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Pioneering the Digital Frontier: CMI's Approach to Forward-Looking Dialogues

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Abstract

As contemporary conflicts grow increasingly complex, new approaches to peacemaking are needed. This article outlines how CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation (CMI) incorporates technology-enhanced foresight methodologies into its dialogue and mediation work. Digital tools, such as software dedicated to data analysis and visualization, play a key role in CMI's foresight approach by facilitating broad-based data collection and participatory analysis. Interactive visual aids foster collective sense-making and help challenge entrenched mindsets of conflict stakeholders. The article illustrates how foresight approaches can be used to develop shared future visions and facilitate collaboration even in the context of stalled peace processes.

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The Changing Nature of Conflict and the Need for Foresight in Peacemaking

As the nature and dynamics of violent conflict evolve, both peace practitioners and policymakers find themselves at a critical juncture. We are witnessing an era of hybrid conflicts, where conventional and unconventional warfare blend with cyber and disinformation campaigns, creating complex and volatile dynamics.¹ The urgent climate crisis introduces another layer of instability, exacerbating resource scarcity and displacing populations, thus becoming a catalyst for conflicts.² Growing geopolitical tensions are influencing regional security dynamics and bringing new dimensions to peacemaking efforts. Altogether, the shifting landscape of global peace and security demands more than reactive strategies—it requires a framework that fosters a multidimensional understanding of the underlying causes of conflict and enables the identification of ways forward.³ To this end, the application of foresight approaches presents significant potential to strengthen peacemaking praxis.

Foresight is understood as the systematic exploration of alternative futures using a variety of methods such as horizon scanning to identify emerging trends and disruptions as well as scenario planning, which entails constructing alternative futures to test and enhance present-day decision-making and policy development.⁴ In the context of peacemaking, foresight methodologies are used to aid conflict parties look beyond their current positions and consider wider conflict drivers, such as economic and demographic trends, impacts of climate change, or global political developments.⁵ At the same time, foresight methodologies enable conflict stakeholders to imagine alternative futures.⁶

CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation (CMI) is an independent Finnish organization that works to prevent and resolve violent conflicts through dialogue and mediation. Founded in 2000 by Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former president of Finland Martti Ahtisaari, the organization is focused on facilitating track 1.5 and track 2 dialogues that engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including political party leaders, civil society actors, and representatives from marginalized groups, often to complement and strengthen formal peacemaking processes.

Over the past decade, CMI has pioneered a digitally enhanced foresight methodology in future-oriented dialogue processes across countries such as Yemen, Libya, Palestine, and Armenia. Fundamental to this approach is the use of software dedicated to data analysis and visualization. CMI's tool of choice has been Inklus, a software solution provided by a Finnish company of the same name.

In practical terms, the forward-looking dialogue process typically starts by jointly analyzing the present state of affairs. Conflict stakeholders are first invited to engage with the factual realities of the conflict by gathering and examining data about past events, current conditions, and views of different groups. The software, coupled with expert facilitation, aids in mapping and displaying the diverse positions of participants. This ensures a comprehensive consideration of various stakeholder perspectives, thereby grounding discussions in the “world as it is.”⁷ The primary objective of this fact-based approach is to establish a clear and shared understanding of the current state of the conflict. Once key political, social, and economic indicators have been collaboratively examined, the group commonly transitions into the scenario-building phase, crafting alternative futures of the “world as it could or should be” based on the previously established facts and figures.⁸ Active facilitation of the process, combined with the use of the Inklus software, provides a structured framework for participatory conflict analysis, scenario building, and enhanced policy planning.

The following sections present two case studies that illustrate CMI's use of digitally augmented foresight in dialogue processes in Armenia and Libya. Drawing on CMI's past experiences, this article suggests some of the key benefits, limitations, and broader potential of foresight and accompanying digital approaches for peacemaking.

CMI's Forward-Looking Dialogue Processes in Armenia and Libya

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh is a long-standing ethnic and territorial dispute that has its roots in the early twentieth century. Nagorno-Karabakh is a region in southwestern Azerbaijan (see Figure 1) that has a majority ethnic Armenian population. The conflict began when the ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh sought to secede from Azerbaijan and join Armenia after the fall of the Soviet Union. A full-scale war in the early 1990s, resulting in significant human suffering, displacement, and economic devastation, ended with a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1994. Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan have continued to simmer, with a major escalation of the conflict in 2020 that resulted in significant losses on both sides and the capture of key territories by Azerbaijan. A ceasefire agreement was brokered by Russia and led to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the region. In 2023, Azerbaijan launched a lightning offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, which led to the takeover of the region and the official dissolution of the ethnic Armenian enclave on January 1, 2024. The conflict resulted in the displacement of more than 100,500 people to Armenia.⁹



Figure 1. Nagorno-Karabakh region as depicted in December 2020. Nicole Thomas et al., “What the United States Military Can Learn from the Nagorno-Karabakh War.”¹⁰

Shortly before the latest escalation of conflict in September 2023, CMI facilitated a series of dialogue workshops with Armenian stakeholders, including parliamentarians, government officials, and members of civil society, to explore the future trajectories of the country’s development and the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process. The process began by jointly analyzing the present state of affairs in Armenia by gathering and discussing data about past events, current conditions, and views of different groups, to establish a shared understanding of the conflict. Using the Inlus software, stakeholders identified and assessed indicators that could determine Armenia’s future political trajectory, either leaning toward liberal or authoritarian directions. These indicators, such as “#25 Armenia becomes a global transit zone,” “#49 Azerbaijan again attacks the international border,” and “#61 Pro-Russian Armenian oligarchs becomes instrumental in decision-making process in the country,” were visualized on a scatter plot, which illuminated the complex interplay of factors driving Armenia’s potential path (see Figure 2). After developing the scenario narratives,

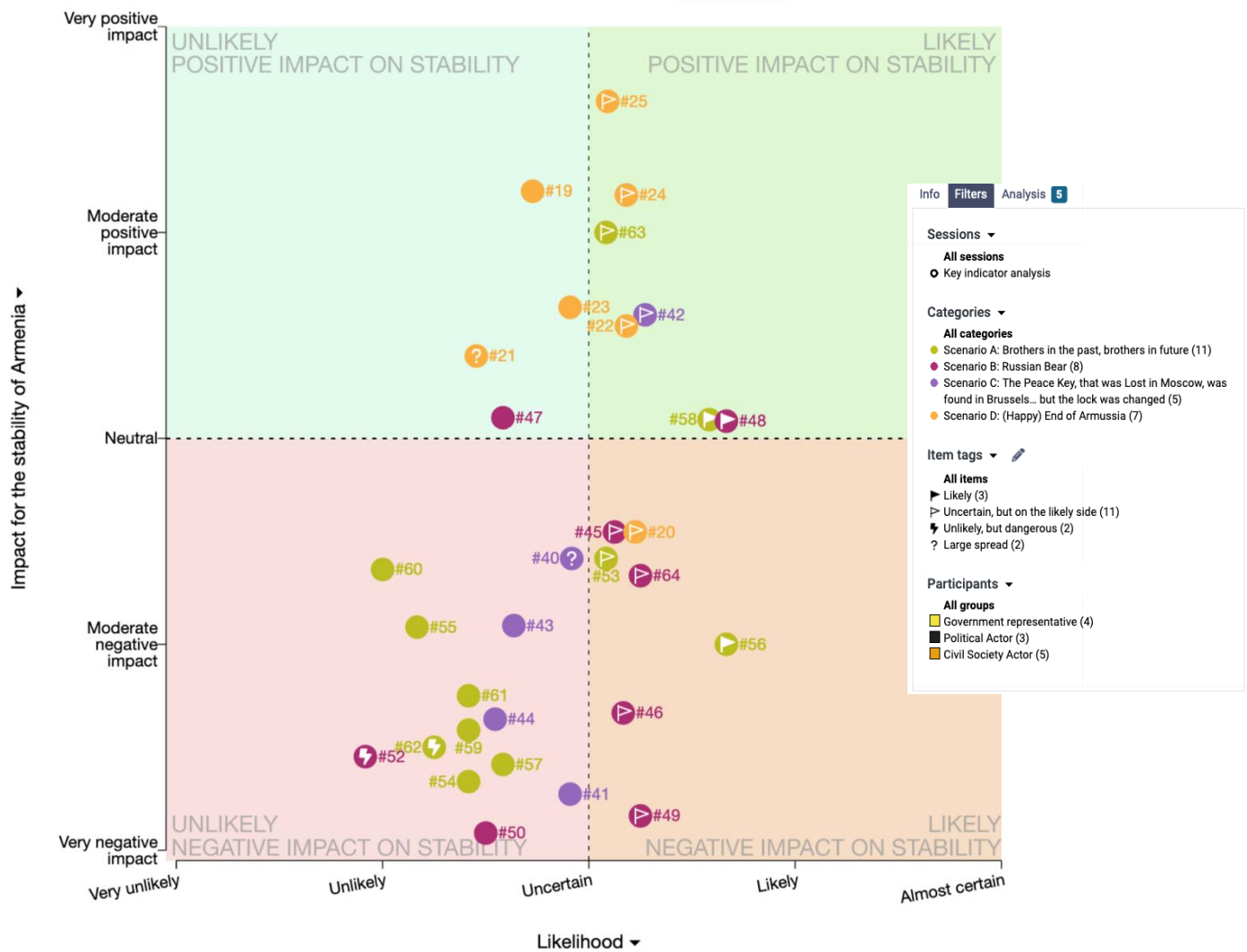


Figure 2. Example of a joint impact analysis generated using Inlus software during the Armenia workshop.

participants presented and reflected on the implications of each scenario. They ranged from a future Armenia close to Russia to one close to the West and they were characterized by civic polarization or public harmony. Last, participants from each stakeholder group selected key indicators responsible for Armenia's political trajectory in liberal or authoritarian directions and developed concrete actions to achieve or improve those indicators. This exercise fostered a strong sense of ownership and agency among participants, as reflected in one participant's statement: "When thinking about the Future of Armenia, especially when it comes to conflict resolution, we never speak about the agency Armenia has but treat it more as subject to other powers."¹¹

The second phase of the process focused on understanding the current trends of the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process and possible futures deriving from it. After highlighting around forty conflict-relevant indicators, the participants used the Includ tool to rank the indicators based on their relevance and impact on the peace process. As a result, the increasing Western mediation in the process and worsening security situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh region were highlighted as the most impactful indicator.

Using these trends, two axes were chosen as a basis for the development of the scenarios: the vertical axis highlighting the failure or success of Western mediation, and the horizontal axis highlighting the problem of human rights and security guarantees for the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh. Four scenarios were developed based on these axes, with the most likely scenario being failed mediation and military escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, resulting in the exodus of the Armenian population—a scenario that became reality shortly after.

Another example of CMI's forward-looking dialogue is the process conducted in Libya in 2021 as part of efforts to establish a shared vision for the country's political future termed 'Vision 2040 for Libya.'

Since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has been engulfed in a state of profound instability marked by the fall of a centralized authority and the rise of multiple armed factions (see Figure 3). The political vacuum has led to severe conflicts, especially since 2014, as two principal factions emerged: the General National Congress (GNC) in Tripoli, and an eastern-based government allied with General Khalifa Haftar. This division has been exacerbated by various regional and international actors, each pushing their agendas through political and military support, further polarizing the nation. Despite a ceasefire deal agreed upon in October 2020, stability remains weak due to the ongoing presence of foreign mercenaries and the deadlock between forces loyal to Haftar and those controlling Western Libya. These complications hinder the UN-led initiatives aimed at unifying the nation through national elections, which are further undermined by repeated delays.¹² Concurrently, the conflict continues to severely impact human rights and gender equality, disproportionately affecting internally displaced persons, migrants, and women. The future development of the conflict and trajectory of the Libyan state is characterized by deep uncertainties intertwined with broader socio-political issues, including the struggle for rule of law and functional governance, and escalating environmental challenges due to climate change.

Against this backdrop of a complex conflict dynamic in Libya, the foresight process facilitated by CMI, and aided again by the data mapping software Includ, gathered Libyan stakeholders from various political factions to discuss key conflict drivers and to explore potential pathways toward peace and stability. Themes such as national unity, governance models, and the role of external influences on the conflict were central to the discussions.

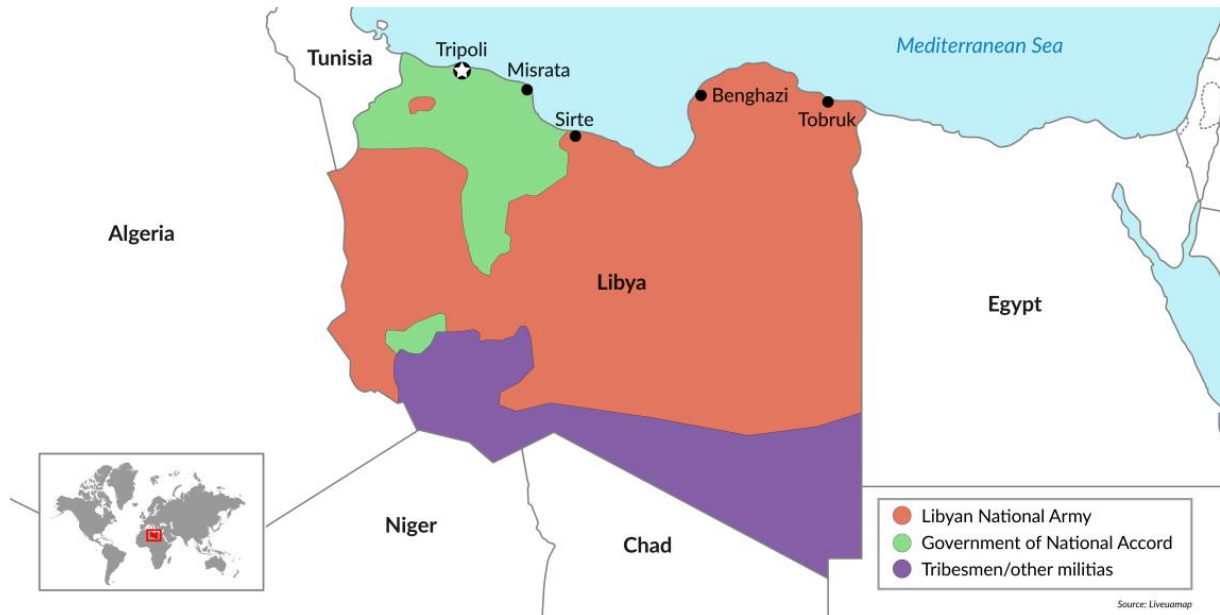


Figure 3. Years of civil war has left Libya torn between the UN-recognized Government of National Accord, based in Tripoli, and the Libyan National Army, based in Tobruk and backed by Russia, Egypt, and the UAE. Federica Saini Fasanotti, “Europe’s Mistakes in Libya.”¹³

The CMI foresight process aimed to foster dialogue among diverse Libyan stakeholders. The process started with crafting a broad, yet deliberately ambiguous, vision statement that could accommodate the diverse perspectives of all involved parties: “Libya 2040 is a one, civil, democratic, and sovereign state built on fair partnership and citizens’ rights, based on decentralization, institutions, the rule of law, and the right to act in political parties.” This vision built on a “Charter of Principles” that was previously developed by Libyan political factions with CMI’s support. Once participants achieved a consensus on the vision statement, the facilitators shifted the dialogue to operationalizing the vision. This phase of the dialogue necessitated a greater level of detail and engagement from the participants, moving from abstract ideas to specific strategies for future governance and societal structure (see Figure 4). The process culminated in a participatory prioritization exercise where stakeholders assessed the urgency and feasibility of the identified goals, again using the data management and visualization tool to prioritize initiatives that were both urgent and feasible, setting a practical roadmap for immediate action.

The systematic prioritization not only grounded the vision in actionable steps but also ensured that the roadmap had the credibility and commitment among participants necessary for implementation. By balancing abstract visioning with detailed operational planning, CMI’s foresight process in Libya bridged ideological divides and laid the groundwork for a shared future, fostering a sense of collective responsibility and forward-thinking among the participants and their respective political parties.

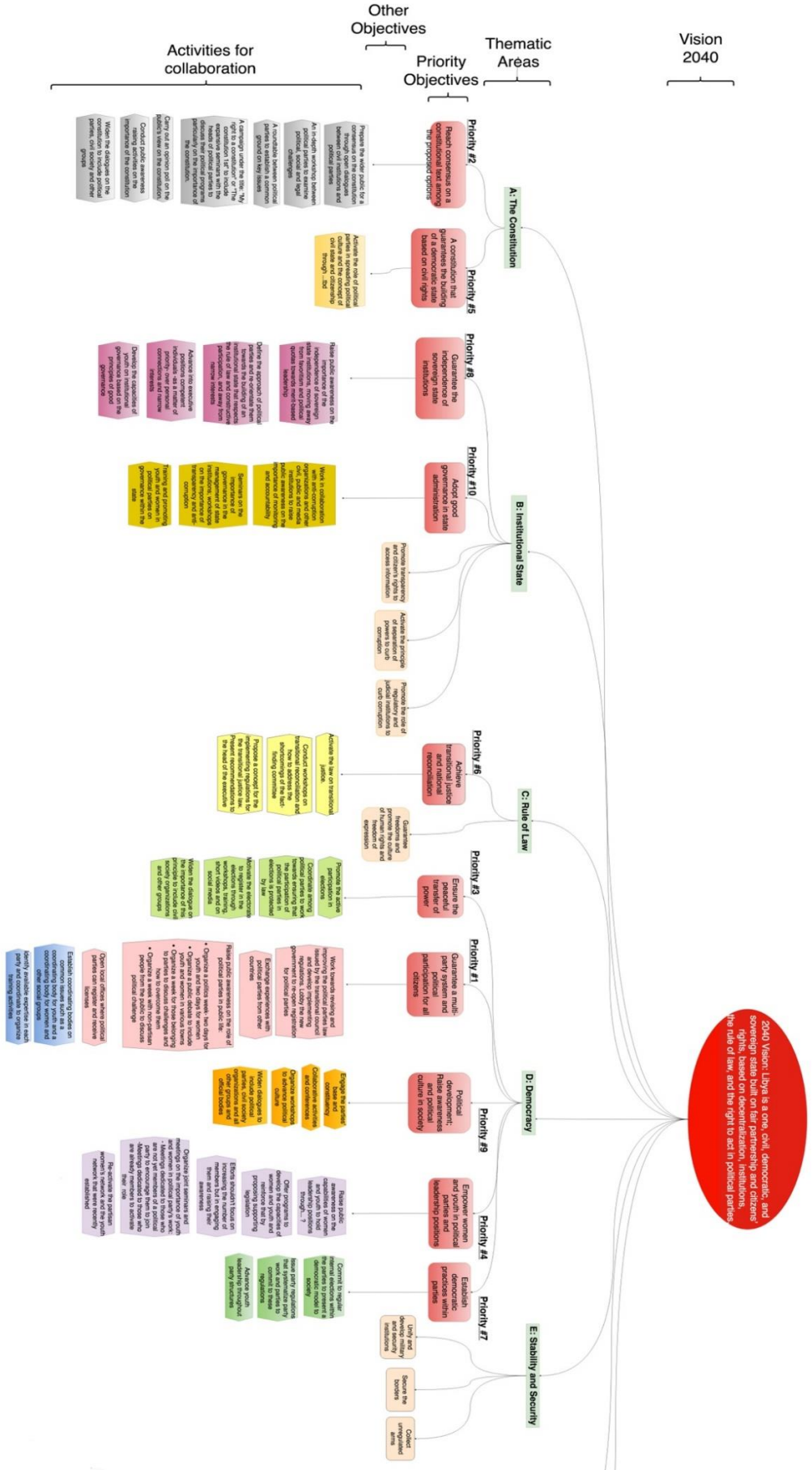


Figure 4. Illustrative example of the results of the road mapping exercise conducted in one of the Libya dialogue sessions, generated with Mindomo software.

The Value of Technology-Enhanced Foresight in Dialogue Processes

CMI's work in these two contexts illustrates how the application of foresight methods, such as scenario planning and horizon scanning, can be used in multi-stakeholder dialogue processes to develop shared visions and roadmaps in regions characterized by prolonged conflict. By operationalizing their shared vision into concrete goals and roadmaps, stakeholders move beyond mere brainstorming and transform foresight into a means for collaborative strategy development. Through such a process, it is possible to empower conflict stakeholders to align around a jointly crafted vision and path forward, enabling the development of longer-term strategies for sustainable peacebuilding in the context in question.¹⁴ Instead of directly addressing contentious issues that can further entrench positions, foresight methods guide participants to move beyond immediate concerns and focus on shared interests and long-term goals. Through participatory exploration of multiple plausible futures, stakeholders can better understand the potential ramifications of their actions and prepare for previously unforeseen developments.¹⁵ CMI's work in Libya and Armenia illustrates these benefits.

The process of considering numerous alternative futures also prompts parties to identify potential risks and opportunities and to develop strategies to address them proactively. This fosters an environment where informed decision-making can take place, empowering stakeholders to shape the future in a positive way. Enabling groups with varying amounts of power and diverse interests to grasp each other's needs, priorities, and the rationale behind their positions builds mutual understanding. Above all, this can nurture trust and confidence in the peacemaking process and in a shared future beyond the conflict.

Challenges for Foresight Practice in Peacemaking

While foresight holds significant potential for peacemaking, it is by no means a silver bullet for conflict resolution, nor does it replace traditional mediation methodologies. Rather, it serves as a useful approach that enhances the set of tools at the disposal of dialogue practitioners.

At the same time, foresight comes with its own set of challenges, many of which are rooted in the intrinsic nature of conflicts and the dynamics between the conflicting parties.¹⁶ At its core, the reluctance of some conflict stakeholders to engage in futures thinking generally stems from fixed positions, a deep-seated fear of considering alternative futures, and the defensive stances that parties often adopt to protect their interests.

In conflict settings, the discourse between parties is often at a standstill, with little shared vision for the future. This impasse is further complicated by past grievances and a general lack of trust, making any discussion of future possibilities a daunting task. Discussions about the future necessitate a willingness to question existing beliefs and entertain the idea of alternative relationships, which is often a significant hurdle to overcome.¹⁷ The key players may be resistant due to fears of undermining their current positions or because they stand to lose from a change in the status quo. Power imbalances, particularly in asymmetrical conflicts, add another layer of complexity, with dominant parties being particularly hesitant to engage in processes that could in any way challenge their superiority.

Implementing a futures thinking process is also challenged by practical considerations such as the inclusion of key actors, securing the necessary time and resources, and ensuring participants' safety. These challenges are also present in online or hybrid settings, where sustaining collaboration and group ownership becomes even more difficult.¹⁸ In summary, while promising, the effective use of foresight approaches in peacemaking is often undermined by challenges that

stem from the nature of conflict itself, resistance to change, and the practicalities of implementing such processes in a conflict-affected context.

Conclusion: New Frontiers for Peacemaking

As modern conflicts intensify in complexity, driven by hybrid threats, the climate crisis, and shifting geopolitics, traditional peacemaking approaches face unprecedented tests. Reactive strategies that merely address surface-level symptoms inevitably fall short against these multifaceted drivers of conflict.

Foresight approaches hold clear potential to strengthen peacemaking by fostering understanding of underlying conflict causes while enabling the identification of broader risks and opportunities. Through structured methods like scenario planning, diverse conflict stakeholders can collectively explore alternative futures and uncover fresh perspectives. For actors such as CMI, foresight approaches have been a relevant way to engage otherwise marginalized voices such as those of women, youth, and civil society.

Finally, the strategic use of foresight approaches can also enable practitioners and policymakers to anticipate crises more proactively. They can examine trends and possible future scenarios to enable them to help address root causes of conflict before violent escalation. Where dialogues stall, foresight can help to facilitate collaboration and trust by shifting focus from immediate concerns to shared long-term goals. While it is not a panacea, foresight serves as a powerful complementary approach that expands the toolkit available to peacemakers. CMI's pioneering methodologies that integrate foresight into dialogues yield promising results: proactive engagement, inclusive decision-making, and participants' ownership. Faced with escalating global complexities, the utility of these results has never been greater.

Notes

¹ Conciliation Resources, "Looking Forward: Connecting Futures Thinking, Mediation, and Reconciliation," Briefing Paper, 2022.

² United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, "Foresight Playbook," 2022.

³ Andreas T. Hirblinger, Ville Brummer, and Felix Kufus, "Leveraging Digital Methods in the Quest for Peaceful Futures: The Interplay of Sincere and Subjunctive Technology Affordances in Peace Mediation," *Information, Communication & Society* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2247070>.

⁴ Denis Loveridge, *Foresight: The Art and Science of Anticipating the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

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⁶ Conciliation Resources, "Looking Forward."

⁷ Hirblinger, Brummer, and Kufus, "Leveraging Digital Methods."

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," Global Conflict Tracker, October 21, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>.

¹⁰ Nicole Thomas et al., "What the United States Military Can Learn from the Nagorno-Karabakh War," *Small Wars Journal*, April 4, 2021, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/what-united-states-military-can-learn-nagorno-karabakh-war>.

¹¹ Translated from Armenian by the author.

¹² Hatem Ben Salem et al., "Conflict in Libya: A Multidimensional Crisis: State of Play and Paths towards a Sustainable Peace," IEMed, October 16, 2017, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/conflict-in-libya-a-multidimensional-crisis-state-of-play-and-paths-towards-a-sustainable-peace/>.

¹³ Federica Saini Fasanotti, “Europe’s Mistakes in Libya,” GIS, May 8, 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/europe-mistakes-libya/>.

¹⁴ Hirblinger, Brummer, and Kufus, “Leveraging Digital Methods.”

¹⁵ CMI Insight, “Pioneering the Digital Frontier.”

¹⁶ Hirblinger, Brummer, and Kufus, “Leveraging Digital Methods.”

¹⁷ Conciliation Resources, “Looking Forward.”

¹⁸ Ibid.