Liberal Peace and Its Crisis: The Revival of Authoritarianism

The "crisis in confidence and credibility" (Cooper 2007: 605) of liberal peace has been a subject of much debate in International Relations. It has also led to the question of genuine and viable alternatives to liberal peace. Critics of these alternatives, however, suggest that they represent "espousing variations within" (Paris 2010) or a "problem-solving framework" for liberal peace (Nadarajah/Rampton 2015) rather than genuine alternatives. This essay argues that the only genuine alternative to liberal peace is illiberal peace, which is not viable. The rising illiberal challenge to liberal peace is, however, not included in the academic debate about the extent of the crisis of liberal peace and its viability and efficacy. Rather, the debate is centred around criticism of the core assumptions of liberal peace and whether emancipatory strategies present genuine alternatives or are still situated within a liberal framework and thus based on the same problematic assumptions (Nadarajah/Rampton 2017; Cooper, Turner, and Pugh 2011).

This essay argues that even though the criticism of liberal peace is, in certain cases, valid, the lack of engagement with the rising authoritarian challenge to liberal peace is a blind spot in the academic debate surrounding liberal peace. Lewis, Heathershaw and Megoran (2018) argue that we see the rise of authoritarian practices and illiberal forms of conflict management characterizing state responses to internal conflict in places like Russia, Sri Lanka, China, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Turkey. Several studies in recent years have paid attention to these tendencies in domestic conflict settlements (Smith 2014; Lewis 2010; Russell 2014; Baglione 2008; Soares de Oliveira 2011).

This essay examines authoritarian trends in peacebuilding by using the example of the Syrian crisis. It argues that domestic tendencies towards a "victory peace" are being fostered by illiberal tendencies in the international sphere. Duncombe and Dunne (2018) suggest that the failure of the international community to intervene in the complex humanitarian emergency in Syria signifies the fragility of the liberal world order. Since the annexation of the Crimea, Russia has openly turned its back against the western liberal norms of international politics. In China, statism, paired with corruption, a lack of democracy and human rights abuses, enables its economic model to outdo the West and the rest. Smaller illiberal powers like Iran keep destabilizing their regions. Furthermore, illiberal populist forces are rising in the heart of the West. If the United States, a key international actor, is not expressing firm commitment to liberal values either in practice, or in rhetoric, anymore, the leadership of the liberal international order is fundamentally challenged. Thus, we might not only be witnessing a rise in illiberal modes of domestic conflict management, but also in illiberal internationalism. This is not how history was supposed to end (Fukuyama 1989). The Syrian crisis could be the final signpost that the crisis of liberal peacekeeping might after all have shifted from one of "perceived effectiveness" towards one of "empirical extensiveness and influence" (Cooper 2007).

With this autocratic revival, tackling the great problems of the 21st century will require more, not less, liberal internationalism. This leads to the conclusion that we might be well-advised in 'saving' liberal peace by engaging with its problem-solving frameworks to prevent genuine illiberal alternatives from becoming dominant. This is challenging, especially in the light of rising authoritarianism in the West itself, as the separation between 'liberal' and 'non-liberal' worlds inherent in liberal peacebuilding becomes more blurred (Nadarajah/Rampton 2017). As the debate on possible alternatives to liberal peace is centred about the question of solving its many problems and failures, and making peace sustainable, fair and holistic, the only genuine alternative to liberal peace, namely illiberal peace, is mainly left out of the discussion. This essay tries to bring it back in and argues that a commitment to liberal peace,

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how imperfect it may be, might be the only way to prevent illiberal peace from becoming more dominant.

This essay will first discuss the academic debate on liberal peace and its crisis. Then it will analyse proposed 'alternatives'. Following the analysis, it will argue that although the literature describes the crisis as one of confidence rather than that of empirical evidence, we might be observing the emergence of a crisis of liberal peace in the form of authoritarian peace. This claim is further explored through the example of the Syrian crisis.

The Trajectory of Liberal Peace

With the end of the Cold War, the United States used the window of opportunity that the breakdown of the Soviet Union presented to adopt a policy of liberal hegemony. Liberal internationalism, however, is not a project that started in 1989; the historical trajectory of liberal peace can be traced back all the way to Kant, Locke or Mill who laid the philosophical foundation of liberalism. Throughout the colonial age, the liberal idea was represented in the 'mission civilatrice' (Paris 2002). Following the Great Depression in the 1930s, it morphed into New Deal liberalism to restore the prosperity of the United States to then rebuild the liberal order after World War II. It was challenged again by the rise of nuclear power and the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. In short, the history of liberal internationalism is one of struggle and counter-struggle. After 1989, however, liberalism had the chance to flourish, as the international order shifted from a bipolar to a unipolar world order under American hegemony.

Liberal peace, though a broad umbrella, can be understood as "the dominant form of peacemaking and peacebuilding favored by leading states, international organizations and international financial institutions" (MacGinty 2010: 391). The rationale behind this form of engagement is based on the 'democratic' or 'liberal peace thesis', which suggests that liberal states do not go to war against each other. Exporting liberal forms of state-building is therefore seen as peace-promoting activity (MacGinty 2010: 394). The conviction that liberalism is intrinsically peace-promoting has led to the increase in internationally sponsored peace interventions in the decades since the end of the Cold War, for example, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Afghanistan or Sierra Leone. As western developmental, humanitarian and peacebuilding engagement in the global South has increased, liberal peace has become the dominant peacebuilding paradigm.

Though there is no agreed upon definition of liberalism, it is possible to identify central liberal values which have served to justify peace interventions throughout the last two decades such as "the primacy of the individual, the belief in the reformability of individuals and institutions, pluralism and toleration, the rule of law, and the protection of property" (MacGinty 2010: 393). In the contemporary world, liberalism can be summarized as "a formal and informal commitment to principles and practices of individual rights and responsibility in the context of equality of opportunity, the rule of law, freedom of expression and association, a mainly market economy and governments chosen in multi-party free elections" (Herring 2008: 48). The belief in the superiority of liberal values, combined with the democratic peace thesis, has encouraged governments and international organizations to display confidence in the ability of liberalism to offer salvation against war, poverty, disease and 'terrorism' (MacGinty 2010: 394). Nonetheless, this confidence has been questioned in recent years.

The Crisis of Liberal Peace

Proponents of liberal peace interventions, though not a homogenous bloc, argue that the core elements of liberal peace, security and stabilization, reinforcing states, democratic governance, and marketization, act to emancipate people (MacGinty 2010: 395). Critics, however, argue that liberal peace is doing little for the emancipation of the general public. Rather, liberal rhetoric seen as justifying the western-led peacebuilding project which is, in reality, an articulation of a new form of imperialism to reinforce Western hegemony through the promotion of neoliberal capitalist development (Chandler 2010; Cooper et al. 2011; Duffield 2011; Dillon 2000; Barkawi 1999; Pugh 2005).

According to critics, the intensification of liberal interventionism after the end of the Cold War has led to the creation of a problematic 'power/knowledge nexus', "constituted by a network of aid donor and recipient states, UN agencies, international financial institutions, NGOs, and myriad academic and policy research centres, that aligns diverse interests, calculations, and practices with an ethical, if not moral, problem-solving mission to end the various

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conflagrations in the borderlands and interstices of a now explicitly globalising liberal order" (Nadarajah/Rampton 2015: 52). This power/knowledge nexus is thought to be problematic as it reflects the practical and ideological interests of the global north. The central irony within liberal peace, which is pointed out by its critics, is that it often engages in illiberal means to promote liberal values. It is further criticized for its alleged ethnocentrism – the promotion of western values as universal liberal goals. Under critique is also the belief in the liberating abilities of the free market (Cooper et al. 2011). MacGinty (2010: 394) argues that liberal peace has become "neoliberal peace and engages in 'aggressive social engineering', whereby the private sector is privileged over notions of the common good, often with profound human consequences".

Since the Global War on Terror and interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere, some argue that a crisis of liberal peace has emerged. These interventions have exposed the "violent, coercive, and militarised character of a cosmetically pacific liberal order", and several problems, including "exacerbated conflict dynamics, developmental failure, and localized and transnational resistances" have become apparent (Nadarajah/Rampton 2015: 52). Cooper (2007), however, emphasizes that any crisis of liberal peace is one of "confidence and perceived effectiveness rather than one of empirical extensiveness" (Cooper 2007: 605).

While there is a crisis concerning what liberal peace can and cannot achieve, the principal focus remains on liberal peace as an instrument of hegemony. In contrast, this essay argues that an empirical crisis of liberal peace is emerging, which has been largely ignored in the academic debate surrounding liberal peace.

Hybrid Peace – a "Problem Solving Tool"?

The intensified critique of liberal peace has led to the emergence of varied 'alternatives' for peace promotion including hybrid, everyday, post-liberal, social democratic, republican and communitarian peace (e.g. Richmond 2011; MacGinty 2010; Mitchell 2010; Roberts 2011; Barnett 2006). The most popular of these alternatives is the 'hybrid peace' concept. It identifies the opportunity for a post-liberal, truly emancipatory form of peacebuilding in the 'hybridity' between liberal international and local everyday agency. This view contends that the statist, territorial logic of liberal peacebuilding can be overcome by interconnected hybrid formations of peacebuilding. Scholars researching hybridity acknowledge that peace is not a universal concept. Rather, they are interested in the space that emerges at sites of peacebuilding interventions when the goals, norms and practices of international actors collide with local, everyday activities, needs, interests and experiences. Within this space, an interface with a unique range of possible practices, responses and agencies forms. Studying this interface opens up political space between the 'local' and the 'international' and allows for attention to be paid to the 'hybridity' between them (Richmond 2012: 1). In general, literature on hybrid peace tries to emphasize the importance of local agency in shaping peacebuilding outcomes. The problems inherent in liberal peace, as described above, are sought to be overcome by the shift of focus towards hybridity.

In many ways, however, this approach is more a "problem solving tool" for liberal peace than a genuine alternative. It is seen as an "encompassment and folding into global liberal order of cultural, political, and social orders perceived as radically different and recalcitrant to its expansion" (Nadarajah/Rampton 2015: 58). First, it is argued that hybrid peace shares key assumptions, values and taxonomies with liberal peace through similar logics of inclusion and exclusion. Second, the approach is said to depoliticize and romanticize the everyday and local spaces by binarily constructing them in opposition to the international/global (Nadarajah/Rampton 2015). Paris (2010) argues that much of the criticism of liberal peace is actually representing variation within rather than genuine alternatives, as they are, themselves, based on liberal principles. He argues that there is no realistic alternative to "some form" of liberal peacebuilding strategy (2010: 340). He concludes that "the challenge today is not to replace or move "beyond" liberal peacebuilding but to reform existing approaches within a broadly liberal framework" (2010: 362). Cooper, Turner and Pugh criticize this argumentation stating all peacebuilding strategies have common core prescriptions of "neoliberal policies of open markets, privatisation and fiscal restraint, and governance policies focused on enhancing instruments of state coercion and 'capacity building'" (2011; 2001). They argue that it would a more constructive approach is "to acknowledge and investigate the variety of political economies in post-conflict societies rather than measuring them against a liberal norm" (2011; 1995).

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Though a legitimate critique, it does not provide an answer to the question of whether there is a genuine and valid alternative to liberal peace. In suggesting to open peacebuilding strategies to variable forms of political economy, thus transcending the neoliberal paradigm, they, however, fail to address whether or not such strategies will still fall under the 'broad canvas' of liberal peace. Therefore, Paris' core argument that there is no genuine and valid alternative to liberal peace is not challenged by Cooper, Turner and Pugh. Also taking into account the critique of hybrid peace as a "problem-solving tool" rather than alternative to liberal peace (Nadarajah/Rampton 2015), it appears Paris is correct. The question of what a genuine and valid alternative is is dependent on how we define liberal peace as such.

The debate on possible alternatives to liberal peace is, to a certain extent, obscured by an unclear understanding of what liberal peace means. While critics often emphasize the neoliberal aspects of liberal peace, proponents focus on the broader meaning of liberalism. Paris, for example, highlights "individual freedom, representative government and constitutional limits on arbitrary power" (Paris 2010: 360) as the core principles of liberalism. While critics may view strategies diverging from the dominant neoliberal, top-down approach as 'alternatives', for Paris, the only genuine alternatives to liberal peace are inherently authoritarian. He identifies three possible alternatives – international agencies could either install permanent trusteeships; identify local leaders who rule as undemocratic strongmen; or rely on traditional or indigenous practices of peacebuilding. The first option would come close to a colonial-type control, the second lacks basic domestic legitimization and the third reinforces existing power holders and is not free from external influence either (Paris 2010: 357-359).

The study of authoritarian tendencies in peacebuilding and conflict resolution remains underdeveloped. Scholars tend to focus on negotiated settlements as the principal method of conflict resolution rather than military victories (Toft, 2010). However, some have argued that we might be witnessing a return to military victories which had been the norm for resolving conflicts before the 'liberal moment' (Kovacs and Svensson 2013).

The Syrian crisis exemplifies this trend. Instead of declaring liberal interventionism dead, because, allegedly, it was never more than "a combination of post-imperial nostalgia with crackpot geopolitics" (Gray 2007), we might be better advised in reforming liberal peace. Otherwise, in the absence of genuine alternatives, we risk leaving a vacuum that can be filled by illiberal forces, as it happened in Syria.

The Syrian Crisis – Towards Authoritarian Peace

In several recent conflicts like those in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, Chechnya or Sri Lanka, we can observe a growing trend in military victories, while liberal keystones of conflict resolution like an inclusive peace process, power sharing, third party mediation and security guarantees seem to lose importance. This form of 'victory peace' has not been given adequate scholarly attention. The debate still revolves around a post-liberal peace, problems inherent in liberal peace and emancipatory, hybrid forms of peace.

Gray (2007) argues that, in a "global crusade for human rights", pre-emptive war would be used to create a new world order, which would lead to the rise of authoritarian regimes. Pronouncing liberal internationalism dead, however, seems premature, especially in the absence of valid alternatives. The example of Syria shows that the rise of genuine alternatives to liberal peace might be worse than what we had before. The crisis in Syria, starting in 2011, is characterized by a civil war entrenched in numerous realist interests and responses that undermine its resolution. What is emerging in Syria today is not any form of liberal peace induced by international agents or a negotiated peace deal. Rather, it is best described as an 'authoritarian peace' (Lewis 2017). Authoritarian tendencies are challenging liberal peace, not only in the domestic sphere, but also in the international. The return of Great Power Politics (Mearsheimer 2001) and illiberal forces in the Global North are furthering an "authoritarian peace" (Lewis 2017).

Lewis, Heathershaw and Megoran argue that what they term as authoritarian conflict management (ACM) constitutes "a set of coherent policies and norms, rather than merely an aberration from liberal norms of conflict resolution" (2018: 492). It entails "prevention, de-escalation or termination of organised armed rebellion or other mass social violence such as inter-communal riots through methods that eschew genuine negotiations among parties to the

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conflict, reject international mediation and constraints on the use of force, disregard calls to address underlying structural causes of conflict, and instead rely on instruments of state coercion and hierarchical structures of power" (2018: 491). They argue that policies within this framework deny grievances causing rebellion, instead locating the causes of conflict in greed of political opponents and the opportunities arising from state weakness. Therefore, these policies focus on reducing opportunities and resources for rebel groups. This form of authoritarian conflict management can be observed in the way Assad's government clung to power and dealt with rebel forces from the start of the uprisings in 2011 until today. What began in 2011 with the Arab uprisings and people all over the Middle East protesting for democratization, freedom of speech, justice and freedom ended in Syria with a bloody civil war and a military victory for the regime.

The period of 2014 until 2015 can be mainly considered as a political and military stalemate in the conflict. While neither of the armed actors was strong enough to seize territorial control over a longer period of time, they were strong enough to continue the fighting. The conflict's war economy continued to grow as the armed groups tried to secure material resources. The distinction between regime and rebel forces became more and more blurred as ISIS and other jihadist groups emerged together with Kurdish groups, the Free Syrian Army and others. The stalemate was fuelled, as international actors supported different armed groups. In 2015, the Russian military intervention introduced new dynamics into the conflict, not bringing it any closer to any form of liberal, emancipatory or local peace but rather towards an authoritarian, illiberal form of peace. Syrian government forces disregarded international norms of combat by deliberately attacking civilians and through the use of chemical weapons. By administering an airstrike against a Syrian airbase in response to the breaking of these norms, the United States tried to send a signal in defence of these norms.

Paradoxically, while Russian intervention has accelerated Syria's humanitarian crisis, it has also paved the way towards a political peace process. In 2016, Iran, Russia and Turkey take over the peace process by implementing the Astana process and alienating the Western states and the UN. Both a ceasefire, arranged by the United States and Russia, and the Ashtanga Agreement reached in May 2017 have led to a weakening in the intensity of fighting between the various armed groups. The fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in Eastern Syria, led by the United States and the Syrian Democratic Forces has, in the meantime, taken up speed. In March 2019 the Syrian Democratic Forces announced the final victory over the last ISIS stronghold after the liberation of Baghouz. In April 2019 the peace talks in the newly renamed Kazakh capital of Nursultan have continued into the 12th round. Due to diverging opinions regarding which steps should be prioritized, a breakthrough could not be achieved, however. While the military battle is coming to an end, the most brutal conflict of recent decades is turning into a fight about who gets to shape what is left after eight years of war. The battlefield is now more and more geopolitical.

Not only the Syrian government's response to the civil war was characterized by "authoritarian conflict management", also, the international responses had little to do with the promotion of liberal values. The increasing intervention of Russia, Iran and Turkey, and the stalling and replacement of the Geneva peace process by the Astana process is an indicator of a shift away from western liberal internationalism towards an authoritarian peace. The international competition for power and security has constrained states which could have intervened more effectively leading to the biggest refugee crisis of the 21st century. Yet, states have put their national security interests above their obligations under the Convention on Refugees and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ignored their responsibilities to guarantee asylum to the survivors of the Syrian civil war. In cooperation with the EU, Turkey, which presents the transit point for most of the refugees from Syria, has agreed to accept the refugees turned away by the EU. The international community has further greatly disregarded its duties under the Rome Statute, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Their efforts to intervene have been blocked by Russia who is also acting to protect its own national interests. The realist core assumption of an anarchic state system, in which nothing is stopping states from ignoring their international obligations to please their national interests, seems to be confirmed by the Syrian civil war and international interventions. These realist interests and responses have been a restrictive force against peace efforts in Syria.

While the United States has been leading an international coalition against ISIS and other extremist groups since 2014, it has ended its military aid to the moderate rebel fractions like the Syrian Democratic Forces. Apart from the

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much-contended missile strikes in 2018, the United States and its Western allies have avoided direct contact with government forces. Its stance on the Assad regime is unclear, while Russia, Iran and Turkey have a much clearer picture of their interests in the Syrian peace process. The outcomes and the further developments are still to be seen, however. From what we know today, though, it is fair to say that Syria is the signpost of the real crisis of liberal peace in the contemporary world.

The Real Crisis of Liberal Peace

Even though we were celebrating the post-1989 'liberal moment' not long ago, liberalism is in crisis again today. While the future seemed to be moving towards the direction of democratic-liberalism, the rock of modernity on which the liberal world order has been built on over 200 years seems to be crumbling now with the rise of non-western authoritarian powers, populism in the West and beyond, and the return of Great power politics. 1989, with the end of the bipolar order, produced the notion of a unipolar world under American hegemony, the triumph of free markets as the world opened up into a single world economy, and the establishment of the liberal world order with its belief in democracy and human rights and the building of new layers of global governance. These developments gave a new impetus for a Europe as a peace project. On a global scale it, at least on the outside, marked the end of organizing international relations by threats and power. 1989 was not so much a power shift, but a shift in the way in which power was organized.

Though liberalism has made inroads in states where it was least expected it to – as shown by the colour revolutions in the Ukraine, the Arab spring, and the Green Revolution in Iran – it is under threat in states where it was thought to be firmly established. A strong populist backlash in Europe and the United States is threatening the democratic liberal order in the west and beyond, and the whole context of the post-1989 liberal order has changed. "The unipolar moment", as Krauthammer (1990/91) called it, is over. In the 1990s the primacy of human rights over state sovereignty had the consequence of the increase in humanitarian interventions. With the Iraq intervention, that idea has died. Responsibility to Protect is a remnant of the previous focus on humanitarian intervention in conflict zones, but it is not followed through with, as has become clear with the Syrian crisis. Russia's contemporary foreign policy, the annexation of Crimea, and its Syria policy demonstrate the desire of greater international and regional influence, confirming its legitimacy as a great power.

In a world where the logic of power is reasserted, the core of liberal peace is challenged. In light of the comeback of victory peace, rising authoritarian modes of peacemaking, and the rise of illiberal power on the regional and international levels mark a crisis of liberalism, which brings with it a crisis of liberal peace. The academic debate, however, seems to focus on the insufficiencies of liberal peace and thereby fails to reflect on illiberal tendencies that are challenging the liberal paradigm as a whole. It does not consider post-liberal peacebuilding and fails to recognize that post-liberal peace might look very different to what it anticipated.

While we have seen a "crisis in confidence and credibility" of liberal peace during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the crisis in Syria, we might now be witnessing a real crisis of liberal internationalism. Syria, now moving towards an 'authoritarian peace' based on perpetual violence and away from the liberal model of peacebuilding, enacted a mode of "authoritarian conflict management" which "seeks to prevent, de-escalate or terminate violent conflict within a state through the hegemonic control of public discourse, space and economic resources rather than by the liberal model of compromise, negotiation and power-sharing" (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018: 499).

Furthermore, the involvement of Russia, Turkey and Iran in the peace process signal a shift away from the western liberal mode of international peacemaking. The Astana process is an example of the return to realist internationalism signified by the return of statism, territoriality and sovereignty, non-interference and non-intervention, proxy war, negative peace and militarism, with inherent illiberal and authoritarian tendencies. With the rise of illiberal populist forces in the West itself, the liberal moment of the post-1989 world order seems to be over.

This apparent crisis of liberal peace is, however, overshadowed by the perceived 'crisis of confidence' (Cooper 2007). The debate on possible alternatives to liberal peace is centred on solving its problems and failures and making peace more sustainable and emancipatory. The critical discourse around liberal peace thus obscures state-

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led authoritarian modes of conflict management and international interventionism, guided by national self-interest, by illiberal great powers. While the critical discourse heavily criticizes Western peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan or the Balkans, it does not adequately capture the prevailing authoritarian tendencies in contemporary conflict management and peacebuilding.

The history of liberal internationalism is, however, one of struggle and counter-struggle. The current crisis, thus, does not have to signal its end. Considering that the only genuine alternative to liberal peace is illiberal peace, we might be better off by saving liberal peace itself. Critical scholarship should take note of authoritarian trends and the changed international environment and explore alternative routes to liberal peace within the liberal paradigm, an option that should be preferred over allowing illiberal forces dictate a new paradigm of illiberal peace. Making liberal peace more emancipatory and sustainable, for example, by paying attention to hybridity, might be our only chance to fight against authoritarian tendencies in conflict management and peacebuilding.

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