

Building the Bridge to Peace: Reframing Peace and Peacebuilding

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**FRAME
WORKS**

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Introduction

The past couple of decades have brought home for Americans how interconnected the world is. Conflict and disruption such as 9/11 and the wars that followed, climate change, the pandemic, and now the war in Ukraine make it clearer than ever that a crisis in one part of the world affects us all. This global impact creates an opening to make a case for supporting peacebuilding efforts around the world.

While this opening is real, so too are the cultural headwinds that peacebuilders are walking into. The militaristic model of American global relations remains strong, and the universal benefits of long-term peacebuilding efforts are little understood. Instead, the alternative to militarism is assumed to be withdrawal and disconnection. The decades-long conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the COVID-19 pandemic are tugging on the thread of isolationism that is woven into the fabric of our politics. A more robust understanding of peacebuilding—how it works and why we need it—is crucial to counteract this sense of fatalism.

In this brief, we offer a new, evidence-based narrative that advocates can use to effectively navigate this cultural landscape. This narrative is the result of several years of deep-dive research conducted in partnership with peacebuilders, and provides a way of explaining to the American public what peacebuilding is and why it matters. Using this narrative collectively and consistently can change the discourse around peacebuilding and ultimately change public mindsets.

These narrative insights focus on making a case for peacebuilding in foreign affairs to an American audience, while also providing ways of talking about peacebuilding that can potentially be used beyond this context. Below, we describe the elements of the narrative framework, explaining how different elements respond to and can potentially shift existing public thinking. We illustrate what each recommendation might look like in a communication.

Why Framing?

Framing is about our choices in what we say, how we say it, what we emphasize, and what we leave unsaid, and how these choices shape how people think, feel, and act. The way the media, political leaders, and advocates frame issues shapes how the public sees the world. Frames affect whether we think an issue is important, whether we think of it as a private, personal problem or a shared social concern, and the kinds of solutions we support.

Framing is also empirical. Advocates can and should use framing strategies that have been rigorously tested and designed to move people's understanding, attitudes, and support for effective policies. A proven framing strategy, shared and disseminated by advocates across an issue field, will accelerate changes in discourse and ultimately shift mindsets in more positive directions.

Common Mindsets, Partisan Reactions

As the first phase of our research **demonstrated**, the common mindsets Americans bring to any peacebuilding discussion present several challenges for communicators. Across demographic and ideological lines, members of the American public share many of the following assumptions about peace and conflict that are unhelpful and even counterproductive:

- Generally think of peace in passive terms, as the absence of conflict or a state of inner calm, but have access to a more active understanding—the recognition that peace must be built by creating the conditions for peace.
- Assume that military action is central to security, yet also recognize the importance of diplomacy and, to a much lesser extent, community-level relationship building and efforts to address economic inequality.
- Widely think of violent conflict as an inevitable product of human nature and ultimately unattainable, yet sometimes see peace as a choice to work toward that is within our grasp.
- Embrace American exceptionalism and believe the United States is uniquely capable of leading the world, yet recognize that when we impose our will on other parts of the world, it doesn't always turn out well.
- Have little understanding of what the work of peacebuilding involves beyond seeing the value of diplomacy.

Different people, of course, draw on these cultural mindsets in different ways. Some ways of thinking are more salient for some people and groups than others. Yet our research found that these ways of thinking are truly common across people and groups.

Despite these continuities and commonalities in thinking about peace and conflict, the issue of peacebuilding is highly susceptible to political polarization. When people's partisan identities are activated, they respond to policy proposals first and foremost as partisans. Our research found that when self-identified Democrats were presented with an unframed policy proposal they saw as aligned with typical Democratic positions (such as supporting diplomacy or cutting military spending), they automatically supported it. When people who identify as Republicans were presented with the same proposal, they similarly saw it as a Democratic proposal and automatically opposed it for the same reason—they associated it with “the other side” and rejected it out of hand.

Mindsets and Mindset Shifts

Cultural mindsets are deep ways of thinking about the world that are part of our shared culture. They shape how we make sense of the world and think about the existing social order. Mindsets matter for social change because some of them naturalize the social order and can be used to maintain the status quo, while others problematize the ways that things work and can be used to contest and shift structures of power.

Mindset shifts refer to changes to the extent that mindsets are dominant of “top-of-mind” among people embedded in a particular culture, or a shift in the boundaries of a mindset when it expands to encompass a new understanding. Mindset shifts happen as a result of various factors, including strategic decisions by communicators who work together in intentional ways to change discourse and build public understanding of a social issue.

To learn more, see our report about mindsets and mindset shifts [here](#).

The good news is that frames that productively engage people’s underlying mindsets can deactivate knee-jerk partisan responses and help people to think more deliberately about peace and conflict. These frames cue and reinforce more productive ways of thinking across political parties and ideologies, increasing understanding of and support for peacebuilding among both self-identified Democrats and self-identified Republicans. Using these frames, we can build understanding of and support for peacebuilding across the political spectrum.

Yet peacebuilders must be attuned to the potential for polarization and how polarized debate detracts from the goals of peacebuilders. Cuing partisan identity can provoke immediate support for policy proposals among Democrats, but it has the opposite effect among Republicans. And setting people on the path to partisan thinking doesn’t advance the long-term goal of shifting our shared discourse around peace and conflict and ultimately shifting mindsets.

While our political parties seem to be far apart in any specific policy debate of the moment, the reality is that our policy apparatus and discourse are oriented around a militaristic approach. To achieve peacebuilding goals, we need to shift the conversation—and by doing so, shift mindsets—to become the default approach. We need a shared narrative that truly centers on peacebuilding. The frames described below provide a means to do that.

How to Frame Peacebuilding

The most effective narrative about peacebuilding is a narrative of connection:

- People and communities around the globe are ***interconnected***.
- To promote peace and prevent violent conflict, we must create the conditions for peace through ***ongoing work*** to ***build bridges*** across social divides.
- Because the world is interconnected, ***when we support peacebuilding in another part of the world, it benefits all of us***.

This narrative leverages the idea of interconnectedness, which is already available to people, while—critically—explaining how peacebuilding strengthens the positive ties that support peace.

Below, we walk through each step of this narrative, describing what advocates should do and how this can shift public thinking. For each element of the narrative, we provide an example of what it looks like in application, though it is important to emphasize that we are not recommending that this specific wording be used in every case. On the contrary, the frames are highly flexible—they can be used in different ways, tailored to messenger, audience, and the channel and goals of specific communications.

What Is a Narrative?

Narratives are patterns of meaning that cut across and tie together specific stories. Narratives are common patterns that both emerge from a set of stories and provide templates for specific stories. For more on narrative form and culture change, see [here](#).

Use the value of *Interdependence* to build support for peacebuilding around the world

How the public currently thinks

The American public widely assumes that the United States inevitably will or should lead and drive global affairs (although they are often unclear about the specific circumstances). The United States is seen as an unrivaled superpower, exceptional in our economic and military power. Americans often see themselves as exceptional in our liberal democratic values, as the “city on the hill” to which others look for inspiration and hope. Coupled with the assumption that a strong military is the key to security, American exceptionalism tends to lead to support for military intervention around the world to protect America’s perceived interests and values.

Sometimes, people express skepticism about serving as the “world’s policeman.” This view is sometimes driven by disbelief that America truly knows best—that our values give us moral authority—and a sense that it’s not America’s place to dictate what others should do. Other times, this skepticism is driven by isolationist thinking—the idea that the government should be committing its energy and resources to helping Americans at home rather than worrying about what happens elsewhere.

What to do and why

Leverage the idea that the world is interconnected—that what affects one of us affects all of us—to build support for peacebuilding. This value helps people recognize that they have a stake in what happens abroad while pushing American exceptionalism to the background and cultivating a sense of shared responsibility for peace.

The value of *Interdependence* has both a moral and an instrumental sense. It fosters the moral idea that, as a country, we have responsibilities to others as part of a global community while also reinforcing the idea that building peace elsewhere is in our interest. The value pushes back against both isolationism and American exceptionalism, generating a sense that the United States must be involved in other parts of the world but should do so on equal footing with others. It reassures those worried about being the world’s policeman that America must act in concert with others rather than trying to solve problems ourselves. In other words, it provokes a sense of responsibility for peace that is shared across communities, nations, and international institutions, and fosters a cooperative orientation toward creating peace that shifts people away from militarism alone and toward peacebuilding.

What it looks like

Not this

Since 2001, the U.S. military has intervened internationally over and over under the auspices of the “War on Terror.” Using the military to address violent conflict has exacerbated sectarian tensions and led to widespread violence. Instead, we must use the proven tools of peacebuilding.

This

The pandemic has underlined just how *interconnected* the world is—what affects one part of the world *affects all of us*. When we allow violent conflict to happen anywhere, it can *spread and disrupt peace everywhere*. As a global community, peacebuilding matters to all of us.

How the pandemic and the upheavals of the past two years are affecting public thinking about peace and conflict

Our research has found that the pandemic amplifies an existing tension in Americans’ thinking about peace and conflict—a tension between recognizing our interdependence and the pull of isolationism.

Before the pandemic, people were already attuned to global interconnectedness. In interviews conducted before the pandemic, people sometimes spoke about our interconnectedness, highlighting how issues like climate change affect people across borders. The pandemic has strengthened this recognition, bringing home to everyone how what happens in one part of the world affects others.

Yet the pandemic has also strengthened the appeal of isolationism for many. Before the pandemic, research participants sometimes suggested that we stop worrying about what happens elsewhere and prioritize what happens at home. In interviews and focus groups conducted after the pandemic started, we saw more of this type of talk, as our crises at home have strengthened the desire among some to withdraw from the world and attend to our own needs.

The recognition of interdependence is an opening for peacebuilders, but there is also a danger that the pull of isolationism will decrease support among Americans for engaging in peacebuilding abroad. This cultural flux makes effective framing more important than ever. Peacebuilders must reinforce our interdependence and make an effective case for peacebuilding abroad to ensure that the cultural soil is fertile for peacebuilding going forward.

Emphasize the active and ongoing character of peacebuilding

How the public currently thinks

People tend to understand peace passively as the absence of conflict. This understanding makes it difficult to realize that peace can and must be *built*. If people think peace just happens when conflict disappears, it is hard to understand what peacebuilding involves other than resolving conflicts when they occur.

While this passive understanding of peace is dominant, an active understanding of peace is available to people. At moments, people recognize that peace results from ongoing, active effort—that peace stems from the right conditions, like cohesive communities, solid institutions, and social and economic equality.

What to do and why

Use active language to talk about peace and avoid passive language. Use active verbs to talk about the work of peacebuilding—including stressing the idea of “building” peace, which itself cues active thinking. Avoid language that describes peace as an end state—as something to be “achieved,” “restored,” or “established.” Stress that peace is built over time.

Active language cues the active understanding available to people but not always top of mind. Focusing on the duration of the work of peacebuilding makes it harder for people to fall back on a passive understanding.

What it looks like

Not this

Peacebuilding programs are designed to end hostilities and restore peace. When violent conflict erupts, peacebuilders stop the violence by bringing together the parties to resolve conflict without violence. Once the conflict is resolved, peacebuilding programs re-establish safety and stability.

This

Peacebuilding programs work to create *sustained* peace in countries and communities around the world. These programs engage in *ongoing efforts* to address the root causes of violent conflict. By *building and maintaining* the conditions for peace, peacebuilders work to ensure *continuing* safety and stability.

Use the *Bridge Building* metaphor to explain how peacebuilding works and why it's important

How the public currently thinks

The public lacks an understanding of what peacebuilding involves. While the language of “building” peace is productive as it cues the active understanding of peace, people have little to say when they are asked what peacebuilding involves in practice. At the moment, the public simply doesn’t know much about peacebuilding. The public does recognize that diplomacy is an important part of foreign policy, but people don’t associate it with the term “peacebuilding.” And beyond diplomacy, the public don’t have concrete ideas about non-military ways to promote peace.

The existing assumptions about peace and conflict also make it difficult for people to internalize information about peacebuilding. People frequently assume that violent conflict is intrinsic in human nature and, in turn, that violent conflict is an inevitable part of human life and society. This creates a strong sense of fatalism about peacebuilding efforts. They also overwhelmingly assume that a strong military is the key to security, either by deterring threats or using preemptive force. This makes it harder for people to recognize that peacebuilding is a method of ensuring long-term security.

What to do and why

Explain what peacebuilding is and how it works by comparing it to building bridges rather than just asserting effectiveness. The bridge building metaphor gives people a productive language to talk about peace and peacebuilding, filling in the blanks for people about what peacebuilding *is* and shifting people away from dominant, unproductive ways of thinking about peace and conflict.

The metaphor provides a rich and varied language that people can easily pick up and use. In interviews and focus groups, we found that this metaphor sticks in people’s minds; they quickly pick up the language of the metaphor to talk about peacebuilding. Research participants naturally incorporated the metaphor into their talk, using phrases like “bridging divides,” “meeting in the middle,” “cooperation from both sides,” “durable structures,” and “getting over obstacles” to talk about the work of peacebuilding.

The metaphor enables people to think and talk about several different aspects of peacebuilding:

- ***Relationships and trust.*** The familiar idea of “bridging divides” provides a useful way to talk about how relationships can be built across social divisions. This conventional use of the metaphor is a useful hook that can be expanded upon, using other aspects of the metaphor to talk about other dimensions of peacebuilding.
- ***Structures and institutions.*** The image of the bridge provides an easy way to talk about the durable structures and institutions that support peace. Stressing the importance of creating durable structures is critical to help people think beyond immediate interpersonal relationships only.
- ***Peacebuilders.*** Talking about peacebuilders as bridge builders enables communicators to place peacebuilders squarely in the picture. Peace—like a bridge—is built by a team with different types of expertise.
- ***Collaboration and equal partnership.*** The idea that the bridge must be built from both sides, by people on equal footing, offers a helpful way of talking about how peacebuilders collaborate with community members, governments, and others. It provides a helpful image for collaboration and shared responsibility.
- ***Ongoing nature of the work.*** The language of building and maintaining a bridge provides a way of talking about the ongoing work needed to build peace. Stressing the importance of maintaining the bridge is vital to get across the idea that peacebuilding doesn’t stop but endures over time.

Our research found this metaphor to be highly effective in building support for peacebuilding policy and motivating people to act in support of such policy. We also found the metaphor cultivates a sense of collective responsibility for building peace abroad, and there is some evidence that it builds a sense of collective efficacy—the sense that it is possible to create a largely peaceful world.

Research also found that when the metaphor is used to talk about those involved in building peace as collaborators and partners on equal footing, it decreases isolationism. Interviews and focus group research suggest it does this by building a sense of distributed responsibility—the idea that the United States is not *solely* responsible for building peace around the world but, rather, should operate as a partner with others, including local communities, other governments, and international organizations.

What it looks like

Peacebuilding addresses conflict by bridging the divides that create conflict. Just as bridges require careful planning, design, and maintenance, peacebuilding takes time and requires ongoing cooperation to endure. And just as bridge building requires a team of builders with diverse expertise, peacebuilding requires local communities, nongovernmental organizations, national governments, and international organizations working together. When the bridge is built from both sides, by parties on equal footing, we can create a durable structure of systems and institutions that bridge divides and allow everyone to work together for peace into the future.

Use examples to give people a concrete understanding of *how* peace is built

How the public currently thinks

Examples help to address many of the same understandings and gaps in thinking addressed above—particularly, lack of understanding of peacebuilding and the assumption that military power is the key to security. Examples also respond to a reality that is familiar but important to keep in mind: Americans lack basic information about world affairs, which makes it difficult for people to think about what peacebuilding means in practice.

There's another challenge that examples can help to address: the public often associates “peace” with a naïve approach or a distant utopia. People sometimes assume that those looking to build peace must be dewy-eyed idealists who think we can achieve “world peace” if we just have love in our hearts. These associations with the term “peace” can get in the way of taking peacebuilding seriously. And once people's cynicism is cued, they can easily slide into the kind of fatalism discussed above—the sense that violent conflict is an inevitable part of human society.

What to do and why

Use examples of peacebuilding programs to illustrate, in concrete terms, what peacebuilding is. Showing people what peacebuilding looks like in practice not only fills in their understanding of what peacebuilding involves, it also shifts people away from thinking about “world peace” as a pie-in-the-sky wish and toward thinking of peace as local, real, and possible.

There are some guidelines that communicators should follow when using examples:

- ***Be concrete and connect the dots between actions and outcomes.*** For examples to give people a stronger understanding of what peacebuilding involves, communicators need to be clear and specific about what actions were taken—what peacebuilders and others actually *did* in a particular case—and explain how these actions prevented conflict and built durable peace. Providing simple, step-by-step explanations of how actions produced outcomes is vital to provide people with a clear understanding of what peacebuilding involves.
- ***Focus on programs, not individual heroes.*** When examples focus on specific individuals doing heroic work, audiences are likely to take away the wrong lesson. People are likely to conclude that the individual’s character is the key ingredient to success, actively undermining the recognition that peacebuilding is an approach that can be used across places and contexts. Focusing on programs makes it easier for people to recognize this.
- ***Explain how investments in peacebuilding abroad affect people in the United States.*** When possible, it’s helpful to explain how peacebuilding programs abroad benefit the United States and Americans. In other words, examples should illustrate our interconnectedness to help people recognize their own stake in peacebuilding elsewhere. Examples that explain how peacebuilding abroad benefits Americans at home are highly effective in decreasing isolationism.
- ***Connect the local and the international.*** It’s useful to explain how local efforts on the ground are linked up with international institutions and programs. Talking about what happens at the local level makes peacebuilding concrete for people and makes it possible for people to see how addressing root issues creates the conditions for peace. Talking about international institutions helps people recognize that peacebuilding is a scalable approach and that international institutions can enable and support peacebuilding on the ground. There is some evidence that connecting local peacebuilding programs and international institutions can combat fatalism and generate a sense of efficacy—the sense that creating a more peaceful world is possible.

Examples of peacebuilding programs are highly effective in building support for peacebuilding policies. Giving people a concrete understanding of what peacebuilding involves helps people see the benefits of funding the State Department, USAID, and NGOs doing peacebuilding work rather than funding the military.

What it looks like

We all benefit when we support programs around the world that build lasting peace. A good example is a peacebuilding program in the “Northern Triangle” of Central America — including El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras — which has successfully reduced crime and gang violence by *working with local communities* to figure out the best ways to keep young men out of gangs. The program *addresses the root causes* of gang violence through counselling for families, job creation, mentoring, and dialogue between youth and police. This program has helped create peace by *bringing the community together to build supports for young people*.

When these communities experience peace, *this program addresses some of the factors that motivate migration* to the United States. By supporting peacebuilding in the Northern Triangle, we reduce pressure on our Southern border and the American immigration system.

In political debates, frame peacebuilding as a cost-effective alternative

How the public currently thinks

As we note above, peace and conflict are highly susceptible to polarization and partisan reactions. Partisan identity is immediately activated by conversations about legislation and—in particular—by mentions of federal spending. Our focus group research found that as soon as the budget and spending costs are mentioned, such as military spending or foreign aid, people are highly likely to react initially and primarily as Democrats or Republicans.

A polarized, partisan context makes self-identified Republicans especially wary of cuts to military spending while making Democrats more supportive of it. Yet, as we note above, Republicans and Democrats alike assume that the military is the main source of security while recognizing that diplomacy is a potentially effective alternative.

What to do and why

The idea of cost-effectiveness should not be used as a primary frame. The idea of cost cues polarization and partisan thinking, pushing people apart and making it harder to discuss peacebuilding on common ground. Yet when communicators want to introduce spending issues—for example, in discussions of federal spending and legislation—framing peacebuilding as cost-effective is an effective message.

Our research found that framing peacebuilding legislation in terms of its cost-effectiveness increases Republicans' support for this legislation. In this context, Democrats are already highly supportive of such legislation, so there's very little room to boost their support. These findings indicate that the cost-effectiveness frame is helpful in this context, but it does not deeply shift thinking about peace and conflict. The narrative of *connection* described above is the way to engage people at this deeper level.

Therefore, when a conversation is already situated in the context of federal spending, use the idea of cost-effectiveness to convince people across the public spectrum to support peacebuilding as an alternative to military spending. Emphasize that by preventing conflict and building peace abroad, peacebuilding programs save the country money and allow us to invest at home.

What it looks like

In these debates over our budget, it's important to keep in mind which solutions are most *cost-effective*. Diplomacy and peacebuilding *create real savings* over the long term by preventing the expensive consequences of violent conflicts down the road. Investing in peacebuilding programs that create the conditions for peace helps us *save money today and in the long term*.

Framing domestic peacebuilding

The research for this project has focused on peacebuilding abroad, not peacebuilding within the United States. The frames recommended in this brief are targeted toward a foreign and international context, not a domestic one.

It is worth noting, however, that our research provides some tentative indications that these frames might be useful for talking about domestic peacebuilding. There is some limited evidence, for example, that the *Bridge Building* metaphor can generate a sense of efficacy about addressing conflicts and building peace domestically, as well as small indications that examples may be useful in shifting thinking about domestic peacebuilding.

It is important to underline that this evidence is quite limited, as the research was not designed with this focus in mind. At the very least, there is no reason to think that using these frames to talk about peacebuilding abroad will in any way undermine understanding of and support for domestic peacebuilding. Further research is needed to explore how the frames recommended here might need to be adapted or supplemented to communicate effectively about peacebuilding within the United States.

Conclusion

Public thinking and discourse about peace and conflict won't change overnight. The cultural barriers to change are deep. Americans too often take militarism for granted and see violent conflict as endemic to human nature. When people question our militaristic foreign policy, they too often think of the alternative as withdrawal from the world. While people typically recognize, at some level, the value of diplomacy, they lack an understanding of peacebuilding as a broader approach, which leads them to fall back on militarism as the only way forward.

The good news is that we have frames that can shift this thinking. The *narrative of connection* described in this brief can help build a meaningful understanding of peacebuilding, counter militarism, and cultivate a more productive understanding of the United States' role in the world.

In order for this narrative to shift public thinking, it has to get into discourse—it has to become part of how we talk in this country about peace and conflict. We *can* change the narrative about peace and conflict, but it won't be easy or quick. We must take seriously the scale of the effort required, both in reach and in time.

Now that we have a narrative that works, how do we use it to change the conversation?

Appendix: Research Methods

The FrameWorks Institute uses a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach called Strategic Frame Analysis™ to identify the most effective framing strategy for advancing social change. The first phase of the research for this project was conducted in 2019–2020. FrameWorks researchers began by conducting interviews and feedback sessions with members of the peacebuilding field and in-depth interviews with American members of the public. Comparing these two sets of data, they then identified challenges and opportunities for communicating about peace and peacebuilding. The report outlining these findings is available [here](#). An analysis of organizational communications about peace and peacebuilding with initial framing recommendations is also available [here](#).

In the second phase of this project, researchers drew on the previous analyses to identify the main communications tasks and test frames that navigate people’s preexisting mindsets about peace and peacebuilding. Researchers used both qualitative and quantitative methods to test frames that build understanding, change attitudes, and raise support for effective peacebuilding strategies. This report presents the results of this comprehensive research endeavor and offers a new, evidence-based narrative for talking about peace and peacebuilding.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org

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