

SPEAKING FUTURES

The Metafuture Keynote Monograph Series

No. 2

# MAY THE POWER BE WITH US

*Creating Peaceful Futures*

Ivana Milojević

Developed from the keynote “Powering Peace”

Asia Pacific Futures Network 2026

Bangkok, Thailand, September 2026



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Image credit: Asia Pacific Futures Network Conference



# 1

## MAY THE POWER BE WITH US CREATING PEACEFUL FUTURES

When I was invited to speak on *Powering Peace* at the 12th Asia Pacific Futures Network Conference in Bangkok in September 2026, the title seemed particularly fitting given the conference's four interconnected themes: Powering People, Planet, Prosperity, and Peace. The conference's wider purpose was to explore alternative futures, share innovations in futures thinking and strategic foresight, and strengthen cooperation among practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and communities across the Asia-Pacific region.

This gave me an opportunity to reflect on a deceptively simple question: what does it actually mean to power peace? And how is powering peace connected with powering people, planet and prosperity?

My starting point was that these four themes cannot readily be separated. We cannot have genuine prosperity on this planet – for the majority of people, ideally for all – without peace. Yet making these connections immediately raises a more difficult question. If peace is integral to the futures we wish to create, what kind of peace are we talking about – and what kind of power might enable it?

Before addressing peace, however, I began with power. This was deliberate. How we understand power influences how we understand both conflict and our capacity to transform it. It also shapes how we think about agency in relation to the future: who or what is understood as having the capacity to create change, which forms of action become conceivable, and ultimately which futures enter – or remain outside – our space of possibilities.

### What, then, is power?

Dictionaries (e.g., Merriam-Webster, 2026) offer a wide range of definitions. Power is “the ability to act or produce an effect”; a “legal or official authority, capacity, or right”; “physical might”; and “mental or moral efficacy”. It is also defined in terms of “possession of control, authority, or influence over others” and, politically, as “control, authority, or influence over others”. Yet another definition describes power as “a source or means of supplying energy”.

These definitions already point in quite different directions. Power can signify capacity – the ability to act and produce an effect. It can refer to formally sanctioned authority or rights. It can denote physical force, mental or moral efficacy, or control and influence over others. And it can signify energy: something that makes action, movement or transformation possible. In the context of *powering peace*, these distinctions matter. They raise the question of whether power should primarily be understood as something one possesses and exercises over others, or whether it can also be understood as a capacity that enables transformative action, agency and change.

Within the social and political sciences, power has long been one of the central – and most contested – concepts. In the Western intellectual tradition, its genealogy stretches from Machiavelli and Hobbes through Marx and Weber and into twentieth- and twenty-first-century debates. While these thinkers conceptualised power in different ways, much political thought has been concerned with domination, authority, coercion, control and the capacity of some actors to shape the actions and possibilities of others.

During the twentieth century, however, this understanding of power was substantially challenged and expanded. Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony complicated accounts centred predominantly on force and coercion. Domination, in Gramsci’s analysis, is maintained not through coercion alone but also through consent. Culture, institutions, ideas and everyday understandings of what constitutes ‘common sense’ participate in sustaining particular social arrangements. Power therefore also operates through the production of what comes to be regarded as natural, normal, realistic or inevitable.

This has significant implications for futures thinking. What is regarded as a plausible or realistic future does not emerge in an intellectual or political vacuum. If prevailing assumptions about what is possible, inevitable, desirable and realistic are shaped within particular historical relations of power, then power also enters into the construction of the possible. Some futures become normalised and

repeatedly reproduced; others become marginal, implausible, utopian or, at times, virtually unthinkable.

Michel Foucault further unsettled the idea of power as primarily something possessed by individuals, institutions or states. Rather than treating power simply as a juridical possession that one actor has and another lacks, Foucault understood it as relational, dispersed and productive. Power traverses social relations and practices. It shapes conduct, produces knowledge and discourse, establishes norms and participates in constituting the subjects upon whom and through whom it operates. In his 1982 essay “The Subject and Power”, Foucault argues that power “exists only when it is put into action”.

The productive character of power is especially important here. To describe power as productive does not mean that its effects are necessarily beneficial. Rather, power *does things*. It produces categories, forms of knowledge, identities, norms, capacities, behaviours and possibilities. It can enable and constrain, include and exclude, normalise and discipline. The analytical questions consequently expand beyond Who has power? and Who has power over whom? We can also ask: How does power work? Through which practices, institutions, discourses and assumptions? What does it produce? What kinds of subjects and relationships does it constitute? What possibilities does it open – and which does it foreclose?

Hannah Arendt offers another important departure from understandings of power centred on domination and command. For Arendt, power arises when people act together and is sustained through association and collective action. Importantly, she distinguishes power from violence rather than treating the two as synonymous. Power, in this account, does not reside simply in the capacity to compel another person to act; it emerges through people acting in concert. Her work therefore provides an important conceptual basis for thinking about power as relational and collective rather than solely as command, coercion or control.

Feminist, postcolonial and decolonial thinkers have expanded these understandings further. The work of bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Naila Kabeer, Jo Rowlands, Judith Butler and Amy Allen, among others, has examined power not only through domination but also through agency, empowerment, resistance and solidarity. Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Paulo Freire and María Lugones, from different intellectual and geographical locations, have interrogated the relations among power, knowledge, representation, culture, identity and coloniality. These bodies of scholarship have

helped make visible forms of power that are obscured when analysis remains confined to formal authority or direct coercion.

Indigenous knowledge traditions offer further perspectives on power, although their considerable diversity means that they should not be collapsed into a single theory or worldview. Relationality, reciprocity and responsibility, together with an understanding of human beings as embedded within a more-than-human living world, provide important counterpoints to conceptions of power organised primarily around individual possession and control. From these perspectives, questions of power can also become questions of participation, relationship and responsibility within living systems.

Taken together, these interventions make possible a considerably richer vocabulary. *Power over* refers to domination, control and the capacity to structure the possibilities available to others. *Power to* concerns agency: the capacity to act, choose, create and change. *Power with* refers to the capacities generated through collective action, solidarity and cooperation. *Power within* concerns consciousness, dignity, self-worth and the recognition and development of one's own agency. These distinctions have been particularly influential within feminist and empowerment scholarship and allow us to move beyond treating power as synonymous with domination.

For the purposes of *Powering Peace*, however, I wanted to add a further question: power toward what? I use *power toward* here perhaps not as another established category of power, but as a way of asking about its direction and purpose. The capacity to act, create, cooperate or transform is not, in itself, sufficient to tell us whether the resulting change is socially desirable, emancipatory, peaceful or life-affirming. The question of power therefore cannot be separated from the question of the goals toward which it is exercised: toward what kinds of relationships, institutions, societies and worlds are we directing our individual and collective capacities?

This brings the discussion directly into Futures Studies. If power is not only about who controls whom, but also about agency, collective capacity, the production of possibilities and the direction of change, how might we understand power specifically in relation to the future?

## Power and Futures Studies

Within Futures Studies, these expanded understandings of power invite a somewhat different emphasis. If futures are not simply events waiting to happen but spaces of possibility that can be anticipated,

imagined, contested and shaped, then power concerns our capacity to participate in their creation.

I proposed four interrelated ways of thinking about power in this context. First, power can be understood as *the capacity to anticipate, imagine, design and intentionally shape alternative futures through present action*. This formulation places agency at the centre of futures work while also connecting future possibilities with choices and actions in the present. Anticipation and imagination matter, but so does the capacity to translate them into processes through which different futures can become possible.

Second, power concerns *the ability to exercise agency as active creators and co-creators of futures rather than as passive observers*. This distinction is important. Futures thinking is not only about trends and emerging issues, nor only about anticipating what may be likely to happen or, perhaps more damagingly, about adapting to changes presumed to be inevitable. It should also involve questioning inevitability itself: examining how particular futures come to be presented as probable, unavoidable or beyond our influence, while strengthening the capacity of individuals and communities to recognise themselves as participants in shaping what comes next.

Third, power can be understood as *the capacity to foster transformative innovations and institutions that enable more desirable social systems, rendering existing structures obsolete through replacement rather than confrontation*. This possibility is especially significant for conflict transformation. Not all change needs to occur through defeating an opponent or confronting an existing system on its own terms. Sometimes the more transformative exercise of power lies in creating practices, institutions and ways of relating that work differently – and work better – so that structures once regarded as indispensable progressively lose their function and legitimacy.

This approach resonates strongly with an observation widely attributed to R. Buckminster Fuller (Buckminster Fuller Institute, 2015): “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.” The formulation captures an important dimension of transformative power: change need not depend exclusively on defeating or dismantling what already exists; it can also proceed through creating alternatives capable of making existing arrangements progressively less necessary, less desirable or ultimately obsolete.

Finally, these dimensions can be brought together by defining power, from a futures perspective, as *the capacity to shape the space of*

*possibilities by influencing which futures can be imagined, prepared for, pursued and ultimately realised.*

The *space of possibilities* is not neutral. As the preceding discussion of Gramsci and Foucault suggests, what a society can imagine is related to what it has learned to regard as normal, credible and possible. Images of the future, dominant narratives of progress, institutional arrangements, economic interests and culturally embedded assumptions all participate in defining the boundaries of that space. Consequently, expanding the range of futures that can be imagined is itself implicated in relations of power.

This is also where *power toward* becomes particularly useful. Futures Studies is inherently concerned not only with capacity but with direction. Once we recognise this, we must also ask: *toward which futures is that power being directed?* Which futures are being normalised, funded, designed and built? Which are neglected or rendered inconceivable? Who and what is included in preferred images of the future – and who and what is absent from them?

These questions become particularly important when the future under consideration is a peaceful one. If we are to speak of *powering peace*, however, power is only half of the conceptual equation. Peace itself also needs to be examined.

### **What, then, is peace?**

If understandings of power have expanded considerably over time, the same is true of peace. Once again, conventional dictionary definitions provide a useful starting point. Peace is defined in several ways: as “a state of tranquillity or quiet”; as freedom from “disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions”; as “harmony in personal relations”; as “a state or period of mutual concord between governments”; and as “a pact or agreement to end hostilities between those who have been at war or in a state of enmity”.

These definitions capture important dimensions of peace, but they also reveal a limitation that has long concerned Peace and Conflict Studies. In particular, defining peace primarily as the cessation of hostilities can make peace appear as something that somehow almost magically emerges once violence has stopped – as though, after people have exhausted themselves through war, killing, destruction and other forms of direct violence, what remains is peace.

Yet the ending of overt hostilities tells us relatively little about the conditions that produced violence in the first place. A ceasefire may

stop people killing one another without addressing exploitation, dispossession, systemic inequality, exclusion or the social and economic structures through which violence is reproduced. Nor does the absence of direct physical violence necessarily tell us much about psychological violence, ecological destruction or the quality of relationships within and between communities.

This is why the distinction between negative and positive peace has been so important within Peace and Conflict Studies. *Negative peace* refers principally to the absence of war, direct physical violence and destruction. It is indispensable: stopping direct violence matters enormously. But if peace ends there, the conditions under which people live may remain profoundly violent.

*Positive peace* expands the analysis by bringing structural and systemic violence into view. Violence does not occur only when one person directly injures another. It can also be embedded in social, political and economic arrangements that systematically expose some groups to deprivation, exploitation, marginalisation or preventable suffering. The distinction therefore shifts the question from *Is there war/violent conflict?* to the more demanding question of what kinds of structures and relationships organise everyday life.

Migration provides one contemporary example. Discussions of migration frequently focus on the movement itself: people cross borders, enter another jurisdiction or seek refuge elsewhere. Yet leaving poverty can also mean leaving forms of structural and economic violence. If the conditions from which people are moving include systematic deprivation, absence of viable livelihoods, profound inequality or other structures that prevent basic needs from being met, then an analysis restricted to direct physical violence captures only part of what is occurring.

Importantly, positive peace cannot be defined only through another absence – the absence of structural violence. It also directs attention towards what must be present for peace to be sustained: cultures, institutions and structures that reduce the conditions under which violence is produced and reproduced in the first place.

A further expansion leads towards what can be referred as *holistic peace*. This brings ecological and psychological violence more explicitly into the analysis. If positive peace asks us to examine structures and systems, holistic peace asks us to extend the field still further: towards relationships with ourselves, with one another and with the more-than-human world. Here again, absence – of ecological and psychological violence – is insufficient. Holistic peace concerns the presence and cultivation of life-affirming values and more harmonious

relationships among individuals, societies and the environments upon which they depend.

These dimensions should not be understood as competing definitions from which one must choose. Negative peace remains essential: where direct violence is occurring, its cessation is an urgent priority. Positive peace deepens the analysis by asking which structures and cultures make violence more or less likely. Holistic peace extends it further by bringing psychological and ecological dimensions into the picture. The movement is therefore one of deepening and widening: from the cessation of direct violence towards the transformation of conditions through which violence becomes possible, normalised or reproduced.

This led me to propose a futures-oriented formulation of peace:

*From a futures perspective, peace is the continuous process of intentionally shaping societies that make violence increasingly unnecessary and unlikely. It involves imagining and designing societies, communities, families and institutions, nurturing cultures, strengthening relationships and embedding values that support justice, inclusion, resilience and ecological stewardship, enabling preferred futures in which people and the planet can flourish together.*



Image Credit: ChatGpt (Glibatree Art Designer), prompts by the author

There are two elements of this definition that I consider particularly important. First, peace is understood as a *continuous process*, rather than a condition that suddenly appears when hostilities cease. It has to be created, maintained, renewed and, as circumstances change, sometimes redesigned. Second, *peace is not separated from futures thinking*. If social arrangements can make violence more or less likely, then imagining and creating alternative arrangements becomes part of the work of peace itself.

In workshops conducted through Metafuture, we have repeatedly asked participants what form of peace resembles the future they would prefer. Across very different cultural and geographical contexts, the response is remarkably consistent: people overwhelmingly express a desire to move in the direction of positive and holistic peace. This raises an obvious but difficult question: if these are the kinds of futures people say they want, why are they so difficult to create?

One part of the answer, I suggest, lies precisely in how we conceptualise power and peace. The cognitive frames through which we understand them influence what kinds of responses to conflict appear sensible, realistic or possible. If power is imagined primarily as domination and peace primarily as the absence of overt violence, the range of available strategies is already significantly constrained. And if a violent future is considered inevitable – perhaps due to how discourses about human nature or gender function in violent societies – then, of course, only a limited set of strategies will be considered viable.

This is where Futures Studies and conflict transformation can be brought into a more explicit relationship.

### **From conflict management and resolution to conflict transformation**

Conflict is not necessarily the problem. It can be an indication that something is not working: that circumstances have changed, previously workable arrangements no longer function, needs are not being met, relationships have become strained, or underlying differences can no longer be ignored. In this sense, conflict contains information. The question is what we do with it.

In simple terms, conflict can be approached destructively or constructively. Destructive responses include denial and avoidance, prolonged stuckness (e.g., protracted conflict), and escalation towards increasingly coercive and violent forms of engagement. Constructive responses seek ways of working with the conflict rather than merely

suppressing it. Conflict resolution is one such response. Conflict transformation goes further. Rather than asking only how an existing conflict can be settled, it asks what the conflict is telling us about what needs to change and what might be created in its place.

This distinction is particularly important from a futures perspective. Attempts at resolution can easily become oriented towards restoration: how do we return to the situation that existed before the conflict? Yet the previous arrangement may no longer be viable – and may itself have contributed to the conflict. External conditions may have changed; relationships, expectations or needs may have changed; or inequalities and tensions previously contained within an apparently stable arrangement may have become impossible to sustain.

Conflict transformation therefore involves using the energy of conflict differently. Instead of devoting that energy primarily to establishing who was right and who was wrong, who started the conflict, or who should ultimately prevail, it can be used to identify what is not working in the present and to ask *what might work better* in the future. Futures thinking becomes especially relevant here because change is not an interruption of otherwise static social life. Individuals, communities, institutions, societies and their environments are continually changing. One of the central concerns of Futures Studies is precisely how we anticipate, navigate and participate in such change.

The distinction between resolution and transformation also does not mean that resolution is unimportant. Many conflicts urgently require settlement, de-escalation or agreement. Rather, transformation adds another question: what can emerge from the conflict that did not exist before it? In this sense, conflict can become not merely an obstacle to peace but also a potential source of information and energy for creating different, better, relationships, institutions and futures.

This was the basis for the multidimensional framework I presented for thinking about *powering peace*: power against, power for, power with and power within. These forms of power are analytically distinguishable, but in practice they need to work together.



Image Credit: ChatGpt, prompts by the author

### **Power against: critique, resistance and deconstruction**

Power against is necessary because not all existing arrangements should be accommodated, adapted to or rendered more efficient. Violence, domination, exploitation and exclusion need to be identified, challenged and resisted. In Futures Studies, *power against* also involves critically examining images of the future that reproduce existing relations of domination/violence or project their further expansion into the future.

This is important because images of the future are never simply illustrations. They contain assumptions about progress, success and prosperity; about people and planet; about what constitutes desirable change; and about who or what has agency in creating the future. They can reveal underlying assumptions that might remain less visible when expressed only through words.

Consider, for example, some of the dominant visual representations of ‘prosperity’ and technologically advanced futures. They frequently contain high-rise cities, spectacular infrastructure, artificial intelligence, spacecraft, flying vehicles and other technological artefacts. Yet people may be marginal or entirely absent, while nature is reduced to scenery or disappears altogether. Such images may represent prosperity from one particular perspective, but they also raise the question of what – or who – has been excluded from that definition of prosperity.

This is not an argument against technology. It is an argument for interrogating the cognitive frames through which technological expansion has become almost synonymous with the future itself. Flying cars are an almost comically persistent example. When generative AI is asked to produce an image of a future society, some form of airborne vehicle seems remarkably likely to appear. By contrast, images organised around ecological regeneration, community, relationships, equity, partnership, spirituality, care or other forms of human and planetary flourishing are often not immediately recognised as images of *the future* at all. They may instead be classified as images of nature, wellbeing or spirituality. Yet they, too, are images of possible futures. They simply arise from different values, priorities and underlying assumptions.

The question of agency is equally important. One image I used in the presentation proclaimed, alongside an image of Elon Musk, ‘We are the future.’ But who exactly constitutes this *we*? When the capacity to create the future is symbolically concentrated in a small group of extraordinarily wealthy and technologically powerful individuals, the majority of humanity is implicitly positioned elsewhere – as consumers, recipients, users or spectators of futures created by others. From the perspective outlined earlier in this paper, this is a profoundly restricted conception of futures agency. The capacity to shape futures cannot meaningfully be confined to billionaires, technological elites or those who currently command the greatest concentrations of economic power.

An even more disturbing example was the AI-generated video ‘Gaza 2025... What’s next?’, posted on Donald Trump’s Truth Social account in February 2025. The video transforms a devastated Gaza into an imagined luxury resort of skyscrapers, beaches, yachts, Trump-branded developments and conspicuous wealth. Among its images are a giant golden statue of Trump, Elon Musk surrounded by money, and bearded Palestinian or Middle Eastern-looking men represented as belly dancers.

As an image of the future, it warrants analysis beyond the question of whether one finds it offensive or absurd. What conception of prosperity is being presented? Who has the power to determine the future of a place and its people? Where are the Palestinians as political subjects and creators of their own futures? What has happened to the history, conflict and relationships that produced the present? And what does it mean to transform a territory marked by immense human suffering into a fantasy of luxury development?

The gendered imagery is significant as well. I interpreted the representation of bearded men as belly dancers through the lens of hegemonic and toxic masculinity. Systems of gender domination do not subordinate women alone; they also establish hierarchies among men, constructing some masculinities as powerful and others as weak, feminised, subordinate or defeated. Within that frame, feminisation can itself become a visual language of humiliation. The image therefore does more than imagine economic redevelopment. It carries assumptions about domination, victory, gender and whose power determines what the future will be.

A different but equally revealing example comes from within the history of Futures Studies itself. The *Humanity 3000* image produced by the Foundation for the Future in 1999 presents an apparent movement from the past, on the left, towards the future, on the right. Yet examining who is represented as participating in the creation of that future reveals a highly particular account of humanity.

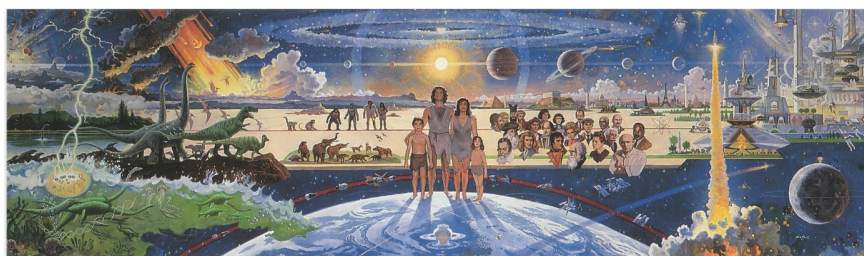


Image credit: "The Prologue and the Promise" (1983) by Robert McCall (with assistance from Louise McCall) / Disney Enterprises, Inc. (Originally created for EPCOT's Horizons pavilion; later featured by the Foundation for the Future's *Humanity 3000* series).

The figures are overwhelmingly white and male. Only two women appear among the historical creators of the future: Marie Curie and Joan of Arc. Their inclusion is itself worth reflecting upon, not least because both paid extraordinary prices for the roles through which history remembers them – Curie through the physical consequences associated with her scientific work and Joan of Arc through torture and a violent death. The image also reproduces a highly conventional

nuclear family – what feminists called the ‘cereal-box family’: mother, father, older boy, younger girl. A sun appears above the male figure, further reinforcing the visual organisation of authority and centrality.

Perhaps most strikingly, almost everyone in the image is represented primarily by a head. Pablo Picasso is one of the few figures given hands – understandably, perhaps, since painting without them would present a visual difficulty. But the broader symbolism is revealing. Humanity’s movement into the future is represented overwhelmingly through cognition: through brains, ideas and intellectual achievement. Bodies, hands, senses, emotions and relationships largely disappear.

Yet futures are not only something we *think*. They are also something we experience, feel, sense, embody and enact. The visual privileging of disembodied cognition therefore raises another set of questions: what counts as knowledge, which human capacities are recognised as relevant to creating the future, and which are marginalised or excluded? The issue is not only *who* is represented as a creator of the future, but also *which ways of knowing and being* are granted a place in its creation.

The purpose of such analysis is not simply to criticise individual images. Power against involves making their underlying assumptions visible: assumptions about progress, prosperity, gender, family, technology, nature, knowledge, agency and the human relationship with the more-than-human world. Some images of the future reproduce human domination of nature; others reproduce social hierarchies or concentrate future-making agency in particular groups. Still others carry forward assumptions so familiar that they become almost invisible.

This is why deconstruction matters. Futures thinking requires the capacity to ask not only *What future is being represented?* but also: *Whose future is this? Who creates it? Who benefits from it? Who or what is absent? What assumptions about progress, prosperity and power does it reproduce? And what does it teach us to regard as normal, desirable or inevitable?*

Yet critique alone is insufficient. Indeed, there is a paradox here. If we devote all our intellectual and imaginative energy to describing the futures we oppose, those futures continue to occupy the centre of our imaginative field. We may become highly sophisticated critics of domination while repeatedly reproducing its images, language and assumptions.

Power against therefore needs to be accompanied by power for. Deconstruction needs reconstruction. If particular images of the future

constrain the space of possibilities, critique must be accompanied by the creation of alternative images, narratives, models and practices capable of expanding it.

### Power for: envisioning and creating alternatives

If power against enables us to identify and challenge violence, domination and limiting images of the future, power for concerns our capacity to imagine and create alternatives. Critique can tell us what is wrong with an existing system or image, but it does not necessarily tell us what should take its place. Without alternative images, models and practices, we risk remaining intellectually and imaginatively dependent on precisely those futures we seek to challenge.

This is why visioning has occupied such an important place in Futures Studies. Fred Polak's classic *The Image of the Future* (1973) explored the relationship between collective images of the future and processes of social and cultural change. Elise Boulding (1995, p. 95) similarly described images of the future as "agents of social change", while Francis Hutchinson (1996, p. 210) wrote of the importance of creating spaces from which we can begin "practical journeys of hope". The underlying proposition is significant: images of the future do not merely represent possible destinations. They can participate in making particular forms of action imaginable in the present.

This is also where *power for* connects directly with *power toward*. The capacity to create alternatives immediately raises the question of direction: alternatives toward what? Different futures embody different assumptions about what constitutes a good society, a good life, prosperity, security, human flourishing and our relationship with the planet. Visioning is therefore not politically or ethically neutral. It involves making choices about what we consider desirable and what kinds of relationships, institutions and ways of living we wish to bring into being.

In the keynote, I contrasted dominant technological images of the future with other images that are frequently not recognised as 'futures' images at all. Images centred on nature, spirituality, human relationships, cooperation or ecological flourishing may not contain the visual markers through which we have learned to recognise the future – skyscrapers, artificial intelligence, spaceships or, inevitably, flying vehicles. Yet there is no intrinsic reason why an image of ecological regeneration, a peaceful community or a different relationship between human beings and the natural world should be

any less an image of the future than a technologically saturated cityscape.

The difference lies partly in the assumptions underlying the image. If technological expansion is assumed to constitute progress, then technologies become visual shorthand for futurity. If prosperity is understood primarily through economic growth and material accumulation, particular infrastructures and lifestyles become symbols of success. If, however, prosperity includes ecological wellbeing, meaningful relationships, care, dignity, creativity, spiritual life or collective flourishing, quite different images enter the space of possibilities.

The *democratisation of the future* must therefore mean more than diversifying who participates in futures work – the geographical locations, generations, genders and other social positions from which futurists speak. It must also involve democratising the conceptual and epistemological frameworks through which futures are imagined. We can diversify the people around the futures table while leaving largely intact the assumptions that shape the conversation: assumptions about progress, prosperity, knowledge, agency, and even what an image of ‘the future’ is supposed to look like. Democratising the future therefore also requires a critical interrogation of the Western and patriarchal frameworks within which the field initially emerged, together with a genuine expansion of the epistemologies, values, experiences and ways of knowing through which futures become thinkable.



Image Credit: ChatGpt, prompts by the author

*Power for* therefore involves consciously expanding that space. It includes imagining alternative social arrangements and models of relationship, such as the more partnership-oriented societies explored in the work of Riane Eisler, the cultures of peace examined by Elise Boulding, and the alternatives to violence developed across Johan Galtung's work. It also involves understanding ourselves as agents of social change rather than merely analysts of change. Francis Hutchinson's work on educating beyond violent futures is particularly relevant here: education about futures and peace cannot be confined to analysing what is likely to happen; it can also cultivate capacities for imagining and acting towards what might be preferable.

The distinction between *power against* and *power for* is therefore not an either/or choice. There are futures and systems that need to be resisted. But resistance without reconstruction can leave the existing system at the centre of our attention, while reconstruction without critique can reproduce assumptions whose consequences have not been sufficiently examined. Deconstruction and reconstruction need each other.

### **Power with: creating futures together**

If *power for* concerns the capacity to envision and create alternatives, *power with* concerns the capacities generated through relationship, cooperation and collective action. Futures are never created by

individuals alone. Even where particular individuals possess extraordinary economic, political or technological resources, futures emerge through complex networks of relationships, institutions, cultures, infrastructures and collective choices.

For futures practitioners, *power with* therefore means more than assembling people in a room and calling the process participatory. It requires engagement with different narratives, worldviews, experiences and understandings of what constitutes a desirable future. It also requires recognition that people enter futures processes from unequal social locations and with unequal access to institutional authority, resources and the capacity to have their preferred futures heard.

The Asia Pacific Futures Network itself provides a useful example. A network derives much of its capacity precisely from relationships: people from different countries, cultures, professional locations and intellectual traditions sharing knowledge, contesting assumptions and creating possibilities that may not emerge within a single institutional or disciplinary setting. In the keynote, I reflected on the APFN imagery itself, which evokes relationships, nature and growth, together with looking outward towards the distance and inward towards ourselves. These are quite different visual metaphors for the future from those organised around technological spectacle or individual power.



*Image Credit: Asia Pacific Futures Network*

I also showed an AI-generated image of what APFN might look like in 2126. The exercise was revealing partly because of the assumptions that appeared almost automatically in the generated image. Once again, technological markers were used to signify 'the future'. This is a useful reminder that generative technologies do not operate outside culture. They draw upon existing bodies of imagery, language and association and can consequently reproduce dominant assumptions about what futurity is supposed to look like.



Image Credit: ChatGpt (Glibatree Art Designer), prompts by the author

Yet *power with* is less about the technological objects surrounding us than about the quality of relationships among us. It concerns our capacity to work across difference, to listen to narratives other than our own, to create sufficient common ground for collective action and, where consensus is neither possible nor desirable, to develop ways of living constructively with disagreement.

This becomes particularly important in conflict transformation. Collaboration does not require the disappearance of difference, and consensus should not be confused with uniformity. If *power with* means anything substantial, it must include the capacity to engage difference without automatically converting it into domination, exclusion or violence.

### **Power within: from interpersonal to intrapersonal conflict**

Power within takes us into another domain: the subjective and intrapersonal dimensions of conflict. It concerns ethical grounding, self-awareness and authenticity, but also the positions from which we perceive ourselves and others.

In the keynote, I brought together several frameworks that I have found useful in thinking about this relationship: Thomas Harris's (1969) subjective positions in *I'm OK – You're OK*, conflict-style approaches associated with Thomas-Kilmann (Kilmann, 2009) and Ron Kraybill

(n.d.), and Johan Galtung's TRANSCEND (Galtung, n.d.) model. These frameworks originate in different traditions and should not be treated as equivalent. Bringing them together, however, allows us to explore connections between our subjective positioning and the conflict strategies that become available to us.

The position *I'm OK, you're OK* creates greater space for cooperation, compromise and transcendence: the possibility of seeking *our way*. By contrast, *I'm OK, you're not OK* readily aligns with directing and competing – with *my way* and the objective of winning. *I'm not OK, you're OK* can orient us towards harmonising, accommodation and giving way – *your way*. And *I'm not OK, you're not OK* can produce avoidance, withdrawal and stuckness – *no way*.

These relationships are not deterministic. People move among conflict styles depending on context, relationships, perceived threat and many other factors. Nor is any single style appropriate in every situation. The value of bringing these models together lies instead in making visible the relationship between inner positioning and outward behaviour.

This is important because conflict does not exist only between people, communities or nations. Conflict also exists within us. We experience cognitive dissonance, contradictory desires, competing values and tensions among different aspects of ourselves. Approaches such as Hal and Sidra Stone's (n.d.) work on selves and Voice Dialogue draw attention to the multiplicity of the self and to the ways in which some aspects of ourselves become accepted while others are disowned.

This has consequences for conflict. What we cannot acknowledge or accept within ourselves can become particularly difficult to encounter in another person. Disowned qualities can be projected outwards, where they are recognised – and frequently condemned – in others. In that sense, some apparently external conflicts are intensified by processes occurring within the self.

This does not mean reducing political, social or structural conflicts to individual psychology. External relations of domination and injustice remain real regardless of the psychological processes through which individuals experience them. Rather, *power within* adds another level of analysis: it asks how inner conflict, projection, identity and self-awareness interact with interpersonal and collective forms of conflict.

It also raises an ethical question for futures practitioners. We regularly facilitate processes in which other people are asked to examine their assumptions, question their images of the future and reconsider what they regard as possible. We therefore need some capacity to examine our own assumptions as well. Who are we? What do we value? From

which intellectual, cultural and ethical positions do we work? What do we ourselves consider preferable?

In the keynote, I used the Manifesto of the Italian Institute for the Future as one example of making such commitments explicit. Articulating who we are and what we stand for does not make our work objective; rather, it makes its normative foundations more visible. *Power within*, in this sense, includes the capacity to recognise our own positioning rather than treating it as universal or neutral.

### The power of framing

These four dimensions of power bring us back to a central proposition: the way a conflict is framed influences the range of strategies considered possible for addressing it.

This insight is central to Causal Layered Analysis, developed by Sohail Inayatullah. How a problem is named and understood affects the solutions that subsequently become thinkable. If the framing changes, the strategic repertoire can change with it.

For example, a power-based approach to conflict asks, in effect: *Who is the most powerful?* If this is the central question, the corresponding strategies readily involve threats, coercion, force, direct violence or military action. The objective becomes defeating, overpowering or compelling the other party.

But this is only one possible frame.

A randomness-based approach asks something closer to: *Who is the luckiest?* Lotteries, sortition and random selection resolve certain distributive or decision-making problems without requiring one party to defeat another or prove a superior claim.

A rights-based approach asks: *Who has the best case?* Here we turn to rules, laws, legal systems, codes, procedures and adjudication. Rights-based approaches are essential to functioning societies and can be particularly important where protection, accountability or enforceable standards are required. But they also relocate significant responsibility for determining the conflict from the parties themselves to judges, lawyers, tribunals or other authorised institutions.

A legal decision can determine who has the stronger claim under existing law without necessarily resolving the relationships and underlying needs that generated the conflict. Legal processes can also require considerable time, money and emotional resources. The case may end while the conflict, in another sense, continues.

An interests- and needs-based approach asks a different question: *What are the needs and concerns of all parties?* This changes the field of possible responses. Strategies such as problem solving, empathy, dialogue, active nonviolence, alternative dispute resolution and nonviolent communication become more salient because the objective is no longer simply to determine who is stronger or who is legally correct, but to understand what needs to occur for the conflict itself to be transformed.

This does not mean that interests- and needs-based approaches replace rights, nor that dialogue is appropriate under all circumstances. Where direct violence, severe coercion or profound power asymmetries are present, legal protections and other forms of intervention may be indispensable. The point is that the frame matters. Asking a different question makes a different set of strategies visible.

And this is precisely where Futures Studies can contribute. Futures work repeatedly asks us to reconsider the question before rushing towards the answer. If the question is *Who will win?* one set of futures becomes imaginable. If it is *What are the needs and concerns of all parties?* another space opens. If we ask *What would it take for this conflict no longer to reproduce itself?* the space changes again. And if we ask *What is our preferred future for this conflict?* we have already begun to move from prediction and reaction towards transformation.

### **The temporal dimension: how we use the past and future**

Futures Studies can also contribute to conflict transformation through something apparently simple but potentially profound: changing the way we use time.

Both the past and the future can be used destructively.

When the underlying intention is to win, the past readily becomes a resource for blame. Attention becomes organised around questions such as: *Who was the victim? Who was the perpetrator? Who was right? Who was wrong? Who did what to whom? Who started the conflict first?*

These questions cannot simply be dismissed. Historical truth, responsibility, justice and accountability matter, particularly following violence and serious wrongdoing. But a conflict can become trapped when the past functions only as an inexhaustible archive of evidence against the other side. Each party searches backwards for the event

that proves its own innocence, the other's guilt or the legitimacy of its present position.

The future can be used just as destructively. Simply being future-oriented does not make an approach constructive. The future can become a site of what can be described as neurotic fantasising: imagining the final defeat of an opponent, settling historical scores, recovering everything that has been lost, or constructing a future in which the people with whom we are in conflict have simply disappeared.

Such fantasies are images of the future, but they are neither helpful nor transformative. They carry the structure of the existing conflict forward in time.

When the intention shifts towards conflict transformation, both past and future can be used differently.

*The past can become a foundation for peace.* Alongside histories of war, domination and victimisation, we can search for alternative histories: histories of cooperation, coexistence, solidarity and periods in which groups now represented primarily as enemies lived together differently. Elise Boulding's (2000) work on cultures of peace is important here because it directs attention towards the 'hidden side of history' – the practices and relationships through which people have sustained peaceful social life even within histories conventionally narrated through war and political power.

Remembering peaceful coexistence is not an invitation to romanticise the past or erase historical violence. It expands the historical repertoire. If the only history available to us is a history of inevitable antagonism, permanent enemies and recurring violence, then violence can begin to appear natural and the future predetermined. Alternative histories provide evidence that relationships have taken different forms before and therefore may be capable of doing so again.

The future can become a proactive vision. Instead of asking how one side can finally prevail, we can ask: What is our preferred future for this conflict?

That question changes the temporal orientation of the conflict. It does not require forgetting the past. Nor does it require agreement about every historical interpretation. It asks instead what kind of future the parties wish to inhabit and what would need to happen in the present to make movement towards that future possible.

From there, further questions follow. What would relationships look like in that preferred future? Which needs would be met that are not being met now? Which structures would have to change? What would

need to be created? What would need to stop? What shared interests might provide a basis for action? What can each party begin doing now?

This is where vision and action need to remain connected. Preferred futures that have no relationship to present action remain simply wishful fantasies. Present action without any articulated sense of preferred direction becomes reactive or fatalistic. Futures practice can connect the two by moving iteratively between images of preferred futures and the choices, strategies and experiments through which movement towards them becomes possible.

### Powering peace across dimensions and levels

Bringing these arguments together, *powering peace* can then be understood as movement across both dimensions of peace and levels of social life.

Along one dimension, peace deepens from negative peace, concerned with the absence of direct violence, towards positive peace, concerned with structural and systemic violence and with the conditions that sustain peaceful societies, and further towards holistic peace, incorporating psychological and ecological dimensions and the cultivation of life-affirming relationships.

At the same time, peace operates across interconnected levels: inner peace; family; local community; nation and society; regional and global society; and environment and planet.

These are not independent layers. Conflict within the self can affect interpersonal relationships. Family and community relations are shaped by wider cultural and economic structures. National conflicts reverberate through local communities and across regions. Global economic systems affect the possibilities available to individuals and families. Ecological degradation can intensify social and political conflict, while prevailing social and economic arrangements profoundly affect ecological systems.

The preferred movement is therefore both deeper and wider: towards richer dimensions of peace operating across increasingly interconnected levels.

This also explains why peace cannot adequately be understood as an endpoint reached after conflict has disappeared. Conflict is part of social life and can signal that relationships, structures or circumstances need to change. Peace thus is better understood as an

ongoing capacity to engage such change without continually reproducing violence.

### Powering peace

To power peace, then, is not simply to possess power and direct it towards something called peace. Both terms require considerably more scrutiny.

Power can operate *over* others, but it can also describe the capacity to act, the capacity generated *with* others and the capacities developed *within* ourselves. We can exercise *power against* structures and practices that reproduce violence and domination, while also exercising *power for* alternatives that make different futures possible. And throughout these processes we need to keep asking the question of power toward: toward what ends are these capacities being mobilised?

Peace, similarly, cannot be reduced to what remains when overt violence stops. Negative peace matters profoundly, particularly wherever people are being killed, injured or displaced. But powering peace also means creating structures, cultures, institutions and relationships that make violence less necessary and less likely; addressing psychological and ecological dimensions of violence; and cultivating the conditions under which people and planet can flourish.

This returns us to the four themes with which I began: Powering People, Planet, Prosperity, and Peace. The four cannot readily be separated. A conception of prosperity that degrades the planet or excludes large sections of humanity cannot easily be reconciled with holistic peace. A conception of peace that ignores structural inequality or ecological destruction remains partial. And a conception of power that leaves most people positioned as passive recipients of futures created elsewhere severely constrains our collective futures agency.

Futures Studies has an important role here because it can expand the space of possibilities. It can help us identify images and narratives that present violence, domination or particular forms of progress as inevitable. It can recover possibilities obscured by dominant accounts of the past. It can help us imagine alternatives, interrogate their assumptions and connect preferred futures with present action.

Conflict transformation similarly asks us to use the energy of conflict differently: not simply to return to what existed before, and not merely to establish who has won, but to understand what the conflict reveals

about what is no longer working and what might need to emerge in its place.

In the end, perhaps the most important question is not simply who has power? It is what our different forms of power enable us to imagine, create and transform – and toward which futures we choose to direct them.

May the power to create better futures be with us!



*Image Credit: The Official group picture of APFN 2026, Day 1, Bangkok September 3<sup>rd</sup>.*

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