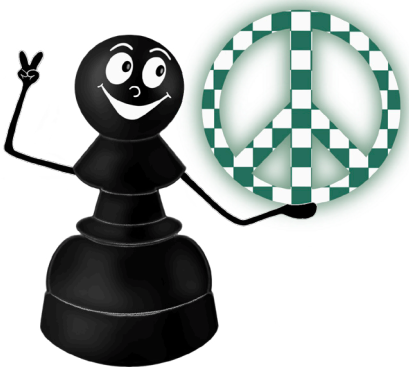
Chess Peace

The Chess Friends
The Man Benji, The Myth Sarang, The Legend Vivaan

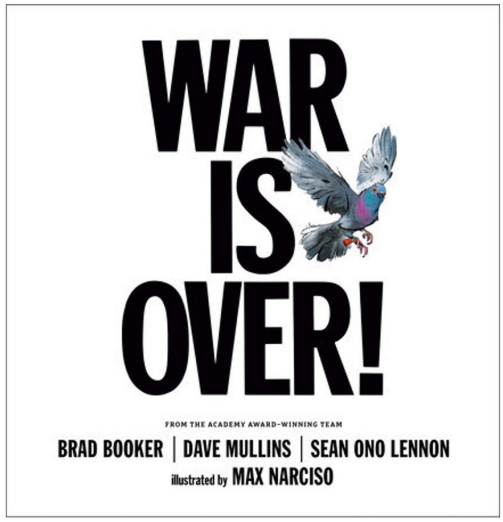
Howdy! It's The Chess Friends!

It's December! As the year winds down, we reflect on the ups and downs of the year that's been and look ahead hopefully toward the New Year. What do we wish for, in our chess world full of positional battles, tactical fights, victories, and defeats?

We wish for PEACE.







A movie poster for WAR IS OVER! *Inspired by the Music from John and Yoko (source: Wiki) and a cover for the picture book WAR IS OVER! by Sean Ono Lennon, Dave Mullins, and Brad Booker.*

There is this saying that chess is a representation of war. Maybe it was a thousand years ago, but times changed and the game evolved. People evolved. ***Chess became a symbol of peace.***

How else would you explain the fact that, when Sean Ono Lennon and his friends were creating the film *WAR IS OVER!* inspired by the song "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)" by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, they turned to chess as a symbol of peace between the two fighting armies?

The film went on to win the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 2024, and later was adapted into a picture book.

In this holiday article, we want to reflect on the idea that chess is a representation of peace. It is a centuries-old vehicle of diplomacy, collaboration, friendship, and learning.

Let's start with some history.

It is believed that chess originated in sixth-century India from the ancient strategy game of *chaturanga*. With its four divisions of an army on each side—cavalry, infantry, elephantry, and chariotry—and with the goal to coordinate them to surround your opponent's king, this early chess was indeed a war strategy game. "A war without bloodshed," as they said.

As people began realizing that conflict could be resolved by many means other than war, chess evolved from a game of war to a diplomatic instrument.

Shortly after the game was created, Devasharma, on behalf of the Gupta Empire, sent a beautifully made chaturanga set to the Persian king Khosrow I of the Sassanid Empire. The board was made with ebony and ivory, rubies and emeralds adorned the pieces, but no rules for the game were provided. The challenge for the Persian court was to figure out how to play and master the game, which wise vizier Bozorgmehr did. It was an early intellectual diplomacy act, when two legendary empires shared a game challenge, bringing out the best through competition and learning rather than war.

In the ninth century in the Abbasid Empire, Caliph Harun al-Rashid of

Baghdad used chess as his go-to move for diplomacy. Legend has it that he gifted Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne a chess set, to set up a strategic alliance between the empires. Shortly thereafter, Byzantine emperor Nicephorus I sent the Caliph a diplomatic letter detailing the geopolitical dynamics between their empires, using chess as the metaphor and common language. Fast forward to the 14th century and we see the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt and the Ottoman Empire of Turkey regularly exchanging the fancy ebony and ivory chess sets to show understanding, respect, and diplomacy.

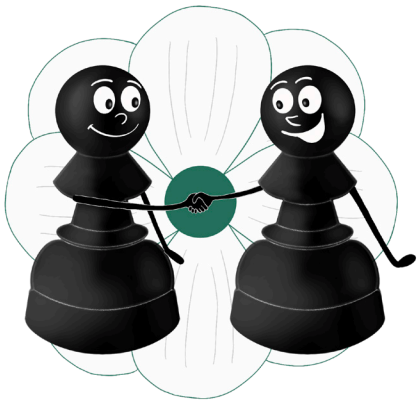
And let's not forget about Benjamin Franklin's efforts to find peace through chess! While serving in London in the 1770s as a spokesman for American colonies, he played several games with Lady Caroline Howe, whose family had close ties with the British monarchy. These chess games looked like friendly gatherings, a chance for Franklin to play a formidable chess opponent. However, they also doubled as secret meetings to find a peaceful compromise between Britain and America. These talks couldn't stop the impending war, but it was a noble effort nevertheless.



"Lady Howe mating Benjamin Franklin" by Edward Harrison May, 1867, from the Yale University Collection. Source: Wiki.

As life went on, chess spread and grew, and wasn't just a tool of diplomatic strategy anymore. Chess became its own world. Chess books were being printed, chess ideas were being exchanged, matches were being held, bringing people from all over the world to sit down together only a chessboard away. They didn't need to discuss any diplomacy, nor did they need to know each other's language. All they needed was to shake hands and begin the game.

That handshake itself is a deeply intentional sign of peace, goodwill, and the hopes of a good game. Traced way back before the invention of chess, handshakes are a symbol of trust and peace: you extend your right hand and shake it with your opponent's, to show that you came with no weapons or bad intentions. You came peacefully to find the truth that exists on the chessboard, in the chess world, aside from any politics.

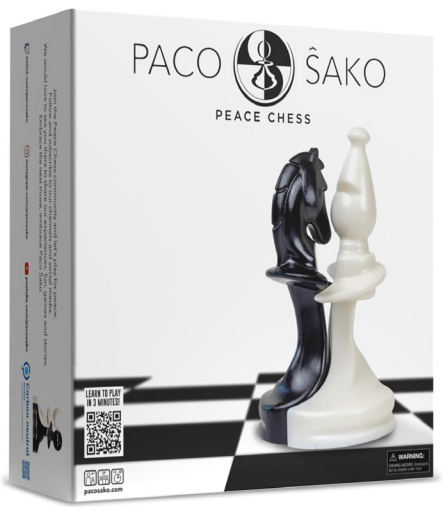


The chess match that became widely politized was the 1972 World Championship between Bobby Fischer of the United States and Boris Spassky of the Soviet Union, the Match of the Century. With political tensions at their peak, non-chess players on both sides thought that a win would score a big cultural and intellectual triumph in the Cold War. After a long 21 games, Fischer was declared the 11th (and first American) World Chess Champion. America scored the big win. Fischer won for his country and for American pride. While differing media sources may have spun this in any number of ways, any chess player knows that you don't come to tournaments to play against enemies. You come because you enjoy chess, its intellectual challenge, and the fun of seeing what your opponent can think of no matter who they are. You come to try your ideas, get inspired, and learn something new together with your opponent, with chess as the vehicle for this peaceful learning and growth.

During the second round of the match, Fischer forfeited the game because he was annoyed by the distraction of the noisy photos and video recordings, and demanded that the match be held in a backstage room without spectators. Spassky could have said no to this demand. Then, he would have been guaranteed the world champion title, a victory for his country. But he declined an easy win. He agreed to Fischer's demands because he didn't come to win a Cold War match. He came to play chess. Later in the match, after Fischer brilliantly won the 6th game, Spassky, alongside the audience, stood up and applauded the great performance.

The dust settled, the time passed, the water flowed under the bridge, the chess champions changed, and the Cold War was no more. What was left of the Match of the Century, that at one point deemed so important politically? Mutual respect and friendship between Fischer and Spassky. They were never enemies. The game helped them to connect and become friends.

Fast forward a few decades and Dutch artist Felix Albers took the idea that chess connects people a leap further. In 2014, he created a spectacular modern chess variant *Paco Ŝako*, which means "peace chess" in Esperanto.



Paco Ŝako set, as seen on Amazon.

Paco Ŝako features the same board, with the same pieces and movements. The difference? Capturing is replaced with connecting. What a beautiful sentiment! Rather than removing each other from the board, opposing pieces form unions to share a square and move together. Each side can move the union—their peace and their partner—in the way their own piece moves, taking turns in the lead, like dancing on the board. Capturing no longer simplifies the board, and united pieces become shared opportunities. You win not by checkmate, but by joining one of your pieces to the opposing king.

The pieces themselves are beautifully designed, and when they merge into a union, the union's base resembles a yin and yang symbol of the Chinese philosophy of complementary forces converging for cohesion, a beautiful message that this game is all about.

If you want to learn more about this lovely variant, visit www.prodigystrats.com/post/paco-sako, and try playing it online at www.pacoplay.com. *Paco Ŝako* is growing: there are tournaments, world champions, courses, and educational work developed, including by the Rahimi sisters who were the first to teach *Paco Ŝako* at a school in Iran.

Fast forward another decade and we're in July 2026. The legendary GM Judit Polgar, the only super GM woman in the history of chess, who once peaked at eighth place in the world by rating, was nominated to become the President of Hungary. Was it because she is great at the strategic chess battles and has won many chess "wars"? Maybe. Was it because she is kind and generous and unites the world through chess? Definitely! Judit Polgar was nominated because her country needed a worldwide-respected leader who can bring peace and unity.



GM Judit Polgar in 2008.
Photo by Ygrek via Wiki

Why did Benjamin Franklin, and so many political leaders before and after him, use chess to stop a war, or to find a common ground? Why does the film *War Is Over!* use chess to represent a connection between fighting armies? How could Spassky, after a tragic loss, get up to applaud his opponent? Why would Judit Polgar be the best candidate to lead a country?

The answer to all these questions is that chess has the potential to bring out the best in people. After all, the best chess players are not only those who climb the highest peaks of chess mountains, but also those who use chess to find their inner peace. The peace to not worry about wins or losses. The peace to not worry about politics. The peace where we don't dwell on the past or fret about the future, but instead enjoy the greatest gift there is, the present! Playing chess is a fun opportunity to learn something new now. When we view the game of chess like that, we achieve the inner peace, and we start to understand that outer peace, the peace we feel toward others, comes from within us.

The current Dalai Lama said, "an atmosphere of peace must first be created within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet."

We have the power to make history. We have the power to stop repeating past mistakes. We have the power to find worldwide peace and happiness through chess, a universal language that unites us all.

Three Cheers, Fellow Future Master Chess Friends! Peace!

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