

## From Perpetual Peace of Immanuel Kant to Perpetual Conflict: A Critical Analysis

Deepak Singh Dhapola<sup>1</sup>, Hridoy Ranjan Borah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Politics & International Studies, Pondicherry University, Puducherry, [deepak.dhapola9@gmail.com](mailto:deepak.dhapola9@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Pondicherry University, Puducherry, [hridoranjborah93@gmail.com](mailto:hridoranjborah93@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This article critically analyses Immanuel Kant's seminal essay, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," in the context of modern international relations. Written during the Enlightenment era, Kant's essay responded to his time's political and philosophical debates, arguing that perpetual peace is a moral and political necessity achievable through international cooperation, republican governance, and cosmopolitan law. Kant's six preliminary articles for perpetual peace, outlined in his essay, have influenced modern international relations. However, the persistence of global conflicts has exposed the limitations and shortcomings of Kant's philosophical framework. This article aims to contextualise Kant's ideas within the complexities of modern international relations, acknowledging both their contributions and limitations in promoting perpetual peace. By critically examining Kant's philosophical framework, this article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities for achieving perpetual peace in the modern era.

**Keywords:** Immanuel Kant, perpetual peace, perpetual conflict

### Introduction

Immanuel Kant wrote the essay 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch' during the Enlightenment era. Kant's essay responds to his time's political and philosophical debates, including the rise of nationalism, colonialism, and the French Revolution. Kant argues that perpetual peace is a moral and political necessity and can be achieved through international cooperation, republican governance, and cosmopolitan law. Kant outlines six preliminary articles for perpetual peace, including i) no secret treaties, ii) no acquisition of another state, iii) no standing armies, iv) non-interference in other state's internal affairs, v) no assassination or poisoning, and vi) no plundering or extortion. While Kant's philosophical framework for peace was groundbreaking, its limitations and shortcomings have become apparent in modern geopolitical realities. Immanuel Kant's visionary concept of perpetual peace has been juxtaposed with the persistence of global conflicts, underscoring the necessity for critically examining his philosophical framework. This critical analysis aims to contextualise Kant's ideas within the complexities of modern international relations, acknowledging both their contributions and limitations in promoting perpetual peace.

### Immanuel Kant on Perpetual Peace

The concept of Perpetual Peace has deeply impacted international relations theory, political philosophy, and the development of international law, continuing to shape debates on global governance, human rights, and peace studies. During the Enlightenment, a period of intellectual and philosophical transformation in Europe marked by reason, science, and progress, the French Revolution (1789-1799) and the European wars of the 18th century created a sense of urgency to address the question of peace. Engaging with contemporary philosophical debates about the nature of humanity, morality, and the state's role, the groundwork was laid for a moral philosophy emphasising reason, universality, and the categorical imperative. Moral principles, it was argued, should be based

on reason rather than empirical or cultural factors. His political thought emphasised the social contract, the rule of law, and the protection of individual rights, believing that humans are capable of both good and evil but are fundamentally rational beings. Advocacy for republican governance, where power is held accountable, and citizens' rights are protected, was paired with a proposal for a voluntary federation of states. This federation would enable member states to resolve disputes peacefully and respect each other's sovereignty. The concept of cosmopolitan law was also introduced, regulating interactions between states and individuals across borders and ensuring universal hospitality and human rights. Education and cultural exchange were crucial in fostering a sense of global citizenship and promoting peace.

"The first section of Perpetual Peace contains six articles"<sup>1</sup>, which are as follows:

- i. "No conclusion of peace shall be considered valid if made with a secret reservation of the material for a future war".<sup>1</sup>
- ii. "No independently existing state, whether it be large or small, may be acquired by another state by inheritance, exchange, purchase or gift".<sup>1</sup>
- iii. "Standing armies will gradually be abolished altogether".<sup>1</sup>
- iv. "No national debt shall be contracted in connection with the state's external affairs".<sup>1</sup>
- v. "No state shall forcibly interfere in the constitution and government of another state".<sup>1</sup>
- vi. "No state at war with another state shall permit such acts of hostility as would make mutual confidence impossible during a future peace. Such acts would include the employment of assassins or poisoners, breach of agreements, the instigation of treason with the enemy state, etc".<sup>1</sup>

The Articles of Perpetual Peace have been systematically violated throughout contemporary history, undermining the pursuit of lasting peace. Secret reservations for future wars have been made through clandestine operations and covert agreements, as seen in the CIA's involvement in regime change efforts and the use of drones in targeted killings. The acquisition of states has occurred through the annexation of territories and the redrawing of national borders, exemplified in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Standing armies have not been gradually abolished but maintained and expanded through the perpetuation of militarism, as evidenced by the United States military-industrial complex and the global arms trade. The national debt has been accumulated for military purposes and used as a means of economic coercion, as seen in the Greek debt crisis and the use of sanctions. Forcible interference in another state's governance has occurred through military interventions, regime change efforts, and the support of insurgent groups, as exemplified in the Iraq War and the Libyan intervention. Finally, acts of hostility have been committed through the use of torture, rendition, and targeted killings, as seen in the CIA's torture program and the use of drones. These consistent violations underscore the need for a renewed commitment to the principles of Perpetual Peace and the development of new strategies for achieving lasting peace in contemporary history.

According to Kant, the key to achieving perpetual peace lies in adopting republican forms of government, which are more conducive to peace than monarchical or despotic systems. This is because republican governments are founded on the principles of representation, separation of powers, and protection of individual rights, which create a system of checks and balances that prevent any person or group from dominating others, thereby reducing the likelihood of war. Furthermore, Kant proposes a federation of free states to achieve perpetual peace. This federation would be a voluntary association of states that agree to resolve disputes peacefully and respect each other's sovereignty. To govern the interactions between states and individuals across borders, Kant introduces the concept of cosmopolitan law, which would ensure universal hospitality and human rights.

Perpetual peace's moral and ethical foundations are central to Kant's vision. He argues that peace is a moral imperative, as it is necessary for realising human dignity and protecting human rights. Kant's moral and ethical foundations for perpetual peace are grounded in the principles of justice, respect for human rights, and promoting the common good. By prioritising these principles, Kant believes that perpetual peace can be achieved and human dignity and rights can be protected.

### **Perpetual Conflict as a Reality**

Despite Immanuel Kant's visionary idea of perpetual peace, the world has continued to experience numerous and devastating conflicts since his time. The 20th century alone saw two global conflicts, 'World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945)', which resulted in millions of deaths and widespread destruction. The Cold War (1945-1991) followed, and geopolitical tension, proxy wars, and espionage between the USA and the USSR characterised it. In the post-Cold War era, new conflicts have emerged, including the 'Gulf War (1990-1991), the

War in Afghanistan (2001-present), the Iraq War (2003-2011), the Syrian Civil War (2011-present), the Russia-Ukraine War (2022-present) and the Israel-Hamas War (2023-present)'. These ongoing conflicts underscore the elusiveness of perpetual peace and highlight the need for continued efforts in conflict resolution and prevention. The world remains complex and challenging, with multiple actors, interests, and factors contributing to the persistence of conflict.

The League of Nations' inability to prevent the Italian aggression in Ethiopia, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, and the German remilitarisation of the Rhineland, coupled with its powerlessness in the face of fascist aggression in the 1930s, underscored the organisation's ineffectiveness. This was further compounded by the absence of universal membership, notably the exclusion of Germany and Japan. Conversely, the United Nations has faced criticism for its inability to prevent or effectively respond to conflicts in Korea, Congo, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Syria. Moreover, the organisation has struggled to address emerging challenges such as cyber warfare, terrorism, human rights violations, and climate change. The UN's ineffectiveness in these areas raises questions about its capacity to maintain international peace and security. This critique is further exacerbated by the organisation's bureaucratic inefficiencies, inadequate funding, and political polarisation, which collectively undermine its ability to respond effectively to evolving global crises.

Analysis of various conflicts reveals several key insights. Firstly, the persistence of nationalism and state interests is a significant factor, with many conflicts driven by nationalist sentiment and competition between states. Additionally, the rise of non-state actors has become increasingly evident, with terrorist groups and insurgent movements playing a prominent role in contemporary conflicts. Furthermore, technological advances have profoundly impacted the nature of warfare and conflict with the emergence of cyber warfare, drones, and other new technologies. Finally, the importance of international cooperation cannot be overstated, as effective conflict resolution and prevention often require collaboration among multiple states and international organisations.

The impacts of global conflicts are far-reaching and multifaceted, affecting various aspects of society, economy, and the environment. Refugee crises have reached alarming levels, with 117.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide and 68.5 million people internally displaced, including 37.6 million refugees.<sup>2</sup> 2020 alone saw 40.5 million new internal displacements across 149 countries and territories.<sup>3</sup> Human rights violations have also escalated, with human rights defenders killed and an increase in violations against women and girls in conflict zones.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, there are increasing attacks on civil society spaces, including restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly.<sup>5</sup> The economic toll of conflict has been devastating, with far-reaching consequences reverberating across the globe. The global economy has suffered a staggering loss, with the conflict zones bearing the brunt of the economic hardship. The world's most vulnerable populations, already struggling to make ends meet, have been pushed further into poverty. Environmental degradation has also been a tragic consequence of conflict. The fight for control over precious natural resources has led to the destruction of entire ecosystems, while the world's most biodiverse regions have been ravaged by war. The impact on future generations will be severe, as the natural world is irreparably harmed. However, not just the economy and the environment have suffered. The social impact of conflict has been nothing short of catastrophic. Children, the most innocent of all, have been caught in the crossfire, their education and well-being sacrificed amid war. Once safe havens, schools have become targets, leaving generations of young people without access to the education they desperately need. The world's youth, already facing an uncertain future, have been disproportionately affected by conflict. Growing up in a world where violence and bloodshed are the norm has left deep scars, and the trauma will take years to heal. As the world grapples with the aftermath of conflict, it is clear that the social, economic, and environmental impacts will be felt for generations to come.

### **Critique of Kant's Ideas**

The pursuit of perpetual peace, as envisioned by Immanuel Kant, remains an elusive goal due to several obstacles. The prioritisation of sovereignty and national interests over international cooperation, inadequate funding and resources, and the complexity of modern conflicts (e.g., non-state actors and proxy wars) have hindered the effectiveness of international institutions. Additionally, political polarisation and the lack of accountability and enforcement mechanisms have further compromised the ability of these institutions to prevent conflict.

While influential, Immanuel Kant's philosophical ideas on international relations possess several limitations and critiques. Firstly, Kant's assumptions about human nature and international relations are overly optimistic, assuming individuals and states will act morally and rationally. However, this neglects the significant roles of power, interests, and emotions in shaping international relations. Moreover, Kant's philosophy fails to account for

the profound impact of colonialism, imperialism, and historical injustices on global politics.

Furthermore, Kant's views on nationalism, sovereignty, and intervention are problematic. His support for nationalism and the "nation-state" concept has been criticised for perpetuating harmful forms of national identity and exclusion. Additionally, Kant's emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference may perpetuate human rights violations and injustice, as it prioritises state interests over human well-being. A major issue is the conflicting perspectives between Kant's visionary moral principles and his practical understanding of political realities. His moral idealism, which prioritises ethics and international law, may conflict with political realism, which prioritises state interests and power. This has led some to argue that Kant's ideas are too idealistic or naive in the face of geopolitical realities.

### **Contemporary Challenges to Perpetual Peace**

The notion of perpetual peace, proposed by Immanuel Kant, has faced numerous challenges in the contemporary era. Globalisation, in particular, has significantly impacted international relations, leading to increased interconnectedness and interdependence among nations. However, this has created new tensions and conflicts as states and non-state actors compete for resources and influence. The emergence of non-state entities, including terrorist groups and multinational corporations, has added complexity to the quest for lasting peace. These organisations often function beyond the traditional state-based frameworks, posing challenges to addressing their actions through usual diplomatic channels. Moreover, climate change and resource scarcity have emerged as significant drivers of conflict as nations and communities compete for dwindling resources and seek to mitigate the impacts of environmental degradation. This has led to increased tensions and conflicts over access to resources, territory, and economic advantage. In light of these challenges, it is clear that the pursuit of perpetual peace requires a nuanced understanding of the complex factors driving conflict and cooperation in the contemporary era. By examining the intersections between globalisation, non-state actors, climate change, and resource scarcity, we can better understand the obstacles to perpetual peace and work towards developing effective strategies to address them. It is essential to address these shortcomings to strengthen international institutions and move closer to Kant's ideal of perpetual peace. This can be achieved through:

- Reforming and strengthening international institutions to better reflect the needs of the 21st century.
- Increasing funding and resources to support conflict prevention and resolution initiatives.
- Improving representation and voting systems to ensure greater inclusivity and equity.
- Enhancing enforcement mechanisms and accountability to ensure compliance with international law.
- Encouraging diplomacy and dialogue to resolve conflicts peacefully.
- Identifying and tackling the underlying drivers of conflict, including economic disparities, social injustices, and environmental degradation, to build a more equitable and harmonious global community.

### **Conclusion**

Immanuel Kant's visionary concept of perpetual peace remains a seminal contribution to international relations theory, yet its limitations and shortcomings necessitate a critical reevaluation. While Kant's emphasis on moral principles, international cooperation, and cosmopolitan law was groundbreaking, its idealistic approach is challenged by the complexities of contemporary geopolitics. The persistence of power politics, national interests, and non-state actors' influence exposes the need for a more nuanced understanding of international relations. Furthermore, Kant's framework is limited in its Eurocentric bias, ahistorical perspective, and lack of concrete enforcement mechanisms. Additionally, his focus on individual rights and freedoms overlooks the significance of collective rights and community roles in promoting peace. Nevertheless, Kant's ideas remain a crucial foundation for peace studies, and their relevance can be revitalised by addressing these limitations. By acknowledging the complexities of global governance, historical context, and diverse perspectives, Kant's perpetual peace can be reimagined to accommodate 21st-century realities.

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