INTRODUCING THE ASPR RESEARCH AGENDA
POLICY BRIEF 1/2018

In recent years, the environment and context for international actors engaging in violent conflict have changed considerably. The ASPR research agenda aims to take account of these changes and to focus on understanding possible consequences and shaping outcomes. For this, three processes are of particular relevance:

Increasing unsettlement in international approaches.
Recent failed attempts at peacebuilding, for example in Syria, reveal the limits of international peacebuilding projects. This failure is the consequence of a 'global marketplace of political change'[1], in which several international and regional players compete for power and influence at various scales. In such evolving multipolarity, alliances are not forming around fixed power blocks. Rather, a highly fluid situation is emerging, whereby alignments are shifting quickly and flexibly. The era of global liberal governance is ending, and common standpoints by a posturing 'international community' are now, and are likely to remain, elusive.

Changing nature of warfare. Two decades ago, Mary Kaldor observed a changing paradigm of violent intrastate conflict that substituted the old idea of so-called 'regular' inter-state warfare, a concept that existed as more of a myth than in reality. She labelled these conflicts 'new wars'.[2] The trajectory of increasing complexity and ambiguity between war and peace has since continued. New technological developments and impacts, such as cyberwar, limit the

utility of any past distinctions between intra- and inter-state war for the purpose of empirical and conceptual research. Peace and conflict studies need to take account of the limited empirical and conceptual use of the war-peace-binary.

Epistemic challenges in peace and conflict studies. The failure of the liberal statebuilding paradigm in the 1990s inspired researchers and policy makers to place their hopes on a 'turn to the local'.[3] A deepened understanding of local processes and a link with local ways of knowledge and practices, it was believed, would better tailor interventions to the so-perceived 'real' needs of the people 'on the ground'. Still, over a decade later there continues to be a lack of success. It is now accepted that more knowledge does not necessarily translate into a better understanding. This assumption failed to account for the social complexity of violent conflict and related processes of political settlement and unsettlement.

Against this background, there is a need to reflect upon the two core concepts ASPR has in its name: peace, and conflict resolution. What is the role of peace as a structural concept in an era in which we must face the reality of enduring transition from warfare and violent conflict? Is its visionary purchase still useful? How can this visionary purchase translate into an effective process tool?

Can we credibly resolve or transform violent conflict? And if so, under what conditions? Emerging from the tiring

1 Thomas Carothers and Oren Samet-Marram, 2015, *The New Global Marketplace of Political Change*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment.
2 Mary Kaldor, 1999, *New and Old Wars*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
3 Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond, 2013, 'The Local Turn in Peace Building: a critical agenda for peace', *Third World Quarterly*, 34:5, 763-783.

debates on concepts such as conflict management, conflict prevention, conflict resolution, conflict transformation and peacebuilding, our research scrutinises and (re-)contextualises the usefulness of all these approaches and their applications, reflecting their contributions, their shortcomings and their context-dependency. We suggest two entry points already discussed in contemporary academic work:

First, we need to accept that the most likely outcome of international peacebuilding efforts in the current global setting is 'formalised political unsettlement'[4], and we need to engage with this condition. International intervention, still a common feature of intrastate violent conflict, is rarely able to settle conflict politically. Instead, the outcomes of intervention are to institutionalise, and thus formalise, the existing political unsettlement. While interventions are usually able to tame active violence to put an end to 'hot' warfare, the trade-off is that fundamental contestation becomes frozen and a perpetual feature of the post-conflict setting.

Current literature has exposed the tension of ending violent conflict against institutionalising a 'political unsettlement', however, it has not been able to come up with a real alternative, despite some research proposing normative solutions. More often than not, a peace deal that falls short of existing expectations and even creates messy outcomes was not a result of 'bad' peacebuilding, but was the only deal on offer because parties would not settle on anything else. We are aware that this does not settle the conflict. Under such conditions of formalised political unsettlement, however, our work aims for identifying and exploring possible avenues of productive engagement.

Second, the persistent failure of conflict resolution efforts underpinned by literal thinking points to the need to rethink engagement in war-to-peace transitions as explorative or even speculative efforts of mutual learning.[5] All involved sides, internal and external actors, face the condition of different positionalities and uncertain outcomes. This does not, and does not have to, mean relativism or arbitrariness. It does, however, require a re-imagination of what we label

4 Christine Bell and Jan Pospisil, 2017, 'Navigating Inclusion in Transitions from Conflict: The Formalised Political Unsettlement', *Journal of International Development*, 29:5, 576-593.
5 David Chandler, 2018, 'Intervention and Statebuilding Beyond the Human: From the "Black Box" to the "Great Outdoors"', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*.
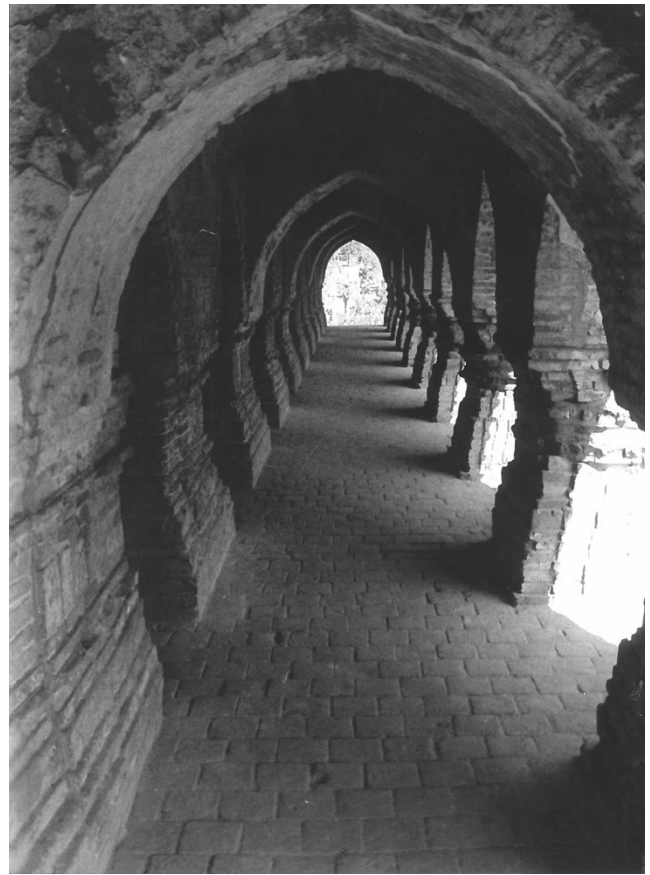
'success' and what role normative positions and international frameworks play in transitional processes. Starting from these two entry points, ASPR focuses its research on three interrelated themes:

Learning Transitions. We doubt that there are prescriptive recipes for success that could be identified to make peacebuilding work. Most likely, peacebuilding interventions will result in 'formalised political unsettlement' instead of a settled peace. This is a condition we need to take seriously when thinking about engagement in situations of violent conflict. We approach such engagement as processes of mutual learning and dialogue in what we assume are processes of enduring transition. To that end, we ask: What would such engagement look like? What forms do these transitions take? What is the relationship of peace processes, peace agreements, and transitions from violent conflict? How does the international system influence external engagement? What types of knowledge and empirical insights do we need to make a useful contribution? How do we assess our own practical experiences in the field?

Utilising Norms. Our work investigates the role of norms in peace processes and conflict mediation, especially in situations of radical disagreement and fundamental contestation, and aims at rethinking norms as process tools in the interplay of international and 'grounded' legitimacy. We ask: What role do norms play in such situations of enduring transitions? What is their justification and usefulness in a situation where global liberal governance, and with it the global applicability of liberal norms, has lost its international dominance and a large share of its purchase?

Reenvisioning Success. If we accept thinking not in terms of clearly defined end-states, but in a logic of enduring transition, how then can we define 'success' in our engagement? We are concerned with navigating political and societal inclusion, and the value of approaches, such as pragmatism and complexity, in informing mutual learning exercises and policy responses in peace processes. Our work aims to translate these findings into concepts that are applicable by policy makers and practitioners.

ASPR's research work consists of three pillars.

ASPR conducts **academic research** by critically examining key concepts in peace, conflict and security studies. This work is disseminated to an international audience through written materials, monographs, reports, peer-reviewed articles and presented at international conferences. The annual **State of Peacebuilding (StoP)** conference gathers international thinkers to discuss and reflect on critical issues as they are impacted and evolve in our work.

A strong **research-practice interface** is an essential feature of ASPR's research stream. In addition to the Centre's activities in dialogue and training, ASPR provides practice-oriented research work tailored for practitioner audiences and our partners in policy making. The **ASPR Vienna Lectures** series are designed to bridge between academics and policy and civil society stakeholders.

The **research impact** of ASPR and its team of researchers is visible through their organisation and participation at international events and workshops, University level teaching and supervision, the publication of briefing papers and research reports, and in the delivery of research-led training, policy work and consulting. The annual **Summer Academy at Schlaining Castle** is the main outreach and dissemination event, which assembles academics, politicians, practitioners, activists and students.

ASPR cooperates with national and international partners.

Conflict Peace Democracy Cluster (CPDC)
Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP)
University of Edinburgh, School of Law
Herbert C. Kelman Institute for Interactive Conflict
Transformation (HKI)
Sigmund Freud University (SFU)
Austrian Federal Ministry for Defence (BMLV)

Find our publications here:

www.aspr.ac.at/briefings
www.aspr.ac.at/reports

Photos: © Renate Graf

Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR)
Rochusplatz 1, 7461 Stadtschlaining, Austria
Phone: +43 3355 2498, Fax: +43 3355 2662, E-Mail: aspr@aspr.ac.at
www.aspr.ac.at | ASPR_Schlaining | ASPR.Schlaining

cpdc