Make Peace A Priority - Research & Analysis

A companion document providing evidence-based research and case studies supporting Australia's transition to peace-centred foreign policy

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Executive Summary

This document provides evidence-based research supporting the Make Peace A Priority campaign's core arguments. The data demonstrates that peace-building is not only morally imperative but also economically beneficial, environmentally necessary, and strategically advantageous for Australia. Drawing on successful peace processes from around the world, including detailed analysis of the Bougainville and East Timor cases, this research shows that addressing root causes of conflict through political solutions consistently proves more effective than military approaches.

The evidence presented here supports a fundamental reorientation of Australian foreign policy towards institutionalising peace as the central organising principle, backed by substantial economic, environmental, and strategic justifications.

1. Economic Analysis: The Financial Case for Peace

Global Military Spending Trends

Global military expenditure reached unprecedented levels in 2023, totalling $2.443 trillion according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).[1] This represents the highest level ever recorded and constitutes 2.3% of global GDP, representing a significant opportunity cost for global development. The 6.8% increase from 2022 (inflation-adjusted) demonstrates an alarming escalation in military spending worldwide.[1]

The top five military spenders globally are the United States ($877 billion), China ($292 billion), Russia ($109 billion), India ($81 billion), and Saudi Arabia ($76 billion).[1] These figures highlight the enormous resources being diverted from productive economic activities towards military purposes.

Australia's military spending for 2023-24 reached $50.3 billion, representing 2.1% of GDP and placing Australia above NATO's 2% target.[2] At $1,950 per capita, Australia ranks among the world's highest military spenders relative to population. Projections indicate this spending will grow to $75 billion by 2033-34, representing a substantial escalation in military expenditure.[2]

The Economic Benefits of Peace Investment

Research consistently demonstrates that investing in peace delivers superior economic returns compared to military spending. The World Bank's extensive research on conflict prevention shows a 7:1 ratio - every $1 spent on conflict prevention saves $7 in post-conflict reconstruction costs.[3] This finding has been replicated across multiple studies and represents one of the most robust cost-benefit ratios in international development.

Countries with higher peace rankings consistently demonstrate superior economic performance. Analysis by the Institute for Economics and Peace shows that peaceful countries have twice the GDP per capita compared to less peaceful nations.[4] Furthermore, stable regions experience 40% more trade compared to conflict-affected areas, demonstrating the direct economic benefits of peaceful international relations.[4]

The annual global cost of violence is estimated at $16.5 trillion (2022 figures), representing approximately 11.5% of global GDP.[4] This staggering figure encompasses direct costs of conflict, military spending, and the economic impact of violence on societies. Redirecting even a fraction of these resources towards productive economic activities would generate substantial global prosperity.

Case Study: Costa Rica's Peace Dividend

Costa Rica provides the most compelling real-world example of the economic benefits of prioritising peace over military spending. Following its constitutional abolition of the military in 1948, Costa Rica redirected defence funds towards education and healthcare.[5] The results have been remarkable:

Costa Rica achieved the highest literacy rate in Central America at 97.9%, compared to the regional average of 85%.[5] Life expectancy reached 80.3 years, significantly above the regional average of 75.2 years.[5] GDP per capita of $12,500 represents the highest in Central America, demonstrating the economic dividends of peace investment.[5]

This case study provides concrete evidence that countries can achieve superior development outcomes by prioritising social investment over military spending. Costa Rica's success challenges the assumption that military spending is necessary for national security and prosperity.

Economic Multiplier Effects: Comparing Military and Social Spending

Economic analysis reveals significant differences in the multiplier effects of various types of government spending. Military spending generates relatively low economic returns, with multiplier effects of 0.6-0.8 times the initial investment.[6] In contrast, social spending generates substantially higher returns:

Education spending produces multiplier effects of 1.5-2.0 times the initial investment, reflecting the long-term productivity gains from improved human capital.[6] Healthcare spending generates even higher returns at 1.7-2.2 times the initial investment, due to improved workforce health and reduced economic losses from illness.[6] Infrastructure

spending produces multiplier effects of 1.4-1.8 times the initial investment through improved economic efficiency and connectivity.[6]

These findings from the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts demonstrate that reallocating military spending towards social priorities would generate superior economic outcomes for Australia.[6] The opportunity cost of current military spending levels represents a significant drag on economic growth and social development.

2. Environmental Impact: The Climate Cost of Militarisation

Military Carbon Footprint

The environmental impact of global military activities represents a largely hidden contributor to climate change. Military activities account for 5.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions, producing between 1,600-3,500 million tonnes of CO_2 equivalent annually.[7] To put this in perspective, if the world's militaries were a country, they would rank fourth globally in emissions, larger than most individual nations.[7]

Despite this massive environmental impact, most countries systematically exclude military emissions from their climate commitments and reporting under international agreements. This represents a significant gap in global climate action that undermines efforts to address climate change effectively.[7]

The United States military alone produces 59 million tonnes of CO_2 annually, exceeding the total emissions of 140 individual countries.[8] NATO military exercises in 2021 generated 24.8 million tonnes of CO_2, equivalent to the annual emissions of several small nations.[9] The sabotage of the Nordstream pipeline released 485,000 tonnes of methane, equivalent to Denmark's entire annual emissions.[9]

Environmental Warfare Impact

Armed conflicts cause devastating and long-lasting environmental damage that extends far beyond immediate human casualties. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine provides a stark contemporary example of environmental warfare impacts. In the first 12 months of conflict, military activities generated 6.6 million tonnes of CO_2 emissions.[10] Thirty percent of Ukraine's protected areas have been damaged or destroyed, representing irreplaceable losses of biodiversity and ecosystem services.[10] Ukrainian authorities have documented 2,400 environmental crimes, with estimated environmental damage costs of $56 billion.[10]

Historical examples demonstrate the long-term environmental consequences of military conflicts. The Vietnam War involved the deployment of 20 million gallons of Agent Orange, resulting in the defoliation of 3.2 million hectares of forest and agricultural land.[11] The environmental effects persist decades after the conflict ended, with ongoing health impacts and ecosystem damage.

The 1991 Gulf War saw 700 oil wells burned and 240 million barrels of oil spilled, creating one of the worst environmental disasters in history.[12] The Iraq War generated 141 million tonnes of CO2 in its first four years alone, demonstrating the massive carbon footprint of modern military operations.[13]

Climate Change as Conflict Driver

Climate change increasingly acts as a threat multiplier, exacerbating existing tensions and creating new sources of conflict. Environmental degradation displaces 21.5 million people annually, creating refugee flows that strain regional stability.[14] Regions vulnerable to climate change experience three times higher conflict risk compared to climate-resilient areas.[15]

Research indicates that 50% of contemporary conflicts have environmental factors as contributing causes, highlighting the interconnection between environmental degradation and violent conflict.[15] The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change projects that 1.2 billion people face risk of climate-induced displacement by 2050, creating unprecedented challenges for international stability.[15]

This climate-conflict nexus demonstrates that military approaches to security are fundamentally inadequate for addressing 21st-century challenges. Climate change requires cooperative international responses that address root causes rather than military responses that treat symptoms while exacerbating the underlying environmental crisis.

3. Human Security: Redefining Security for the 21st Century

Global Displacement and Conflict Trends

Contemporary conflict patterns reveal the inadequacy of traditional military-focused security approaches. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that 110 million people are currently forcibly displaced worldwide, including 35.3 million refugees under UNHCR mandate and 62.5 million internally displaced within their own countries.[16] This represents a doubling of displacement since 2012, marking the fastest growth in displacement in recorded history.[16]

Modern conflicts disproportionately affect civilian populations, with 90% of casualties in contemporary conflicts being civilians, compared to only 10% in World War I.[17] This shift reflects the changing nature of warfare and highlights the failure of military approaches to protect human security. An estimated 426 million children currently live in conflict zones, representing a 72% increase in civilian casualties since 2019.[18]

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program recorded 238,000 conflict-related deaths globally in 2022, demonstrating the ongoing human cost of unresolved conflicts.[17] These statistics underscore the urgent need for more effective approaches to conflict prevention and resolution.

Regional Security Analysis: Asia-Pacific

The Asia-Pacific region represents both enormous economic opportunity and significant security challenges for Australia. The region accounts for $3.8 trillion in trade volume (2023) and 60% of global GDP, with 4.6 billion people whose prosperity and security directly affect Australian interests.[19] However, rising tensions have led to a 37% increase in regional military spending since 2013, creating dangerous escalation dynamics.[1]

Australia's economic interdependence with the region is profound. Seventy percent of Australia's trade occurs with Asia-Pacific partners, representing $1.7 trillion in two-way trade value (2023).[20] This trade relationship supports 2.8 million Australian jobs, demonstrating that regional stability directly translates to Australian prosperity.[20] The security interdependence is equally clear: regional stability equals Australian prosperity, while regional conflict would devastate Australian economic interests.

Traditional military approaches to regional security create escalation dynamics that threaten the very prosperity they claim to protect. Alternative approaches focused on economic cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and multilateral institution-building offer more promising pathways to sustainable regional security.

4. Peace-Building Effectiveness: Evidence from Successful Interventions

Quantitative Analysis of Peace Interventions

Systematic analysis of international peace interventions reveals consistently superior outcomes compared to military approaches. United Nations preventive diplomacy missions achieve a 67% success rate in preventing or resolving conflicts.[21] The annual UN peace-building budget of $1.37 billion generates estimated savings of $18 billion annually through successful conflict prevention.[21] Countries receiving peace-building support experience a 50% reduction in conflict recurrence compared to those without such support.[21]

International mediation demonstrates significantly superior outcomes compared to unmediated conflicts. Mediated conflicts achieve a 42% success rate compared to only 16% for non-mediated conflicts.[22] Mediated conflicts resolve faster, averaging 2.5 years compared to 7.3 years for unmediated conflicts.[22] The recurrence rate is dramatically lower, with only 23% of mediated conflicts resuming compared to 45% of unmediated conflicts.[22] The cost differential is equally striking: mediation averages $50 million per intervention compared to $50 billion average cost for military interventions.[22]

Case Studies

Northern Ireland: The Power of Inclusive Dialogue

The Northern Ireland peace process demonstrates the effectiveness of addressing root causes rather than managing symptoms. After 30 years of conflict, the Good Friday Agreement achieved sustainable peace through negotiation rather than military victory.[23] The economic benefits have been substantial, with Northern Ireland experiencing a £30 billion GDP increase since 1998.[24] Tourism has grown by 300%, demonstrating the peace dividend in practical terms.[25]

Crucially, the Good Friday Agreement did not demand that the Irish Republican Army disarm before negotiations began. Instead, it created political frameworks that made armed struggle unnecessary, with disarmament following as a consequence of political progress rather than as a precondition for it.[23] This sequencing - addressing root causes first, then achieving disarmament as a natural consequence - provides a model for other conflict resolution efforts.

Cambodia: Australia's Leadership in Peace-Building

Australia's leadership role in the Cambodia peace process demonstrates the potential for middle-power diplomacy to achieve transformative results. Australian diplomatic leadership in the Paris Peace Agreements (1991) was decisive in ending a 20-year conflict that had devastated Cambodia.[26] The UN Transitional Authority successfully implemented the peace agreement, enabling Cambodia's transition from conflict to development.[27]

This case study illustrates several key principles for effective peace-building. Middle-power diplomacy can be decisive when major powers are constrained by competing interests. Comprehensive peace agreements that address root causes prove more durable than partial solutions. International support for implementation is crucial for translating agreements into sustainable peace.

Bougainville: Addressing Self-Determination Through Political Process

The Bougainville conflict and peace process provides a particularly relevant case study for understanding how addressing root causes leads to sustainable conflict resolution. The 1988-1998 armed conflict between Papua New Guinea government forces and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) was triggered by disputes over the world's largest copper mine and broader environmental and economic grievances.[28] With an estimated 15,000-20,000 casualties, it was described as the largest conflict in Oceania since World War II.[28]

The 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement established a groundbreaking approach that did not demand BRA disarmament before political negotiations. Instead, it created a "three pillars" framework where autonomy came first, followed by gradual weapons disposal linked to political progress, and culminating in a referendum on independence.[29] The three pillars - Autonomy, Weapons Disposal, and Referendum - were carefully sequenced and inter-linked, with the establishment of the Autonomous Bougainville Government occurring before complete disarmament.[29]

The results validate the effectiveness of addressing root causes first. BRA members successfully transitioned from armed resistance to participation in democratic governance as the root cause - denial of self-determination - was addressed through the autonomy arrangement and promised referendum.[28] The weapons disposal programme was successfully completed in stages as political progress was made.[28] The 2019 referendum resulted in 98% support for independence, with independence now scheduled for 2027 pending Papua New Guinea government approval.[30]

The Bougainville case demonstrates that sustainable disarmament occurs as a consequence of addressing root political grievances rather than as a precondition for political progress. This principle has broad applicability to other conflicts where self-determination and political grievances drive armed resistance.

East Timor: International Intervention for Self-Determination

The East Timor independence process provides another compelling example of how addressing root causes - in this case, the denial of self-determination - leads to successful conflict resolution. Following 24 years of Indonesian occupation (1975-1999) that resulted in an estimated 200,000+ deaths, the international community finally acted to address the fundamental injustice.[31]

The 1999 UN-sponsored referendum on independence saw 78% of East Timorese vote for independence from Indonesia.[31] Crucially, Indonesian military withdrawal occurred after the political decision to allow self-determination, not as a precondition for it. The UN Transitional Administration (UNTAET) successfully managed the transition to independence, which was formally achieved in 2002.[32]

The East Timor case demonstrates several key principles for effective international intervention. Self-determination through democratic process can resolve seemingly intractable conflicts. International intervention backed by political will can be decisive when addressing fundamental injustices. Military withdrawal and disarmament occur naturally as consequences of addressing root political causes rather than as preconditions for political progress.

Like the Bougainville case, East Timor shows that addressing the root cause - denial of self-determination - through political processes leads to successful resolution. The Indonesian military withdrawal occurred as a consequence of the political decision to allow self-determination, not as a precondition for it.

Lessons from Successful Peace Processes

Analysis of successful peace processes reveals consistent patterns that challenge conventional approaches to conflict resolution. Sustainable disarmament occurs as a result of political settlements that address underlying grievances, not as a precondition for such settlements. Inclusive political processes that address root causes prove more durable than exclusionary approaches that focus on military victory. International support for implementation is crucial, but external actors cannot substitute for genuine political will among conflict parties.

The sequencing of peace processes matters enormously. Addressing root causes first creates conditions that make armed resistance unnecessary, leading to natural disarmament. Demanding disarmament before addressing root causes typically fails because it removes leverage from weaker parties without addressing their fundamental grievances.

These lessons have direct relevance for contemporary conflicts and for Australia's approach to regional security challenges. Rather than focusing primarily on military deterrence and alliance relationships, Australia could achieve superior security outcomes by investing in conflict prevention, diplomatic engagement, and addressing root causes of regional tensions.

5. Public Opinion and Political Feasibility

Australian Public Support for Peace-Centred Policy

Australian public opinion demonstrates strong support for peace-centred foreign policy approaches. The Lowy Institute's 2024 polling reveals that 73% of Australians support increased diplomatic engagement, while 68% prefer negotiated solutions over military intervention.[33] Most significantly, 81% believe Australia should be a peace-building leader in the region, indicating substantial public appetite for the policy reorientation advocated here.[33] Furthermore, 59% support reducing military spending to fund social programmes, suggesting public recognition of the opportunity costs of current military expenditure levels.[33]

Global polling data reinforces these trends, with the Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Peace Survey finding that 89% of people worldwide want their government to work for peace.[4] Seventy-six percent believe their country spends too much on military purposes, while 84% support international cooperation over competition.[4] Most remarkably, 92% want conflicts resolved through dialogue rather than violence, indicating overwhelming global support for diplomatic approaches to conflict resolution.[4]

These polling results demonstrate that peace-centred policies enjoy broad public support both in Australia and globally. Political leaders who embrace peace-building approaches are likely to find receptive audiences rather than political resistance.

International Examples of Peace-Centred Policies

Several countries provide successful models for implementing peace-centred policies that Australia could adapt to its own circumstances. Costa Rica's constitutional ban on military forces (1949) represents the most comprehensive example, but other models offer different approaches suitable for various national contexts.[34]

Switzerland's armed neutrality combined with mediation leadership demonstrates how countries can maintain defensive capabilities while prioritising peace-building internationally.[35] Norway's substantial peace-building fund ($1.2 billion annually) shows how wealthy nations can invest systematically in global peace while maintaining

conventional security arrangements.[36] New Zealand's nuclear-free policy (1987) illustrates how middle powers can take principled stands that enhance rather than diminish their international standing.[37]

These examples demonstrate that peace-centred policies are not utopian ideals but practical approaches that have been successfully implemented by democratic nations. Each model offers insights that Australia could adapt to develop its own distinctive approach to peace-centred foreign policy.

Conclusion: The Strategic Imperative for Peace-Centred Policy

The evidence presented in this analysis demonstrates conclusively that peace-centred foreign policy offers superior outcomes across economic, environmental, security, and social dimensions compared to military-focused approaches. The economic case is overwhelming: peace investment generates superior returns, creates more jobs, and produces better development outcomes than military spending. The environmental imperative is urgent: military activities contribute significantly to climate change while conflicts cause devastating environmental damage. The security argument is compelling: addressing root causes of conflict proves more effective than managing symptoms through military means.

International case studies from Northern Ireland, Cambodia, Bougainville, and East Timor demonstrate that sustainable peace results from addressing underlying grievances rather than demanding disarmament as a precondition for political progress. These examples provide practical models that Australia could adapt to contemporary regional challenges.

Australian public opinion strongly supports peace-centred approaches, with substantial majorities favouring diplomatic engagement, negotiated solutions, and peace-building leadership. International examples demonstrate that peace-centred policies are practical and achievable for democratic nations.

The Asia-Pacific region offers significant opportunities for Australian peace-building leadership. Existing multilateral frameworks provide foundations that could be strengthened and expanded. Australia's position as a trusted middle power with strong regional relationships creates unique opportunities for constructive leadership.

Climate change represents a fundamental security challenge that requires cooperative rather than competitive responses. Peace-building approaches offer superior pathways to climate resilience compared to military responses that exacerbate underlying environmental problems.

The transition to peace-centred foreign policy requires systematic institutional reform, capacity building, and appropriate metrics for measuring success. However, the potential benefits - economic, environmental, security, and social - justify the effort required for this transformation.

Australia faces a choice between continuing current approaches that generate escalating costs and diminishing security returns, or embracing peace-centred policies that offer superior outcomes across all dimensions of national interest. The evidence strongly supports the latter course.

The time has come for Australia to institutionalise peace as the central organising principle of foreign policy. The economic, environmental, security, and moral arguments all point in the same direction. The question is not whether Australia can afford to make this transition, but whether it can afford not to.

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This document represents an analysis of the evidence supporting peace-centred foreign policy for Australia. The research demonstrates that peace-building approaches offer superior outcomes across economic, environmental, security, and social dimensions compared to military-focused strategies. The case studies of successful peace processes provide practical models for addressing contemporary challenges through diplomatic and political means rather than military force.