International Cooperation in a Turbulent World: Policy Insights from an Ultrasocial Lens

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International Cooperation in a Turbulent World: Policy Insights from an Ultrasocial Lens

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ABSTRACT

We are living through an era of profound global challenge, from climate emergency to nuclear tension to strained alliances and democratic backsliding. Russian aggression, China's military build-up, intractable conflicts in the Middle East, and 'America First' strategies give us much to be concerned about. In the midst of instability and conflict, humanity's persistent capacity to achieve and sustain international cooperation seems to defy the odds. The long peace since the Second World War has seen a reduction in poverty levels and a decline in violence, showing how human motivations tend towards empathy and cooperation. This article, stemming from the author's 2024 book and her plenary address to the 2025 annual conference of the International Affairs Standing Committee, considers humans as an 'ultrasocial' species. It shows why this matters for policy, arguing that if we recognise our nature as a species and the potential we have to work together, we can galvanise people around progressive, inspirational ideas. The author offers recommendations for policy and governance to harness this ultrasociality and create a cooperative breakthrough.

INTRODUCTION

We are living through an era of profound global challenge, from climate emergency to nuclear tension to strained alliances and democratic backsliding. The reasons for pessimism are everywhere: Russian aggression, China's military build-up, intractable conflicts in the Middle East, and 'America First' strategies give us much to be concerned about. Beyond high politics, regular citizens suffer

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from the effects of climate change, terrorism, displacement and brutal dictator-
ships. Even in developed regions like North America and Europe, there are rea-
sons to question whether democracy has the longevity assumed, how economic
inequality will impact human flourishing, and whether nationalistic extremism
can be kept at bay.

Alongside this troubling landscape, humanity's persistent capacity to achieve
and sustain international cooperation seems to defy the odds. Long-standing
processes of European integration, international cooperation in space explora-
tion, the nuclear weapons taboo, and transnational efforts to combat climate
change demonstrate that as a global society, we have a notable ability to tran-
scend conflict and self-interest in pursuit of shared goals. At critical junctures,
we often choose paths that improve our international system. As a result, the
number of people on Earth living in poverty has gone down by more than 50%
since 1990,[1] violence has declined,[2] and great powers have not gone to war with
each other since the Second World War. The numbers of military and civilian
deaths since then have been strikingly low in historical terms.[3] We can now safely
say that this long peace is not simply the product of the Cold War, but of some-
thing more fundamental to human motivations.

This pattern is no accident. Recent scientific discoveries across social neuro-
science, evolutionary biology, anthropology, and cognitive psychology, among
others, reveal a fundamental truth that most policymakers have overlooked:
humans are an ultrasocial species. As Jeremy Rifkin writes:

> A radical new view of human nature is emerging in the biological and cogni-
> tive sciences…Recent discoveries in brain science and child development are
> forcing us to rethink the long-held belief that human beings are, by nature,
> aggressive, materialistic, utilitarian, and self-interested. The dawning realiza-
> tion that we are a fundamentally empathic species has profound and far-
> reaching consequences for society.[4]

As a species, we are hard-wired, soft-wired, and pre-wired to be other-regarding,
empathic, and inclined toward wide-scale cooperation, even among strangers.[5]
This is not optimism, but a corrective based on years of amassing empirical evi-
dence across fields. And it has profound implications for how we design policy
and approach international cooperation.

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[1]World Bank, 'Poverty headcount ratio at $2.15 a day (2017 PPP) (% of population)', available at: https://
data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.DDAY (12 December 2025).
[2]Steven Pinker, *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined* (New York, 2011).
[3]Neil Halloran, 'The fallen of WWII', documentary, 2015, available at: http://www.fallen.io/ww2; Pinker,
The better angels of our nature.
[4]Jeremy Rifkin, *The empathic civilization: The race to global consciousness in a world in crisis* (New York,
2009), 1.
[5]Nicholas Christakis, *Blueprint: The evolutionary origins of a good society* (New York, 2019); Rifkin, *The
empathic civilization: The race to global consciousness in a world in crisis*.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND ULTRASOCIALITY

The evidence for human ultrasociality is overwhelming and represents a consilience across multiple disciplines reaching the same conclusion about human inclinations.[6] Social neuroscientists have discovered that the brain's default mode is to think socially.[7] When we are not concentrating on a specific task, our minds naturally wander to our social interactions. We experience social pain from social rejection in the same way as physical pain—in the same part of the brain.[8] Mirror neurons, crucial for empathy, fire both when we take an action and when we observe someone else taking that action.[9] On a psychological level, humans individually fail to thrive without social interaction. The need for social contact is actually more important than even food and water for human flourishing.[10] Studies show that loneliness is as detrimental to human health as smoking fifteen cigarettes per day.[11] Conversely, people living in cities, highly social environments, gain a 10 to 15% health advantage because of the social forces present there.[12]

From an evolutionary perspective, cooperation—defined by evolutionary biologists as a behaviour whereby someone 'pays a cost for another to receive a benefit'—involves altruism and restraint from competition.[13] It is not competition that primarily characterises the success of human societies, but cooperation. Early in human evolution, the chances of survival were much higher if humans found ways to divide labour and specialise in food and material production. Cultural evolution also played a key role, around 200,000 to 300,000 years ago, as our species emerged, through processes of self-domestication among others.[14]

As human evolution scholar Sarah Mathew explains:

> Humans cooperate with strangers, and cooperate in groups comprising millions of genetically unrelated individuals…Even without coercion from the state, people voluntarily cooperate: they donate blood, contribute to charity, assist in disaster relief, organize community events, protest unjust laws, give

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[6]Edward Wilson, *Consilience: The unity of knowledge* (New York, 1998).

[7]Matthew D. Lieberman, *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect* (New York, 2013).

[8]Lieberman, *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect*, 56–60.

[9]Lieberman, *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect*, 135.

[10]Lieberman, *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect*, 43.

[11]Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy Smith, Mark Baker, Tyler Harris and David Stephenson, 'Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review', *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10 (2) (2015), 227–37.

[12]Dirk Helbing, as cited in Laura Spinney, 'Karma of the crowd', *National Geographic* (February 2014), 123–135.

[13]Martin Nowak; 'Five rules for the evolution of cooperation', *Science* 314 (5805) (2006), 1560; Robert Axelrod and William Hamilton, 'The evolution of cooperation', *Science* 211 (4489) (1981), 1390–96.

[14]Richard Wrangham, *The goodness paradox: The strange relationship between virtue and violence in human evolution* (New York, 2019).

up their seat on a bus for an elderly person, return items to lost-and-found locations, give directions to travelers, etc.[15]

Indeed, a team of evolutionary scientists recently found that human morality itself is universally based on cooperation and promotes cooperation.[16]

Anthropologists have documented thousands of 'human universals', defined as shared features of culture, society, language, behaviour, and psyche for which there are no known exceptions.[17] Every society across the planet regards cooperation—specifically empathic cooperation—as a virtue, and cruelty toward others as immoral. We not only act to be in ultrasocial situations; we also restrain our behaviour to fulfil this need. Morality is derived collectively in addition to individually.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR POLICY

The problem with allowing pessimism to become common wisdom is that it is based on a starting point about human motivations that is, quite simply, entirely wrong. If our default assumptions about international relations over-determine conflict, we risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Underlying much of international relations theory is the assumption that humans are by nature power-maximising and engage in zero-sum behaviour, using the language of threat, great-power competition, and conflict between allies and adversaries. But this assumption is entirely at odds with the scientific consensus in fields studying human behaviour that humans are actually socially oriented, inclined towards cooperation, empathy, even altruism.

The implications are profound. Ontology is defined as a theory of being, the basis of what we assume is our social reality. If on a grand scale humans have an ultrasocial predisposition, our starting point should reflect this. Instead of asking why we overcame self-interest, we could ask why we deviated from ultrasociality. This reframing opens up new possibilities for understanding and achieving international cooperation. Better-informed policy recommendations can flow from here. As Matthew Lieberman observes, the scientific innovations that have enabled us to understand the social nature of our brains have only occurred in the past few decades, but our societal institutions were designed well before this and were largely based on erroneous foundations.[18] If we can fundamentally change the way we look at international relations to take into account these new

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[15]Sarah Mathew, 'Evolution of human cooperation', in James D. Wright (ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences*, vol. 11 (2nd edn, Oxford, 2015), 259.
[16]University of Oxford News, 'Seven moral rules found all around the world', 11 February 2019, available at: https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2019-02-11-seven-moral-rules-found-all-around-world.
[17]Donald Brown, *Human universals* (New York, 1991).
[18]Lieberman, *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect*, 10.

discoveries and developments, the possibilities for improving international cooperation become much more promising.

THE POWER OF TRANSFORMATIONAL IDEAS

An ultrasocial lens enables us to see the societal power to transform. A cooperative breakthrough is often the culmination of large numbers of regular people living their lives, but also taking time to push for something that matters to them. This occurred historically with the launch of the European integration process, the consolidation of the nuclear taboo, the growth of a movement devoted to preserving space as a peaceful domain for all humankind, and the widescale pursuit of the Net Zero climate goal.[19]

Using ultrasociality as a starting point, we as humans are predisposed to embrace ideas that enable ultrasocial behaviour. Other factors can distort this tendency and ultrasocial ideas will not always win, but they are more likely to convince people and, in some cases, galvanise them around a cause. This is especially true for ideas that have the potential for transformational impact, are optimistic, and capture the imagination. They create space for the power of possibility. Such transcendent ideas, if championed well by good leaders, may galvanise a societal movement. Eventually, the power of the idea and the movement can lead to a widespread and fundamental shift in beliefs around the world, which pushes political leaders to embrace policy change.

At the same time, manipulative leaders can sway groups of people into nationalistic, far-right populist, and authoritarian ideologies by initially appealing to their desire to belong to something bigger than themselves and their desire to join others (ultrasociality). After a while, it becomes clear that what primarily drives these tribalistic leaders is actually grounded in 'us versus them' behaviour and not ultrasociality. Empathy can be weaponised by immoral leaders. Manipulative leaders can use their followers to do terrible things, resulting in outcomes of nationalistic conflict amongst states, war, oppression, genocide. These types of destructive movements ultimately tend to fail, precisely because they are not truly about ultrasociality. And over history, we have developed laws, norms, and institutions to push back against these violent outcomes.

At various periods of time, the world can be more or less ultrasocial: we need good leaders, ideas, and favorable circumstances. At other times, we may see more instances of tribalism. Usually, there is a combination of the two to varying degrees. But a crucial takeaway is that the future is unwritten and human agency matters. We can create an environment more conducive to empathic cooperation.

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[19]Mai'a K. Davis Cross, *International cooperation against all odds: The ultrasocial world* (Oxford, 2024).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: HARNESSING ULTRASOCIALITY

How can the policy community capitalise on ultrasociality in designing policy? Drawing from historical cases of successful cooperation, here are six key recommendations:

1. Elevate anti-weaponisation norms in emerging domains

Just as we established norms against nuclear weapons and preserved space as peaceful, we must proactively establish similar frameworks for frontier technological areas such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology and cyberspace before weaponisation takes hold. This could include supporting civilian-controlled scientific cooperation as separate from military applications, which enables cooperation even between geopolitical rivals. We should extend the International Geophysical Year (IGY) model[20] of data sharing to new technological domains. The IGY's principle of 'free movement of data' enabled unprecedented cooperation even during the Cold War.

We should support large-scale scientific infrastructure projects like the International Space Station that require sustained cooperation across political divides and administrations. These projects create networks of scientists, engineers, and institutions whose collaborative relationships transcend temporary political tensions. They build trust, shared standards, and habits of cooperation that become difficult to reverse.

2. Adopt a planetary lens for climate action

The net-zero idea frames climate action around shared prosperity, but building on this, we could harness ultrasociality by adopting a planetary lens that transcends nation-state boundaries, broadening ultrasociality to include relationships with nature. This could include creating transnational governance structures around ecological systems or bioregional systems rather than political borders, what some call 'biosphere consciousness'. River basins, ocean ecosystems, and climate zones do not respect political boundaries. Governance structures that reflect these natural systems could foster cooperation based on shared ecological destiny rather than competing national interests.

Policy initiatives might include Planetary Councils that bring together scientific, business and civil society sectors in climate diplomacy, or globally synchronised climate experiences that create moments of collective awareness and action across borders.

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[20]The International Geophysical Year was a coordinated global effort to discover new scientific knowledge about the Earth, which took place in the 1950s. For more information see: https://www.nasa.gov/centers-and-facilities/johnson/65-years-ago-the-international-geophysical-year-begins/ (11 December 2025).

3. *Preserve transformational visions*

Policymakers must allow for aspirational goals, even if they exceed immediate political feasibility. This means preserving transformational visions by maintaining references to them even when immediate actions are incremental. In other words, it is important to remember that successful policies connect to deeper human aspirations. Purely technical or transactional approaches often fail to mobilise broad support. The European Federalist Movement understood this. Jean Monnet designed institutions for the European Coal and Steel Community knowing the immediate goal—a common market for coal and steel—was merely a step toward the grander vision of a United States of Europe. That transformational vision pulled integration forward even during transactional periods.

Similarly, the spaceflight advocates who pushed for joint US-Soviet Moon landings in the 1960s didn't achieve that specific goal, but their bold vision opened pathways for Apollo-Soyuz, Shuttle-Mir, and eventually the International Space Station. The joint Moon landing proposal brought other cooperative breakthroughs much more within reach. Policymakers should create hope-centered policy framing. Even during crises, they can proactively frame crisis narratives as opportunities to articulate transcendent, forward-looking visions. When the climate movement shifted from saying 'we must sacrifice' to 'we can transform our economy for shared prosperity', it galvanised unprecedented support.

4. *Create space for both formal institutions and informal networks*

The most successful cooperative breakthroughs combine formal institutional structures with vibrant informal networks. Jean Monnet stepped down from his formal position leading the European Coal and Steel Community in 1954 precisely because he recognised his influence would be greater championing the federalist idea from outside official institutions through his Action Committee for the United States of Europe. This encourages multiple sectors—scientific, business, civil society—to play meaningful roles in diplomacy. The International Astronautical Federation, bringing together rocket societies since 1950, created networks that enabled cooperation even when official governmental relations were strained. Today it gathers around 10,000 space scientists, policy experts, space agency representatives and astronauts annually, all committed to peaceful cooperation in space.

Public and cultural diplomacy that foster people-to-people connections are important for policymakers to invest in. They build mutual empathy, enable exchanges, and even in the most difficult international relationships, find pockets of areas with mutual goals. During the Cold War, scientific exchanges and the 'NASA-Soviet Academy channel' maintained communication and cooperation on space even as broader political relations remained hostile.

5. Embed ultrasocial values in institutional design

Many of our institutions were designed in a time when we lacked awareness of our social predispositions and have baked in assumptions that could be re-examined. At the global level, we could reform diplomatic practices to incorporate insights about ultrasociality rather than assuming conflict as the default condition. Standard diplomatic protocol focuses on proper procedures and formal exchanges. What if this protocol also included time to acknowledge the individuality and social context of those present and the larger human implications of negotiations?

At the domestic level, in terms of education, we should develop the social brain by teaching through social contexts rather than power dynamics, emphasising communication over purely technical training. Educational programs can nurture curiosity and big-picture thinking to eventually encourage ultrasocial breakthroughs, rather than emphasising narrow, procedural or technical questions. Curiosity leads to deep thinking, individuality, and open-mindedness. Children are born curious, but this diminishes as they become adults, often replaced with pragmatism. Yet curiosity is what enables leadership and engagement in issues broader than oneself. Liberal arts education excels here by putting curiosity at the center rather than just technical skills.

We might even develop a Global Empathy Curriculum that can be shared across borders, helping people understand diverse perspectives while recognising our common humanity. This could include funding interdisciplinary research on human cooperation that bridges biological and social sciences.

6. Recognise and counteract tribalism

At various periods, tribalistic alternatives challenge ultrasocial progress. Understanding how tribalism works is essential for counteracting it. Collective-oriented societies—those with histories and cultures of strong societal bonds, egalitarianism, democracy, and community—are more likely to be tolerant and to reject tribalistic leaders. Strengthening these characteristics in our societies and institutions creates buffers of protection against corruption of our ultrasocial tendencies.

Different eras bring varying degrees of cynicism or openness to new ideas. We should consistently celebrate developments anchored in the ultrasocial landscape—peace treaties, trade agreements, scientific discoveries, globally-oriented leaders—and denounce those that are not. Importantly, us-versus-them actions actually often spark ultrasocial backlashes. The Women's March following Trump's election, Black Lives Matter after George Floyd's murder, global support for Ukraine facing Russian aggression, all demonstrate how extreme tribalism catalyses movements affirming shared humanity and cooperative values. Policymakers should recognise and amplify these ultrasocial responses rather than focusing primarily on the tribalistic provocations that sparked them.

LEARNING FROM SUCCESS

Each of the four major cases described in my recent book, *International cooperation against all odds: The ultrasocial world* illustrate key lessons valuable to policymakers:

1. The power of societal movements

In European integration, nuclear disarmament, space exploration, and climate action, grassroots movements preceded and enabled governmental action.

2. The importance of working from outside formal structures

Jean Monnet left his official position to champion federalism more effectively.[21] Nuclear scientists formed Pugwash conferences outside governmental structures.[22] Climate activists created parallel summits to UN negotiations. Sometimes the most transformational ideas need space to develop outside formal institutions before they can reshape those institutions.

3. The role of crises in creating openings

Major existential threats opened windows for transformational ideas. The Second World War enabled European federalism. The Cuban Missile Crisis strengthened nuclear taboos. Climate disasters are now galvanising net-zero commitments. Crises, while painful, create moments when societies become receptive to bold new visions. As Tali Sharot's research demonstrates, it is during hard times that people rely on optimism the most, and collective optimism—rare but powerful—emerges when society faces unprecedented lows.[23]

4. The stickiness of ultrasocial achievements

Once transformational change grounded in ultrasociality is achieved, it becomes progressively harder to dislodge. The European Union has weathered multiple existential crises—constitutional crisis, Eurozone crisis, migration crisis, Brexit—yet consistently emerges stronger.[24] The nuclear taboo has held for nearly 80 years despite occasional saber-rattling. Space remains fundamentally cooperative despite 'Space Race 2.0' rhetoric. Institutions, norms and practices that allow expression of ultrasociality develop their own momentum.

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[21]Jean Monnet, *Memoirs*, trans. Richard Mayne (Garden City, 1978).
[22]Joseph Rotblat, 'Disarmament and world security issues at the Pugwash conferences', in William Epstein and Toshiyuki Toyoda (eds), *A new design for nuclear disarmament* (Nottingham, 1977), 29–35.
[23]Tali Sharot, *The optimism bias: A tour of the irrationally positive brain* (New York, 2012), 60–71.
[24]Mai'a K. Davis Cross, *The politics of crisis in Europe* (Cambridge, 2017).

ADDRESSING SKEPTICISM

Some will object that this approach is naïve, that it ignores power politics, strategic competition, and the harsh realities of international relations. But the dominant assumption in international relations—that states are purely self-interested power-maximisers—cannot explain why European states voluntarily pooled sovereignty, why Cold War superpowers cooperated extensively in space, why nuclear powers refrained from using their most powerful weapons even against non-nuclear adversaries, or why 136 countries committed to net-zero emissions despite short-term costs.

The evidence is clear: we are capable of far more cooperation than our current theories and policies assume. The ultrasocial approach does not deny that power, interests, and strategic calculation matter. Rather, it provides the deeper context within which these factors operate. It explains why certain ideas resonate and others fail, why some cooperative breakthroughs succeed against all odds, and why tribalistic alternatives ultimately prove self-destructive. Manipulative leaders may exploit empathy for power. Our individual agency means there are many pathways leading away from our socially oriented nature and toward tribalism. Corrupt leaders can manipulate followers. Deep-seated disagreement, lack of good leadership, or focus on narrow transactionalism can work against ultrasocial ideas.

While tribalistic alternatives are always present in our ultrasocial world, we should not be discouraged by them. Us-versus-them actions often spark ultrasocial backlashes. Even in the face of leaders who manipulate empathy for their own personal power, it matters that others around the world make bold statements and take action rooted in genuine ultrasociality. The collective voice of humanity, expressed through social movements, scientific communities, civil society organisations, and democratic publics, has repeatedly overcome the cynicism and self-interest of those who would divide us.

Humans are drawn to finding ways to express mutual empathy, to feel a sense of societal belonging, and to pursue a common, cooperative endeavour. In the face of existential crises, when much is at stake, we tend to gravitate toward ultrasocial solutions, particularly when they allow for optimism, transcendence, and a new narrative. But it matters that others around the world make bold statements and take action rooted in genuine cooperation.

CONCLUSION

Our current moment presents both dangers and opportunities. We face democratic erosion, rising authoritarianism, climate emergency, and potential great power conflict. Yet we also see unprecedented global connectivity, rapid technological advancement, and growing awareness of our interdependence. Our

society and governance structures can create a context where good ideas emerge and leaders are able to galvanise people around progressive, inspirational ideas, ultimately leading to a sense of global empathy. It is important to invest in people-to-people connections, frame policy around shared aspirations, support ideas that come from outside of formal structures, and design institutions and agreements for long-term cooperation. Media and political discourse disproportionately focus on conflicts and failures so it is important to deliberately highlight cooperative breakthroughs. Everything from scientific discoveries to successful treaties to collaborative projects create positive feedback loops and inspire further cooperation.

The stakes are too high to ignore the underlying presence of ultrasociality. If we recognise our nature as a species and the potential we have to work together, we can transform institutions and devise policies that take advantage of this capacity. Time and time again, our ultrasocial predisposition has pushed us toward big ideas that inspire and bring us together around the power of possibility. As I concluded in my recent lecture at the Royal Irish Academy: even in the face of those leaders who manipulate empathy for their own personal power, it matters that others around the world make bold statements and take action.

The future is unwritten. Human agency matters. And the science tells us that when we align our policies with our ultrasocial nature—when we preserve transformational visions, adopt planetary perspectives, embed cooperative values in institutions, and create space for both formal and informal networks—we can achieve cooperation against all odds.