to reimagine peacebuilding and community cohesion through daily acts of community care, resistance, creativity, and collective organizing. It ensures that hope does not remain abstract or unattainable but becomes a lived and actionable force for transformation.

The Global Youth Mobilization (GYM) initiative, launched in 2020 by the Big Six in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, exemplifies this ethic of radical hope in practice. In its first phase, GYM funded over 600 youth-led projects across more than 100 countries, tackling issues such as mental health, digital literacy, climate action, gender equity, and education recovery. These were not top-down initiatives. Each project was designed, implemented, and evaluated by young people embedded in their communities—seeking small-scale support to turn local ideas into meaningful action.

In its second phase, GYM has received nearly 20,000 applications across two rounds and is expected to support over 1,000 additional youth-led projects. Once again, the model of youth assessment and peer review

remains central. This overwhelming response signals the deep and urgent desire of young people to be heard, supported, and accompanied as they claim their voice and agency.

What unites these diverse initiatives is not a common methodology but a shared ethos: action rooted in agency, co-creation, empathy, and mutual trust. These efforts reject the narrative that “youth are the future” and instead assert youth are here and now. By trusting young people to lead, GYM moves beyond symbolic participation—it demonstrates what peacebuilding looks like when radical hope becomes praxis.

Non-Formal Education: A Vehicle for Peace

Non-formal education (NFE) remains a core part of this story. It is the story of the Big Six Youth Organizations collectively aiming to reach 250 million young people annually. Recognized for its learner-centered, experiential, and voluntary approach, NFE offers the flexibility, relevance, skills, and trust-building capacity necessary for promoting peace in volatile environments. It develops critical life skills—such as empathy, intercultural understanding, negotiation, and non-violent communication—that are vital for both personal and collective transformation.

The Big Six Joint Position Paper on NFE (2023) stresses that this form of education helps young people become "active citizens and agents of change." These are not just aspirational labels; they represent real lived experiences. Youth-led solutions supported by NFE platforms foster agency and develop new leadership styles, especially among those often excluded from formal systems. It encourages critical thinking and motivates young people on a lifelong path of service, imbued with the values of volunteerism and framed within emotional intelligence.

One example is the Youth as Agents of Behavioural Change (YABC) initiative, which integrates experiential learning, arts, reflective practices, and peer education to promote peace, dignity, and inclusion. Initially developed within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement for an education program, YABC has since influenced programs across other thematic areas such as climate and sport. It exemplifies the pedagogical dimensions of radical hope, offering practical tools to develop emotional resilience and ethical leadership.

NFE also plays a crucial role in fostering intercultural and intergenerational dialogue. By creating spaces where differences are neither erased nor ignored but genuinely explored, NFE helps to reduce fear and

mistrust while strengthening community cohesion. In settings as varied as post-conflict zones, urban outskirts, and rural communities affected by climate change, these practices are transforming the potential of education for peace. NFE must be integrated into national education frameworks, supported through public policy, and recognized for its contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, learning must be intergenerational, place-based, and inclusive of the diverse ways people come to know and act in the world.

Trust: The Fuel for Peace

If radical hope offers the moral compass and non-formal education (NFE) serves as the vehicle, then trust is the fuel that propels peace forward. Youth leaders across diverse contexts have consistently cited mistrust—in institutions, in leaders, in systems—as a primary barrier to meaningful engagement. Trust, therefore, must be viewed not as an assumed condition, but as a constructed, dynamic force essential to peacebuilding. In fragmented societies—those living within what has been called the "peace flux"—trust becomes the critical element that holds the pieces together. Like the broken shards of a mirror, our shared humanity is fractured along lines of power, identity, and history. Rebuilding peace in these contexts requires

reassembling trust, not to erase difference, but to honour complexity and enable plural truths to co-exist.

Trust is not just a value—it is a set of practices and relationships that sustain inclusion, cooperation, and resilience. I have previously outlined (Saleem, 2023) a powerful framework for this relational rebuilding through the 5 R's of Trust-Building:

- Responsibility – Taking ownership of one's actions, biases, and impacts is the foundation of integrity. Acknowledging harm and modelling accountability is crucial, especially in postcolonial contexts where institutional trust has often been undermined.
- Relationships – Trust is forged through empathy, co-creation, and enduring solidarity. It is inherently relational, cultivated through consistent and reciprocal engagement.
- Respect – Recognizing the dignity, perspectives, and agency of others allows for vulnerability and inclusive dialogue. Respect is foundational in intercultural and intergenerational spaces.
- Reflect – Deep self-awareness, humility, and critical reflection on

power and positionality ensure that trust is not performative but structurally embedded.

- Renew – Trust is not static. It requires continual investment, repair, and re-commitment to endure.

Complementing this, I have also drawn on the Trust Quotient model by Maister, Green, and Galford (2000), which evaluates trustworthiness through four factors: credibility, reliability, intimacy, and low self-orientation. In peacebuilding contexts, high self-orientation -when institutional actors prioritize their control over community ownership -erodes trust. Conversely, redistributing power and fostering accountability strengthens it.

These frameworks are not abstract; they are actively embodied in initiatives like the GYM. GYM places trust in the hands of young people—resourcing them to define local problems, co-create solutions, and assess peer-led projects without external imposition. It operates on the principle that youth are not just the future—they are leaders of the present. Trust, in this model, is not earned through consultation but enacted through co-governance. It decentralizes leadership and grounds accountability in community agency.

Trust also plays a decolonial role. Colonialism’s most enduring legacies include

the erosion of epistemic trust—the silencing of voices and the denial of community wisdom. Rebuilding trust post-colonially requires more than reform: it calls for the restoration of cultural agency, historical dignity, and the affirmation of multiple truths. Inclusive dialogue, intersectional reflection, and intergenerational co-learning become radical acts of care.

Thus, trust is not merely the foundation of peace—it is its lifeblood, its fuel. It allows fractured communities to imagine new futures, fosters relational repair, and enables the practice of radical hope. Trust doesn’t come from being invited to the table. It comes from knowing your voice will shape the menu.

An Ethics for Post-normal Peace Reassembly

In analyzing youth-led practices from the Global Youth Mobilization (GYM) and the broader Big Six ecosystem—particularly through the lenses of radical hope, non-formal education, and trust-building—three core ethical orientations emerge:

- Empathetic Listening: A disciplined and open engagement with uncomfortable truths and silences. It resists the temptation to prematurely resolve difference and instead holds space for complexity and discomfort.

- **Shared Vulnerability:** A conscious shift away from performative certainty toward mutual learning, humility, and emotional openness. It allows youth and adults alike to be learners, not just leaders.
- **Polyphonic Power:** An ethic that values multiplicity. It embraces many truths, ways of knowing, and forms of leadership, recognising that collaboration across difference is essential to systemic change.

These ethics require not only recognition but support and scale. Yet scaling does not mean standardizing. It means deepening these values across the systems that shape our lives—education, governance, civil society, and humanitarian action.

Together, radical hope directing non-formal education, powered by trust, points toward a broader vision of lifelong learning as a foundation for just and resilient societies. This requires a redefinition of who counts as a learner, what knowledge matters, and how learning is practiced over time. Peace must not be reserved for moments of crisis. It must be lived, learned, and renewed throughout life. The experience of GYM and the Big Six is clear: when young people are trusted, resourced, and included, they don't just

transform their communities—they begin to rewire the very systems around them.

From Compass to Praxis: Charting Peace in Post-normal Times

In a world marked by fragmentation, uncertainty, and systemic exclusion, peace can no longer be imagined as a fixed destination. It must be understood as a journey—messy, nonlinear, and continually negotiated across differences. This journey requires direction, tools, and energy. It requires youth at the helm.

In this context, I propose an interlocking framework: radical hope is the compass, pointing us toward futures that are not yet fully visible, but still worth pursuing. Non-formal education (NFE) is the vehicle, offering flexible, inclusive, and locally grounded means for navigating that path—particularly for young people at the margins of formal systems. And most critically, trust is the fuel. Without trust—between generations, across institutions, among peers—neither the vision nor the vehicle can move forward.

Peace travels at the speed of trust -in post-normal times, it is the most vital fuel we have.

Non-formal education creates space for trust-building. It transforms the adult–youth relationship from directive to dialogic. It affirms that young people are not future

peacebuilders, but present ones. In NFE spaces, youth are not passive recipients of knowledge or trust—they become its architects. In this way, non-formal education becomes not just a means of learning, but an infrastructure for peace.

Radical hope is not wishful thinking. It is the disciplined, ongoing work of relationship-building, power redistribution, and imaginative courage. Youth-led solutions, grounded in non-formal education and supported by global movements like the Global Youth Mobilization (GYM), offer a compelling pathway forward. The work of the Big Six and initiatives like YABC show that young people are already leading. They are not passengers or inheritors; they are designers, builders, and navigators of peace.

Through youth-led solutions, radical hope becomes praxis. Through NFE, learning becomes liberation. Through trust, fractured systems begin to repair. I conclude not with answers, but with an invitation: To rebuild peace is not to eliminate conflict, but to transform how we live with it. And to move toward justice in post-normal times is to keep hope as our compass, learning as our vehicle, and trust as our fuel. It is to recognize youth not as subjects of peace interventions, but as authors of ethical futures. And to invest in non-formal education as the space where

radical hope can be practiced, scaled, and sustained.

Transforming Leadership: Centering hope, compassion, and collective action

For those of us engaged in or dedicated to peacebuilding, humanitarian work, and social justice, the violence and upheaval of recent years has resulted in a deep sense of collective grief. Many of us are grappling with feelings of anger and sorrow for the widespread and often unnecessary suffering happening throughout the world- fueled by political, economic, and social forces that remain unchanged or worsen the harm. This is compounded in contexts like the United States, where I live, where there is growing hostility toward the very ideals of human rights, justice, and equality. Leaders increasingly frame the work of activists, educators, and peacebuilders as unpatriotic or irrelevant, despite the critical roles these individuals play. Combined with budget and program cuts, it is no surprise that burnout is widespread and hope in the future is faltering for many.

This despair is not limited to those engaged in peace and social justice; it is pervasive in many communities in the U.S. and worldwide. Alongside this fading hope - fed by and instigating rising tensions,

inequality, and uncertainty - is growing fear. This fear breeds polarization, and as we retreat into familiar identities, viewing those outside our group as “other”, our collective imagination has narrowed and made space for harmful, fear-driven leadership to take root.

To counter this we need leaders who offer an alternative - rather than leaders who exploit our fears to achieve their agenda or stoke greater tension and divisions among us, we need leaders who can lead from a place of hope, humility, and shared humanity. We need leaders who foster connection instead of division, build trust across differences, and help us remember that a more just and peaceful future is still within reach if we are willing to reimagine how we lead and who gets to lead.

In recent years I have had the privilege of working with and learning from two organizations - Euphrates Institute and the Center for Compassionate Leadership (CFCL) - who are pushing back on dominant leadership ideals in favour of models that centre compassion, care, empowerment, and shared leadership. While their contexts and strategies differ, these organizations and the individuals who participate in their programs share a deep commitment to peace, justice, and liberation, and to leading change through nonviolent, inclusive, and compassion-

centered approaches. Their example has been a powerful source of inspiration for me, and a reminder of what is possible, even in times of chaos and grief.

The following section discusses the Euphrates and CFCL leadership programs and the leadership ideals and approaches they embody and cultivate in others through their work. Most of these ideas are not new; they are rooted in peace and justice movements and existing scholarship and practice. However, they are being uplifted and reframed in our current context, and with that offer us the opportunity to imagine what could be possible if these ideals and lessons were extended to broader audiences and integrated in our broader societies and cultures. The section concludes by exploring how this time of upheaval might hold the potential for a cultural shift—one that more boldly supports and sustains this kind of transformative leadership.

About the leadership programs

The mission of Euphrates Institute is to equip, connect, and uplift peacebuilders around the world, working toward a future where humanity collectively chooses and practices peace to end all forms of violence. Their Peace Practice Alliance (PPA) program was created to cultivate communities of peace

leaders and provide them with the tools, practices, and support needed to thrive. Since 2020 over 200 peace leaders from 61 countries have participated in this virtual, 6-month intensive program. The PPA program is grounded in integral peace leadership (McIntyre Miller & Green, 2015) and centers around four pillars of peace practice: personal, interpersonal, community, and global. Participants learn with and from one another through bi-weekly calls, an online learning platform, and small group discussions.

The Center for Compassionate Leadership's mission is "to advance compassionate methods of leadership by integrating best practices of modern leadership, evidence-based science, and contemplative wisdom" (Center for Compassionate Leadership, 2025, training page). They pursue this through thought leadership, research, trainings, community building, and collaborations. Since 2019 more than 800 leaders from organizations and institutions, representing at least 65 countries, have participated in their Compassionate Leadership Certificate Training. During this virtual, eight-week program, participants come together for interactive monthly calls in which topics related to compassionate leadership are taught and discussed.

Within each organization's target audience, there are a diverse set of individuals who have participated in their programs. The peacebuilders who have completed Euphrates' PPA program are diverse in terms of age, experience, and geography, as well as the focus and type of peace work they are engaged in. CFCL Training participants come from various sectors (e.g., government, private sector, nonprofits, academia) and vary in their levels and type of formal and informal leadership. The curriculum of both programs brings together theory and practice, with an emphasis on providing participants with practical, real-world practices and examples. They are grounded in research from various fields - social science and leadership studies, as well as neuroscience, contemplative practice, religious studies, and other fields.

Inspiring hope, not fear

Many of the great leaders of our time have been driven by a deeper purpose and their steadfast belief in the possibility of a better future. They inspire hope, foster connection, and mobilize collective action. They understand that while fear may be effective in driving action in the short-term, it rarely leads to sustainable change, and instead often fosters more aggression and distrust, which can further exacerbate issues.

Euphrates and CFCL share this approach and embed it in their leadership programs. Euphrates believes in “the transformative power of individuals to create positive change in the world” (Euphrates Institute, 2024) and that through the collective practice of peace leadership at personal, interpersonal and community levels, sustainable global change will be possible. According to CFCL, “Compassion is the means to lead humanity forward from a world of competition and conflict to one of understanding, cooperation, equity, and justice... a more compassionate, peaceful world where individuals are free to express their full, innate potential for the greater good of all” (2025, vision page). They do not shy away from the ugliness of the world or the complex challenges that lie ahead; they approach them head-on and inspire others with a radical vision of hope for the future.

Redefining strength

Both organizations define and demonstrate leadership strength very differently from what many think of traditionally and certainly quite differently from our world leaders who are guided by the political and military concept of ‘peace through strength’. Rather than defining strength as dominance over others or pursuing

peace through military or economic control, they favour leadership approaches centered in compassion and collective leadership.

To them, *how* one leads is critically important to achieving lasting change. As a result, they emphasize approaches and practices that create supportive, inclusive spaces. For CFCL, the focus is on building a culture of compassion, which includes psychological safety and applying a growth mindset. In the PPA, Euphrates emphasizes the importance of deep listening, nonviolent communication, creating safe spaces for dialogue and collaboration that bring together diverse voices and perspectives, and the importance of inviting others into leadership - recognizing that all members of the community have unique gifts to offer. In both cases, the program leads demonstrate their teachings in action by creating warm, welcoming, and non-judgmental spaces for dialogue and exploration. Their care for the participants is evident, and they create a culture of mutual respect and care within each cohort of their programs.

Building inner strength and personal peace

In both programs, the leaders’ ability to be truly effective in their work and to contribute to transformative change begins from within.

They recognize that a leaders' state of mind and physical wellbeing will have a major impact on their behaviour, capacity to reason, creativity, and ability to empathize. In order for leaders to show up fully, even in times of stress, and to practice compassion with others, they need to have practices that enable them to develop and maintain inner peace and strength.

As a result, both programs emphasize the importance of increasing self-awareness, cultivating compassion for the self, and practices that promote personal wellbeing. The Euphrates PPA program begins with a focus on 'personal peace', which includes getting in touch with their mind, heart and body; practices for self-regulation and self-care, and self-compassion. Similarly, a core focus of the CFCL training is inner strength, "leverag[ing] awareness, self-compassion, and vulnerability to elevate your leadership presence and potential" (Center for Compassionate Leadership, 2025).

Fostering connection

In addition to elevating inner peace, both organizations (and their programs) emphasize the importance of connection in creating the conditions for transformative change to take place. The PPA program includes leadership approaches and practices designed to promote

partnerships and foster collaboration across generational, cultural, and faith-based lines. By inviting leadership from diverse voices, partnering with others, and nurturing inclusive dialogue, they help build a sense of shared purpose and mutual support. In the CFCL program, deepening connection is a core theme, and includes discussions on fostering high-quality relationships, creating cultures of safety, increasing belonging, and navigating difficult conversations skillfully within the workplace (Center for Compassionate Leadership, 2025).

In addition, the program models of PPA and CFCL double as a means to restore and re-energize participants, many of whom are suffering from burnout and faltering hope, or who may feel isolated in their desire for and belief in change. Each program is designed to be very interactive, with opportunities for participants to get to know and connect with one another throughout. Through the act of coming together and sharing their stories, challenges, and ideas, participants gain a renewed sense of belonging and hope.

Supporting systems transformation

While both programs target individual leaders and hold a steadfast belief in the power of individuals to create positive

change, Euphrates and CFCL also recognize that we operate within a complex set of systems and structures. To achieve long-term, sustainable change, we also need to address the root causes of issues and take multidimensional approaches that account for these complex factors. This takes time and collective action.

For Euphrates, as an organization and in their PPA program, leadership requires more holistic approaches that emphasize nonviolent solutions and the promotion of positive peace—creating the conditions for collective flourishing by addressing the root causes of conflict and advancing justice. Participants in the PPA program learn about and discuss systems thinking and mapping, social networks and nonviolent action, and decolonization. While the CFCL program has a narrower focus on workplaces and institutions, they also include content and discussions focused on creating and maintaining cultures of compassion within these spaces, considering the influence of the broader culture and other systems in which they are held.

Reimagining leadership

The events of recent years have exposed the deep cracks in our systems—and with them, the limitations of leadership models

rooted in dominance, division, and fear.

Organizations like Euphrates and the Center for Compassionate Leadership are daring to imagine a new possible future in which leadership is centered around compassion, driven by hope, and creates opportunities for collective action that drive meaningful change. The interest in their programs demonstrates that there are many people worldwide who are ready for and interested in this type of change, and the evaluations of these programs demonstrate the transformational potential of these types of programs.

History shows us that times of great disruption can also be a turning point, and moments of profound grief and upheaval often open opportunities to imagine and build something better. *What if this moment is such an inflection point—not only for our world, but for how we lead within it?* If we can transform this moment into a catalyst for reflection and renewal, there is an opportunity here to reimagine and help reshape leadership: not as control, but as compassion; not as individual heroism, but as shared responsibility. This kind of leadership—rooted in hope—has the potential to create positive change in our communities, workplaces, families, nations, environment, and world.

Conclusion: Radical Hope as Leadership for Collective Transformation

The world today teeters between transactional diplomacy and transformational leadership. The resurgence of “peace through strength” as a dominant foreign policy doctrine—articulated in military coercion, economic leverage, and vertical diplomacy—seeks to engineer geopolitical stability through pressure and conditionality. But as recent events have shown, such approaches risk perpetuating cycles of resentment, disempowerment, and unsustainable peace. When peace is imposed without context, without care, and without dialogue, it becomes brittle—an agreement on paper, not a transformation of reality.

Against this backdrop, this essay has offered a different proposition: that peace must be practiced—not merely negotiated—and that leadership must be redefined. True peace is not the result of force or fear, but of relationships, rootedness, and radical imagination. Across the polylogue, a powerful framework emerges—one that situates **radical hope** as the moral compass, **non-formal education (NFE)** as the generative vehicle, and **trust** as the vital fuel. This triad is not idealistic; it is already alive in the world. It is embodied by the young people mobilizing through initiatives like the Global

Youth Mobilization (GYM) and the broader Big Six ecosystem, and the work being done by Euphrates Institute, the Center for Compassionate Leadership, and many others worldwide.

What this moment demands is not just new agreements or institutions, but new *ethics of engagement*. It requires **empathetic listening, shared vulnerability**, and **polyphonic power**—practices that resist simplification and honour complexity. If the Nobel Peace Prize is to mean anything in this age of shattered mirrors and deep rupture, it must recognize not only outcomes, but **processes rooted in justice**. Peace cannot be engineered from above while trust is eroded from below. It cannot be brokered through dominance while truth is suppressed or awarded while communities are silenced. Peace, to be lasting, must be relational. And leadership, to be ethical, must be rooted in radical hope.

We are living in post-normal times -times of uncertainty and contradiction -but also of tremendous possibility. The mirror may be shattered, but it is not beyond repair. Youth-led movements, NFE ecosystems, new models of leadership, and cross-cultural solidarities are already gathering the shards—not to restore an illusion of unity, but to assemble a new mosaic of shared humanity. In this

mosaic, each voice matters. Each act of courage counts.

Let us then reimagine leadership not as command, but as accompaniment. Let us invest in the spaces—non-formal education, polylogues, intergenerational movements—where peace is lived, not theorized. Let us

treat hope not as an abstraction, but as a commitment: to do the hard, relational work of reassembling peace with care, justice, and trust at its heart.

This is not only possible. It is already underway.

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