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The Crisis of Liberal Interventionism and the Return of War

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Abstract

Liberal interventionism is in crisis, being weakened both from within and without. From Kabul to Kyiv and beyond, the contributions to our thematic issue reveal that the crisis of liberal interventionism has unraveled differently than previously understood. In countries of the Global North, it stretched out in different ways, depending on the political culture, party/coalition in power, or institutional path dependencies. In countries of the Global South, mandate-specific benchmarks, in addition to the neglect of local agencies by both interveners and domestic elites, produced unintended consequences and a backlash effect. The articles in this thematic issue contribute to a better understanding of the crisis of liberal interventionism by unpacking the global fragmentation of collective security instruments, patterns and conditions of foreign policy change in liberal democracies, intervention failure in Afghanistan, alternative forms of interventionism like the one of the Wagner Group, international orientation change through the *Zeitenwende*, or counter-terrorism and deterrence postures. To conclude, the thematic issue critically investigates whether singing the swansong of liberal interventionism is premature.

Keywords

Afghanistan; crisis; liberal interventionism; Ukraine; war

1. The Crisis of Liberal Interventionism

Liberal interventionism, defined as the use of armed force to advance liberal norms and values (see Geis & Müller, 2013), is in crisis. The chaotic withdrawal of NATO and partner forces from Kabul in August 2021 symbolizes the failure of the Western state, nation, and democracy-building project in Afghanistan, occurring after enormous investments of funds and troops over twenty years. Less than a year later, the

Russian invasion of Ukraine marks the return of inter-state war and nuclear threats to Europe. To be sure, we have witnessed inter-state wars in other parts of the world over the past decades, such as between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The war in Ukraine, however, has developed into a systemic fault line in global politics, generating or aggravating principled controversies and rifts about order(s) and hegemony, international law and its (im)partiality, South-North relations, and the prospects for and conditions of global cooperation.

Both events and their repercussions challenge liberal interventionism as well as the liberal international order (LIO) more broadly. The LIO consists of “economic openness, multilateral institutions, security cooperation and democratic solidarity,” and it is not only premised on the idea that power politics can be tamed but also expects states to move “in a progressive direction, defined in terms of liberal democracy” (Ikenberry, 2018, pp. 7, 11). The combination of security cooperation and democratic solidarity led to the formation of alliances, such as NATO, and of security communities, as in the North Atlantic area after World War II. Moreover, liberal democracies “have repeatedly tried to build more inclusive global systems of security cooperation—what is called collective security” (Ikenberry, 2020, p. 40). Whereas the East–West conflict had by and large paralyzed the United Nations Security Council, the end of the Cold War originally led to an “unprecedented level of liberal intrusiveness” (Börzel & Zürn, 2021, p. 294). The United Nations endorsed human security and the protection of civilians as guiding principles for a new generation of peacekeeping and enforcement missions. Building on liberalism’s inherent tendency to advance liberal norms and values abroad, and its perceived entitlement to use force against non-liberal states (Doyle, 1983), liberal interventionism became a pillar of the LIO in the 1990s. Whereas some mark the end of liberalism’s heyday already at the end of the 1990s (Jahn, 2013, p. 4), Kabul, Kyiv, and, more recently, both the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas against Israel and the Israeli response to them put the LIO to a severe test and point to the crisis of liberal interventionism.

This thematic issue has two objectives: First, we aim at contextualizing the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the challenge of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine to LIO in longer-term developments in liberal interventionism. Second, we are interested in the policy responses of the LIO’s main stakeholders: the liberal democracies of the Global North.

The contributions to this thematic issue show that liberal interventionism has been challenged both from within and from the outside since, at least, the beginning of the global *war on terror* in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The security and defense policies of liberal democracies have changed in response to the re-emergence of state-based threats. Such changes, however, have often been incremental and subject to the peculiarities of a country’s domestic politics.

2. Contributions to This Thematic Issue

Peter (2024) discusses the emergence of and the challenges to a cornerstone of the LIO and liberal interventionism in particular: the human protection norm. After the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia, the human protection norm gained momentum in the course of the 1990s. Whereas the Responsibility to Protect reached a dead end after the Libyan intervention in 2011, the protection of civilians became a standard element in UN peace operations mandates. Over the last decade, UN operations have increasingly become coopted into the Global North’s counter-terrorism policies, with an emphasis on stabilization and supporting governments in their fight against non-state armed groups. Peter shows that the crisis of liberal interventionism within collective instruments is best understood as the result of these longer-term

developments: the rising (and often difficult to meet) expectations to protect civilians and the blending of peacekeeping with stabilization. Although Russia's war against Ukraine has further fueled the crisis of liberal interventionism and the LIO more broadly, they have also been weakened from the inside.

Geis and Schröder (2024) argue that the crisis of liberal interventionism began long before the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The US-led global *war on terror* shifted the emphasis away from liberal peacebuilding to the security of states already in the early 2000s. So-called *robust peacekeeping and stabilization missions* focused on containing and combatting designated enemies of a host government, thereby risking and often losing support among locals. Geis and Schröder show that there has been a similar development in international security assistance where security sector reform with its emphasis on democratic and human rights standards gave way to security force assistance with an emphasis on effective combat and warfighting capacities. Western military support to Ukraine thus appears as a preliminary high point of a development that has gained momentum over many years.

Younus (2024) explores the failure of liberal intervention in Afghanistan by examining the contrasting discourses of *modern* and *tradition*. She raises the question of why liberal intervention did not succeed in the country, arguing that the recurring pattern of intervention and the subsequent resurgence of the Taliban signify a fundamental setback for the liberal project. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis and drawing upon the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Younus dismantles the discourse of the modern to uncover how it encountered resistance and was supplanted by an alternative narrative of tradition, ultimately leading to the collapse of the liberal endeavor in Afghanistan. Younus' article elucidates how specific identities were utilized to legitimize the modern discourse deployed by politicians, like Bush Jr. and the subsequent US presidents, as a rationale for intervention. Simultaneously, it illustrates how the discourse of tradition delegitimized the former. In the Afghan context, the Taliban dismantled the modern discourse by framing it as *oppression* and *occupation*. The primary reason for the triumph of the Taliban's discourse lies in its perceived legitimacy and alignment with the norms of appropriateness, having been articulated in the language of Afghan culture, religion, and history, and resonating with the broader post-colonial discourse. Consequently, the discourse of tradition forged a common bond among the ethnically diverse social groups in Afghanistan and contributed to the consolidation of the Taliban's authority in Afghanistan.

Jacobsen and Larsen's (2024) analysis of the Russian Wagner Group, a private military company (PMC) that often acts in a semi-official capacity for the Kremlin, shows the close connections between the war in Ukraine and the crisis of liberal interventionism. Drawing on the concept of *flows*, they highlight how practices of recruitment, economic activities, and actual troops and military materials move back and forth between Ukraine and several theatres in Africa. Their analysis of economic, military, and political flows and intervention infrastructures draws a broader picture of Wagner's engagement on the African continent that shows the deep implantation of the Russian PMC there. Jacobsen and Larsen argue that Wagner's implantation in Africa is not a mere result of a power vacuum or Russian disinformation. Instead, the mistakes and missteps of the liberal interveners contributed to a growing disenchantment with liberal interventionism and the LIO more broadly.

The contributions by Böller and Wenzelburger (2024), Patrick Mello (2024), and Massie and Munier (2024) examine the responses of liberal democracies to the crisis of liberal interventionism and the return of inter-state war in Europe. The quantitative study by Böller and Wenzelburger (2024) provides a broader

picture of foreign policy change since the end of the Cold War. Analyzing twenty liberal democracies over the period between 1988 and 2021, Böller and Wenzelburger show that foreign policy is similar to domestic policies with many small adjustments and few major changes, as expected by Punctuated Equilibrium Theory. Böller and Wenzelburger point to Sweden, Finland, and Germany as illustrations of potentially major policy shifts in response to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. With a view to Germany, however, they also underscore persisting partisan differences and bureaucratic hurdles.

Mello's (2024) contribution delves deeper into the transformation of German foreign policy since the announcement of the *Zeitenwende*, catalyzed by Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine. This event triggered a major recalibration in Germany's global orientation. Mello applies Hermann's (1990) well-established conceptual framework for assessing alterations in foreign policy, encompassing shifts in an actor's role, changes in their international engagements, and redirection of foreign policy in various domains. Mello's contribution reveals a shifting role conception within Germany's foreign policy landscape. Despite contestation across the party spectrum, opposition in the Bundestag has diminished significantly for what would earlier have been considered highly controversial decisions. The most striking changes observed post-*Zeitenwende* pertain to programmatic and goal-oriented shifts, such as the creation of a substantial defense budget surplus, increases in the regular defense budget, ample arms provisions to support Ukraine, and significant reinforcement of its military commitment to NATO's Eastern flank. Germany's role in the international arena is progressively diverging from its longstanding identity as a *civilian power*, evolving towards a new perception of Germany as the "guarantor of European security," as articulated by Chancellor Scholz (2023, p. 22). This undeniably modifies the traditional civilian power role by introducing the concept of robust security, implicitly involving military power. While this new role has not yet fully materialized, Germany has taken significant steps towards assuming this mantle.

Massie and Munier (2024) examine the defense policies of two allies of the US, namely Canada and Italy. Although both countries have reduced their contributions to military interventions abroad and begun to invest more in homeland defense, differences between the two countries remain. Massie and Munier explain these differences with country-specific experiences, on the one hand, and party politics on the other. In Italy, for example, the 2011 intervention in Libya depressed subsequent support for the use of force abroad. Moreover, the question of whether and to what extent Russia poses a threat was more contested among Italian political parties than among Canadian ones. Notwithstanding the pro-Ukrainian consensus since 2022, party politics played a role in Canadian defense politics as well. The change of government from the Conservatives to the Liberals in 2015 led to an early withdrawal from Afghanistan and an increased contribution to Iraq.

The thematic issue concludes by giving space for a deviating opinion on the supposed crisis of liberal interventionism. By analyzing strategic culture, elite views, and state-society relations since the 2000s, Olsen (2024) argues that despite contradictory "rumors" and events like Kabul or Kyiv, liberal interventionism is alive and kicking. Using a neoclassical-realist framework, Olsen's contribution cuts through Western intervention politics, discourses, and decision-makers' attitudes since 9/11. He posits that despite changing systemic influences (US unipolarity vs. the advent of a multi-order world) and domestic politics polarization (e.g., through radical and nationalist political forces), US and European elites still view liberal interventions as a potential means to further the national interest and related liberal objectives. Despite, at times, different appreciations of conflicts and operational failures in those interventions waged, the US commitment to liberal interventionism is bipartisan and rather steadfast, as it maintains the

US-favorable LIO. Olsen's argument is further strengthened because European states still align with the US out of dependency and share a commitment to upholding liberal values abroad. Furthermore, the strong political, military, and economic support of Western states to Ukraine in countering the Russian war of aggression, since February 2022, is another reason that denotes the potential of liberal interventionism. Weighting radical domestic forces' opposition to interventions, Olsen maintains instead that with the latter war, public support for the liberal-interventionist project has increased, reassuring elite opinion in relation to the maintenance of liberal interventionism.

From Kabul to Kyiv and beyond, this thematic issue contextualizes the geographically multifaceted crisis of liberal interventionism. Its manifestations have unfolded differently in the Global North and the Global South. In the Global North, the crisis dynamics have been shaped largely by the party or coalition in power. The crisis has also catalyzed significant shifts and the emergence of new foreign policy paradigms, as the case of *Zeitenwende* has shown. In the Global South, liberal interventionism has been marred by unintended consequences and contributed to the emergence of alternative models of interventions, as the case of Afghanistan or the Wagner Group in Africa has demonstrated. Although the crisis of liberal interventionism commenced earlier, Kabul, as a symbol of Western withdrawal, and Kyiv, representing the return of war to Europe, expose crucial new dimensions of the crisis of liberal interventionism.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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