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UN Security Council Arria-formula Meeting on Peacebuilding

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Why principled pragmatism is a strategic necessity in a transactional age

Mr. President, Excellencies, distinguished colleagues,

Thank you very much.

We meet at a moment when conflict seems to speak more loudly than principles across the international system.

Diplomacy is losing terrain when it is needed most. The international environment is more transactional, competitive, and fragmented than at any point in recent decades. Warmakers and peacemakers get blurred, as we saw in the 2010s: for instance, in Libya and Syria.

And those who are entrusted with international peace and security like the Members of this Council realise this every day and will have to internalise this reality and change course in order to make peacemaking work in this new environment. And of course that is not easy.

In such a world, we need a new approach that recognises the transactional and fragmented world in which we live, that is pragmatic but is rooted in core principles. We owe that to the more than two billion people impacted by conflicts around the world. Two billion: let that sink in. The truly global International Commission on Principles for Peace that I co-chaired embarked on a two-year data driven journey of events and consultations around the world on this very topic of trying to find these new and more effective ways in complementing what did work well before.

In fact more than 150 of these consultations were held with a large and diverse and worldwide mix of different constituencies and people including 700 case studies . It will not be a surprise to you that from top to bottom and up-again, from diplomats, mediators, media and businesses to local associations and the citizenry there was a deep realization that most existing mechanisms are in crisis and radically new forms of engagement are required if we wish to be successful in this polarized world.

What history has taught us — and what it has not

Because we do not need to look far into the past to see what happens when peacemaking is pursued through power alone.

Agreements imposed without legitimacy tend to collapse. In most cases rather quickly. Settlements that prioritise short-term stability tend to store violence rather than resolve it. Processes that exclude key constituencies succeed on paper but fail quickly; imposed and standard toolboxes do not work. History shows us that power can stop violence temporarily, but only an intelligent road to legitimacy sustains peace.

At the same time, we must learn from history but not be crippled by it: while self-interest was always a factor, state and non-state actors are more explicit in the pursuit of their own interests.

Making and maintaining peace therefore becomes more dependent than ever on whether all parties can be convinced that agreement rather than conflict is in their self-interest. That implies understanding that a comprehensive playbook is needed for peacebuilders of today.

Lessons from a former diplomat and lifelong peacebuilder

I was foreign minister and development minister for my country, the Netherlands. Having conducted my nation's foreign policy, I know the tradeoffs and dilemmas in peacebuilding are very strong. Domestic and more often than not polarized politics co-determine the gravitas and seriousness of peacemaking at home and abroad. It is never a one-off.

I was also Special Representative for the UN Secretary-General in Côte d'Ivoire and Mali.

In Côte d'Ivoire, I learned that power-sharing agreements collapse when they lack legitimacy on the ground, no matter how elegant they look on paper. Elections might invite conflict rather than reduce it, and therefore they have to be part of a larger legitimizing peacemaking effort.

In Mali, I watched as operational outcomes of the National Dialogue were not supported enough by local, national or international actors – and thus instead of serving as a gamechanger, failed to form the necessary basis for what Principles for Peace has termed (with the help of our Advisory Group member, the former UN Force Commander in Rwanda, Roméo Dallaire) accountable and therefore effective security for the population in the fight against terrorism.

Extensive top-down approaches failed to prevent violence because they ignored local dynamics and the perception of international backers.

On the other hand, I observed the Bangsamoro peace process in the Philippines, where phased autonomy, constitutional clarity, and sustained international guarantees transformed a protracted conflict into a durable political transition. There, too, our Principles and their measurement helped to make a good agreement sustainable.

These experiences taught me that principles aren't constraints on pragmatism: they're what makes pragmatism work.

Peace-making in a transactional world

So let us be clear-eyed in that context about the world we are operating in. Today's peace-making takes place in an environment that is:
- Multipolar and contested;
- Driven by interests and leverage;
- Constrained by domestic political pressures;
- Marked by declining trust in global institutions;

In this environment:
- Armed actors negotiate from strength, not goodwill;
- States calculate costs and benefits carefully;
- Comprehensive agreements are harder to reach and harder to sustain.

This does not make peace impossible. But it does mean that peace-making must become more strategic, more flexible, and more credible.

As a peacemaking innovative start-up that is broadly supported we are developing in such a context new playbooks for peace.

Traditional peace processes often aim for a single, comprehensive agreement — a grand bargain that resolves everything at once. In today's conflicts, this approach frequently fails.

That is why we need to build peace through sequenced, mutually reinforcing steps, not one final leap – what we sometimes call a modular approach.

In practice, this can include:

- A local ceasefire stabilising a specific area; but only if it followed through by a tailor-made stabilization force with a credible, sustainable and precise mandate which can gain public support and legitimacy on all sides. That's why we developed, in the context of our coalition on Middle East peace, a framework for such a force in Gaza with our Advisory Member General Kees Mathijssen. This framework was based on the Principle of accountable security.

- A temporary governance mechanism restoring basic services, building legitimacy through delivering concrete benefits could also be a modality, but it should allow for the principles of hybrid solutions and flexibility on the side of public and private actors alike. Our network works specifically on making this possible by proposing new alliances and initiatives on the basis of new coalitions of the willing.

Each step achieves three things:
1. It reduces harm to civilians;
2. It creates habits of cooperation;
3. It generates political capital for the next step.

This last point is crucial: it recognises that parties need to be presented clear arguments as to why a step towards peace is in their own self-interest, and the rewards reaped from each successful bit of progress serve as arguments for going further.

And importantly, this will allow engagement without requiring immediate agreement on final-status issues.

It's what we're seeing now in Gaza, for example, with the Trump plan. If it is followed by the building of an accountable security framework that brings an end to fighting and lets civilian life resume, it can then lead to political reforms and ultimately a longer-term resolution. This virtuous circle is what we need.

Principles for Peace: values as design tools

The work of Principles for Peace, a foundation I'm proud to advise, demonstrates that principles succeed when they are treated not as aspirations, but as design criteria. Key principles include:

- Pluralism, meaning structured participation of key constituencies, not symbolic representation or token groups;

- Legitimacy, locally-led and internationally-guaranteed;

- Accountability, through monitoring, measurements and credible consequences; This is key, as measurement of principles is accepted and can help consensus on course correction;

- Integrated and incremental approaches, sequencing commitments to build trust over time;

- International responsibility, providing reliable guarantees without imposing solutions. The balance between global, regional and local is now confused and often chaotic and competitive.

These principles as they have been elaborated are all pragmatic and based on an understanding that no party is perfect, but that all can be moved in the right direction with the right incentives, as long as the peacebuilders keep sight of that north star of the principles.

They have shaped lessons for Israel–Palestine, where experience shows that progress occurs only when security, recognition, and political rights are addressed together, and collapses when power replaces legitimacy.

They're based on AI- and data-driven tools like the Peace Navigator, a fantastic platform you can find at peacenavigator.org, but also simulations and copilots. They help mediators in this new context of proxy-warfare, and as the world is dominated by Wargaming, we have developed these tools to make the difficult and complex reality of Peacegaming a new and urgent reality, working with different governmental and nongovernmental actors around the globe.

They involve convening and building of new coalitions of the willing bringing together disparate actors in leadership across business, politics, security and media who don't always agree on everything, but can find common ground to make concrete progress – a "middle-out approach" that refuses the binarity between top-down and bottom-up philosophies.

And obviously accompanying countries with both strategic advice and on-the-ground support.

All of this, built on measurable principles.

What this means for the Security Council — concretely

Excellencies,

The Security Council does not need unanimity to act responsibly. But it does need to actively support peace-making approaches that are credible in today's geopolitical reality.

Four steps are particularly important.

First, the Council could explicitly endorse principle-anchored peace frameworks that are inclusive, sequenced, and measurable. This allows members with differing political views to support process integrity, even where end-state preferences diverge.

Second, the Council could normalise modular peace-making in its mandates, resolutions, and briefings — treating interim agreements if they are tailormade and well drafted not as failures of ambition, but as foundations for sustainable peace.

Third, transactional tools like sanctions relief, economic access, reconstruction support, diplomatic recognition should be conditional, reversible, and behaviour-linked.

Fourth, the Council should strengthen international guarantees by clarifying roles, monitoring mechanisms, and follow-through. Responsibility does not require ownership, but it does require some more consistency.

Conclusion

Mr. President,

The choice before us is not between ideals and interests. It is between short-term deals that fail and agreements that endure.

In a world where power is increasingly asserted, unprincipled transactionalism is self-defeating. By contrast, principled pragmatism and tailored engagement create incentives for restraint and space for politics.

The Security Council has a responsibility not only to react to crises, but to actively support new approaches to peace-making that fit the world as it is. There is still space for principled peace-making, if we apply those principles to the world as it really is rather than as we would like it to be.