

## PART I **Apocalypse No!**

*Why We Should Care*

# I Smart Idealism and the Peace Formula

## *Introduction*

If we don't end war, war will end us.

H. G. Wells

The fight had already been going on for what seemed an eternity when a series of blows caused his opponent to stumble and ultimately fall to the floor. Blood, sweat and tears flowed and the surrounding crowd of 60,000 spectators started to cheer. The scene also captivated over a billion spectators in front of their TVs at home, making it one of the biggest TV events to date. Shortly thereafter, Muhammad Ali was declared winner by knock-out over George Foreman in the “Rumble in the Jungle” – one of the most famous matches in boxing history, which took place in 1974 in Kinshasa, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC). While the nominal winner and loser of this epic fight were, respectively, Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, it may well be argued that its greatest beneficiary was Zaire's ruthless dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, and the biggest loss was at the expense of the Congolese population, whose plundered wealth was used to pay part of the bill for this mega-event.

Less than a decade after gaining power in a coup in 1965, Mobutu was relishing his international reputation and prestige. He essentially prided himself on being a darling of various major powers, each competing for his attention. From its very beginning, Mobutu's presidency was characterized by public executions of rival politicians (drawing live audiences greater than that for the Rumble in the Jungle), bloody suppression of demonstrators (with the aid of foreign mercenaries), gruesome torture of dissidents, kleptocracy on a breathtaking scale (he amassed a personal fortune worth several billion US dollars), and an appalling lack of democracy and

4 PART I: APOCALYPSE NO! WHY WE SHOULD CARE

development. This, however, did not prevent Western leaders from generously supporting their ally against the Soviets. Mobutu was a regular guest at the White House, having had warm relations with Presidents Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George Bush Senior. Even under the somewhat more distant Jimmy Carter, Zaire received nearly half of the US foreign aid allocated to sub-Saharan Africa. This financial help was not put to good use – to put it mildly – as the country still suffers from alarming levels of political violence today, is democratic in name only, and is ranked 226th (out of 229 countries) in terms of real gross domestic product per capita.<sup>1</sup> No matter what ranking of governance, human development, human rights protection, or socioeconomic development is used, the country is consistently close to the bottom.

How could such a tragedy occur in a country blessed with abundant natural resources and great potential? It is almost a textbook example of what can go wrong in the presence of several (sadly common) misperceptions. In short, similar to many other cases, Western governments favored short-term stability and the strategic upside of supporting an anticommunist dictator over the promotion of actual democracy. Beyond this cynical Cold War realpolitik, many well-intentioned policymakers endorsed the shady peace deals mastered by Mobutu (who had the habit of offering “*plata o plomo*” (silver or lead), that is, either buying off or killing detractors). Their underlying assumption was that bargaining and cutting deals between the dictator and the current opposition could promote peace. Since the independence of the DRC from Belgium in 1960, time and again Western powers supported (and sometimes saved) Mobutu and other cronies financially and militarily and brokered peace talks and ceasefires, which invariably proved short-lived and failed to deliver lasting peace. As shown in this book, the logical fallacy of such an almost exclusive focus on short-term bargaining is that whenever one given rebel leader has been bought off at the negotiation table, other aspiring warlords are already in the starting blocks. As in the ancient Greek Hydra myth, for each rebel removed,

two new challengers arise. When the breeding ground for political unrest persists (poverty, bad institutions, natural resource rents to grab, low productivity and public insecurity), there will always be armed movements ready to capitalize.

Another misconception of Mobutu's Western allies was that they hoped to "buy" peace through cash transfers that were largely embezzled by a kleptocratic regime. In contrast, productive "investments" in human capital did not receive much consideration (e.g., the DRC's schools are infamously underfunded, and security risks and violence have been major obstacles to schooling in the past decades). Finally, the need to, first and foremost, establish public security as a basis for any policy hoping to bring positive change has been widely underestimated – and lack of public safety has indeed been a major factor jeopardizing any promising reforms or policy measures, an example being the fight against the 2018–2019 Ebola epidemic. In a nutshell, poverty and lack of democracy, as well as insecurity, have been the root causes for renewed political violence in the DRC over the last six decades. As shown in this book, key elements of a formula for peace – both for the DRC and around the world – include policies that provide a *voice*, *work* and *warranties*.

#### BEYOND THE DRC: A DIRE STATE OF AFFAIRS

Sadly, the tragedy in the DRC is not a unique case. We live in dangerous times. When switching on the TV and watching the news, on an average day one may hear about several dozen civil conflicts worldwide. The more mediatized of them include the civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya, or the fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan, the DRC and Somalia. The subjective perception of an escalation in such political violence is confirmed by cold-hearted statistics: The fifty-six distinct instances of ongoing wars and conflicts in 2022 correspond to a record number since 1946.<sup>2</sup>

At the forefront of the news are also drug-related massacres and organized crime, for example, in Mexico, Colombia or Honduras, in addition to mounting international tensions, most

6 PART I: APOCALYPSE NO! WHY WE SHOULD CARE

prominently between the current superpower, the United States, and its rising rival, China, as well as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and tension between Russia and neighboring countries, such as Georgia. Even Western democracies are not spared. Populism is on the rise across rich countries and democracy is on the decline. Again, this subjective perception is consistent with statistics from Freedom House, suggesting a decline in worldwide average democracy/freedom scores for the seventeenth consecutive year.<sup>3</sup> There are also mounting social tensions in several countries, most notably in the United States, with waves of protest by the Black Lives Matter movement after recent incidences of police violence against black citizens.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated various forms of social and political violence.<sup>4</sup> As discussed in this book, poverty and lack of human capital are crucial root causes fueling the threat of conflict and violence. The pandemic has led to spiking levels of unemployment and poverty (especially among the most unfortunate, who work in the informal sector and do not have access to formal insurance mechanisms). Access to schooling is also under severe stress – among others for sanitary reasons. This may well constitute a fertile breeding ground for further violence to come. Furthermore, the imperative of fighting the virus has provided a formidable pretext for populists and autocrats to limit freedom of assembly and expression, and to step up surveillance. Last but not least, a pandemic tends to reduce international trade and business relations. Declining interdependence between countries thereby reduces the economic cost of international wars (and hence makes them potentially more likely, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 3).

Does this affect us directly or is it just some depressing intermezzo we watch on the TV news before turning on the next Netflix series or feel-good movie? Well, it turns out that we are in this together. Nobody is an island and violence – like a virus – does not stop at country borders. Mischief travels not only across space but also through time, as wars today sow the seeds of future poverty and

discord, through a series of vicious cycles. Throw in global warming, pandemics, grand economic transformations and demographic transitions, and you have an explosive concoction threatening global stability and well-being. Just as the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 in Sarajevo triggered World War I and fighting around the globe, the rise to power of Adolf Hitler in Germany in 1933 led to a chain of events resulting in millions of people dying not just in Germany but thousands of miles away up to a dozen years later. Hence, even if some of our lives appear on the surface like a long, winding river flowing down the same valley since eternity, in reality, conflict and war can exert a global grip on society, with each one affecting us directly – like a worldwide pandemic.

Thus, the time has come to take the bull by the horns and act at once to ensure a prosperous and peaceful future for generations to come. Just as for the *torero* at the *corrida*, inaction is fatal and will be punished by history. To tackle threats to peace, we first need to understand why people fight and how to prevent it. As it turns out, economic forces play a major role in the outbreak and perpetuation of violence, but they may also hold the key for positive change. In particular, having *work* and a *voice* provide the nutrients and sunlight required for the seeds of future prosperity and peace to blossom.

Sadly, too often the economic root causes for turmoil are ignored in favor of peace plans focusing on cutting deals with the powerful, leaving the real underlying reasons for conflict unaddressed. There has been an alphabet soup of naive or cynical top-down policies, cooked up by powerful international leaders and policymakers. The ingredients in this indigestible brew include ill-prepared mediation, biased military assistance and untargeted food aid. As detailed in this book, such measures can fail spectacularly and ignite the social tensions and civil unrest which ravage our time.

This book will argue that, instead, bottom-up policies are required to align economic incentives for peace, achieved through a well-designed blend of peace-promoting institutions, state capacity building and health, education and labor market policies. There is

8 PART I: APOCALYPSE NO! WHY WE SHOULD CARE

also a crucial role for the international community (and ordinary citizens) in regulating and monitoring international firms, migration policies and funding the right initiatives. In a nutshell, while this book explains how well-intended yet naive policies backfire, often with disastrous consequences, it also sketches a path forward. Drawing on decades of careful academic research on conflict, it makes the case for “smart idealism,” that is, a set of policies shown to foster incentives for sustained peace.

INFLUENTIAL – YET FATAL – MISCONCEPTIONS

In what follows, we shall first revisit some common misconceptions – already encountered in the example of the DRC – that have given birth to failed peace policies for decades, before outlining promising ingredients for successful peacebuilding and revisiting some successful transitions to democracy, peace and prosperity.

*Misconception 1: “He Is an A-Hole, But He Is Our A-Hole” (Alias “Better the Devil You Know”)*

This logic has been invoked to prop up autocrats around the world for decades, even centuries. During the Cold War, for example, being anticommunist may have been enough to warrant support from Western powers – independent of how dismal a nation’s democratic and human rights track-record was – whereas swearing alliance to Marxism, similarly, was enough to get the USSR on board. A good illustration is provided by Nicaragua’s fight in the 1980s between the Sandinista (supported by the Kremlin) and the Contras (supported by the Ronald Reagan administration). While neither the United States nor the USSR were convinced by the moral, political or economic appeal of their protégé group, they actively supported their ally in the goal of preventing their own zone of influence from shrinking. Similar cynical calculations are made today in the Yemen war and when it comes to backing particular fighting groups in Libya (linked to particular gas pipeline projects). As argued in this book, backing bad regimes and despots in exchange for short-run influence and

(seemingly) lucrative deals is not just morally wrong but may also backfire politically and economically.

Take the case of Muammar Gaddafi's regime. Coming to power in a coup in 1969, Gaddafi consolidated a tight grip on power and became *persona non grata* in many Western democracies in the 1990s owing to his financing of various terrorist and extremist groups globally, and following Libya's role in the Lockerbie bombing of Pan AM flight 103, which killed 270 innocent people in 1988. Some years later, after Gaddafi turned in the alleged perpetrators of the Lockerbie bombing and paid financial compensation and stopped his unconventional weapons program, all was forgiven and forgotten. Once more, Western diplomats were busy rolling out the red carpet for an autocratic ruler. The race to please Tripoli's despot was so frantic that any human rights abuses by the Libyan regime were duly ignored by Gaddafi's new-found Western friends, who acclaimed him with the highest honors during state visits. In 2008, Gaddafi's son Hannibal was accused of beating up his servants and arrested by Swiss police in Geneva. During the subsequent diplomatic turmoil between Switzerland and Libya, one of Switzerland's oldest allies, France, refused to take sides between the Swiss insistence on equality of the law versus Gaddafi's thirst for vendetta (which culminated in the arrest of two high-level Swiss businessmen in Tripoli for alleged visa irregularities, and Gaddafi calling for jihad against Switzerland). In 2010, the then French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner famously talked about a "dispute between their Swiss friends and their Libyan friends" in which France did not want to take sides and "distribute responsibilities and errors."<sup>5</sup> Little did it matter that one of the French "friends" was one of the continent's oldest democracies, which in this affair could be accused of nothing else than applying the rule of law and respecting the judiciary's independence, while the other (new-found) French "friend" was a dictator with a decade-long track record of human rights abuses, supporting terrorism and violently repressing opposition at home.

Sadly, realpolitik and ignorance of human rights abuses of “useful” dictators is often the rule rather than the exception. The problem is that – besides being morally wrong – it does not work. As discussed in this book, there is ample recent academic research showing that the price to pay for short-run stability and attractive deals is mounting anti-Western sentiment in the long-run. The population in destitute countries finds it hard to understand why champions of democracy at home help to prop up corrupt regimes abroad. This hypocrisy results in rejection and hate of the West and its values – which are perceived as phony. For example, a systematic study of international terrorism shows that US military aid to doubtful regimes in the last few decades has resulted in *more, not fewer*, terror attacks from beneficiary countries against the United States, prompting the authors to wonder in the title why the United States were willing to be “Paying them to hate US?”<sup>6</sup> Another study, examining US military aid to Colombia, found that – if anything – it strengthened illicit armed groups to the detriment of weakened domestic political institutions.<sup>7</sup>

As argued in this book, rather than cutting shady deals with despots and distributing, without scrutiny, vast sums of military aid, rich and stable Western countries should endeavor to foster peace by helping to lay the groundwork for a peaceful society. Having work, a voice and security warranties ensures citizens do not have incentives to engage in political violence – an investment more beneficial and durable than supporting autocrats.

### *Misconception 2: Sending Enough Cash Can Curb Conflict*

Another widespread misconception is that fostering peace is directly linked to the amount of money spent for this purpose. As argued in this book, “buying” peace by simply disbursing cash does not work – yet “investing in” peace by strengthening human capital and productive capacities does. The core pervasive misconception is that any amount of financial means put at the disposal of a given country will lead to similar effects, no matter the modalities, as typically money

will be put to best use. Unfortunately, this logic is as watertight as a teabag. The problem is that the presence of large, accessible resources naturally triggers the incentive to appropriate them – a phenomenon occurring in rich and poor countries and in democracies and autocracies alike. When something is “up for grabs” there will typically always be people trying to get their hands on it. While the thirst for rent-seeking may not differ between rich democracies and countries torn by civil war, what prevents the worst excesses in democratic states is that strong state capacity and a powerful legal apparatus keep people’s behavior in check. However, in unstable countries with a weak state, having a sudden inflow of rents to grab can be disastrous – as can be easily illustrated by oil holdings. As discussed in Chapter 4, recent studies have found that while oil reserves can have positive effects in strong, stable states such as Norway, for less stable countries such as Venezuela, Sudan, Chad, Nigeria, Angola and so on oil money is often a critical source of instability and turmoil. The “resource curse” of in-fighting for rents has been a key reason why, despite impressive oil and mineral revenues, many oil- and mineral-producing states have not achieved the level of prosperity one may have expected. Incidentally, as argued in this book, a “smart” green transition yields the double dividend of tackling climate change and at the same time reduces the scope for toxic petropolitics, which, in turn, fosters the prospectives for peace.

The trouble is that sending cash or goods can have – in some cases – remarkably similar effects to having oil in the ground. For example, a recent study has found that US food aid on average – if anything – *increases rather than reduces* the risk of fighting in the beneficiary regions.<sup>8</sup> In the presence of political instability and a weak state, it is not surprising that various armed groups would typically try to appropriate food aid and sell it – which can fuel further fighting.

Does this mean that Western democracies should resign and renounce any aid to unstable regions? No: Thankfully there exist ways to provide aid that do not suffer from the “resource curse”