Is Liberal Interventionism Dead?

Events in Libya have raised the question of whether liberal interventionism remains a prominent idea in international relations. Proponents point to changing rhetoric and norms championing "human rights" as opposed to simply "states' rights". However, this essay will argue instead that liberal interventionism is a dying trend, due to two main factors. Firstly, the changing norms alluded to earlier are permissive in nature – they allow liberal interventionism by states under certain conditions, but do not require it. Secondly, and as a result, the realization of the extreme costs involved in intervention and changing geopolitical priorities among the liberal coalitions will force interventions to become much more selective, and have a progressively smaller liberal component (in comparison to power politics).

Using liberalism as a justification for intervention in another states' domestic affairs is an idea that has always been at odds with the developing norm of sovereignty deriving from the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia and definitively established by Article 2 [7] of the UN Charter. Nonetheless, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN in 1948 is often cited as the beginning of the norm of liberal intervention[1]. However, it is critical to note the UN Commission on Human Rights resolved it had no power to take any action in regard to any complaints concerning human rights[2]; it was purely a moral declaration that held no force over state prerogatives[3]. Further, there was never any formal reference to liberal aims in interventions until the post-Cold War period, with the initial exception of India's 1971 intervention in East Pakistan (a justification which was almost unanimously rejected in the international community in favour of the norm of sovereignty). The UN did not even begin to critically examine the issue of human rights within states until the founding of the Human Rights Committee in 1992[4].

Nonetheless, in the immediate post-Cold War period, a number of interventions were conducted on justifications that were increasingly liberal in nature with the international community's approval, including Iraqin 1991, Somaliaand Bosnia. What is of particular importance in predicting the future of liberal interventionism in our time is looking at how the decision to intervene was established in the international community, and whether a norm for liberal intervention had been established in doing so. The key unifying factor in all of these interventions is the reference to Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which allows the UN Security Council (UNSC) wide discretion in declaring the existence of a "threat to the peace"[5], allowing the use of force to remove that threat. Importantly, in each of those cases, there was always a significant bloc of countries that opposed action but were persuaded to vote in favour of intervention due to unique circumstances; they qualified their decision by maintaining it did not constitute a new norm violating that of sovereignty.

In the case of Iraq, though rhetoric was used to the effect that a failure to protect the Kurds would constitute a humanitarian disaster, the key issue according to China, Indiaand other countries was the transnational nature[6] of the Kurds and how a refugee problem in northern Iraq would in turn affect Turkey and Iran[7]. The "threat to the peace" in this case was sovereign concern of neighbouring countries – liberal concern for the Kurds was out of the question for a significant bloc, as it breached the principle of sovereignty. This primacy of states' rights over human rights continued in the case Somalia. Though liberal rhetoric was used, the key issue persuading China and India not to veto was the "lack of government" in Somalia at the time[8], echoing the assessment of the Secretary General[9]. Since neither the norm of sovereignty[10] nor the immediate interests of other states were under threat, most countries were able to acquiesce to Somalian intervention, though not on liberal grounds. Intervention in Bosnia in order to establish 'safe havens' was grounded in similar terms to Iraq, with the same bloc of non-Western countries abstaining on the basis that intervention was a unique case and re-asserted the primacy of sovereign norms[11]. It is

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telling that around six years later, the UN rejected the use of force to intervene to stop the humanitarian disaster in Kosovo; chiefly due to the objections of Russia (which argued intervention would have destabilized the region instead), and China (which plainly did not interpret the humanitarian situation in Kosovo as a "threat to the peace")[12], as well as other countries in the wake of the NATO intervention[13].

These examples illustrate the permissive nature of developing norm of liberal interventions. Interventions are legitimate insofar as they do not threaten the existing norm of sovereignty, and so long as there are states to champion these liberal interventions[14]. The obligation for maintaining human rights remains the initiative of states themselves[15], not the international community – because deep disagreement remains about the place of human rights in the international system. Although proponents point to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as proving that states have now forged a firm consensus on the exact conditions when human rights trump sovereignty, a closer look reveals that the liberal enterprise has actually been slightly set back since the late 1990s. References within R2P are made that states have a sovereign responsibility to protect their citizens from mass murder and ethnic cleansings, and that the UN is expected to assist states in exercising their sovereign responsibilities, up to and including the use of force. However, emphasis is made that only the UN Security Council (UNSC) is allowed to sanction this use of force, a pointed reference to the intervention in Iraq and Kosovo, which did not receive UN approval[16]. The framers of R2P were keen to balance out this limitation out with a provision constraining the use of veto in UNSC decisions regarding intervention unless vital national interests were at stake. However, this provision was watered down and eventually removed altogether in order to garner support of China, Russia and India[17] in passing R2P. The end result is a norm that pays lip service to the ideal of intervention but relies on states having to uphold R2P as well as having the universal support of the UNSC. This makes possible a situation where intervention into Kosovo, for example, is not sanctioned by the UN, despite support from the majority of the international community, due to Chinese and Russian vetoes. This was demonstrated in R2P first's test case in the Darfur conflict. China in 2004-05 for example sought to block UN intervention using R2P language, arguing the Sudanese government was still trying to keep to its sovereign responsibilities[18]. Thus, in the absence of a clear norm developing in the international community, liberal intervention as an idea remains at the mercy of the will of liberal states themselves[19].

It is thus prudent to closely examine the reasons why liberal states champion intervention, sometimes in defiance of international norms, and whether this trend will continue. The cases of Kosovo, Afghanistanand Iraqare of most interest, as all three were conducted without explicit UN sanction. What was crucial for the success of intervention in these cases was moral legitimacy and political effectiveness[20]. This was granted by the structure of the liberal coalition – made up of a liberal superpower providing political effectiveness (with the means and will to unilaterally project power abroad) accompanied by the multilateral support of weaker states providing moral legitimacy (allaying concerns that the superpowers was intervening for geopolitical reasons) in support of intervention outside the UN's ambit.

Rwandaclearly illustrates the need for both. Though a significant minority in the UNSC led by New Zealandwas willing to provide multilateral support for intervention, they were unable to contribute troops to any peacekeeping force[21] and instead implied that the US had a duty to provide the means, which it firmly refused. The resolve of the Organisation of African Unity to contribute troops in a limited intervention fell apart due to logistical difficulties and a lack of financial support on the part of the Western powers[22]. Though the troop contributing capabilities of a superpower are crucial, what is also needed is a responsive and unified command, which only a single state can adequately provide, especially given the tendency for humanitarian catastrophes to spiral out of control. Romeo Dallaire, the UN force commander, estimated that a force of 5000 troops would have been able to halt the genocide in its early stages, a conclusion supported by the Carnegie Commission – with the caveat that such a force would have to be thoroughly financially and logistically supported with clear leadership, which the Commission judged only the US could provide on short notice[23]. However, the UN-sanctioned decision of France (a regional superpower at the time) to unilaterally intervene was regarded with suspicion given its ties to Rwandan genocidaires, revealing that acting without multilateral support in an intervention tends to undermine the liberal enterprise by throwing a spotlight on ulterior, non-liberal motives.

Proponents would claim that despite the absence of clear norms, a liberal coalition will persist, primarily due to the force of international and domestic pressure to intervene. A closer reading reveals that the force of public support is

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merely a permissive cause for action. Beyond USinaction in the face of international condemnation during Rwandan Genocide, the USalso refused to strike Iraqi ground forces threatening Marsh Arabs in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, despite similar interventions having been made in support of the Kurds. Some attributed this to an unwillingness to alienate regional Sunni allies by protecting the primarily Shia Marsh Arabs[24]. Conversely, major US intervention in Somalia commenced well before any sustained media pressure was brought to bear on the US leadership[25]. Some have attributed this to George Bush Sr. desire to head-off foreign policy concerns in an upcoming election. In the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, as multilateral support dwindled at the onset and in the aftermath of the wars, both countries tried to marshal public opinion through media manipulation and stretching intelligence reports, particularly through the Coalition Information Centre[26], in order to burnish the liberal credentials of the interventions. However, the decision to intervene in Iraq had already been made in advance of public opposition[27]; public support was a useful, but not critical factor.

Instead, politicians' inclinations and the geopolitical situation was the key enabling factor for intervention. The UK's Strategic Defense Review in 2001 admitted that it had military capability far in excess of what it needed for basic territorial defense, and recommended its use in achieving foreign policy aims[28], a situation mirrored in the US. Additionally, a UK poll conducted in the lead-up to the Kosovo intervention suggested that the public was more motivated by domestic concerns and national security, rather than humanitarian issues[29]. However, due to a lack of direct strategic threats faced by the liberal states, with China, Russia, India and Brazil focused on domestic development or regional concerns, politicians were given space and freedom to pursue a liberal foreign policy. A modicum of public support was achieved by tying the "liberal mission" abroad with the issue of "national security" at home. Politicians including Tony Blair were able to persuade the public that humanitarian violations in Kosovo threatened the long-term security of Europe as a result of growing interdependence[30]. With the permissive condition of public apathy combined with foreign inaction, the liberal coalition succeeded in stretching the definition of a "threat to the peace" far beyond the bounds of existing norms.

Ten years on from the quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan, a new awareness is dawning that most liberal interventions are doomed to failure due to long-term commitments beyond what states are able to bear, particularly when total "societal reconstruction" on the order of post-war Japan and Germany is called for[31]. Politicians and academics are now painfully aware of the great sensitivity of liberal publics to casualties and spiraling costs in such an uncertain mission, destroying the permissive public apathy they had previously maintained before[32]. Even the proposed solution of letting the UN handle reconstruction efforts is highly unreliable. Despite a few successes, including UNTAC in Cambodia, reconstruction is highly vulnerable to spoilers[33] such as the case of Russia in Kosovo. Furthermore, UN forces are still reliant on state contributions, as was disastrously demonstrated in Somalia following the hasty withdrawal of US troops from UNOSOM II[34]. On a practical level, the limitations of air power in conducting liberal interventions are becoming keenly felt[35], particularly when the cause of humanitarian abuse draws from ethnic, religious or cultural grievances rather than of a policies of single tyrant[36]. Examples of this include staunch Christian and Alawi support for the Assad regime, and Serbian support for Milosevic's genocidal policies. States, not the international community, remain the final guarantors of the success of liberal intervention. Taken together though, all of these concerns have greatly weakened the resolve of liberal states and publics to bear the costs.

However, what truly puts the ideal of liberal interventionism at risk is the transformed international context. The backlash from the non-liberal bloc (Russia, Brazil, Indiaand China) in the watering down of R2P was just the first step[37]. More importantly, the growing economic and strategic ascendancy of these countries signals a deadlock between liberal interventionism championed by the coalition and strategic interests of these growing powers in certain countries[38], particularly resource-rich ones (e.g. Sudan). Also, in a wider sense, the ideal of liberal intervention as a concept risks becoming discredited due to a competition of norms, akin to the Soviet Union's promotion values of anti-colonialism and a non-liberal conception of human rights[39] in defiance of liberalism. A similar situation shows signs of emerging, with China and Russia espousing their own conception of "collective" human rights[40] guaranteed by the sovereign state itself (not the international community) and decrying neo-imperialism. This will in turn weaken the level of multilateral support, and thus moral legitimacy for liberal intervention[41], further diminishing the will of regional powers to intervene liberally. Conversely, faced with diminished military strength and growing direct strategic threats, liberal states and publics[42] themselves will re-

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orient their priorities away from liberal interventions and towards geopolitical concerns. Liberal interventions will become progressively less liberal in nature, akin to theUS intervention inNicaragua towards the end of the Cold War, with liberalism merely providing a fig leaf.

Nonetheless, there is a caveat for this prediction. It assumes that the domestic regimes in the non-liberal bloc proposing norms contrary to intervention will be relatively stable for the next few decades, allowing them to completely erode and roll-back any residual norms of liberal interventionism including R2P. This is a contested judgment beyond the scope of this essay, relying on predictions about whether a liberal mode of governance will be adopted by this key bloc, and even allowing for that, whether these countries apply those same principles abroad (IndiaandBrazilhave been reluctant). However, neither the precedent of Russia, which shows signs of lapsing back into authoritarianism after being exposed to liberal democratic ideals for more than 20 years, nor the growing popularity of the Chinese and Singaporean model in combining political repression and capitalism bode well for liberalism, and by extension liberal interventionism.

Seen in this light, the Libyan intervention represents a chance confluence of favourable circumstances in a passing trend. Including: an isolated state with few international allies and many enemies; a dictator with a tiny power base within his own country; potential geopolitical benefits to intervention (including preferential access to resources in the post-war settlement); a situation in which there was no clear sovereign (due to the competition between the increasingly legitimate TNC competing with Gaddafi's loyalists); and the key role played by a regional superpower, France, in brokering an coalition which was stretched to its military and logistical limit. Liberal interventionism may not be dead, but it is dying.

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[1] Pg. 5, (Dunne & Wheeler, 1999)

[2] Pg. 73, (Dunne & Wheeler, 1999)

[3] Pg. 55, (Chandler, 2002)

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[4] Pg. 56, (Chandler, 2002)

[5] Pg. 49, (Chandler, 2002)

[6] Pg. 144, (Wheeler, 2000)

[7] Pg. 146, (Wheeler, 2000)

[8] Pg. 186, (Wheeler, 2000)

[9] Pg. 183, (Wheeler, 2000)

[10] Pg. 187, (Wheeler, 2000)

[11] Pg. 253, (Wheeler, 2000)

[12] Pg. 261, (Wheeler, 2000)

[13] Pg. 264, (Wheeler, 2000)

[14] Pg. 89, (Bull, The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics, 1977)

[15] Pg. 85, (Dunne & Wheeler, 1999)

[16] Bellamy, 2006

[17] Pg. 229, (Fischer, 2011)

[18] Bellamy, 2006

[19] Pg. 29, (Wheeler, 2000)

[20] Pg. 78, (Walzer, 2006)

[21] Pg. 227, (Wheeler, 2000)

[22] Pg. 229, (Wheeler, 2000)

[23] Pg. 223, (Wheeler, 2000)

[24] Pg. 163, (Wheeler, 2000)

[25] Pg. 179, (Wheeler, 2000)

[26] Pg. 134, (Kampfner, 2003)

[27] Pg. 225, (Kampfner, 2003)

[28] Pg. 64, (Chandler, 2002)

[29] Pg. 61, (Chandler, 2002)

[30] Pg. 227, (Fischer, 2011)

[31] Pg. 72, (Walzer, 2006)

[32] Pg. 32, (Wheeler, 2000), Pg. 73, (Walzer, 2006)

[33] Pg. 265, (Wheeler, 2000)

[34] Pg. 207, (Wheeler, 2000)

[35] Pg. 255, (Wheeler, 2000)

[36] Pg. 71, (Walzer, 2006)

[37] Bellamy, 2006

[38] Pg. 17, (Bull, Intervention in World Politics, 1984)

[39] Pg. 62, (Chandler, 2002)

[40] Pg. 13, (Dunne & Wheeler, 1999)

[41] Pg. 293, (Wheeler, 2000)

[42] Pg. 288, (Wheeler, 2000)

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