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The Promise and Limits of Liberal Internationalism in Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT (10 PT)

Liberal internationalism presents an ambitious vision of a peaceful, rule-based international order grounded in democracy, human rights, and multilateral cooperation. Drawing on Kantian philosophy and Wilsonian idealism, it assumes that liberal democratic states are inherently more peaceful and capable of sustaining international stability. However, the practical application of liberal internationalism has repeatedly fallen short of its theoretical promise. Historical experiences after both World Wars and during the post-Cold War era reveal persistent tensions between universal liberal norms and state sovereignty, cultural diversity, and power politics. Humanitarian intervention and the promotion of democracy have often been perceived as instruments of Western, particularly American, hegemony. Consequently, while liberal internationalism remains normatively attractive, structural inequalities, geopolitical interests, and resistance from non-liberal states have rendered its full realization largely impractical.

Keywords : *Liberal internationalism; human rights; humanitarian intervention; state sovereignty; American hegemony*



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INTRODUCTION

The liberal imagination is vast, and the ideas and designs for liberal international order are also extraordinarily wide ranging (Ikenberry, 2009). A cluster of ideas such as universal human rights, humanitarian intervention, promotion of democracy, limitation on the power of states, interdependence, and multilateralism have been the value propositions of liberal internationalism. Ikenberry (2009) argued, “at its most basic, liberal internationalism offers a vision of an open, rule-based system in which states trade and cooperate to achieve mutual gain.” The central tenet of this paradigm is the assumption that the surest foundation for peace, both within and between states, is market democracy, that is, a liberal democratic polity and a market-oriented economy (Paris, 1997). The liberal internationalists design a blueprint for reformation of the international system guided by democratic values, international law, and human rights regimes, where liberal institutions should promote diplomacy and multilateralism to attain the goal of perpetual peace. These ideas also resonate with transnationalism, particularly in their emphasis on porous borders, universal rights, and forms of belonging that extend beyond the nation-state.

It is a normative approach: how should the world be? Liberal internationalists anchor international cooperation in promoting liberal democratic values, such as individual freedom and human rights, which will generate like-minded countries with less possibility of war. It is both a critique and an alternative to the realism that claims that the international system is anarchic—there are no rules and no overarching power to regulate the behavior of states. Realism overrules cooperation for the stability of the international system and emphasizes the balance of power as an element of stability. However, realists consider liberal internationalists naive and label them “utopians.” The core components of liberal internationalism—human rights, humanitarian intervention, and the precedence of national interests over collective ones—have failed to garner universal approval, which hinders their practice in its true spirit.

Against this theoretical and historical backdrop, this paper addresses a central puzzle in liberal international thought. This paper examines the gap between the theoretical promises of liberal

internationalism and its practical outcomes, arguing that structural inequalities, sovereignty concerns, and hegemonic practices have limited its realization.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Liberal Internationalism: From Kantian to Wilsonian Idealism to Bush

Kantian

Immanuel Kant exerts profound philosophical influence over liberal international thought. His proposals of (I) a republican form of government—naturally inclined towards peace—(II) an international *federation* of republican states and (III) the establishment of world citizenship—easy movement and the erasing of borders— for perpetual peace are core concepts that inspire the liberal international thoughts. Kant's notion of world citizenship anticipates contemporary liberal transnationalism by challenging rigid borders and emphasizing mobility, cosmopolitan belonging, and cross-border moral obligations. These assumptions laid the foundation of democratic peace theory: democratic states display peaceful behavior within themselves and with other democracies in their relations, and as the number of democracies grows, the zone of peace will expand. Immanuel Kant acknowledged that his sketch of the conditions - for perpetual peace represents an ideal which, although correct in theory – and therefore correct morally – is very far from being achieved in practice (Lawson, 2015).

Wilsonianism

Liberal internationalism has developed in stages to reach its modern form. The classical liberal philosophers provided an inspiration for Wilsonian idealism or Wilsonian internationalism, where international law, collective security, national self-determination, and the sovereign equality of nation-states were taken as paramount essentials. It is an inside-out approach that asserts that similar to domestic political structure, an international political structure can be achieved. E.H. Carr accused the idealistic international institutions that were designed to avert a second world war of escalating the international crisis in 1939. Its premises that global normative consensus can be achieved and applied remained a fatal flaw that ignored the state-centric security concerns altogether. Even in a utopian international system, norms of right behavior cannot replace concerns for national power and material capabilities. Second, its deontological approach treats state relations so mechanistically that it eliminates any possibility for political prudence and judgmental calls (Goldsmith & Krasner, 2003).

International law and international politics cohabit the same conceptual space. Together they comprise the rules and the reality of 'the international system (Slaughter, 1995). International law is an important attribute of liberal international thought. The fatigue of a prolonged war in 1648 cried for an overarching legal foundation in order to regulate state relations on the European continent. The series of multilateral treaties at The Hague Peace Conventions provided a direction for liberal international thought in the 20th century. However, the scourge of WWI terminated the global initiative in this regard. The US president Woodrow Wilson efforts for a multilateral institution such as the League of Nations and the concept of a collective security system were guided by the theoretical framework of liberal internationalism. Critics also asserts that Wilsonian approach turned back on International law. However, in this phase, finally, liberal internationalism attempted to counter realpolitik through a moral, ethical approach to international order, with a concern to stress international justice and provide an alternative to power politics (Pugh, 2012). Nevertheless, liberal internationalism was born and died in the process.

Bush Departures

During George W. Bush administration selectively invoked liberal internationalist principles to justify unilateral military interventions, particularly after 9/11. While the Bush doctrine drew on liberal ideas such as democracy promotion and human rights, it departed from classical liberal internationalism by privileging preemption, unilateralism, and regime change. This marked a significant transformation of liberal internationalism from a multilateral, rule-based project into a security-driven and hegemonic practice. Consequently, the Bush era represents not a continuation but a distortion of liberal internationalist ideals.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative analytical approach based on a review of existing literature on liberal internationalism, including key theoretical and historical debates. Secondary sources such as scholarly books, journal articles, and policy analyses are examined to assess the gap between the theoretical promises of liberal internationalism and its practical outcomes in international politics (Creswell, 2014).

DISCUSSION

Why It Failed After World War I

The first phase of liberal internationalism failed to materialize. The retreat of America as a result of the reversion of the US Senate to isolationism has pulled out solid ground for thriving. There were several reasons, but the most vital was the embedding of liberal thoughts only in the American domestic political system while the rest of Europe still has to reconcile itself with liberal ideology in its true sense. Another reason was the weakening of democratic states on the European continent that were more obsessed with state security in the face of a resurgent Germany. Additionally, the democratic European states were still having colonies that undermined the credibility of their democratic pledges in the League of Nations (LON). Wilson strove for the establishment of Kant's federation of peace in the shape of LON, but the other requisite of Kant's perpetual peace, republican democracies, was largely absent.

Why It Failed After World War II

After the wave of decolonization set off, the newly independent states largely preferred to rush towards Moscow. In the post-World War II era, although liberal internationalism was once again patronized by the US, the other half of the world staged stiff resistance to republican democracy and its blueprints for a human rights regime. The narrative of post-colonialism and capitalism as an exploitative system developed a resistance to the implantation of liberal internationalism in the decolonized world and in the Soviet sphere of influence. In the majority of states, dictators took over post-independence affairs in the Third World. Their apparent anti-imperial stance in order to prolong their rule brought the decolonized world face-to-face with the essentials of liberal internationalism. As an inside-out approach, for which America served as the birthplace, the liberal internationalism was portrayed as an invasion of culture that had been orchestrated through the western-sponsored regulatory regimes, multilateral organizations and was declared as an indirect invasion of their sovereignty. The anti-imperial ambitions at the grass-roots level were capitalized by demagogue leaders whose rule was threatened by democratic ideals, which successfully garnered popular resentment against democracy.

Why It Failed in Post-Cold War Period

Although, theoretically, states are equal under liberal internationalism, in practice it is a hierarchical system. especially in post-cold war era, in this hierarchy US largely dictated the rule of the business. It delivered public services like economic efficiency, security protection, and advocacy for laws and institutions consistent with its foreign policy objectives. The dollar was the global currency, and the American global military presence catapulted it to the top rung of the hierarchy. In America, over the period of 100 years, the goal of liberal internationalism has shifted from Wilson's desire for "no conquest, no domination, and champion of the rights of mankind" to Bush and Trump's unilateralism and violations of human rights. In the post-Cold War era, it transmuted from multilateralism, apparently guided by international law, into American unilateralism and was viewed as an instrument for American led liberal hegemony. However, liberal internationalism swerved from its normative approach to the dominant theme of hegemony of the American foreign policy. The policy of democratic expansion and the humanitarian intervention under Clinton were seen as the products of America's unilateralist approach in a unipolar world. Even critics blamed that during the Bush administration, the US distracted from the principle of liberal internationalism (Nye, 2003). The resistance to liberal internationalism in the post-Cold War era also reflects tensions between transnational liberal ideals and state-centric notions of borders, sovereignty, and national belonging.

From Human Rights to Humanitarian Intervention

The prevention of atrocities and genocide that were inflicted during World War II required special attention in designing the post-war liberal order. It remained an essential part of the UN's missions to ensure human rights and the decolonization process in the post-World War II era. The

human rights project was led by Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed on December 10, 1948. The human rights regime is one of the foundational essentials of liberal thought, and it is claimed that certain norms and values should be applied universally (Burchill et al., 2013). However, its universal applicability was soon challenged by the cultural relativists, and the human rights regime was declared the product of Eurocentric culture that has no relevance in other (Asian) societies (Le, 2016). As the field of comparative politics asserts, Asian societies cannot be taken at par with European societies, and the same set of rules that work in the West, the product of centuries of experience, cannot be applied in the East, where relatively newcomers are trying to pursue Western standards. Their economic struggles to meet the end inculcated less concern for the liberal essentials such as political rights, freedom of speech, and human rights, and the primacy of democracy in their countries. Many Asian leaders, such as Lee Kuan Yew, asserted the supremacy of Asian values, which are supposedly antithetical to universal or Western norms.

The enforcement of the human rights regime by employing military means entails a debate about the legitimacy and legality of humanitarian intervention. Humanitarian intervention is a method for enforcing international law with respect to human rights and the laws of war in situations where the state has collapsed or where the state itself violates the law (Kaldor, 2003). Unlike Wilsonian idealism, post-Cold War liberal internationalism justifies the intervention in the domestic affairs of other states in certain cases—genocide and mass murder, for example. This intervention on humanitarian grounds entails an assault on state sovereignty. The concept of humanitarian intervention is the most controversial subject in liberal thought. It directly goes against the traditional understanding of state sovereignty and challenges the concept of state security, which is essential in the realist realm. On the other side, its experiments, especially in Kosovo, left several question marks about their success. Critics of the humanitarian intervention claimed that it had contributed to a new ‘military humanism’ or ‘human rights imperialism’ that legitimizes a new American ‘colonizing enterprise (Gellner, 1994). They do not believe that leaders, whose responsibility is to uphold national interests, can take action in favor of "noble causes." The other aspect of the conduct of the humanitarian intervention is collateral damage. No matter how precise the strike, it is impossible to avoid collateral damage. Additionally, the destruction of physical infrastructure, internally displaced persons, and communication and food distribution problems can worsen the humanitarian crises. From a transnational perspective, humanitarian interventions also reshape patterns of displacement, refugee flows, and diasporic belonging, linking liberal norms to lived experiences across borders. Such interventions in **Libya**, Afghanistan, Syrian and so forth are comprehensive case studies of collateral damage and humanitarian disaster.

Limits of Multilateral Enforcement and R2P

The structure of multilateral organizations can be a consensual mechanism for upholding international law and for peacekeeping operations, rather than the unilateral action of a specific power. However, to ensure enforcement of the law in case of violation, UNO maintains no standing army at its disposal. Several times suggestions surfaced for the building up of such forces, but due to the unwillingness of various states to put an army contingent of their country under the command of the UNO, such plans never materialized. American President Bill Clinton, whom many consider the cradle of the idea of liberal internationalism, refused to put the US army under UN general military command (The Bureau of International Organizational Affairs, 1996). As a result, multilateral institutions often function less as autonomous enforcers of international norms and more as arenas shaped by the preferences of powerful states, undermining the liberal internationalist promise of equality and rule-based governance.

CONCLUSION

The liberal internationalism sounds attractive in theory, but its ingredients are broad, ambitious, and idealistic for implementation. The democratic requisite, military interventions for human rights, and universalist vs. cultural relativist debate on the human rights regime provoked resentment worldwide. It evolved from a project of perpetual peace to the American-led liberal hegemony, where democracy, the human rights regime, and the role of international organizations have been perceived as means of American liberal hegemony. When it comes to its true practice, America has deviated from its basic principles, especially with its reluctance to recognize the International Criminal Court (ICC),

and Trump's trade war. Viewed through a liberal transnational lens, the failure of liberal internationalism highlights the difficulty of reconciling universal norms of mobility, rights, and belonging with territorially bounded political authority. The drastic departure from the realist perspective and resistance from other cultures to the Western-guided liberal principles have made it impossible to practice in its true sense in the international system, where cooperation can only be pursued when it remains consistent with state security.

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