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**WORKING POLITICALLY IN PRACTICE SERIES  
– CASE STUDY NO. 4 –**

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**BEYOND THE TOOLKIT:  
SUPPORTING PEACE PROCESSES IN ASIA**

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October 2015

*Lisa Denney and Patrick Barron*



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# BEYOND THE TOOLKIT: SUPPORTING PEACE PROCESSES IN ASIA

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LISA DENNEY AND PATRICK BARRON

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# Foreword

For several decades, The Asia Foundation has been implementing development programs through a highly responsive, politically informed, iterative ‘searching’ model of assistance. Variations of this approach have been an important element in the Foundation’s work going back to its founding in 1954. While each program varies, this model is broadly characterized by a heavy emphasis on contextual knowledge and relationships, combined with multiple small, nuanced and carefully targeted interventions working closely with local partners. This stands in sharp contrast to the conventional, pre-planned ‘projectized’ approach that has long been the standard in the development industry. Especially in cases where a development problem may seem to be politically intractable, an approach that focuses on building relationships and expanding knowledge of the landscape of interests and influence, while retaining the flexibility to adjust program strategy and tactics as new information or unexpected opportunities become available, is more likely to yield good results.

The Asia Foundation’s Working Politically in Practice Series has allowed the Foundation to share what it has learnt from its efforts to test iterative and politically-informed approaches to programming across Asia. This series was initially launched under the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade – The Asia Foundation Partnership (DFAT-TAF Partnership), as a way to share learning from The Asia Foundation’s work under the Partnership to trial iterative, politically informed approaches to programming across Asia. More recently, The Asia Foundation has expanded this series to capture lessons from other programs being implemented by The Foundation across the region. This includes support from the UK Government through the Programme Partnership Arrangement which aims to improve state-society relations to support peace and stability in countries and subnational regions affected by protracted conflict and fragility.

This fourth paper in the series, *Beyond the Toolkit: Supporting Peace Processes in Asia*, posits that existing peace process support models do not reflect what we know about the nature of conflict, how it ends, and how peace processes are sustained and peace consolidated. This is true everywhere but especially so in the context of conflict in non-fragile settings. New ways of working are needed to ensure that peace support work connects with the realities faced by conflict-affected countries. One alternative lies in learning from the ‘thinking and working politically’ agenda – with its focus on more nationally and locally led and politically astute ways of working. The paper provides an initial conceptual framing of the Foundation’s approach to peace support to capture existing knowledge about how conflicts – broadly speaking – end and the nature of post-conflict transitions. It also briefly outlines key insights on what flexible programming means in practice, using examples from the Foundation’s experience undertaking peace support activities in the Philippines, Myanmar and Nepal. These insights may be of particular interest to practitioners interested in exploring new ways for supporting peace processes, in Asia and beyond.

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# 1. Introduction

In recent years there have been growing calls for new approaches to supporting peace in post-conflict contexts (see, for instance: World Bank 2011; Parks et al. 2013). These have built on a wide literature that has similarly critiqued dominant approaches to peacebuilding by the international community (Paris 2004; Cramer 2006; Ghani and Lockhart 2008; Berdal and Zaum 2013; MacGinty 2013). Current peacebuilding models do not reflect what we know about the nature of conflict, how it ends, and how peace processes are sustained and peace consolidated. This is true everywhere but especially so in the context of conflicts in non-fragile settings. Since the 1990s, the international peacebuilding architecture has been

**Current peacebuilding models do not reflect what we know about the nature of conflict, how it ends, and how peace processes are sustained and peace consolidated.**

built to respond to civil wars in fragile states. In these contexts, the current architecture faces deep challenges but they are all the more apparent in countries where state capacity is not lacking. Conflicts frequently occur in such places, many of which have middle income status. In Asia, for example, the dominant pattern of large-scale violence is of subnational conflicts occurring in the peripheries of functioning states (Parks et al. 2013).<sup>1</sup> Such conflicts do not directly pose a threat to the control of the state. Rather, they simmer at the margins of society – often for decades. Dominant international approaches are often ill-suited for supporting peace in these places.

The Asia Foundation, working in a number of conflict contexts on a wide range of governance issues, is keen to develop better tools to support peace processes as part of this work. To this end, the Foundation will produce a series of papers, of which this is the first, presenting aspects of an alternative method of peace

process support. These will document the ways in which three country programs have been working politically on peace process support to date – in the Philippines, Nepal and Myanmar – notably by not always working directly on issues of peace. These country experiences will document different ways of working that do not fit within the conventional peacebuilding approach of the international community. We believe that lessons learned on working politically apply not only to the work of international non-government organizations like the Foundation, who often work at a relatively small-scale, but also to larger bureaucratic organizations, such as bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors.

This first background paper sets out the nature of the problem and provides an initial conceptual framing of The Asia Foundation's approach to peace support. In doing so, we first capture some of the existing knowledge about how conflicts (broadly speaking) end and the nature of post-conflict transitions. Second, we highlight how the dominant approaches to peacebuilding undertaken by the international community to date fail to connect in important ways with what we know about conflict and transitions to peace. This reveals the need to move beyond the existing toolkit to support peace, not only in non-fragile settings but especially in these places. Third, this paper looks to the literature emerging around 'thinking and working politically' and 'doing development differently', which has gained increasing traction within development circles. This is used as it chimes with some of the Foundation's efforts to develop a more politically-informed approach to supporting peace. The approach aims to move away from a sole focus on technical knowledge and capacity to examining and engaging with the entrenched power structures and political dynamics that hold back development (and, in this case, peace). Finally, we provide a brief introduction to the peace support activities that The Asia Foundation has been undertaking in the Philippines, Nepal and Myanmar, which will be the topic of three case studies to follow.

1. Subnational conflicts within Asian countries have constituted more than half of all new civil wars since 1945 (51.6 per cent) (Fearon and Laitin, cited in Parks et al. 2013: 15).

# 2. How conflict ends and the nature of post-conflict transitions

Programming effectively on conflict requires understanding why conflicts occur, sustain and end, and the factors that shape conflict-to-peace transitions. A number of insights have emerged, of which we highlight five we see to be key.

## 2.1 CONFLICT OCCURS BECAUSE (SOME) PEOPLE WANT IT TO OCCUR

Large-scale violence is not an irrational aberration from an otherwise natural process of development – it is not, as has been popularly argued, ‘development in reverse’ (Collier 2003). Rather, conflict can be a rational reflection of the interests of people within a given society.

These interests are not merely the self-maximizing calculations of individuals in the liberal economic sense, but also include the wider span of human interests related to identity, culture, beliefs, political ideology, power and religion. They include motivations driven by both greed and grievance, which are not the dichotomies they are often presented to be (Ballentine and Sherman 2003). This wide span of interests can coalesce in ways that afford violence a functional utility (Berdal and Zaum 2013). As David Keen notes:

Internal conflicts have persisted not so much despite the intentions of rational people, as because of them. The apparent ‘chaos’ of civil war can be used to further local and short-term interests. War is not simply a breakdown of a particular system, but a way of creating an alternative system of profit, power and even protection (1998: 11).

Rather than constituting a setback or breakdown of the ‘normal’ order, or emerging due to the failings of institutional capacity, conflict tends to have its own political and economic logic from which some benefit (Keen 1998; Kalyvas 2006; Cramer 2006; Newman 2014).

## 2.2 CONFLICTS OCCUR EVEN IN STRONG STATES; STATE CAPACITY DOES NOT NECESSARILY TRANSLATE INTO PEACE

Such incentives for conflict can be in place even where the state functions and has capacity. At a certain level of income and institutional development, civil wars tend to become less frequent.<sup>2</sup> Strong states are important because they can limit opportunities for groups to use violence and promote growth and the delivery of services and public goods, reducing conflict risks. Yet civil wars are not confined to failing states. Stronger middle- and high-income states such as those in the Balkans, Lebanon, Guatemala and the United Kingdom all have states that collect revenues, build roads and fund armies. None makes state fragility lists. But all have seen substantial violence, either currently or in the recent past.

Indeed, the state incapacity argument is especially unhelpful in explaining the persistence of many subnational conflicts in Asia where many middle income countries and even upper-middle income countries have been plagued by long-standing internal conflicts (Parks et al. 2013). These conflicts are not about rebel groups seeking control of the state, but rather about them seeking to subvert, resist, or break away from the state. These conflicts are not waged in or even near the seat of political power, but in the countryside, in the outer-reaches of countries (Parks et al. 2013: 16). In such places, communities benefit from ungoverned spaces and are resisting the power of the state, rather than seeking to capture that power (Scott 2010). Conflict has thus been growing in a part of the world where state capacity is rarely considered a primary concern and where the conflicts are not about state weakness, but state strength. In these contexts, projections of state strength may make resistance and violence worse (Joliffe 2014).

## 2.3 ELITES AND ORDINARY PEOPLE MATTER

While violence is usually waged by, and affects, ordinary citizens, elites are often key in producing either war or peace (Keen 1998: 12).<sup>3</sup> As the most powerful within a society, elites control resources and their allocation and are responsible for negotiating and implementing the policies and agreements that affect wider populations (North et al. 2009; Kalyvas 2006). Again, these interests may be economic, but

2. Besley and Persson (2011: xi), for example, discuss “the observed tendency for effective state institutions, the absence of political violence, and high income per capita to be positively correlated with one another”, both across countries at a given point in time and across time within a country. Of the 17 countries ranked by the World Bank as being fragile in the 1980s, and which remained fragile between 1990 and 2008, 16 experienced civil wars (World Bank 2011). See also, Fearon and Laitin (2003).
3. Elites are those within a country with extensive power. They may hold formal political positions or may have informal bases of authority. Common across all elites is that they have support bases they can mobilize.

they may also relate to survival (of both themselves and their constituents), political power, land, and the relative leverage their side holds at a particular time in the conflict. Stability tends to emerge when elites can seal an effective bargain amongst themselves – a political settlement – providing some degree of certainty (Valters et al. 2015; North et al. 2009: 18). The incentives of elites thus play a strong role in determining whether formal fighting comes to an end or continues and whether peace consolidates after peace accords. Even local level conflicts are often endogenous to elite incentives, emerging from within their logic, particularly through patrimonial and rent-seeking structures that tie ordinary citizens into elite conflicts.

Elite deals, of course, do not simply erase tensions between communities (Darby and MacGinty 2000: 234). To transition from war to peace, elites must be convinced that peace will be in their interests more than the continuation of war (North et al. 2009). But elite incentives will depend in part on the views of those below them. In democracies, even patronage democracies (Chandra 2004), citizen attitudes will shape elite preferences. Bottom-up sources of pressure can be important. And elites who want to mobilize people to use violence need to provide some incentive for people, something that is harder if popular preferences support peace.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.4 CONFLICT LOGICS CAN CONTINUE INTO PEACETIME

Even when elites decide that more can be obtained from peace than from war, conflict logics can continue into peacetime. Because formal conflict ends on the basis of elite interests, these same interests continue, at least initially, to dominate the prevailing political settlement in the post-conflict phase. This is one reason why civil wars often recur and post-conflict violence is common (World Bank 2011). As a result, peace agreements and the immediate post-conflict period can represent a pause in fighting while also a continuation of conflict by other means (Berdal and Zaum 2013: 11-12; Suhrke and Berdal 2012). As Keen explains:

The distinction between war and peace may be hazy, and the two may not necessarily be opposites. War can involve cooperation between

‘sides’ at the expense of civilians; peace can see adversaries striking deals that institutionalise violence, corruption and exploitation. These similarities help to explain how peace can be possible, and why it has often swiftly relapsed into war (1998: 11).

It is important, therefore, to recognize that the interests that have shaped conflict often continue to shape the post-conflict political settlement and, as a result, there can be a good deal of continuity between the ‘conflict’ and ‘post-conflict’ stages. This also underlines the lack of linearity in war-to-peace transitions (Sriram and Nielsen 2004: 2). Indeed, the war-to-peace transition phase itself may prove to be in the interest of elites – providing them with legitimacy and resources that they may wish to see sustain and thus draw out the transition process. This underscores the point that war-to-peace transitions tend not to come in neat game-changing ‘moments.’

## 2.5 INTERNATIONALS MAY BE LESS IMPORTANT FOR PEACE THAN NORMALLY THOUGHT

In the subnational conflicts in Asia – which this paper is primarily interested in – it is questionable as to the degree to which international actors and their conventional tools (aid and diplomatic pressure) can influence these elite incentives. As shall be discussed in the following section, much of the international community’s conventional peacebuilding approach

**While international actors may be able to shape the incentives of national actors in particular ways, their influence is often exaggerated.**

is predicated on a belief in the ability of the international community to foster more liberal political and economic orders (Cramer 2013). Yet the elite interests that tend to shape post-conflict contexts are rooted in a complex combination of country-specific social, political and economic processes, as well as cross-border or regional influences. While international actors may be able to shape the incentives of national actors<sup>5</sup> in particular ways – particularly through the use of sanctions – their influence is often exaggerated (Parks et al. 2013: 52).

4. See the literature on the free rider collective action dilemma (Olson 1965) around mobilizing fighters (e.g. Popkin 1979; Gates 2002; Weinstein 2005) See also Horowitz (1985) on how this applies to riots.

5. Throughout the paper, we use the term ‘national’ to refer to people, often elites, within the aid recipient country. The term includes those at the central state level and those at the subnational level. It should be clear from the context where we are talking about each.

# 3. The limitations of conventional liberal peacebuilding

Given what we know about the nature of transitions from conflict to peace, how appropriate are existing peacebuilding approaches in supporting and sustaining such transitions?

In this section, we introduce liberal peacebuilding, its evolution and key components as the dominant approach of the international community to supporting peace settlements and post-conflict peace. We argue that liberal peacebuilding does not adequately reflect or engage with many of the key dynamics of conflict, as set out in section 2. As a result, the approach (and the programs that flow from it) is limited in its ability to support peace in many conflict settings, in particular in non-fragile contexts. New approaches to supporting peace are therefore needed. Potential avenues are explored in section 4.

## 3.1 A HISTORY OF PEACEBUILDING

Peacebuilding has its origins in post-war reconstruction efforts in Germany and Japan after the Second World War; the term was first coined in 1976 by Johan Galtung as a component of peace (separate from peacekeeping and peacemaking) that entailed building an 'infrastructure' of peace in a society (Ryan 2013: 26). However, peacebuilding only entered into mainstream discourse in 1992 with the United Nations publication *An Agenda for Peace*. This defined peacebuilding as "action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict" (UN 1992: s. 21). The aims of peacebuilding were to be focused on: "rebuilding the institutions and infrastructures of nations torn by civil war and strife; and building bonds of peaceful mutual benefit among nations formerly at war" (Ibid: s. 15). This report emerged at the end of the Cold War as attention was increasingly turning towards the largely intrastate conflicts that were occurring in countries such as El Salvador, Namibia, Bosnia, and Cambodia

(Ryan 2013). With the UN Security Council no longer hamstrung by superpower rivalry, it was in the new position of being able to act in such theatres.

The emergence of peacebuilding at the end of the Cold War means that the term was imbued with a particular ideological bias present at the time – a belief that liberalism represented the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution" (Fukuyama 1989). The effect of such ideological trends was that peacebuilding subsumed a number of dominant liberal ideas in a relatively uncritical manner. As Stephen Ryan explains:

These developments occurred as the liberal peace hypothesis emerged as one of the most influential doctrines of the post-Cold War era. Indeed, by the end of the twentieth century, it is not unreasonable to think of it as the dominant peace theory. As such it was inevitable that it would impact on thinking about peacebuilding. This is despite the fact that in its original version this hypothesis was restricted to the narrow claim that democratic states do not go to war against each other ... However it did not stay confined to this realm and policymakers, in particular, began to apply it to intrastate as well as inter-state conflict despite the absence of clear empirical data to support this move (2013: 27).

Infused with the liberal ideology pervasive at the time, peacebuilding thus developed based on a relative consensus that democracy, a free market economy and the rule of law were the key ingredients for building peaceful societies (Campbell et al. 2011: 1; MacGinty 2013: 2-3; Valters et al. 2015). While the term 'liberal peacebuilding' has been used far more by academics than practitioners, many of the goals and assumptions that underlie the approach are also found in commonly used approaches that donors and INGOs pursue, whether the stated aim is 'statebuilding',

'post-conflict recovery' or 'stabilization'. There is often little critical questioning of how such desired goals can be achieved. Rather, it is assumed that directly promoting elections, reformed economies and stronger state institutions will bring them about. This approach to peacebuilding "has been accepted almost universally" (Jeong 2005: 10). These three elements remain at the heart of much international peacebuilding – either explicitly or implicitly.

Following poor results in early peacebuilding operations in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Rwanda, the UN published A Supplement to An Agenda for Peace in 1995. This acknowledged the complexity of conflicts being faced and the need for greater context awareness and national/local ownership of peacebuilding efforts (Sabaratnam 2011: 15-16; Pugh 2013). It also highlighted the role of weak or collapsed state institutions in fueling conflict, and thus the need for peacebuilding to "extend beyond military and humanitarian tasks ... [to] include the promotion of national reconciliation and the re-establishment of effective government" (UN 1995: s. 13). Rather than reining in the ambitions of peacebuilding in the wake of failure, the Supplement instead highlighted additional conditions necessary in order to achieve its ambitious aims.

Of course, it is important to note that 'liberal peacebuilding' does lump together differences in approach within the liberal paradigm and its analytical utility has been questioned (Zaum 2012). Increasingly, peace advisors working in conflict-affected countries have questioned the models' linear thinking and the assumptions that, say, elections will lead to peace, pushing instead for greater conflict sensitivity when making decisions on what to do and when. As Roger MacGinty notes, critiques of liberal peacebuilding need to be careful of creating "caricatures that inflate its coherence and strength" (2011: 6). There are differences in approach, for instance, between UN peacebuilding as compared to peacebuilding carried out by the European Union or the United States (see Ryan 2013: 32-33; Zaum 2012).

Yet despite these variations, and an attempt by some within donor agencies and international organizations to take context seriously and grapple with the messy, non-linear transitions from conflict to peace, strategies to support peace remain remarkably similar and it is difficult to see a translation of more nuanced thinking at a policy level into practice. As MacGinty (2011: 6) notes, "commonalities abound, not least in the familiar cast list of states and institutions that promote liberal peacebuilding, the familiar script of liberal rhetoric,

and the familiar policy prescriptions. In other words, the category retains validity as an analytical device."<sup>6</sup> Even where peacebuilding advisors and experts within agencies are pushing for different approaches, this often has little impact on the broader portfolio of programs that international agencies tend to promote in conflict and post-conflict areas.

### 3.2 KEY COMPONENTS OF THE PEACEBUILDING TOOLKIT

In practice, peacebuilding is delivered through a set of common components that help to establish the liberal values that are seen as key to peace. This involves a long list of sequenced activities, including:

- Brokering peace negotiations: to achieve ceasefires and accords that are the first step to providing a window of stability to allow for other peacebuilding activities;
- Disarming, demobilizing and reintegrating former-combatants: to dismantle fighting forces and begin to shed their militarized mindset so they are ready for civilian life;
- Repatriating refugees and internally displaced persons: to enable families to re-establish homes and encourage diasporas to return;
- Carrying out transitional justice: to prevent impunity for past crimes, heal wounds, and rebuild trust between citizens and the state;
- Reforming the security sector: to transform police, militaries and other security providers from being sources of insecurity for the population to sources of protection, also enabling the rule of law to take hold which will encourage investment;
- Supporting and monitoring elections: to support democratically elected and thus locally legitimate leaders through free and fair franchise;
- Building state capacity to deliver services and manage finances: to enable the state to deliver healthcare, education, water and sanitation and other services, and to ensure taxation and financial accountability for sustainable financing of government services;
- Strengthening civil society and the media: to hold government to account and provide a voice for citizens, particularly the poor and vulnerable, in the public sphere.

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6. While the values espoused by peacebuilding may be inherently liberal, this is not to imply that it is always carried out through necessarily liberal means. Indeed, the aggressive US-led coalition interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan highlight that the goal of liberalism can be pursued through highly illiberal practices (MacGinty 2011). The liberalism of liberal peacebuilding relates to its foundations in liberal values and its belief that particular forms of politics are necessary to achieve sustainable peace, such as democracy, individual freedom and rationality, a free market and the rule of law.



Importantly, because peacebuilding is funded overwhelmingly by multilateral and bilateral donors and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), it is 'done' to recipient countries by those external to it (MacGinty 2013: 2). Even where host governments finance much of the (post-)conflict program, there is usually pressure from international donors for countries to adopt approaches that are part of the international toolkit. The delivery of these components is characterized by a high volume of international experts who are sent in to 'recipient' countries, backed by substantial donor financing. In some cases, donor peacebuilding resources have exceeded the recipient country's gross domestic product (GDP), as in the cases of Afghanistan and Liberia (Berdal and Zaum 2013: 2). A large increasingly professionalized cadre of 'peacebuilding experts' now move between various international peacebuilding operations, adopting "specialised vernacular and ... common working practices and codes of conduct" (MacGinty 2013: 6).

Of course, peacebuilding experts and the international community more broadly recognize that liberal peacebuilding is based on an ambitious set of assumptions that do not always hold in practice. Many of the individuals that constitute the organizations promoting peacebuilding are themselves critical of many aspects of the approach – from the ideals that are being promoted, to the ways in which they are operationalized, to the hubris of mission (Marshall 2014; Isser 2011; Quick 2015). Those working within these institutions may thus have good knowledge of the contexts in which they work and the problems with the peacebuilding model they are in the business of promoting. But this does not get reflected in the much more blunt ways of the workings of many donors and international NGOs. The political economies of these organizations themselves delimit certain ways of working that favor a 'toolkit' approach with its neat log frames, replicable interventions, familiar results and predictable funding requirements (Denney 2014: 158-161). Here, the bureaucratic constraints of programming processes, the results imperative, the need to demonstrate value for money, and resultant risk aversion, also play an important role in delimiting the scope of what it is possible for donors and international organizations to do as part of peacebuilding. Their room for maneuver is not unlimited.

Importantly, there have been attempts to learn from peacebuilding experience, with research highlighting the need to understand context and complexity and improve national ownership and sequencing (see, for instance, Stedman and Rothchild 1996). In addition,

donors are increasingly undertaking political economy analysis and attempting to root programming in the particularities of a governing context. Yet these attempts aim to fix the existing model and do not question the underlying liberal prescriptions and their relevance to the problem of a given conflict. This means that while interventions might be tweaked – they are not fundamentally altered.

A growing body of work critiques liberal peacebuilding and the problem-solving literature more fundamentally, arguing that the existing model of peacebuilding is faulty and that its prescriptions do not sufficiently engage with what we know about the nature of conflict, its causes and how order is sustained (for more on this, see: MacGinty 2013; Pugh 2013; Campbell et al. 2011; Cramer 2006; Paris 2004; Berdal and Zaum 2013).

**The political economies of donors and international NGOs delimit certain ways of working that favor a 'toolkit approach' with its neat log frames, replicable interventions, familiar results and predictable funding requirements.**

Here, we focus on how dominant approaches to peacebuilding fail to adequately connect with what we know about how and why conflict and peace occur, and how peace is maintained, as set out in section 2. While not a comprehensive list of the limitations of liberal peacebuilding,

the below features demonstrate why dominant approaches are not fit for purpose in responding to what we know about conflict dynamics in many parts of the world:

- Treat recipients of peacebuilding as deficient with weak institutions and capacity that require donors' skills and resources;
- Implement standard toolkit of pre-planned technical interventions that are assumed to 'go together';
- Focus overwhelmingly on the state;
- Assume international actors have greater leverage than is often the case;
- View peace agreements as neat demarcations of conflict and post-conflict stages.

### 3.3 TREAT RECIPIENTS OF PEACEBUILDING AS DEFICIENT WITH WEAK INSTITUTIONS AND CAPACITY

Dominant approaches to peacebuilding tend to view post-conflict societies as being deficient in the components necessary to achieve peace. A fragile state is “defined as a deviation from a developmental or capable norm, i.e. by what it is not” (Carayannis et al. 2014: 30). That is, post-conflict settings are seen to lack the institutions and capacities that would prevent violence from breaking out and peacebuilding activities thus center on building these institutions and capacities (Berdal and Zaum 2013: 6). Often, this involves using institutions and capacities from donor countries as the blueprints, on the basis that “if only war-torn societies had been blessed with democracy, good governance, civil society, open markets and human rights, in short more like western societies, then conflict would have been less likely” (Pugh 2013: 17). Laws, policies, IT systems and procedures are thus recycled, implying that changes in form will encourage change in function (Pritchett et al. 2010). This is overwhelmingly a supply-driven approach that begins by asking what donor countries have that recipient countries need, thus emphasizing the main levers at donors’ disposal (financial resources and technical skills). For bureaucratic organizations like donors, this is a rational attempt to make use of their ‘offer’ within development processes (Barnett and Finnemore 2004).

This approach derives from peacebuilding’s roots in primarily fragile state conflicts that became the dominant form of conflict at the end of the Cold War. As these conflicts were interpreted as being caused by weak institutions and low capacity, peacebuilding has developed institution- and capacity-building tools (UN 1995; Ghani and Lockhart 2008). These now standard tools tend to get deployed in all peacebuilding operations – regardless of whether the problem is in fact one of weak institutions and capacity. As Ken Menkhaus explains:

By reducing state failure to a matter of low capacity, this view lends itself to technical solutions ... More funding, better trained civil servants, a more professionalised and equipped police force, and a healthy dose of democratisation (where not politically inconvenient) have been the main elements (2010: 176).

This approach has been criticized in its application to fragile states where, it is argued, causes of conflict and national/subnational capacities should be assessed in their own right in each context and understood according to their own political and economic logic

(Carayannis et al. 2014: 9-12). It also overlooks the fact that weak institutions may be in the interests of elites who actively work to “hollow out the state and its institutions in order to entrench their own power and personal economic interests” (Berdal and Zaum 2013: 7). The focus on weak institutional capacity has distracted from other causes of conflict. And even while donors are increasingly recognizing that the problems at hand derive from more than just capacity deficits, peace support programming continues to focus overwhelmingly on capacity building through training, technical assistance, rehabilitation or construction of facilities and institutional development.

Peacebuilding approaches predicated on weak institutional capacity are especially inappropriate for non-fragile contexts, and middle income countries in particular, where institutional capabilities are often much higher. As a result of assuming that the problem to be fixed relates to weak institutional capacity, and with its focus on national state institutions, liberal peacebuilding also misses some of the other problems that cause conflict, highlighted in section 2 – such as the lack of will on the part of political elites or fighting factions to sustain peace, weaknesses in subnational institutions, or the desire of some communities to resist state power.

### 3.4 IMPLEMENT STANDARD TOOLKIT OF PRE-PLANNED TECHNICAL INTERVENTIONS

Connected to the standard reading of post-conflict settings as requiring stronger institutional capacities, dominant peacebuilding approaches draw on a standard toolkit of interventions (see the key components listed above) and assume them to be relevant everywhere,

**What the standardized approach misses is the real locus of power driving conflict – the nature of the political settlement.**

regardless of differing political settlements, levels of development, or other contextual features. While there is an effort to tailor programming to context, the key components remain remarkably similar

across diverse contexts, even if the ways in which those components are implemented varies (MacGinty 2011: 42). As Christoph Zürcher notes:

Peacebuilders rarely adapt their strategies to the context, but tend to treat post-conflict democratisation generally as a problem that can be solved by mechanically implementing a series of known tasks in the correct order, resulting

in an ahistorical and voluntaristic approach to democratic peacebuilding (2011: 71).

than on the content and politics of reform processes themselves (Carothers 2004).

Table 1 below highlights some of the standard peacebuilding interventions and the multiple country contexts in which they have been deployed. While the interventions may have been tailored to the context in each place where they were implemented, the fact that the list of interventions themselves remains so consistent across diverse countries suggests ‘taking context into account’ remains secondary to drawing on a catalogue of existing interventions (Zürcher 2011: 71). Rather, a series of known tasks are implemented with much focus on the correct sequencing, rather

In part, this is a hard to avoid side-effect of greater numbers of peacebuilding operations and more professionalized staff working across them. Developing standard approaches and toolkits is the natural extension of bureaucratizing peacebuilding. This kind of toolkit approach all too easily becomes a linear chain of attempted social engineering, by which peace is instilled, rule of law and democracy established and economic growth nurtured in a manner that suggests ‘all good things go together’. Yet as MacGinty suggests, “Instructional manuals are

**Table 1: Common peacebuilding interventions across countries**

	DDR	Transitional justice	SSR	Elections support	Capacity building of key government ministries
<b>Indonesia (Aceh)</b>	X	X		X	X
<b>Afghanistan</b>	X		X	X	X
<b>DRC</b>	X		X	X	X
<b>Liberia</b>	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Sierra Leone</b>	X	X	X	X	X
<b>South Sudan</b>	X		X	X	X
<b>Timor-Leste</b>	X	X	X	X	X

best left to mechanical and electronic devices that operate without the vagaries of human emotion such as ethnicised incitement, or feelings of hurt, loss and envy” (2013: 2).

Even more worrying, perhaps, is the influence that this standardized set of interventions has had on the ‘peacebuilt’. Not only does it shape what international organizations provide, but also what national and local partners request (Sending 2011: 63). Lacking basic knowledge on what peace processes have involved elsewhere, governments, insurgents and civil society actors often turn to internationals for advice on what a ‘normal’ process looks like and hence what they need. This, in turn, shapes what governments ask internationals for help with – requests that are sometimes drafted by international development agencies themselves.

The irony is that despite appearing increasingly technical and apolitical, liberal peacebuilding is of course deeply ideological and has political implications in the places where it is applied. At times, its liberal ideological commitments have been pointed to as a source of harm – whether it be through elections acting as a trigger for violence (Call 2012: 241), liberal economic policies damaging post-conflict economies (Paris 2004), or elections and power-sharing deals consolidating the power of wartime elites (Berdal and Zaum 2013: 12).

Making something inherently political appear technical “brings with it the danger that creativity, alternatives and localised incentives are excluded” (MacGinty 2013: 6). Because of the near unanimity of support for the liberal approach to peacebuilding,



its politics have been normalized, which can serve to close off alternative political and economic ideas (see, for instance, Duffield 2001). This has the effect of reinforcing the reliance on the standard peacebuilding interventions that we see in diverse post-conflict countries.

Critically, what the standardized approach also misses is the real locus of power driving conflict – the nature of the political settlement – the formal and informal ‘rules of the game’ that determine how power is allocated and exercised within a society (e.g. OECD-DAC 2011; Laws 2012). The key insights of the political settlements literature are that (a) it is the way institutions work in practice that shape trajectories of development and conflict/peace, (b) that these institutions are shaped, in large part, by the incentives and interests of powerful actors and (c) settlements tend to involve an elite deal over the generation and distribution of economic rents (Khan 1995; Parks and Cole 2010). Many of the toolkit activities outlined above—such as transitional justice and DDR—are unlikely to have any significant effects on such interests and hence the nature, robustness and durability of the settlement. As such, while some liberal peacebuilding components can be useful, they do not fundamentally get at the deeper determinants of war or peace. In particular, where projects or activities are implemented in parallel to the formal and informal systems that define power relations in a given country, they are unlikely to have any effect, positive or negative, on the political settlement.

### 3.5 FOCUS OVERWHELMINGLY ON THE STATE

In (re)building institutional capacities, the focus of liberal peacebuilding is overwhelmingly on the state as the vehicle for peace. This is largely connected to

**Focusing on building state institutions can actually be harmful for the prospects of peace.**

the early failures of peacebuilding, mentioned above, in which the UN’s *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace* highlighted the need for more far-reaching transformations in post-conflict countries to achieve peace (UN 1995). Since the late-1990s, the focus of peacebuilding has extended from building the basic conditions for peace (demobilized forces, an elected government, a reformed security sector, etc.) to building the entire infrastructure of a state that can support and sustain the peace (Paris 2011: 35). As Charles Call explains:

For many analysts, post war state building is the answer to the challenge of consolidating peace.

Building self-sustaining legitimate and effective states obviates the need for foreign troops, reduces the international peacekeeping burden, and advances numerous international security objectives. As Fukuyama (2004: ix) says: ‘State building ... should be at the top of our agenda’ (2012: 3).

As a result, the focus of institution building has been primarily on the formal state apparatus, and the category of peacebuilding has become increasingly synonymous with statebuilding (Berdal and Zaum 2013; Zürcher 2011: 69).

There are two problems with the overwhelming focus on the state. First, we know that for many people in many places, the state is but one authority with many others also accruing legitimacy and support. The reality is more often “hybrid governance systems which may exist outside of, overlap, or subvert formal state structures” (Carayannis 2014: 1). The importance of informal institutions has long been recognized (e.g. North 1990; Helmke and Levitsky 2004) but these are often given little attention by international state- and peacebuilders.

Second, focusing on building state institutions can actually be harmful for the prospects of peace. Indeed, in the case of most subnational conflicts, groups are fighting against the state. As Michael Pugh argues: “Not only do some communities regard their allotted state as largely meaningless, as in sites as far apart as Bougainville, Haiti and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the attempt to build one has often been a cause of conflict, as in Kosovo” (2013: 17). In such cases, the state is not necessarily perceived as a ‘good’ whose reach should be extended. Rather, it can be seen as a dominating force that seeks to control, stamp out difference or other sources of authority (see, for instance, Scott 1998). The overwhelming focus of peacebuilding on state capacities thus cannot always be seen as a vehicle for achieving peace and overlooks engagement with critically important sources of authority that may be deemed as important, or even more important, than the formal state (Parks et al. 2013: 29).

### 3.6 ASSUME INTERNATIONAL ACTORS HAVE GREATER LEVERAGE THAN IS OFTEN THE CASE

Dominant forms of peacebuilding tend to assume that international actors have greater leverage than is often the case – that in relatively short timeframes, they will be able to achieve transformations in security and governance (Parks et al 2013: 52). This derives, in part, from the earlier assumption that the reasons for

conflict are to be found in weak institutional capacity that peacebuilders can help to strengthen due to their privileged knowledge of international best practice and the peacebuilding literature (Pugh 2013: 14). Yet this overlooks the many ways in which populations can “subvert, exhaust, renegotiate, and resist the liberal peace” (MacGinty 2011: 7). While the vast bulk of literature on peacebuilding seeks to confirm or deny the influence of external peacebuilders on peace or conflict, what gets overlooked is the more influential matter of the interests, resources and actions of actors with conflict-affected or post-conflict countries and areas (Sending 2011: 59) and how these shape the political settlement. An interest in taking context seriously should put such considerations front and center in the analysis of the sustainability of peace. A recent study looking at post-conflict transitions in Liberia and Timor-Leste found that, while the international community played important roles in peacekeeping and security sector reform, it was overwhelmingly national and subnational leaders and their policy choices that were key in building security (Valters et al. 2015).

In practice, there is often an implicit assumption that because a recipient country government has formally given approval to a peacebuilding mission (often construed as constituting ‘ownership’), that the government and peacebuilders are aligned in their interests (Zürcher 2011: 72-73). This may well be partly true, in that both are interested in peace but, as Christoph Zürcher highlights:

This objective is loosely enough defined to trigger a constant bargaining over the exact contents of the peace, over allocation of resources, over who has the control over the process, over priorities and, most importantly, over the contexts of reform policies (2011: 73).

While international peacebuilders do of course retain significant power – not least because they control budgets and the design of projects – national actors too have considerable autonomy to draw on both the material and symbolic elements of peacebuilding to further their own interests (MacGinty 2013: 5; Sending 2011: 63). There is often a lack of understanding of the machinations of power in the countries being peacebuilt. While political elites may adopt the necessary language to satisfy international peacebuilders, in part because of the funding and political support doing so can attract, they then select, draw on, shape or discard as suits their wider interests (Sending 2011; Swidler 2009). This is not to suggest that elites are entirely cynical self-maximizing individuals. Rather, elites in such contexts must

satisfy various constituencies – from donors and the international community, to political party supporters, to groups connected to them by patronage networks. Each may require different usage of material and symbolic resources, which may or may not cohere with the interests of peacebuilders. What is more, the ability of international actors to influence elite behavior towards other constituencies is limited (Call 2012: 236).

While the international peacebuilding community, holding the purse strings, can technically withdraw their support at any time, they rarely do. Instead, as Zürcher notes:

Peacebuilders are highly dependent on domestic actors because their cooperation is essential for a smooth and stable implementation of the many peacebuilding projects. Without the consent and the support of local elites, peacebuilding programmes cannot be implemented, and security for international personnel cannot be guaranteed. This creates a strong incentive to cooperate with local elites, even when they are not committed to democratic reforms (2011: 73).

Rather, what occurs is a ‘hybrid peace.’ That is, pressures for liberal peace from peacebuilders combine with the ability of national and subnational actors to use, subvert or resist these pressures to create “a distorted or hybrid peace that is not pure or pristine or insulated from the factors influencing it” (MacGinty 2011: 8-9).

This ability of elites to selectively support peacebuilding measures is true in all contexts (see, for instance, Englebert and Tull 2008; Swidler 2009; Call 2012). However, this is especially relevant in non-fragile contexts. In such places, reliance on aid tends to be minimal, weakening the leverage of international actors. In addition, where conflict is subnational and does not disrupt the interests of incumbent national elites, external pressure to resolve conflict is likely to be much weaker. In such contexts, the influence of external actors and their ability to transform conflict-affected contexts is thus often exaggerated.

### 3.7 VIEW PEACE AGREEMENTS AS NEAT DEMARCATIONS OF CONFLICT AND POST-CONFLICT STAGES

There has been a tendency in much conventional peacebuilding to view peace agreements as a defining marker between conflict and post-conflict phases, overstating the degree to which these are in reality



distinct. In practice, we know that violence extends after the formal conflict ends in particular forms and for particular groups – in some cases even worsening (Suhrke and Berdal 2012). In addition, many conflicts go through periods of dormancy, where violence declines to very low levels, only to become more active again later (Parks et al. 2013: 19). If peacebuilding is to result in greater security and opportunities for all, there is a need to understand why and how violence retains functional utility for some after conflict has formally ended or declined (Berdal and Zaum 2013: 12; Barron 2014). It is a mistake to assume that once the formal conflict has ended the structures, economies and logics that supported the conflict necessarily retreat. Rather, these tend to be remarkably resilient and can be seen to continue to influence post-conflict political dynamics (ibid.). In some cases, peace agreements also act as markers of exhaustion, rather than a genuine commitment to peace. As a result, the political and economic logic of elites is unlikely to change – including their unwillingness to give up their capacities for violence (North et al. 2009).

Moreover, the transitions are, of course, messy and non-linear, subject to unpredictable and sudden changes that can alter the context dramatically. This environment is a challenge for the upfront planning and linear 'project' thinking of much peacebuilding work. What is needed is patience and time to understand unfolding dynamics – of which peacebuilders are often in short supply given short timeframes and limited windows of political commitment to crises.

The limitations discussed here highlight the disconnect between what we know about the nature of conflict and transitions to peace, and the international community's peacebuilding toolkit. This suggests the latter is not fit for purpose, in particular in non-fragile states where conflicts are subnational. For The Asia Foundation, for whom the bulk of conflict programming is operating in such non-fragile states, different tools to support peace are therefore needed. In the following section we suggest ways in which peace support might move forward and what different ways of working might look like that are more in keeping with the reality of how conflict and peace transitions are experienced.



# 4. Beyond the toolkit: working politically to support peace



## 4.1 WHAT DOES WORKING POLITICALLY MEAN?

The relatively poor track record of international development attempts to promote transformational change has triggered reflection on dominant ways of working. This has helped to expose the political constraints within which aid operates (Carothers and de Gramont 2013), the complexity of transformations being sought (Ramalingan 2013) and the rigidity of much aid practice (Andrews 2013).

While much of this was not altogether new (see, for instance, Ferguson 1994; Mosse 2005; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Ostrom et al. 2001; Natsios 2010), it came at a ripe moment when austerity measures in many donor countries led to a push for greater results, including by 'doing more with less'. This encouraged a search for new ways of working within aid agencies. A number of communities of practice have emerged around 'thinking and working politically' and 'doing

development differently' which promote problem-driven, nationally/locally-led, politically-smart, iterative and adaptive approaches that include feedback learning throughout the life of programs (Booth and Unsworth 2014; Faustino and Booth 2014; Wild et al. 2015). Table 2 summarizes four of the main articulations of this agenda. Critically, these approaches counter the focus on technical knowledge and capacity as standard solutions to what are inherently political problems – that is, where the problems are actually ones of political will, entrenched interests, or power structures. These approaches – which we refer to here in shorthand as 'working politically' – offer potential avenues for 'doing peace support differently' that chime with some of the features that The Asia Foundation is already operationalizing in its peace support work. We believe that the principles have application not only for NGOs working on peace but also for larger bi-lateral and multi-lateral development agencies.

**Table 2: Working politically approaches**

<b>Problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA)</b>	PDIA has been advocated by researchers at the Kennedy School at Harvard University. It focuses on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Finding indigenous solutions for locally-defined problems in performance;</li><li>• Creating an authorizing environment for decision-making that encourages positive deviance and experimentation;</li><li>• Embedding this experimentation in tight feedback loops that facilitate rapid experiential learning;</li><li>• Engaging broad sets of agents to ensure that reforms are viable, legitimate, relevant and supportable.</li></ul>
(Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock 2012)	
<b>Thinking and working politically (TWP)</b>	In November 2013, representatives of donors, along with leading thinkers and researchers created a community of practice promoting TWP in development and focusing on what donors can do. Recognizing that political economy analysis has not shifted donor practice, three core principles are promoted: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strong political analysis, insight and understanding;</li><li>• Detailed appreciation of, and response to, the national and local context;</li><li>• Flexibility and adaptability in program design and implementation.</li></ul>
(TWP Community of Practice 2015)	
<b>Politically smart and locally led</b>	David Booth and Sue Unsworth document programs that are characterized as ‘politically smart and locally led’, understood as having the following features: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Politically informed by a sense of history, in-depth understanding of country and sector context, including continually updated national/subnational political economy dynamics;</li><li>• Politically astute by using information about politics intelligently and creatively. Donors and partners must be clever operators, with the capacity to work with or around politics, as well as donor constraints. Third parties will be more politically informed and astute than outsiders can ever be;</li><li>• Nationally and locally owned, not just in the narrow, technocratic Paris Declaration sense, but focused on problems that have salience for potential beneficiaries and at least some individuals/groups with power to support, influence or block change;</li><li>• Nationally/locally negotiated and delivered, prioritizing national and subnational leadership and capacity to search for solutions to locally identified problems. Locals will more likely have the motivation, credibility, knowledge and networks to mobilize support, leverage relationships and seize opportunities in politically astute ways.</li></ul>
(Booth and Unsworth 2014)	
<b>Doing development differently (DDD)</b>	The ‘DDD’ community held its first meeting in October 2014, endorsing the DDD Manifesto which commits signatories to develop programs that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus on solving nationally/locally defined problems that are debated and refined in an ongoing process;</li><li>• Are legitimized at all levels (political, managerial and social), building ownership in reality (not just on paper) and momentum;</li><li>• Work through national and local conveners to mobilize all those with a stake in progress to tackle common problems and introduce relevant change;</li><li>• Blend design and implementation through rapid cycles of planning, action, reflection and revision to foster learning from success and failure;</li><li>• Manage risks by making ‘small bets’: pursuing activities with promise and dropping others;</li><li>• Foster real results – real solutions to real problems that have real impact: that build trust, empower people and promote sustainability.</li></ul>
(The DDD Manifesto Community 2014)	

A small but growing body of evidence demonstrates that flexible, adaptive, politically smart programs can produce tangible results that go beyond traditional programs on the same issues. For instance, David Booth (2014) documents a USAID-supported Asia Foundation reform initiative in the Philippines aimed at securing land titles for ordinary citizens, which resulted in a 1,400% increase in residential titling. This initiative worked by building ‘coalitions for change’ and trialing multiple approaches to the same problem (using small bets) before settling on the best course of action. Its success sat in contrast with an earlier Australian program that had sought to achieve the same outcome through conventional programming approaches but which failed – although the technical work conducted under this program was critical to The Foundation’s later success.

Similarly, in Nigeria, the State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI), a DFID-funded program, has helped to achieve budget reforms, as well as some improvements in state level health and education, by building coalitions amongst civil society, media, and state government representatives to collectively problem solve (Booth and Chambers 2014). A number of other examples of the impact of these ways of working have been documented that help to move programming from a focus on technical capacity building to more constructive engagement with the political dynamics preventing change (see Booth and Unsworth 2014; Denney and Kirwen 20014; Wild et al. 2015).

From the multiple frameworks developed to date, a number of features of working politically can be distilled. These include:

- Investing in in-depth knowledge: This may be through longer-term commitments in-country and/or through a stronger reliance on national staff. Knowledge of political economy dynamics is not a one-off but something that is constantly reevaluated and updated throughout programming in order to remain relevant and abreast of opportunities;
- Focusing on specific developmental problems, rather than on entire sectors: This helps to pinpoint the particular change being sought – the difference between, for instance, working towards a particular policy change rather than ‘better governance’;
- Building not just political awareness but astuteness to enable smart programming:

This is not just about having a solid grasp of the political economy upfront in programming but rather about continuing to follow and understand evolving political dynamics throughout the life of reform and being able to strategically engage;

- External actors play a supporting role to national and local actors who take the lead: International actors, in most contexts, are there for the short-term, making sustainability of initiatives they lead problematic. They can also struggle to get ‘inside’ the politics of a country due to language, cultural and other barriers. External actors are most effective in supporting national/local actors to lead reform initiatives;
- Investing in multiple small bets to trial different approaches to addressing a problem: Rather than designing a program upfront and then implementing it as planned for two-four years, investing in small bets allows for multiple strategies to be pursued in tandem to hedge bets and to see which avenue yields most success;
- Investing in ongoing learning with feedback loops that can lead to altering program direction: Programs need to have built in mechanisms for adapting on the basis of changing context, new information and emerging results of program strategies – both success and failure. These enable the program to remain relevant.

## 4.2 WORKING POLITICALLY ON PEACE

To our knowledge, there has been limited articulation of how insights on working politically derived from other development sectors may have application to peacebuilding. Peace Direct have applied some of these principles in their work on ‘Local First,’ advocating for locally led, owned and delivered peacebuilding (Peace Direct 2012). And of course many organizations would claim they are already operationalizing some of the principles of working politically.

Yet there remains a need to translate the emerging evidence into a broader conceptual framework that provides practical guidance on new ways to effectively support peace, moving away from generic programming responses and opening up a range of more contextually-devised approaches that adapt and learn as the situation and problem evolve. Such guidance is relevant not only for NGOs like The Asia Foundation but also for larger development actors working on peacebuilding.

Some of these features map against the deficiencies of existing peace support approaches outlined in section 3 (see Table 3), and thus offer an opportunity for peace support that better responds to the nature of conflict and post-conflict transitions.

In some respects, the right column chimes with aspects of existing Asia Foundation approaches – such as working primarily through national staff with a smaller role for internationals (the vast majority of Asia Foundation staff are nationals of the country

**Table 3: Liberal peacebuilding versus working politically to support peace**

Limitations of liberal peacebuilding	Working politically to support peace
<b>Assume recipients of peacebuilding are deficient with weak institutions and capacity</b>	Invest in understanding the logic underpinning each conflict and its causes without falling back on conventional thinking. Develop programs that use levers other than technical skills and money.
<b>Rooted in fragile state experiences of conflict</b>	Adapt to experience of conflict, and different political and economic dynamics, in diverse settings. Continually update knowledge of political economy dynamics to inform program.
<b>Implement standard toolkit of pre-planned technical interventions</b>	Develop nationally- and locally-relevant solutions that may differ substantially and need not reflect international ‘best practice’. This includes working on peace by working on other issues or sectors. Adapt these solutions as the situation changes and accept there will be trade-offs – all good things will not necessarily go together.
<b>Seeks to build particular ‘best practice’ liberal political and economic systems</b>	Adopt a more open ended ‘best fit’ approach to institutional forms. Trial different approaches to see what works and what does not. Iteratively learn by doing, accepting that some things will fail. Prioritize and think through sequencing.
<b>Focus overwhelmingly on formal state processes</b>	Recognize the diversity of organizational forms and engage with those institutions that are most meaningful within recipient countries – both formal and informal and at different levels.
<b>Assume international actors are influential</b>	Recognize the limited influence and knowledge of external actors and support national and local actors who lead, including by building coalitions and brokering relationships based on trust. International actors can manage but actors within recipient countries must lead. Willingness to disappear.
<b>View conflict and post-conflict stages as neatly demarcated and qualitatively different</b>	Recognize the continuity of institutional structures, power dynamics and interests and the non-linearity of the transition process. Continually analyze to identify openings which may occur at unexpected times.

they work in), remaining committed for the long-term (the Foundation has had a permanent presence in Asia since 1954 and most international staff stay in the same country for long periods) and engaging with both formal and informal sites of power in peace processes. There are thus some complementarities between The Asia Foundation’s work on peace support and wider debates about working politically although these remain under-explored. There may be potential to learn from approaches The Asia Foundation has pursued, both for NGOs and other development actors.

In addition, there are non-conventional aspects to the Foundation’s work on peace support that the case studies will explore – such as the approach of working on peace by working on other issues. In many cases, the Foundation’s work on peace support has occurred largely through its engagement with wider governance reforms that are not ostensibly about peace, but rather about the wider political settlement – such as decentralization of power or engagement with political parties. This kind of work is explicitly political and about altering power dynamics within a country

– which is fundamental to peace transitions. Yet it is often seen as lying outside of peace support work. A politically informed approach to peacebuilding is one that attempts to understand whole systems. These kinds of approaches that understand the relationship between peace and how power is exercised within countries and communities will likely be an important element of working politically to support peace.

The table above offers some initial ideas on what working politically to support peace might look like, drawing on what we know about the nature of conflict and post-conflict transitions, the limitations of existing peacebuilding approaches and insights from the working politically literature on how to do development differently. This will be fleshed out and refined through the three case studies to develop a fuller account of what The Asia Foundation’s approach to supporting peace looks like, whether and when it makes sense to construe it as ‘working politically’ and what this can add to ongoing discussions about working politically in practice across the field of development.<sup>7</sup>

In practice, it is likely that some of these features will prove more important to the Foundation’s work than others – and that some might not prove relevant at all, with others not listed here emerging as key. This is why the empirical cases are needed to test the validity of the features noted here. Each case study will document the nature of the conflict and peace transition, the dominant peacebuilding approach used in the country in question, how The Asia Foundation has been conducting its peace support and what this reveals about different ways of working. Critically, this is not about coming up with a new model to replace that of liberal peacebuilding. The intention is not to replace one rigid, hegemonic approach with another. Rather, it is to highlight ways of working and principles of engagement that ground better peace support. And The Asia Foundation’s experience will of course represent just one possible manifestation of this – with other organizations likely also construing their approach as ‘working politically.’ Larger development agencies may also face challenges related to their internal structure that make it more difficult to work in these ways. Building up a catalogue of such experiences would be helpful. This project is a first step in that direction, focusing on one organization’s experiences.

#### 4.3 WHY WORKING POLITICALLY ON PEACE MAY BE DIFFERENT THAN IN OTHER DEVELOPMENT FIELDS

It is important to note that the working politically agenda has largely been developed for reform processes not directly related to conflict (and often not in conflict-affected areas). It is likely that this agenda will necessarily look different when applied to peace support – both because this might not involve a clear ‘reform’, per se, and because of the extreme sensitivities involved in working directly on issues of conflict.

Issues of peace and security are arguably more sensitive and ‘political’ than other areas of reform because they go to the heart of what it is to be a nation-state in terms of monopolizing the use of force. This means that the stakes are especially high in relation to peace and security matters – at the level of constituting existential threats in some cases. This means the issues are usually highly sensitive, making them

**Issues of peace and security are arguably more sensitive and ‘political’ than other areas of reform.**

particularly difficult for externals, and even national or local actors, to work on.

In addition, actors involved in conflict tend to be more

fluid as the power balance between fighting groups shifts and as some leaders are killed and others take their place. Elites can be harder to access because they may be underground, or highly protected, making meetings and building relationships difficult. Power may also be more fragmented because of shifts in the balance of power between fighting groups. This can mean that relationships built with one side or faction may become redundant when power shifts away from them. These facts suggest that working politically on issues of peace and security may well look different from working politically on other areas of reform. The case studies will yield useful insights on these issues.

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7. See Annex 1 for the case study template developed to support this.



# 5. The Asia Foundation's peace support work

The Asia Foundation has been working in a number of conflict-affected countries in Asia in support of peace processes.<sup>8</sup> Overall, the Foundation's work on conflict works towards three objectives (The Asia Foundation 2012):

1. To address critical governance challenges that prolong conflict and fragility by supporting engagement between leaders and citizens.
2. To strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of formal and informal transitional institutions.
3. To strengthen informal institutions that provide justice, stability, and services where the state has limited reach and/or legitimacy.

This work has aimed to move beyond the conventional approaches to peacebuilding set out in section 3 in an effort to be more nationally and locally led and relevant to each particular context. This has meant that the approach varies from country to country. Below, we provide a quick-brush sketch of what the Foundation's peace support work has looked like in the three countries on which case studies will be conducted. This provides an initial overview of the kinds of approaches used in the Foundation's work; this will be expanded and deepened in the case studies.

## 5.1 THE PHILIPPINES

The Asia Foundation in the Philippines has been working on peace support for 15 years. This emerged from two distinct areas of programming that were not specifically peace process-related. The first started with a survey that revealed rido (clan conflicts) were perceived as being the conflicts most likely to affect people. This prompted research conducted through partners in academia and civil society to study rido. One of the groups, United Youth for Peace and Development, got involved in actually addressing the conflicts, rather than just researching them. The

presence of the Foundation at inter-group talks to resolve rido provided assurance for the protection of leaders and enabled dialogue without recourse to violence that could escalate and affect the peace process. Over the years, Foundation partners have settled more than 200 rido conflicts, which had led to more than 600 fatalities (The Asia Foundation 2014).

The second area of programming was focused on local governance. In 2001, a new law for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao led the Foundation to focus on the implementation of local (municipal and city) governance in the region. This work became timely following the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, and enabled the Foundation to learn about local level dynamics in Mindanao, who the key actors were, what the alliances were, etc. Having built a reputation locally, the Foundation got involved in supporting a local organization to train the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in civil service functions in anticipation of a forthcoming peace agreement. The Foundation also carried out survey work, frequently not published, but provided to both sides of the conflict – building trust in the Foundation as an independent source of information.

This work meant that by the mid-2000s, the Foundation was well placed to become involved in the peace process. In 2008, when an interim peace agreement was about to be signed, the Foundation was invited to witness the signing. When that agreement fell through at the last minute, the Foundation already had the contacts and capacity to conduct a survey immediately and provide a number of small grants to local organizations equipped to deal with the fallout. In 2009, both sides to the conflict had sufficient confidence in the Foundation given their previous engagement to invite it to be part of the International Contact Group to support the peace negotiations. In 2013, the Foundation was asked to join the Third Party Monitoring Team and oversee effective implementation of the peace agreement.

8. Since 1997, The Asia Foundation has run at least 131 conflict-related programs in 17 countries. Of these, 119 programs worked on conflict issues (with 71 having addressing conflict as the primary objective), while 12 programs worked in conflict-affected areas but did not have an explicit objective to reduce conflict. In this time period, at least USD 342 million has been spent on conflict programming. Ten percent of The Asia Foundation's conflict programs work explicitly on providing support to peace processes. The Asia Foundation (2015).

Building on this work, the Foundation has also become involved in security sector reform and political party support, as well as working with religious leaders to support dialogue. Throughout this process, research has been a critical way of building knowledge and relationships, filling critical information gaps and creating space for difficult conversations. The use of small grants to multiple national and local partners over many years has facilitated strong relationships, providing them with the space to lead. Importantly, having gained a reputation for working at the local level on a number of other areas before getting involved in the peace process meant that the parties were not so suspicious when the Foundation did start working directly on the conflict.

## 5.2 NEPAL

The Asia Foundation works at three levels on peace support in Nepal.

At the national level it focused on providing safe space for dialogue between political parties between 2009 and 2015. Importantly, this involved second-tier party leaders as a back door to dialogue. This meant that while leaders were publically refusing to talk, dialogue could continue at the secondary level. This was not ultimately about the formal signing of documents but about building the trust that would eventually enable that to happen. The focus was therefore on keeping parties engaged, not on drafting contentious documents. The Foundation provided a safe space and facilitators and, critically, kept proceedings discrete so that they did not end up in the media or donor reports and get politicized. To protect the process – even from donors – the Foundation removed itself from the dialogue, placing partners in charge of this with the Foundation as behind-the-scenes manager of the process and a firewall. In addition, the Foundation identified key international resources (persons, exchange opportunities and events) and carefully matched those to national and local needs. Confidentiality was critical to allowing the dialogues to continue and to build trust between the Foundation and the parties involved.

At the subnational level, the Foundation is developing another layer of political dialogue with a violence prevention focus. This is in light of the Federal Constitution that was anticipated in Nepal, and has now been promulgated, which will put in place new governance structures in Nepal's provinces and likely create ethno-linguistic tensions along some of the provincial borders. The Foundation is attempting to prepare for this by putting in place a cadre of

influential dialogue brokers and mediators who will be equipped to deal with these tensions and prevent their escalation.

Finally, at the local level, the Foundation has supported community mediation, initially at the household level but now also expanding into community-level multi-stakeholder resource conflicts. The mediation program has developed a South Asian/Nepali style of mediation that flourished during the Maoist insurgency. It has also been used in the context of earthquake relief, supporting the elderly and female-headed households to negotiate a fair share of relief.

The Foundation's peace support work has expanded by turning single programs into multiple entry points – for instance taking the national level political dialogue to the subnational level and the local level mediation to higher levels – thus converging on a comprehensive approach around the theme of building trust and relationships. The focus is on the political transition, rather than the peace process per se – cultivating relationships with key actors rather than working on specific issues.

## 5.3 MYANMAR

Unlike the other two country offices, the Myanmar Asia Foundation office does not have an explicit peace support program. This is by design. The Foundation only reopened a country office in Myanmar in 2013, after an absence of many decades. It was felt that conflict was highly sensitive and too complex an issue to engage in without sufficient understanding of the national and local contexts, especially given the rapidly increasing number of organizations working on peace and conflict issues from 2010 on.

Given the extreme lack of quality information regarding government institutions and emerging governance dynamics under the 2008 Constitution, affecting stakeholders inside and outside of government, the Foundation made a strategic decision to focus on knowledge generation. Since 2012, the Foundation has invested in an anticipatory research agenda – research in issues that are likely to become important as Myanmar's peace process and governance reforms unfold. The initial and ongoing focus on decentralization and governance capacities has provided the Foundation with a good understanding of subnational governance and enabled it to expand into research on parallel systems of governance by armed groups, looking at health, education and public administration.

There is a great risk in Myanmar that the development community becomes increasingly bifurcated into those working on peace and conflict and those working on governance when they are in fact intricately related and, therefore, should be considered in an integrated fashion. The Foundation's anticipatory research agenda is aimed at addressing this challenge, and the expanded work on decentralization recognizes that subnational governance is critical to both Myanmar's democratic transition and the peace process. The Foundation's experiences in countries like the Philippines, Nepal and Sri Lanka has certainly underscored the potential for addressing conflict-related challenges through the subnational governance lens.

This role as a research provider has been especially important in what is a low information, high change environment. The atomized nature of authoritarian rule over the decades has meant that groups in Myanmar often do not have information about how the system works as a whole. The critical demand for quality data and informed analysis has become even more urgent as the country made the dramatic shift to a quasi-civilian government since 2011 and the peace process renewed. As such, Foundation research, underpinned by a long-term view of development and governance

reforms, is increasingly being used by government, ethnic armed groups, political parties, civil society organizations as well as development partners to inform their own work. Building trusted relationships in-country, understanding the interests and incentives of key players, identifying critical issues, sharing information and shaping the discourse have been central to the establishment of the Foundation's program in Myanmar and will continue to be so as the Foundation expands to work with national and local partners to more directly support subnational governance capacity and a thoughtful national dialogue on decentralization, which is at the heart of the peace process.

The case studies, and the final synthesis paper, will aim to unpack these stories of what the Foundation's peace support work has entailed. In so doing, they will cultivate new ideas on how to support transitions from conflict to peace, helping to move the literature on by offering concrete alternatives to the dominant peacebuilding approaches. In addition, the research generated will also aim to contribute to debates on 'thinking and working politically' and what this might mean when applied to working on issues of peace support.

# 6. Conclusion



This paper has detailed the problems faced in supporting peace processes, especially in relation to the subnational conflicts that afflict many low and middle income countries in Asia. We know that these conflicts and their transitions to peace are:

- Fought for rational reasons related to perceived interests (be they economic, political or identity-based);
- Not necessarily related to capacity deficits;
- Characterized by the dominance of elite incentives (but that ultimately also depend on ordinary people);
- Marked by a continuation of wartime logics after conflict has ended; and
- Resistant to outside influence.

Yet the dominant approach to peacebuilding adopted by the international community fails to adequately capture or engage with these features of war-to-peace transitions. These approaches:

- Treat recipients of peacebuilding as deficient with weak institutions and capacity;
- Implement standard toolkit of pre-planned

technical interventions;

- Focus overwhelmingly on the state;
- Assume international actors have greater leverage than is often the case; and
- View peace agreements as neat demarcations of conflict and post-conflict stages.

These assumptions are faulty in many cases but especially so in relation to middle income country contexts. New ways of working are therefore needed to ensure that peace support work connects with the realities faced by conflict-affected countries. One alternative lies in learning from the 'thinking and working politically' agenda – with its focus on more nationally and locally led and politically astute ways of working. Over the coming year, The Asia Foundation will document how three of its country programs have been working to support peace in the Philippines, Nepal and Myanmar, with the aim of elaborating and articulating what this looks like in practice. It will explore what the 'thinking and working politically' agenda means when applied to issues of peace. This research will move the peacebuilding literature forward with fresh ideas that go beyond the blueprint approaches that have traditionally dominated.



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# Annex 1: Case study template

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Background to the conflict

- Causes/drivers
- Actors
- Basic timeline of key moments
- Key issues to be resolved

### 2. What have dominant international peacebuilding actions looked like in this context?

- Who are the main international governments and organizations involved?
- What have been their primary approaches to dealing with the conflict?
- What have these approaches been successful in achieving?
- What have been their limitations/failures?

### 3. What is The Asia Foundation's approach to supporting peace?

- Overview and evolution of support
- What ways of working have enabled this kind of support? For instance:

- Decisions about when and how to engage;
- Process of developing interventions that do not rely on standard peacebuilding activities (like DDR, SSR, etc.);
- National staffing and working through partners;
- Political relationships (if so, how were these built?);
- Open-ended engagement with state and non-state authority structures;
- Mechanisms for ensuring ongoing national and local relevance (and adapting to changing context?)

### 4. How The Asia Foundation is working 'beyond the toolkit'

- Using the table below as a guide, update its contents based on the limitations of dominant peacebuilding approaches identified in the case study country and contrast with how The Asia Foundation are attempting to support peace by alternative means.

Limitations of liberal peacebuilding	Working politically to support peace
<b>Assume recipients of peacebuilding are deficient with weak institutions and capacity</b>	Invest in understanding the logic underpinning each conflict and its causes without falling back on conventional thinking. Develop programs that use levers other than technical skills and money.
<b>Rooted in fragile state experiences of conflict</b>	Adapt to experience of conflict, and different political and economic dynamics, in diverse settings. Continually update knowledge of political economy dynamics to inform program.
<b>Implement standard toolkit of pre-planned technical interventions</b>	Develop nationally- and locally-relevant solutions that may differ substantially and need not reflect international 'best practice'. This includes working on peace by working on other issues or sectors. Adapt these solutions as the situation changes and accept there will be trade-offs – all good things will not necessarily go together.
<b>Seeks to build particular 'best practice' liberal political and economic systems</b>	Adopt a more open ended 'best fit' approach to institutional forms. Trial different approaches to see what works and what does not. Iteratively learn by doing, accepting that some things will fail. Prioritize and think through sequencing.
<b>Focus overwhelmingly on formal state processes</b>	Recognize the diversity of organizational forms and engage with those institutions that are most meaningful within recipient countries – both formal and informal and at different levels.
<b>Assume international actors are influential</b>	Recognize the limited influence and knowledge of external actors and support national and local actors who lead, including by building coalitions and brokering relationships based on trust. International actors can manage but actors within recipient countries must lead. Willingness to disappear.
<b>View conflict and post-conflict stages as neatly demarcated and qualitatively different</b>	Recognize the continuity of institutional structures, power dynamics and interests and the non-linearity of the transition process. Continually analyze to identify openings which may occur at unexpected times.

- Building on the table, discuss the process of 'working politically' to support peace in the case study country.
- If relevant, discuss why working politically on issues of peace and security is difficult in the case study country and how the program has had to adapt to do so.

## Conclusion

PEACE and  
POLONIAN EMIRATES









## The Asia Foundation

Improving Lives, Expanding Opportunities

The Asia Foundation  
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The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Informed by six decades of experience and deep local expertise, our programs address critical issues affecting Asia in the 21st century—governance and law, economic development, women’s empowerment, environment, and regional cooperation. In addition, our Books for Asia and professional exchange programs are among the ways we encourage Asia’s continued development as a peaceful, just, and thriving region of the world.

Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals. In 2013, we provided nearly \$114 million in direct program support and distributed textbooks and other educational materials valued at over \$10 million.

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