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The Russian War Against Ukraine and Its Implications for the Future of Liberal Interventionism

Anna Geis [1] and Ursula Schröder [2]

[1] Institute of International Politics, Helmut Schmidt University, Germany
[2] Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, Germany

Correspondence: Anna Geis (anna.geis@hsu-hh.de)

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Abstract

The Russian war against Ukraine has already had crucial implications for the future of liberal interventionism. Drawing on current debates in IR about the transformation of the global world order, the article outlines how processes of global reordering affect (liberal) interventionism at different scales. The article argues that what has become known as the liberal international order is in retreat, at the expense of liberal peace-oriented international interventions. At the same time, current geopolitical realignments appear to be dividing the world into new spheres of influence, pitting democracies against autocracies at the global level and within regional conflicts. However, when it comes to security interventions and peacekeeping, the emerging realities on the ground, where a growing number of actors with different agendas interact, are more complex than simplistic world-order narratives suggest. Using the cases of international peacekeeping and security assistance as examples, the article shows that in some current international intervention sites, the emerging "multi-order world" is characterised by complicated constellations of parallel external assistance offers and rapid shifts in allegiances that do not necessarily follow clear divisions between "authoritarian" and "liberal" forms of assistance. The article therefore does not confirm expectations of the emergence of a "new Cold War" and a new round of ideological competition between international systems.

Keywords

liberal international order; liberal peacebuilding; multi-order world; peacekeeping; security force assistance; Russia; security sector reform; Ukraine; United Nations; war

1. Introduction

What are the consequences of the Russian war against Ukraine for the future of liberal interventionism? Based on an analysis of recent developments in international peacekeeping and security assistance, this article draws conclusions for plausible future trajectories of liberal-peace-oriented international interventions. Contributing to current debates about the transformation of the global world order, we argue that what is known as the liberal international order (LIO) is in retrenchment. Rather than expecting a renewed competition of systems or a "Cold War 2.0" between liberal and illiberal powers, however, the article gives first indications of the potential messiness and complexity of emerging world orders, both at the global level and in local intervention sites.

In the past years, the "crisis" discourse about the end of the LIO in IR has been widespread (Peoples, 2022). It raises questions about the future of the collective governance of international security and conflict resolution (Baciu et al., 2024). As Duncombe and Dunne (2018, p. 25) argued, it is "a rare moment in IR, in which all mainstream theories concur that the hegemony of the liberal world order is over." For the "liberal peace" project, this crisis has been long in the making. As one cornerstone of international ordering practices, the concept of "liberal peacebuilding" (see Campbell et al., 2011; Paris, 2010) centres on the promotion of democratic institutions, human rights, and market economies in (post-)conflict settings. However, the "global war on terror"—declared by US President George W. Bush following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and joined by many democratic and non-democratic states around the globe—promoted a strongly security-focused agenda that emerged alongside and often in tension with the normative liberal peace agenda. As just one result of this shift, military interventionist practices by the UN and NATO member states have increasingly moved towards so-called "stabilization" operations (Curran & Hunt, 2020; Peter, 2024). Less ostensibly "liberal" and less "peace"-oriented, these practices have sought to strengthen state authority in and after war and violent conflict. In parallel, international security assistance has expanded to support the capacity of allied governments' security sectors, often without the envisaged effects. These developments point to a now decades-long move away from "liberal" interventions with their—at least formally stated—broader focus on fostering democratic institutions, human rights, and the rule of law.

By 2023, these longstanding trends of global (security) governance and conflict resolution are coming into sharp focus. While the Russian war against Ukraine is a pivotal point in the expansion of international military assistance, the highly visible catastrophic failures of longer-standing international interventions with ostensibly liberal aims point to their systemic crisis. Both the disastrous withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan in 2021 and the failure of the 20-year-long international engagement in Afghanistan are cases in point. International interveners' inability to transform Afghanistan into a democratic or even stable state after 20 years of intervention coincided with NATO's reorientation towards territorial defence and fortification of the alliance in the wake of Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2014. In addition to NATO's retreat from large-scale military interventions, the challenge to the LIO posed by Russia and China, as well as the growing relevance of individual nation-states and regional actors from the Global South in global security governance, raise the question of the future of liberal interventionism. Finally, recent political developments in the Sahel region have showcased new challenges to the liberal agenda: In the past three years, military coups in Guinea (2021), Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and most recently Niger (2023) removed elected presidents across the Sahel region, with negative repercussions for international interventions in the region. The withdrawal of the UN MINUSMA mission from Mali until the end of 2023 was one case in point, the reduction in the size of the EU's training mission in Mali and the EU's suspension of all security

cooperation activities with Niger after the military coup another. The Sahel region has long been a complex international intervention site "in which a myriad diverse and largely unsynchronized intervention actors sometimes overlap and cooperate, but just as often operate in parallel" (Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen, 2020, p. 858). The rapid post-coup policy reversal therefore also had consequences for Western security strategies and architectures, for instance, Niger had played a crucial role as an anchor point for US and European counter-terrorism operations (cf. Brosig et al., 2023).

This article explores the consequences of these real-time shifts and transformations—catalysed by the Russian war against Ukraine—for the future of (liberal) interventions. The current geopolitical realignments seem to be dividing the world into new (or sometimes not so new) spheres of influence. They also seem to be pitting democracies and autocracies against each other in a rather crude way at the global level and in regional conflicts. This problematic grand narrative of a "return of authoritarian powers" or "great power competition" between democratic and autocratic political regimes at the global level suggests clear dividing lines between liberal and illiberal regimes in global politics. However, we argue in this article that given the complex economic and technological interdependencies among states in a globalized world, the political realities cannot be reduced to such binaries. Instead, with a particular focus on military interventionist practices, we show that the emerging realities on the ground, where a growing number of Western and non-Western actors (both state and non-state) interact, are much "messier" than simplistic world order narratives suggest.

To make this argument, the contribution ties in with a growing body of literature that links IR global order debates to peace and conflict studies (e.g., de Coning, 2021; Osland & Peter, 2021; Paris, 2023). Drawing conceptually on the notion of an emerging "multi-order world" (Section 2), we seek to highlight two trends in contemporary intervention policy that exemplify the parallel rise of security-focused rather than democracy-focused aid and the decline of liberal interventionism and peacebuilding. First, the replacement of liberal peacebuilding by stabilization missions in UN peace operations (Section 3), and second, a shift from security sector reform (SSR) to security force assistance (Section 4). To conclude (Section 5), we summarize our findings on how the Russian war will speed up the decline of liberal peacebuilding.

2. World Order Transformations

With the benefit of hindsight, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine might one day be regarded as the final act in burying ambitions for a global liberal order. This idea of an order is being challenged both from "within" the "liberal core" of the Global North as much as from "without" (Lake et al., 2021). And while many observers have pointed to upheavals in what we know as the LIO over the past decade, it is less clear where this transformation is currently heading. In effect, we can observe several countervailing trends: On the one hand, we have witnessed a partial revitalization of the "liberal core" around economic, political, and military support for and cooperation with Ukraine. As a result, two core regional institutions of the liberal order, NATO and the EU, are now experiencing (NATO) or debating (EU) the accession of new members. This is not self-evident at all, given that accession of new members to both organizations had stalled for years. On the other hand, the UN system as the manifestation of a global institutionalized order has long experienced multiple crises: of its financing, political support for its institutions, and its effectiveness and impact. A final trend is the increasing distance and departure of many postcolonial states from UN institutions. The long-standing discontent of many states with a system of international institutions

perceived as unequal, non-inclusive, and biased (Duggan et al., 2022) has also become visible in the substantial number of abstentions from the Global South in recent votes in the UN General Assembly to adopt the sanctions regime against Russia. The violations of international law by Western powers in their own military interventions and Western arrogance in shaping the rules of the "rules-based order" have not been forgotten in the Global South (Zhang, 2022). As these developments indicate, we have arrived at a moment in time where formerly hegemonic ideas of how global cooperation patterns work and should work are being challenged by new scripts and stories. Alternatives to the formerly hegemonic storyline of liberal internationalism with its focus on democratization, human rights, market economies, and international institutions promoting corresponding norms and practices have started to emerge.

One of the alternatives that has gained popularity is the narrative of an emerging multipolar order. In this notion, we are entering a world of increasing competition between different poles, where new powers—first and foremost the BRICS states—gain influence, leading to a decline of unipolar (US) dominance in the world. This new world is often depicted as divided into spheres of influence, and sometimes linked to the idea that we are entering a new world of systems competition and potentially a new Cold War, be that between Russia and the West, or, more often, between the US and China. This emerging competition, then, leads to the return of policies of containment (e.g., Daalder, 2022).

However, a different narrative about the shape of the coming order informs our argument in this contribution. This narrative makes the general point that the emerging order will be more ambiguous than the notions of multipolarity and systems competition foresee. A crucial starting point for this narrative is critical assessments of the liberal world order, which point out that this order has never been as liberal or as global as it has portrayed itself. Acharya (2014, p. 37) neatly summarizes its global reach as the " 'first myth' about the U.S.-led liberal hegemonic order" and that "despite the exalted claims about its power, legitimacy, and public goods functions, that order was little more than the US-UK-West Europe-Australasian configuration." Moreover, it was "hardly benign for many countries in the developing world" (Acharya, 2017, p. 271). Based on this critique, Acharya (2017, p. 277) developed the notion of a "multiplex world" that remains interconnected and interdependent, but "is not a singular global order, liberal or otherwise, but a complex of crosscutting, if not competing international orders and globalisms." Later arguments build on this idea to identify at best "fuzzy bifurcations" of an emerging world order that is "much messier" (Higgot & Reich, 2022, p. 627), as any resemblance to the Cold War spheres of influence remained superficial.

Building on a different iteration of this argument of messiness and complexity in emerging world orders, we prioritize the notion of emerging diverse and plural orders as introduced by Flockhart and Korosteleva (2022) to make our case about the future of liberal interventionism. In their understanding, we are in the "final stages of the transformation of the global rules-based order into a new global ordering architecture characterized by diversity and plurality" (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022, p. 466). Important here is the distinction between a global rules-based order and a LIO that are often conflated: both can co-exist "in a co-constitutive relationship within one global ordering architecture—conceptualized…as a multi-order world" (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022, p. 469). Drawing on the English school distinction between solidarism and pluralism, the authors conceive of the LIO as being based on solidarist liberal values such as democracy, rule of law, and political freedom, and the global order as prioritizing state-centric principles such as sovereignty and legal equality that allow for more diversity within the international system (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022, p. 469). The global rules-based order can thus include a number of diverse international orders that

are limited to those who share their values. Flockhart and Korosteleva (2022, pp. 470–472) outline four ideal types of international orders that might emerge and co-exist within the transformation of the world order into a multi-order world: an American-led liberal order, a Chinese-led "Belt-and-Road" order; a Russian-led Eurasian economic order, and an Islamic-led Sharia order. Further international orders might emerge. Those orders are conceived as being connected via a "complex network of 'inter-order' relationships" that will "determine the character of the coming 'multi-order world' " (Flockhart, 2016, p. 5).

In this line of argumentation, the world order emerging today is a far cry from earlier expectations that processes of democratization would consolidate and proliferate around the world. Instead, observable changes within the global rules-based order seem closer to the "multi-order" architecture envisaged here. Adding to this argument of diverse and plural orders, we conceptualize the emerging order not as a system of distinct and competing spheres, but as one of potentially overlapping and layered orders that can exist in parallel. Emerging research on how major shifts in world order—in this case, Russia's war against Ukraine—are reflected in everyday experiences already points to differences between narratives of geopolitics and order at the global level and the "complexities and ambiguities" of everyday experience (Wolfe et al., 2023, p. 4). By giving a voice to scholars who have been personally impacted by the war, this research aims to "make space for nuance and complexity—indeed, for the messiness of actually-lived humanity" and to thus explore the "intimate and everyday geopolitics" of the Russian war (Wolfe et al., 2023, p. 5).

We develop our argument about the future of the "liberal peace" project with this focus on "messiness" and "nuance." In contrast to expectations of the full decline of liberal interventionism, or the emergence of ideological competition between liberal and illiberal practices of intervention in conflict-affected states, we argue that current developments point to a more nuanced picture. (Putatively) "liberal" states can do "illiberal" things in practice (cf. Glasius, 2023), as the US-led "global war on terror" has long demonstrated (Sanders, 2018). And "illiberal" states might engage in practices that can be seen as broadly in line with liberal conceptions of making and sustaining peace. As Peter and Rice (2022) have shown in an instructive literature review on non-Western practices of peace-making and peace-building, Western scholarship lacks adequate complex conceptualizations and understandings of such practices to date, while often ascribing negative ideological motives to these engagements of illiberal actors. In form and substance, the conflict management practices of non-Western powers appear to differ substantially from those of Western actors: in the shift from multilateral to unilateral interventions and from global to regional or local actors; in their top-down approaches to host governments; in their relationship to norms of non-intervention, accountability, and participatory governance; and their prioritisation of development over democracy (Peter & Rice, 2022, pp. 17–25). However, as Peter and Rice (2022) conclude, more research is needed to understand how intervention practices by non-Western actors feed into each other and how exactly they relate to established liberal models of peace. While we also employ problematic binaries such as "Western/non-Western" or "liberal/illiberal" in labelling actors in this article, we seek to illustrate that current realities—especially in a period of global order transition—are messier than the simple dichotomies of systems competition, liberal/illiberal interventions or a new Cold War.

3. From "Liberal Peacebuilding" Towards "Stabilizing" of State Governments

Current reflections on the future direction of UN peace operations try to make sense of several challenges that have emerged from the intervention practices of the last decade and a half. On the one hand, the increasingly assertive behaviour of China and Russia in security politics, especially the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, renders cooperation within the UN Security Council even more difficult than has already manifested in the Libyan and Syrian violent conflicts of the 2010s (Benkler et al., 2023). On the other hand, the "robust," i.e., militarized, peace operations of the UN in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Mali, mandated in the early 2010s, have been met for a long time with heavy criticism for not being conducive to promoting peace, let alone "liberal" peace. They have also been facing increasing resistance from local populations (e.g., Berdal, 2018; Curran & Hunt, 2020; von Billerbeck, 2017). During 2023, the weakening legitimacy of the UN peacekeeping operation within Mali (MINUSMA) and the enhanced frictions between the military-led interim Malian government and UN (as well as EU) actors culminated in the decision to terminate MINUSMA by the end of the year ("Mali: 'MINUSMA is leaving, but the UN is staying,'", 2023). Within the Democratic Republic of the Congo, discontent with the UN troops of MONUSCO grew further and manifested in violent protests in 2022 and 2023. While its mandate was renewed in 2023, the future of this peacekeeping operation is very uncertain (Jänsch, 2023). Depending on the upcoming election in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, MONUSCO might be drawing to a close as well within the next years.

The case of interventions in Mali, especially after the recent series of coups across the Sahel region, highlights not only the fragile legitimacy and weak effectiveness of "robust" UN peacekeeping operations but also the growing influence of Russia in the Sahel region, which has become a key region for EU-European security concerns. The Russian war against Ukraine has directed much public attention to the so-called "Wagner Group," a private military company whose close links to the Russian executive branch had long been denied but became obvious during the war in Ukraine in 2022 and 2023. Increasing conflicts between the founder of the group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and the Russian leadership, well documented in media outlets, as well as the (halted) march of the group on Moscow in June 2023 rendered the significance of these fighters visible. While the future of the "Wagner Group" after Prigozhin's death in a plane crash is uncertain, the Russian employment of private military companies (PMCs) in a growing number of violent conflicts has become widely known through these incidents.

In comparison with the well-established research on Western PMCs (e.g., Avant, 2005; Singer, 2003), the activities of Russian PMCs have been much less studied and the database remains very small (see Jacobsen & Larsen, 2024). Apart from its operations in Syria, in Eastern European, and Central Asian countries, Russia has increased its military presence by way of PMCs in African states during the last decade, such as Libya, Chad, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, Mozambique, Sudan, Nigeria, and Mali (Bukkvoll & Østensen, 2020; Jones et al., 2021). In contrast to many Western-based PMCs, the affiliation with the Russian executive branch is very strong, so the term "private" is misleading.

The Malian case highlights that governments in the Sahel region now have more options to "pick and choose" trainers for their militaries, among others due to the availability of Russian PMCs (see Section 4), but that intervention sites also become more "crowded" and messier through the involvement of more external actors. In April 2022, the EU, engaged with a training mission in Mali, decided to suspend its

training operations when it became known that the Malian interim military government might collaborate with the Wagner Group (van der Lijn et al., 2022, pp. 4–7, 11). While the Wagner Group has been blamed for several severe human rights violations in their operational sites, a UN report of May 2023 highlighted a particularly serious incident in March 2022 in the village of Moura in Mali's Mopti region: The investigations by a human rights fact-finding mission conducted by UN staff detected "strong indications that more than 500 people were killed—the majority in extrajudicial killings—by Malian troops and foreign military personnel believed to be from Wagner" (Burke, 2023). The growing presence of Russian PMCs thus not only adds a further actor to the multi-actor intervention sites in the Sahel region but also increases the risks for human rights violations as well as frictions between Western interveners, the UN, and Russia.

At the global level, the Russian war against Ukraine will exacerbate the current conundrum of the liberal peace project in different ways. As a baseline assessment though, while Western powers have refrained from conducting large "boots-on-the-ground" operations following the failures of the last decade, it is likely that UN peace operations will continue to exist and evolve further (Coleman & Williams, 2021). The UN's engagement will probably shift towards more moderate assignments such as mediation, special political missions, humanitarian missions, and sanctions (de Coning, 2021, p. 215). It is unlikely that new large and expensive peacekeeping operations will be launched (Osland & Peter, 2021). Already challenged by budget cuts in the wake of the Trump administration, UN peacekeeping is likely to face further cuts, as political priorities and attention across Europe and beyond shift to territorial defence and cooperation within the alliance. However, as optimistic observers of the UN's peacekeeping history point out, this institution of collective conflict management has so far demonstrated remarkable resilience and ability to adapt to changing world order constellations throughout the decades of its existence (e.g., Paris, 2023; Peter, 2019). Correspondingly, they anticipate an era of more "pragmatic" peacekeeping, that will rely more on regional organizations, have less ambitious goals, and probably further de-emphasize the "liberal" outlook of its engagement (Benkler et al., 2023; Cassin & Zyla, 2023; Paris, 2023). This phase of retrenchment might lead to deployments of smaller missions with more focused goals that deviate clearly from previous multi-dimensional operations (Oksamytna & Lundgren, 2021).

The UN's turn to "robust peacekeeping" (Hunt, 2017) was part of a global response to the rise of transnational violent non-state actors as contenders of the liberal world order, especially those labelled as Jihadist groups (Sheikh, 2022). Their rise has created new security challenges for state actors and international organizations. It also spurred the development of an elaborated intervention repertoire: Interventionist practices directed at fighting such non-state actors can carry different labels such as counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, countering violent extremism, or stabilization. They are not employed to create a liberal peace but to contain and combat designated adversaries and "enemies" of a host government in a violent conflict or of intervening governments that identify such groups as threats to their home countries, as in the case of the US merging the Taliban with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001 and the years after (Strick van Linschoten & Kuehn, 2012). In this context, so-called "stabilization" doctrines have gained prominence, with NATO, the US military, but also the UN turning towards this doctrine in the wake of the "global war on terror." The UN launched its first stabilization mission in Haiti in 2004 and three additional missions in the 2010s in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2010), Mali (2013), and the Central African Republic (2014). According to a NATO strategy document and a US Army field manual, stabilization activities are understood to contribute to a continuum of interventions, including peace support, humanitarian assistance, counterinsurgency, and combat operations (NATO, 2015, § 1–2, 1–3) as

well as security cooperation and foreign internal defence, involving external support for a government in countering subversion and terrorism (United States Army, 2014, § 1–6, 1–7, 1–26).

The term "stabilization" is often criticized for its vagueness (Curran & Hunt, 2020). In the context of the US-led Afghanistan military intervention, one of the lessons learned reports by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) observes that the term is not precisely defined and is used very frequently but inconsistently by US agencies and international donors in strategic documents and speeches "as a vague euphemism to mean 'fixing' a country or area mired in conflict" (SIGAR, 2018, p. 4). As SIGAR (2018, p. 4) John Sopko continues to note:

> On the ground in Afghanistan…stabilization refers to a specific process designed to keep insurgents out of an area after they have been initially expelled by security forces….Stabilization projects were intended to be a temporary stopgap measure to solidify the military's gains in territorial control through improvements in local governance, better position the Afghan government to assume control and build upon the initial gains, and create the necessary conditions to allow a coalition drawdown.

The "global war on terror" since 2001 has emphasized threat framings centred on state "failure" and armed non-state actors. The large US-led military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan are often discussed as the most prominent missions in this regard, but the proclaimed war on terror extended across the Middle East and Africa, promoting the alignment and coordination of security interests and practices among democratic and non-democratic states. As a result, international peacekeeping and counter-terrorism have become entangled today: Pursuing peace and protecting civilians now converge with objectives of countering extremism, defeating actors labelled as "terrorists," stabilizing territories and reinstalling state authority (Moe, 2021, pp. 9–14).

For the UN, this "robust turn" of peacekeeping has led to frictions within the UN's normative structure. The UN is still not considered as suited for conducting full-blown counterterrorism operations but the "discursive turn towards stabilization, counterinsurgency and counterterrorism" (Karlsrud, 2019, p. 73) underlines that the liberal peacebuilding paradigm is in decline (see Peter, 2024). Since the 2010s, Western powers, among them the US, the UK, and France, have sought to "upload" their own conceptualizations of stabilization to the UN Security Council level (Curran & Holtom, 2015). The UN's turn towards more coercive operations implies that UN troops deviate from the norm of minimal use of force and risk becoming a conflict party themselves as demonstrated in MONUSCO's mandate in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to "neutralize" rebel groups, or MINUSMA's mandate in Mali to help to regain territorial control by force, as well as the associated security cooperation between MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel regional counter-terrorism force (Welz, 2022).

Some scholars have argued that stabilization operations will not survive, given that they imply a significant and uneasy departure from the UN's principles in peacekeeping (de Coning, 2021, pp. 216–217; Osland & Peter, 2021, pp. 198–199), or that they might represent a "phase" in UN peacekeeping history (Curran & Hunt, 2020). It is rather unlikely that the veto powers in the UN Security Council will support the launch of such large-scale operations in the near future. Nevertheless, it is likely to remain the case that intervention actors will increasingly side with the interests and powers of national armed forces, including increasing support for the security sectors of host governments.

4. From SSR to Security (Force) Assistance

The field of international security assistance illustrates this shift from peacebuilding to stabilization and counter-insurgency with particular clarity. In line with the described move away from more comprehensive international interventions to stabilization practices focusing on regime security in partner states, external support to security institutions has moved away from the paradigm of "SSR" to more strategic "security (force) assistance" practices. In this field, Flockhart and Korosteleva's (2022, p. 466) argument that we are in the "final stages" of the transformation of the global order into an architecture "characterized by diversity and plurality" is observable already now.

External support to security sectors of assisted states has a long history. It has historically taken various shapes and support is given with very different rationales and political aims. On one end of the spectrum, we place those often multilateral (liberal) intervention practices that seek to foster peace in partner states through reforms to the security sector. SSR, in a widely accepted definition of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, seeks to "increase partner countries' ability to meet the range of security needs within their societies in a manner consistent with democratic norms and sound principles of governance, transparency and the rule of law" (OECD Development Assistance Committee, 2004, p. 11). Clearly couched in the language of liberal peacebuilding, this policy paradigm began to gain prominence in the late 1990s and had its heyday throughout the early 2000s, parallel to the expansion of liberal peacebuilding interventions. In these years, this comprehensive policy paradigm, aimed at both strengthening and democratizing security sectors in states emerging from conflict and in situations of fragility, spread rapidly. As Swiss (2011, p. 375) outlined for security approaches in the development world more generally, "the spread and institutionalization of security and development approaches among bilateral development assistance donors in recent years has been striking." This liberal optimism of the early 2000s then rapidly gave way to disillusionment with the effects of this particular "liberal" set of international security assistance practices. In the wake of the failures and challenges of direct multilateral interventions in Afghanistan, Mali, Iraq, and others, many Western states have shifted their preferences to supporting and enabling allied governments to settle their security challenges with external support, but without direct engagement. As a result, today, security (force) assistance dwarfs more comprehensive SSR programmes. In fact, one has to look hard to find dedicated SSR programmes aimed at the wholesale (democratic) reform of security sectors emerging from conflict and war.

Interventions on the other end of the spectrum of security assistance, i.e., those interventions that seek to primarily enhance partner states' capacities for warfighting and security provision in partner states, have continuously gained ground. In particular, those assistance programmes directly aimed at strengthening foreign armed forces have gained in importance and scope. Valid data on international security assistance programmes is difficult to come by, with the "security assistance monitor" being the best publicly available database focusing on US security support to foreign governments. Restricted to the case of US support, however, the rise in security assistance has been interpreted as a "dramatic" (Sullivan, 2023, p. 467) increase in US military aid to foreign governments. Overall, US security assistance grew and expanded in the past 20 years, as both the "scale of the enterprise and its geographical distribution expanded dramatically" (Yousif & Woods, 2021, p. 3). US spending between 2001 and 2011 increased by more than 300% (from $5.7 billion annually to over $24 billion). In overall figures, the US spent more than $300 billion on security assistance between 2002 and 2019 (Sullivan, 2023, p. 467). While US aid to the Western hemisphere had been in

decline—at least prior to the start of massive military assistance to Ukraine—to take just one example, US security assistance to the Sahel region has increased substantially in recent decades (Yousif, 2023). At the same time as military aid expanded, a shift in oversight over these programmes became visible, with programme administration shifting from the State Department to the Pentagon (Sullivan, 2021).

This form of security force assistance, as defined by Rolandsen et al. (2021, p. 566), can be understood as a set of activities of an external actor (provider) equipping and training an armed unit (recipient) with a stated aim to strengthen the recipients' operational capacity and professionalism. Security force assistance has a long history, as states have always assisted other strategically aligned states in training and equipping their armies, whether in the Cold War or much earlier. Today, however, much of the assistance focuses on "countries designated as 'fragile states' and their fragmented security forces" (Rolandsen et al., 2021, p. 563). One notable exception is the ongoing large-scale Western military assistance to train and equip the Ukrainian armed forces in their defence against the Russian Federation. The Ukraine Support Tracker—a database of military, financial, and humanitarian aid given to Ukraine—gives a regularly updated estimate of the scale of these international assistance efforts.

While SSR had not been an aid priority for years, the observable turn away from multilateral assistance practices geared at SSR and towards power projection via often—but not always—bilateral forms of security assistance has become difficult to overlook. While this trend does not come as a surprise and dovetails with the expansion of stabilization missions at the expense of more comprehensive earlier peacebuilding missions outlined above in Section 3, the case of security assistance showcases a development longer in the making than the dual crises of the Afghanistan intervention failure and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. In short, what has become visible is a move away from liberal (security) interventionism in the sense of attempts to comprehensively transfer the (liberal) state monopoly on the legitimate use of force to a partner state. Instead, assistance to help partner states self-police security risks has become a core practice (Chandler, 2016). However, despite the widespread use of this policy instrument—described as a veritable Swiss army knife of foreign policy (Miller & Mahanty, 2020)—the effects of security assistance have been "mixed at best" (Metz, 2023, p. 96), with the collapse of the internally trained Iraqi army "more the norm than the exception" and the disastrous disintegration of the Afghan National Security Forces in 2021 being further cases in point (Metz, 2023, p. 96).

At the same time, the clear distinction between SSR as peacebuilding practice and security force assistance as warfighting and security-building assistance is increasingly muddied in practice. The field of security assistance is therefore a useful terrain on which to trace and further elaborate on the previously outlined transformation of international intervention practices. Iraq is an insightful case for this development. For this case, Costantini and O'Driscoll (2022) outline how Iraq became a laboratory for different security interventions and draw a clear picture of a paradigm shift from SSR as a pillar of liberal state-building intervention in Iraq to security force assistance as a remedy that has been endorsed by the post-interventionist turn since the 2010s. With more specific mandates, lighter footprints, and little emphasis on fostering democratic norms of security governance, the newer assistance missions and projects are also often, but not always, in the domain of bilateral assistance. Here, the global increase in security assistance incorporates not only Western but increasingly also non-Western states. Cases in point are the security assistance practices of China as collated by Carrozza and Marsh (2022). These encompass assistance to likely 51 states in Africa since the year 2000, with assistance, however, spread wide and thin.

Thus, Carrozza and Marsh (2022, p. 13) come to the conclusion that China is using security force assistance not as a military alignment policy, but to pursue a strategy of economic alignment in Africa. Other research has already pointed out that security assistance to African states increasingly comes from different providers and may as a result further fragment, rather than integrate, African security forces (Marsh et al., 2020).

While there is a clear potential for competition between different forms of security assistance, particularly given the repercussions of the Russian war against Ukraine worldwide, some research indicates that there is significant overlap between Western and non-Western security assistance practices. In fact, security assistance practices of "liberal" and "non-liberal" states are not as dichotomous as expected, and non-Western countries continue to operate both within and outside the liberal peace perspective (see Peter & Rice, 2022). Non-Western governments, however, often prefer to work bilaterally and often provide security assistance with only limited conditionality regarding internal arrangements (Peter & Rice, 2022, p. 2). Overall, the observable rise of often bilateral security (force) assistance has all but crowded out more comprehensive multilateral SSR interventions. Emerging in parallel to but also going beyond the described trends towards stabilization operations, security assistance practices can be expected to continue to proliferate in an international order characterized by uncertainty about the future and a decline of liberal international intervention patterns.

5. Conclusions

The LIO has long been in crisis, not only from "without" (e.g., China and Russia) but also from within the "liberal core." Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine dramatically illustrates that a transformation of the LIO is taking place, the implications of which are not yet fully visible. In this article, we have discussed developments and trends in violent conflicts outside NATO territories, where Western states intervene as well as other actors such as the UN, regional organisations, non-Western powers, and non-state actors (cf. Brosig et al., 2023, pp. 20–23).

While the implementation of the liberal peacebuilding project has in many intervention sites long led to massive failures and sustained critique, the liberal peacebuilding paradigm had been based on a theory of change "where accountable institutions providing security and services for people were deemed a precondition for stability and sustainable peace" (Osland & Peter, 2021, p. 203; cf. Paris, 2010). It is the decline of this paradigm that we observe in interventionist practices in the name of "stabilization," as these practices seem to lack such a theory of change altogether and are presented as primarily oriented towards a strengthening of state security forces and security agendas. The Russian war against Ukraine will, in our expectation, speed up this decline of liberal peacebuilding, as political attention shifts elsewhere.

In a parallel trend, we have identified increasing and often parallel offers of security assistance from different bilateral and multilateral donors "on the ground" in current theatres of operation, such as Mali or the Central African Republic. This proliferation of security assistance is creating complex situations where long-standing allegiances to specific donors can shift and change rapidly, as has recently been seen in the Sahel, and where multiple offers of different forms of security assistance can lead to further fragmentation of the security sectors being supported. On these phenomena, future research might usefully inquire into the shifting roles of multilateral and bilateral forms of stabilization and security assistance, and it can place a focus on assessing the changing relationship of "Western" and "non-Western" forms of assistance. While

peace and conflict studies and IR have produced a lot of research on Western interventionist practices since 1990, studies of practices and effects of "non-Western" interventions have been, in comparison, less developed. In addition, the binary distinction between "Western" and "non-Western" actors in interventions has proven to be misleading. The question of whether interventionist practices differ fundamentally and why requires more systematic research (Turner & Kühn, 2019).

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Conflict of Interests

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About the Authors

Anna Geis is a professor of international security and conflict studies at the Institute of International Politics, Helmut Schmidt University, Germany. Part of her research focuses on the legitimation of security policies and military interventions; beyond this, her research interests lie in (non-)recognition of armed non-state actors, and in transitional justice issues. She is also a member of the 2022–2024 Study Commission of the German Federal Parliament on Lessons from Afghanistan for Germany's comprehensive international engagement in the future.

Ursula Schröder is the director of the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at Universität Hamburg. Her research focuses on the transformation of peace and security orders in a world of multiple crises. She currently directs projects on democratic security in times of crisis, international security assistance, as well as the nexus between security and climate change. She is also a member of the 2022–2024 Study Commission of the German Federal Parliament on Lessons from Afghanistan for Germany's comprehensive international engagement in the future.