

Can Sustainability and Neutrality Lead Humanity beyond War?

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the relationship between war, development, and peace as a central question of contemporary civilization. Starting from the hypothesis that, after the Second World War, humanity could have directed science, technology, and production toward the rejection of war and international cooperation, the contribution examines the link between modernization, poverty, productive dependence, and conflict. It shows how the promise of development is compromised whenever economic growth remains subordinated to armed competition, social marginalization, and the unequal control of strategic resources. From this perspective, sustainability and neutrality are not configured as mere political options, but rather as normative principles for a different organization of international coexistence. Sustainability subordinates growth to the protection of life, the environment, and social dignity; neutrality, understood in an active sense, removes relations among states from the logic of military blocs and permanent enmity. The central thesis maintains that only a global order founded on productive cooperation, food security, technological responsibility, and the reduction of inequalities can transform peace from a moral aspiration into a structural principle of world organization. “Within this framework, sustainability and neutrality should be understood not as contingent political choices, but as enduring normative principles for building a global order no longer governed by the recurrence of war.” The argumentative path of the essay therefore proceeds through several historical and geopolitical turning points in which war, development, and poverty appear closely intertwined: Chinese modernization after the fractures of the twentieth century, the industrial transfer from the West to Asia, competition for natural resources, new forms of wartime mobilization, and the persistence of social masses exposed to marginalization. In this framework, war does not appear as an inevitable destiny of humanity, but as the outcome of an economic and political organization that continues to produce dependence, exclusion, and the availability of poor lives to be sacrificed. The question guiding this contribution is

therefore whether sustainability and neutrality can be transformed from moral principles into concrete instruments for freeing contemporary civilization from the recurrence of war and from extreme poverty as one of its underlying preconditions. The essay develops a broad theoretical and historical argument about the relationship between war, poverty, industrial relocation, sustainability, and neutrality. It does not use a statistical model, dataset, or measurable dependent and independent variables. Accordingly, no quantitative analysis, uncertainty estimates, or statistical tests support the central causal claims, and p-values are not applicable or reported. Instead, it uses selected historical and geopolitical cases to explore recurring mechanisms through which material deprivation, productive dependence, political exclusion, and security competition may contribute to conflict.

Keywords

Sustainability, Neutrality, War and Peace, Global Development, Food Security, Technological Responsibility, Industrial Relocation, Social Justice, Resource Conflicts

1. Introduction

China followed a historical path very different from Europe's after the Second World War. The collapse of the Qing dynasty, China's last imperial dynasty, opened a long period of political fragmentation, foreign pressure, republican experimentation, civil war, and external aggression. The government established in 1912 did not immediately create a stable national order; rather, it revealed the difficulty of transforming an ancient imperial structure into a modern state capable of resisting both internal division and foreign domination.

The central question, therefore, is not merely what new weapons or instruments of destruction humanity can invent, but whether future generations may one day live in an age in which such weapons have become obsolete and are remembered only as relics of a less mature civilization. The present age, however, does not yet seem to move toward that horizon. On the contrary, it is marked by the multiplication of wars in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, and by armed conflicts in which the control of mineral wealth, oil, rare earths, and other strategic resources often becomes more important than the protection of human life. In this sense, the very resources that could sustain development, food security, and technological progress too often become causes of persecution, dependency, internal conflict, and war (Diamond, 1997; Fagan, 2017; Atlani-Duault & Dozon, 2011).

For this reason, the problem of war cannot be separated from the problem of development. When economic growth is based on domination, speculation, relocation driven only by labor-cost advantages, and the unequal control of essential resources, it generates instability rather than peace. A truly sustainable civilization must therefore increase the productivity of the Earth not in order to

feed new forms of competition, but to guarantee food security, dignity, education, technological progress and real participation in the benefits of modernity for all people (Sen, 2009; Raworth, 2017; UNDP, 2021).

Artificial intelligence offers a further and particularly revealing example of the thesis stated in the Abstract. Like technology and development more broadly, AI is not neutral in its historical effects; its consequences depend on the political, legal, and moral order within which it is designed, governed, and deployed. If subordinated to military competition, surveillance, and the unequal control of strategic resources, it may reinforce the logic of conflict. If instead guided by sustainability, neutrality, food security, and human dignity, it may contribute to forms of security no longer founded upon fear, scarcity, and permanent enmity (Cossiga, 2021; Diamandis & Kotler, 2014).

Neutrality, understood in this broader sense, is neither indifference to injustice nor a retreat from responsibility. It is the active refusal to organize international life around permanent enemies, military blocs, and the expectation of future wars. If sustainability offers the material basis for a more balanced world, neutrality may offer the political and ethical method through which states can learn to cooperate without converting every crisis into a battlefield (Kissinger, 2022; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010).

The history of modern China also shows that economic modernization does not automatically produce political freedom. After the Maoist period and the subsequent opening of the economy, the protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989 revealed the tension between demands for reform, civil participation, and the persistence of authoritarian control (Fukuyama, 1992; Zhao, 1993; Naughton, 2009).

The Chinese social situation at the end of the 1980s was especially fragile. The repression of democratic demands appeared to freeze political opening, while economic liberalization in the West encouraged an industrial transfer of vast proportions toward Asia. The Chinese case therefore became decisive: a country still poor and lacking political freedoms offered Western companies very low labor costs, an immense workforce, and a work culture shaped over centuries. Entrepreneurs grasped this opportunity before economists fully understood it, turning Chinese poverty into a competitive advantage and opening a phase that would profoundly reshape Western industry.

The repression of the democratic movement marked the closure of political liberalization, but it did not end economic reform. On the contrary, the subsequent political retrenchment and temporary economic caution were followed by Deng Xiaoping's 1992 Southern Tour, which re-legitimized accelerated reform and prepared the way for the Fourteenth Party Congress and the formal adoption of the "socialist market economy" (Zhao, 1993; Naughton, 2009). Naughton argues that the model emerging after 1989 became a high-input, high-investment, high-growth regime in which political concentration and economic modernization reinforced one another (Naughton, 2009). In this sense, China's post-1989 modernization was primarily economic rather than political: it combined restored party control with renewed market opening, foreign investment, export manufacturing, infra-

structure expansion, and preparation for accession to the World Trade Organization (Zhao, 1993; Lardy, 1995; Ianchovichina & Martin, 2004).

Within this framework, opening to the market can also be interpreted as part of a political search for stability after the upheavals of 1989. At the same time, Western firms were reorganizing production through global value chains and seeking lower production costs, access to large markets, and more efficient supply chains. Lardy shows that, by the mid-1990s, China had become one of the world's largest trading nations and one of the largest recipients of foreign direct investment, with FDI rising sharply after the pause that followed the 1989 crisis (Lardy, 1995). The IMF similarly emphasizes China's scale as an FDI destination in the reform era, while later World Bank research finds that manufacturing FDI from 1990 to 2005 accelerated structural transformation by pulling labor out of agriculture and into factories and services (International Monetary Fund, 2003; Liu, 2022). These sources directly substantiate the claim that industrial relocation toward China resulted from the convergence of China's search for growth and stability with multinational firms' search for lower costs, market access, export capacity, and supply-chain efficiency.

An extraordinary historical coincidence therefore brought together Chinese social pressure after 1989, the leadership's decision to preserve political control through accelerated economic modernization, and the willingness of Western firms to relocate or expand production in China. The strongest evidence concerns foreign direct investment, export manufacturing, trade liberalization, and labor-market transformation. The narrower claim that Western stock markets systematically rewarded each relocation decision should therefore be stated more cautiously: the documented incentive was not a uniform stock-market mechanism, but a broader corporate-finance logic in which firms sought lower costs, market access, higher margins, and shareholder value through international production networks. Recent research on multinational joint ventures in China identifies market access and lower labor costs as central motives and finds that such ventures generated short-run gains for large U.S. firms, even while creating longer-run competitive and wage costs for the broader U.S. economy (Choi et al., 2025). Evidence on offshoring also shows that firm-level effects are heterogeneous: firms may continue domestic production while shifting lower-quality varieties abroad, reallocating domestic labor toward innovation and technology occupations rather than simply eliminating every job at home (Bernard et al., 2020).

The so-called Chinese miracle took shape within this intertwining: Western companies gained access to lower production costs and a rapidly expanding manufacturing base, while the Chinese leadership could present integration into international trade as proof of modernization and social advancement after the political closure that followed the events of 1989. The employment effects were substantial but uneven. World Bank research on China's WTO accession estimated that accession would boost manufacturing sectors, especially textiles and apparel, and raise the real wages of skilled and unskilled nonfarm workers relative to farm

workers (Ianchovichina & Martin, 2004). Liu's city-level study of China from 1990 to 2005 further finds that manufacturing FDI drew excess labor away from farms into factories and services and promoted human-capital accumulation through higher skill premia (Liu, 2022). At the same time, evidence on offshoring cautions against a mechanical narrative in which every job moved abroad is simply subtracted from employment at home; firm-level studies show varied effects on domestic production, technology, and employment, while affected manufacturing communities may still face serious adjustment pressures (Bernard et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2025). The result was therefore not a simple exchange of unemployment for employment, but a reorganization of labor across countries, sectors, and social groups. Today, artificial intelligence seems to reopen, in different forms, a similar tension between innovation, labor rationalization, and the possible penalization of workers engaged in simpler tasks.

The Chinese case therefore shows how economic modernization, when not accompanied by political inclusion and social justice, can foster new forms of dependency and marginality, ultimately feeding dynamics of conflict and war (Bhat-tasali & Kawai, 2001; Kose, Otrok, & Whiteman, 2019; Milanovic, 1998).

2. When Poverty Feeds War: Inequality, Marginality, and the Fate of Humanity

In my view, this periodic and creative shock is a constant feature of our world: it prepares the future through a movement whose meaning is often unable to understand while it is unfolding. Taking up the bold image of the bouncer, one might even hypothesize, with deliberate harshness, that war—like science and culture—has functioned as an anthropic mechanism for containing the number of inhabitants on the planet. Yet while the storm-like innovative power of science and technology is evident in the periodic transfer of technologies from one continent to another, there is no comparable support for the unacceptable thesis that war may be a kind of meat grinder invented to reduce, through a terrible and widespread hurricane, the number of human beings on Earth. This hypothesis must be rejected, because over the course of centuries and millennia the *Terra felix* has shown itself capable of supporting and nourishing billions of human beings, and there is no sign that our Mother Earth has lost the capacity to prepare food for her children (Smith, 1922; Cicerone, 1990; Diamandis & Kotler, 2014).

War is unfortunately an invention of human beings themselves, or rather of minorities who invoke love of country—certainly not to be demonstrated by paving the roads with civilian dead and young soldiers under arms. Poverty and extreme marginalization remain decisive conditions because they make lives more exposed, populations more recruitable, and whole communities more vulnerable to sacrifice; yet it would be too simple to conclude that war would disappear automatically if poverty disappeared. Armed conflict also arises from struggles for political power, territorial disputes, nationalist mobilization, state repression, competition over resources, and security dilemmas in which one state's defensive

measures are interpreted by another as threats. These causes do not operate separately: poverty may intensify grievances, nationalism may transform them into collective passions, authoritarian power may repress dissent or externalize internal crises, and territorial or security disputes may convert fear into organized violence. The task, therefore, is not merely to abolish poverty, but to transform the political, social, and international conditions that allow inequality, domination, fear, and coercion to converge into war (Mearsheimer, 2014; Huntington, 1996; Fukuyama, 1992; Piketty, 2013).

We may therefore argue that war becomes possible wherever a part of humanity is perceived as socially excessive, marginal, or expendable; but this does not mean that the disappearance of poverty would, by itself, make war disappear. Poverty and exclusion create vulnerability, resentment, and more easily sacrificed populations, yet armed conflict also grows out of struggles for political power, territorial disputes, nationalist mobilization, state repression, competition over strategic resources, and security dilemmas in which one state's search for protection is interpreted by another as preparation for aggression. These forces interact rather than operate in isolation: poverty may deepen grievances, nationalism may give them a collective language, authoritarian rule may repress or redirect them, and territorial or security disputes may transform fear into organized violence. A world with less hunger and inequality would therefore remove one of war's most fertile grounds, but the overcoming of war also requires political inclusion, respect for borders and people, restraint in the use of state power, and international institutions capable of reducing fear before it becomes conflict.

Without the history of wars, historical memory itself would be largely redefined: it would no longer be organized primarily around conflicts, conquests, and military catastrophes, but around the gradual evolution of humanity through scientific discovery, the understanding of the laws of nature and the universe, and the civil progress that has accompanied such knowledge.

In 1965, Lyndon Johnson established a bicentennial commission and sought to use it to promote Great Society. His legislative program, the War on Poverty, distributed funds in memory of the Revolution and presented social reform as a renewed expression of the American founding. When Nixon succeeded Johnson, his bicentennial committee was later associated with the misuse of funds for his Republican reelection campaign. Returning to the origins of the American state, we may recall the declaration adopted by Congress on July 4, 1776:

"When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another... We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness... and to organize its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness."

If, therefore, the pursuit of happiness presupposes that every human being, born free, may recognize himself within a social order founded upon the will of

the people, then it is for peoples themselves to create the conditions in which freedom and happiness do not remain merely abstract principles. Yet a decisive question remains open: can the people guarantee all, precisely as beings born free, the effective right to a free and dignified life? This does not mean denying that such an aspiration has already been realized for a significant part of humanity; for many individuals, freedom still consists in the possibility of pursuing their own projects and assuming responsibility for them. The problem arises, however, when millions of people on every continent remain excluded from this promise and find no concrete path toward freedom, dignity, and happiness (Sen, 2009; Francis, 2014).

At present, we remain convinced that it is the responsibility of the people to ensure that each individual, and all individuals together, may pursue freedom and happiness. This is also because Mother Earth is capable of nourishing all human beings and of providing everyone with the essential means of life, thereby opening to each person the possibility of pursuing his or her own life project. At that point, there would no longer be room for dictators to reopen the now impossible scenario of war. War would then appear almost as a nemesis descending upon humanity so long as the conditions—above all hunger—continue to exist that open the gates to Maahes, Horus, Mars, Perses, Huracan, Tohil, and the many other figures through which peoples and civilizations have personified war, spilled blood, and the dying.

From this perspective, overcoming war does not depend on an impossible sudden transformation of human nature, but on the historical capacity to reduce hunger, marginalization, and the availability of poor lives to be sacrificed. It is precisely from this conclusion that the next chapter begins: if war is nourished by material inequality and social exclusion, then we must examine the instruments capable of changing those conditions before they once again become fertile ground for conflict.

3. Sustainability and Neutrality as Paths beyond War

The conclusion of the previous chapter leads to the central issue of this second section: if war is nourished by hunger, social marginalization, and the availability of poor lives to be sacrificed, then overcoming war cannot be limited to a moral condemnation of conflict. It must instead examine the material and political conditions capable of preventing its recurrence. It is precisely in this transition—from the denunciation of causes to the search for concrete instruments of transformation—that sustainability and neutrality acquire their deepest meaning. They should not be understood as abstract formulas or merely diplomatic options, but as two complementary paths for reorienting international coexistence toward peace (Raworth, 2017; Cossiga, 2022; Cossiga, 2023).

- **Sustainability:** concerns the material conditions of peace, namely food, work, the environment, social dignity, and effective access to development.
- **Neutrality:** concerns the political method through which states may free themselves from the logic of blocs, permanent enmity, and continuous prep-

aration for war.

On the basis of these two directions, war appears as the result of a continuous preparation for a negative event that is treated as almost inevitable: it generates further war, whereas peace can arise only from political, economic, and cultural conditions that are stably oriented toward peace. For this reason, peoples are periodically subjected to the stress of military mobilization, as if the survival of states still depended on the construction of an enemy and on the expectation of future conflict.

The history of great empires, from the Chinese Celestial Empire to the Roman Empire, helps to show how the idea of security was long formed within a logic of domination: control of borders, subordination of neighboring peoples, and permanent readiness for military force. This historical legacy now calls for a reversal of perspective: no longer survival through preparation for war, but the construction of security through cooperation, the reduction of inequalities, and active neutrality.

From this perspective, the geographical and temporal distance between the great empires of East and West does not erase their common feature: both in the Celestial Empire and in the Roman *Mare nostrum*, security meant extending control over the surrounding space and imposing obedience within one's sphere of influence. The power of generals, the guarding of frontiers, and the transformation of neighboring people into potential enemies thus became ordinary instruments of political survival.

Active neutrality, in this sense, should not be confused with passivity, indifference, or moral equivalence between aggressor and victim. If a neutral state is itself attacked, neutrality cannot require surrender: under the United Nations Charter it retains the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence until the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore peace. If another state is attacked, active neutrality would require the neutral state to avoid becoming a belligerent while still condemning aggression, refusing the use of its territory for military operations, applying lawful sanctions or restrictions impartially where required, supporting humanitarian corridors, protecting refugees, and assisting diplomacy. In the face of mass atrocities, active neutrality could not mean silence: it would oblige public denunciation, humanitarian protection, cooperation with international investigations, and support for non-coercive or collectively authorized measures aimed at protecting civilians. Where treaty obligations exist, they must also be recognized: a permanently neutral state is bound by its constitutional and international commitments to neutrality, while a state party to a collective-defense alliance cannot claim the same status if its treaty requires military assistance. Active neutrality is therefore distinct from simple non-alignment, which mainly avoids bloc membership; from mediation, which is a diplomatic function that may be performed by neutral or non-neutral actors; and from collective security, which rests on institutional decisions by the United Nations or other lawful bodies to respond to threats to peace. Its purpose is not to withdraw from crises,

but to resist the automatic militarization of every crisis while preserving self-defense, legal responsibility, humanitarian action, and the possibility of negotiated de-escalation (Figure 1).



Figure 1. “Magical White Horse,” Tang dynasty (618-907), attributed to Han Gan (706-783), painted between 742 and 756. Ink on paper, 30.8 × 34 cm.

This conception of security as domination does not belong only to the past. The European history of the last hundred years, marked by two world wars and by a long succession of armed balances, shows how fragile a peace remains when it is entrusted solely to military deterrence. In this context, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may be read as the re-emergence, in contemporary forms, of an imperial claim: to reconstruct by force a lost sphere of influence and to re-establish political control over territories linked to the memory of the Soviet space.¹

This imperial claim produces consequences that extend beyond Ukraine’s borders and affect the entire European balance. The conflict has not strengthened the aggressor’s position in the sense imagined by authoritarian logic; rather, it has encouraged an increase in European military spending and pushed NATO to consolidate its defensive posture. Yet every increase in military expenditure risks becoming a political instrument immediately available to accustom citizens to the possibility of war.

¹The page describes an alleged **secret mobilization in Russia** aimed at recruiting new soldiers for the war in Ukraine without announcing an official national draft. According to the text, the Russian authorities are trying to avoid the public backlash that followed the 2022 mobilization, when widespread fear and discontent led many men of military age to leave the country. Instead of an open mobilization, recruitment would take place through indirect pressure on companies, factories, universities, technical institutes, and schools. The goal would be to compensate for the heavy losses suffered by the Russian army, which independent sources estimate at more than one million dead and wounded. In the Ryazan region, companies with more than 150 employees are reportedly required to provide a fixed number of “volunteers” for military contracts. Businesses that fail to comply could face heavy fines or administrative sanctions against their managers. The page also highlights the involvement of the education system. Russian universities and technical institutes are allegedly being asked to encourage students to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defence, especially for military units specialized in drones. According to the text, recruiting even a small percentage of students could provide tens of thousands of new soldiers. Human rights organizations warn, however, that these contracts, although presented as temporary, could become effectively indefinite and may not prevent students from being sent to the front.

In this perspective, sustainability and neutrality do not mean passivity, but the construction of security through instruments other than armed threat: economic cooperation, the reduction of inequalities, the protection of common resources, and the refusal of permanent mobilization against a necessary enemy.

In a democratic world, however, no security policy can be withdrawn from the judgment of the people, because it is the people who bear the material, moral, and human burden of decisions concerning war. For this reason, peace cannot be merely a decision of governments or military apparatuses: it must become a shared civil responsibility, grounded in the conscious participation of citizens and in their capacity to reject the transformation of fear into consent for permanent mobilization.

It should not be surprising that, in a democracy, the people may intervene in the conditions that make freedom and happiness effective. Such intervention does not mean supervising individual lives or interfering in personal affairs. Rather, it means creating general social conditions that allow families and new generations to grow, plan their future, and fully develop their potential. In this sense, every human being is born already bearing within himself or herself the possibility of a healthy and serene life. Yet if historical experience shows that part of humanity remains caught in war, poverty, and exclusion from social well-being, this means that the expectation and preparation of war have often hindered the civil and solidaristic function that should guide peoples toward a broader realization of freedom and happiness.

War produces its effects not only when it is already under way, but also in the phase that precedes it, when military preparations intensify and decisions are made to increase defense spending. This is what is occurring, for example, in Europe, where the demand for greater strategic autonomy is being fueled by the persistence of Russian missile attacks and raids against Ukraine and other territories formerly belonging to the Soviet space. In this way, war tends to generate further war: it multiplies military apparatuses, legitimizes new military expenditures, and transforms prevention into a dynamic of escalation. A circuit of conflict thus emerges, one that risks assuming the form of a potentially endless spiral.

4. Conclusion

The true task of our time is not merely to prevent the next war, but to render war progressively unthinkable as an instrument of human organization. Such a task requires a change in the very principles through which security, development, and technological progress are conceived. Peace cannot remain the fragile interval between conflicts; it must become the institutional and civil achievement of a world order capable of giving priority to prevention, cooperation, human dignity, and the responsible use of knowledge.

This task demands a solemn appeal to the responsibility of the United Nations and to the conscience of the international community. Faithful to its founding mission of preserving peace and promoting cooperation among peoples, the United Nations should be entrusted with greater responsibilities, adequate re-

sources, and a more effective mandate—conferred through the authority of the General Assembly—to act as a neutral body in situations of ongoing armed conflict. Such a mandate should include the capacity to deploy internationally recognized peace forces, monitor ceasefires, establish humanitarian corridors, protect civilian populations, support negotiations between belligerents, and, where necessary, physically separate opposing forces in order to prevent further escalation. The proposed mandate should be framed as a General Assembly recommendation rather than a binding authorization. If the Security Council is blocked by a permanent-member veto despite a threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression, the Assembly could convene under the “Uniting for Peace” procedure and recommend collective measures, potentially including a UN-commanded or multinational peace operation. That route would not displace the Security Council’s primary responsibility or create a Chapter VII enforcement power: only the Council can adopt binding coercive measures under Articles 39 - 42 of the Charter. The Assembly’s resolution would therefore need to record Council paralysis, recommend the mission’s mandate and financing arrangements, request the Secretary-General to prepare operational plans, and invite willing states to contribute personnel and assets. Where the operation entered the territory of a functioning state, host-state consent would remain legally decisive unless the Security Council later authorized enforcement action; without such consent, the Assembly could at most recommend non-coercive measures, assistance to a consenting victim state, or support for self-defense consistent with Article 51. This role would not replace diplomacy, nor diminish the sovereignty of people; rather, it would give institutional form to the common interest of humanity in protecting life before violence becomes irreversible.

Within this renewed framework, artificial intelligence should be governed not as an autonomous force of domination, but as a common instrument for preserving life. If wisely directed by democratic oversight, international law, and an unwavering commitment to human dignity, AI could help detect early signs of escalation, measure food insecurity and environmental stress, support diplomatic prevention, and make visible, before it is too late, the human and economic costs of conflict. It could also contribute to improving the fertility of the Earth, strengthening food security, anticipating environmental and social crises, and sustaining the conditions for a free and dignified life for every human being.

If AI, scientific knowledge, and political responsibility are placed at the service of life rather than domination, they may help humanity recognize conflicts before they become irreversible, transform scarcity into cooperation, and convert fear into shared responsibility. In this horizon, sustainability and neutrality would no longer appear as merely moral aspirations, but as concrete principles for organizing coexistence beyond the recurrence of war.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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