



The Spoils of War

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War has often been an exercise in taking. Throughout history, nations have fought for land, resources, labor, and strategic advantage. “To the victor go the spoils” captures a reality that has shaped international relations for centuries.

In recent decades, however, the United States has presented itself as a defender of an international order grounded in law, democracy, human rights, and national sovereignty. Critics have long noted the gap between those ideals and American practice, but the language of rights and international norms remained central to how U.S. power was justified.

Under the current Trump administration, those moral claims have increasingly given way to a more explicit emphasis on national interest. Strategic competition and economic advantages have moved to the forefront of public policy. Whether in discussions of Venezuela and its vast oil reserves, pressure on Iran and the security of global energy markets, negotiations over access to Ukraine’s critical minerals, or proposals regarding Greenland’s strategic location and natural resources, economic and geopolitical interests are no longer cloaked in moral language. They are openly acknowledged and frequently celebrated.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth declared in December 2025 that “the Monroe Doctrine is in effect, and it is stronger than ever under the Trump corollary,” describing it as a restoration of American “power and prerogatives in this hemisphere.” Such language moves beyond the defense of national



interests toward a world organized around spheres of influence, where great powers claim special rights within their respective regions, reminiscent of earlier eras of territorial expansion and American empire.

The message heard around the world is simple: power secures interests, and interests justify power. But precedents matter. If powerful states reserve the right to pursue their interests beyond their borders, why should China not claim a similar right in Asia, including over Taiwan?

These concerns were very much on the minds of participants at an ecumenical gathering in Taiwan this past April. Church leaders and international partners gathered not only to discuss geopolitics but also to ask a deeper question: What is the faithful response if war comes? Has the church articulated a theology robust enough to resist the assumption that conflict is inevitable and militarization unavoidable?

But this raises a deeper question about peace itself. For the current administration, peace often appears to mean stability secured through American dominance. Conflict is resolved when rivals accommodate American interests and power. Yet peace maintained by threat is not peace; it is merely a pause between demonstrations of power. The question, then, is “what a more durable and just peace might require.” In the 1980s, the United Church of Christ articulated a theology of Just Peace that called on Christians not merely to oppose war or regulate war, but to actively create the social, political, economic, and international conditions that make peace possible and sustainable. Peace that does not rest upon justice, mutual security, and the protection of vulnerable people is neither lasting nor legitimate.

Partners in the United Church of Christ in Japan, particularly in the Hiroshima region, continue to ask whether another way is possible. They point to Article 9 of Japan’s Constitution, not merely as a relic of postwar idealism, but as a continuing challenge to con-

conventional assumptions about security. They ask whether nations might pursue demilitarization with the same determination that they pursue rearmament. Can a state work as hard for peace as it does for war? Survivors of Hiroshima have spent decades posing that question to the world.

The prophet Isaiah envisioned a day when nations would beat their swords into plowshares and learn war no more. That vision is as urgent as ever in an age of renewed great-power rivalry, extreme global wealth concentration, and resurgent imperial ambition. If history teaches anything, it is that militarism brings suffering to ordinary people. The challenge before the church is not merely to remember that lesson, but to carry its commitment to Just Peace into policy, public witness, and the moral imagination of our time.

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