From Kabul to Kyiv: The Crisis of Liberal Interventionism and the Return of War

Edited by Cornelia Baciu, Falk Ostermann, and Wolfgang Wagner

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EDITORIAL

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.

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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ARTICLE

Global Fragmentation and Collective Security Instruments: Weakening the Liberal International Order From Within

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Abstract

Collective instruments, such as UN peacekeeping or mediation, are a lens through which we can examine broader normative fault lines in the international order. They hold both practical and symbolic value. In the post-Cold War moment, these instruments started reflecting liberal values. They became concerned with balancing the rights of individuals and state sovereignty. These advances around "human protection" are now in question, with contestation perceived as emerging from non-Western powers. I contribute to the debates on the "pragmatic turn" within collective responses but contend that while the focus in current debates about the normative shift has become global fragmentation, the momentum for the de-prioritization of human protection within collective instruments comes from within the liberal order itself. Human protection is now a broadly shared and firmly entrenched norm, but to shield the norm from abuse, the collective international community progressively restricted any use of force to advance the norm within the instrument of UN peacekeeping. The co-optation of UN peacekeeping into counter-terrorism efforts and the introduction of stabilization mandates undermined the principled nature and moral authority of the instrument of peacekeeping itself. This, in turn, compromised the implementation of human protection. This development is now accelerated and exposed due to global fragmentation, influencing not just peacekeeping but also other adjacent activities, such as mediation.

Keywords

human protection; impartiality; liberal international order; mediation; moral authority; peacekeeping; peacemaking; UN

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1. Introduction

Western policymakers regularly discuss the need to uphold a "rules-based international order" (Thomson, 2019). With any political order being rules-based (Barnett, 2021), the formulation itself is a tautology. References to a rules-based order tend to imply support for what can be better described as the liberal international order (LIO). The LIO is a contested concept and I use it here as a shorthand for a set of rules and institutions that were normatively established in the aftermath of World War II and then augmented in practice at the end of the Cold War (Lake et al., 2021). Some scholars explicitly differentiate between a Cold War order and one practiced after the end of the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2019). Others contend that the order merely got remoulded during a unipolar moment while retaining the same institutional and normative underpinnings (Acharya, 2018; Lake et al., 2021; Slaughter & LaForge, 2021). There is no definitive catalogue of the values underpinning the LIO, but different lists tend to coalesce around open markets, individual rights, equality of sovereign states, and cooperation through rule-bound multilateralism. The LIO and its values are now perceived as in decline (Acharya, 2018; Flockhart, 2016; Lake et al., 2021; Sørensen, 2017). Policy and academic debates on the decline of the LIO often revolve around the practices of individual states, especially the great powers. They draw on the balance of power and revival of geopolitical discussions, where China and Russia contest the norms of the prevailing order (Bettiza & Lewis, 2020). These challenges have reached a new level with the Russian war on Ukraine, where the breach of rules was so egregious it has been referred to as *Zeitenwende*, a major historical turning point that has profound implications on all aspects of the order (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022). China, meanwhile, is viewed as gradually eroding the LIO and articulating a new vision of international order: one that is significantly more state-centric, thus undermining individual rights, a core value in the LIO (Foot, 2020; Fung, 2019). Other emerging powers are joining this challenge. While the popular dichotomies of "the West vs. the rest" or "liberal vs. illiberal" persist, scholars have done much to nuance the positions of "non-Western" powers, arguing that they should not be treated as a block (Jütersonke et al., 2021; Peter & Rice, 2022). Others have shown that, for many non-Western actors, contestation of the LIO is not motivated by the order's values, but by how the order was implemented by the US and its allies. Issues have included the selectiveness of cases where state oppression against civilians seemingly matters (e.g., a blind spot to the Palestinian question), abuses of the rules-based order (e.g., the invasion of Iraq in 2003), and a failure to deliver on promised transformations (e.g., the Afghanistan state-building project; Parmar, 2018; on Afghanistan see Younus, 2024).

In this article, I examine how these challenges to a rules-based order embodying liberal values have been unfolding within instruments of collective security and what they mean for "human protection." Collective instruments are a lens through which we can examine broader normative fault lines in the international order. These instruments hold both practical and symbolic value, especially when powerful states break or creatively interpret the rules of the order through unilateral action (Hurd, 2002). In the post-Cold War moment, collective instruments were substantially reshaped to reflect liberal values (Paris, 2010; Turner & Wählisch, 2021). They became concerned with balancing the rights of individuals and state sovereignty, with innovations such as Responsibility to Protect (R2P), protection of civilians (POC), criminal responsibility through international courts, inclusive mediation, the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, and liberal peacebuilding. All these are intended to advance civil and political rights or, at minimum, protect civilians from the worst abuses enacted by the state. These advances around human protection are now in question. Much of the contestation is seen to be emerging from non-Western powers, especially Russia and China,

who wield veto powers on the UN Security Council (UNSC). Scholars have studied their voting records in the UNSC (Badache et al., 2022) and examined how China has sought strategic appointments within global institutions to pursue a more state-centric agenda (Foot, 2020; Fung & Lam, 2021). Experts now widely maintain that this shifting power dynamic and the advent of a multipolar world order have already had profound normative ramifications, deprioritizing human protection in collective instruments as part of their "pragmatic turn" (de Coning, 2021; Dunton et al., 2023; Hellmüller, 2022; Paris, 2023).

I contribute to the debates on the "pragmatic turn" within collective responses but contend that while the focus in current debates about the normative shift in collective instruments has become "global fragmentation," the momentum for the de-prioritization of human protection within collective instruments comes from within the LIO itself. I draw on earlier debates about the growing disconnect "between doctrine and practice" in UN peacekeeping (Peter, 2015) and the tensions within what Paddon Rhoads (2016, p. 2) describes as "assertive liberal internationalism." The article combines these earlier critiques of illiberal developments within collective instruments with current debates about global fragmentation. Empirically, I show that human protection as a liberal value is now a broadly shared and firmly entrenched norm. But the norm is also prone to abuse. To shield the norm from abuse and ensure its principled implementation, the collective international community has restricted any use of force to advance the norm within the instrument of UN peacekeeping. However, the co-optation of UN peacekeeping into the counter-terrorism efforts and introduction of stabilization mandates—as adapted from Western experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan—over the last decade has undermined the principled nature of the instrument of peacekeeping itself. This, in turn, compromised the implementation of human protection. This development is now accelerated and exposed due to global fragmentation, as host governments have options between third-party peace and security providers. This is impacting not just peacekeeping but also related activities, such as mediation.

The article proceeds by outlining the role of collective mechanisms and how these could have been realigned with liberal values after the end of the Cold War. It argues that the authority of these instruments rests in their ability to be perceived as transcending particularistic interests. For UN peacekeeping, that principled nature rests on its doctrine, especially the principle of impartiality. I then demonstrate that human protection, as a norm, enjoys broad support within the order, but that any use of force to protect civilians has progressively become collectivized within UN peacekeeping. This was done to protect the norm from abuse and ensure its impartial implementation. Finally, I show how this development has been undermined through UN stabilization missions, as these compromise the principled nature of peacekeeping by undermining its impartiality.

2. Collective Instruments as a Core of a Rules-Based Order

Since the adoption of the Charter of the United Nations (1945), collective approaches have been the core of a rules-based international order, prohibiting the use of force as an instrument of national policy. Their first layer comes from a clear hierarchy dictating the supremacy of the UNSC on all peace and security matters or collective security. The Charter of the United Nations (1945, Art. 2(4)) is predicated upon the prohibition of the threat or use of force, with the only permissible use of force by individual states being self-defence (Art. 51). Russia broke this prohibition when invading Ukraine, as any use of force not meeting the criteria of self-defence is exclusively within the domain of the UNSC. In addition to sitting at the apex of international peace and security, the UNSC also has the right to "determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach

of the peace, or act of aggression" (Charter of the United Nations, 1945, Art. 39). While this is regulated by strict voting rules (Art. 27), the UNSC holds broad discretionary powers, allowing the Council to add new issues to matters it considers a threat to peace. In the post-Cold War era, this allowed the UNSC to include new threats among those necessitating a collective response. Two of these areas, newly accepted under the UNSC remit of threats to peace and security, are threats to civilians by state, and non-state threats against state authority (Tams, 2009). These two issues are interlinked and part of the same norm cluster (Gallagher et al., 2022). Both pertain to the internal constitution and relations within the state, balancing the rights of individuals with state sovereignty.

The second layer of collective security is equally important for principled multilateralism and relates to distinctions between different instruments for peace and security. These instruments are developed from Chapter VI (peaceful and consensual resolution of disputes) and Chapter VII (enforcement action) of the Charter of the United Nations (1945). They relate to measures taken by external actors in support of peace. There is a clear distinction between military and non-military policy frameworks. If peacekeeping and peace enforcement entail military measures—with or without the consent of relevant parties, respectively—peacemaking and peacebuilding capture their non-military counterparts (UN, 1995). UN peacekeeping holds a particular symbolic value among these instruments. It represents the non-existent "Chapter Six and a half" of the Charter of the United Nations, involving a military component that is deployed with the consent of the parties. Demarcated from enforcement action, UN peacekeeping has its doctrine guided by three principles: consent, impartiality, and non-use of force, except in self-defence and defence of the mandate (UN, 2008).

The legitimacy of UN peacekeeping rests on this doctrine, which is designed to transcend particularistic interests and symbolize action undertaken by the international community. UN peacekeeping is not the most effective military force and its ability to be perceived as a useful tool and induce deference relies on its moral authority (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005; Levine, 2013). Perceived impartiality has always been integral to this authority and has been described as its "oxygen" (Tharoor, 1995, p. 58; cf. Laurence, 2019; Levine, 2013; Paddon Rhoads, 2016). Dag Hammarskjöld, the second UN Secretary-General, asserted that "a United Nations operation must be separate and distinct from activities by national authorities" (UN, 1958, p. 165) and "cannot be permitted in any sense to be a party to internal conflicts" (UN, 1958, p. 166). During the Cold War, impartiality became near-synonymous with neutrality and peacekeepers primarily reported on violations but did not actively bring parties to account for their transgressions. In the aftermath of the Cold War, as the UNSC increasingly started deploying missions to deal with peace settlements relating to civil wars, the principle of impartiality became increasingly difficult to maintain (de Coning et al., 2017). Peacekeepers were asked to undertake more expansive post-conflict tasks—from election monitoring, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration to reforms of the judiciary and other state institutions—with peacekeeping merging with peacebuilding (Paris, 2010). The UN Capstone doctrine provided a new understanding of impartiality, which was not to "be confused with neutrality or inactivity" (UN, 2008, p. 33). Peacekeepers were tasked to "be impartial in their dealings with the parties to the conflict, but not neutral in the execution of their mandate" (UN, 2008, p. 33). While scholars often pointed out that the content of mandates had a liberal bias (Chandler, 2010; Lidén, 2009), impartiality became understood as active protection of the mandate with "even-handedness towards the parties." This principled nature of impartiality, as I demonstrate below, could be maintained even when the UN developed POC mandates, as peacekeepers were supposed to defend civilians against all threats equally, regardless of their origin. The application of

such even-handedness changed with the introduction of stabilization mandates, which mandated UN peacekeepers to engage in counter-terrorist activities protecting state authority. This brought peacekeeping closer to enforcement action and, as I discuss in Section 4, undermined the instrument of peacekeeping itself.

3. Human Protection and UN Peacekeeping as Its Last Collective Bastion

The normative underpinnings of human protection as a component of the LIO predate the end of the Cold War. They are primarily seen in civil and political rights within international human rights documents. However, it was not until the end of bipolarity that human protection began to be operationalized as something that allows and even necessitates a response by international actors. The argument that individuals, not states, should be the primary referents of security policies is not uniquely Western or liberal, with non-Western scholars and policymakers often driving the argument for the expansion of security beyond that of states. The concept of human security was introduced to the international vocabulary by former Pakistani Finance Minister Mahbub ul Haq and Indian economist Amartya Sen (UNDP, 1994). Their holistic concept, which included economic, environmental, and other social threats to individuals, was critiqued by many Western governments, who wanted to focus international action on insecurities resulting from violent conflict (Axworthy, 1997). While it is oversimplistic to portray these debates as "the West vs. the rest" (Acharya, 2001), during the peak of the LIO most progress in operationalizing international protection of individuals was made in relation to insecurities resulting from armed conflict. Most of the instruments developed have been non-coercive, but these new understandings allowed for the possibility of the use of force to protect humans from state and non-state threats. This occurred primarily through the UNSC's recognition that civil wars could represent a threat to international peace and security. While imperfectly practiced, such an understanding—as demonstrated below—is now broadly entrenched in the international order and has been protected and re-articulated when states were perceived to be abusing it.

Throughout the 1990s, the UNSC progressively incorporated human protection into the mandates of UN peacekeeping missions. In Somalia, peacekeepers were deployed primarily to protect humanitarian personnel. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, they were asked to create safe zones for civilians. However, these policies were seen as failures, especially after armed peacekeepers, with no clear mandate to engage, passively witnessed the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica (Malone & Thakur, 2001). In 1999, the UNSC adopted two seminal resolutions: Resolution 1265 on the POC through UN peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping (UN, 1999a) and Resolution 1270, which authorized the UN peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone with the first explicit mandate to protect civilians (UN, 1999b). Since 1999, the UNSC has mandated all multidimensional peacekeeping missions under Chapter VII, indicating that force could be used to protect civilians (Howard & Dayal, 2018). All these resolutions relate to situations where the UNSC acts with host state consent.

More divisive are situations where such consent is absent. In 1999, the looming genocide against the Albanian population in Kosovo presented this issue, with many actors unwilling to authorize enforcement action under Chapter VII. The nuances of these developments are well covered elsewhere (e.g., Hehir, 2008). Here, the point is that after NATO members took unilateral action to protect Kosovo Albanians, the question of proper authorization increased in urgency. While most actors wanted to mitigate human insecurities, without a rulebook on who could act and when, the rule-based order prohibiting the unilateral use of force could be fatally undermined. The debate on powerful actors abusing human protection—at the time termed

humanitarian intervention—to further their own interests is not unique to the great powers. Indeed, the newly established African Union Constitutive Act (2000) first developed both the concept of "non-indifference"—the African equivalent to R2P—and rules regulating its proper authorization. The non-indifference norm has been unevenly implemented in the African Union (AU) context and member states have been reluctant to authorize force without the consent of the government (Williams, 2007). While the AU, much like the UNSC, prefers working with governments and deploying peace support missions, human protection without the consent of parties first became institutionalized and regulated outside of a Western or global context. Globally, the question of proper authorization was the primary contention in R2P's adoption. By the mid-2000s, opposition to the principle that the international community had a responsibility to respond to atrocities—when governments were either unwilling or unable to do so—began to subside, with early objectors, such as China, beginning to accept the norm (Foot, 2020). The R2P proposal, developed by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), recommended that any enforcement action should go through the UNSC. If the Council was blocked—as in the Kosovo case—the UN General Assembly (UNGA) or regional organizations could also authorize force, seeking subsequent approval from the UNSC (ICISS, 2001, pp. 47–56). With some seeing the possibility for abuse of regional mechanisms and the UNGA, the final compromise resolution restricted authorization of the use of force to the UNSC (UN, 2005, Art. 139).

R2P was developed as a three-pillar approach: The first pillar outlined the responsibility of the state for protection; the second, the international responsibility to assist the state in its efforts; and the third, placing responsibility on the international community to respond if a state was unwilling to cooperate in protecting civilians. In practice, most outside interventions relating to human protection operate under the second pillar: assisting—not overruling—the host state. These policies encompass mediation, developmental assistance, and capacity building. The only third pillar R2P action—authorization by the UNSC without the consent of the host government—occurred in 2011, in response to atrocities perpetrated by the Gaddafi regime in Libya. With the UN lacking its own military, the operation was implemented by NATO, which started pursuing regime change. While implementing states argued that removing Gaddafi was the only way to protect civilians, most others considered this outside the mandate, again raising worries about powerful actors abusing human protection to advance their particularistic interests. Analyses of the use of R2P in Libya point to the regional instabilities caused by the intervention, its bearing on other cases such as Syria and Myanmar, and the impact on the R2P doctrine. After Libya, R2P was even described as "RIP" (Doyle, 2016; Gifkins, 2016; Thakur, 2013).

The "pure" third pillar of R2P lost its momentum, which it has little chance of regaining in an increasingly fragmented world, as all permanent members of the UNSC would need to agree on enforcement action. This, however, did not result in the end of human protection as a core value in the global order. Instead, states and other actors turned to R2P's "close cousin," POC (Paddon Rhoads & Welsh, 2019), to develop human protection elements within a less controversial instrument: UN peacekeeping. Because UN peacekeeping is collectively implemented and does not rely on outside actors (unlike reliance upon NATO in Libya), the instrument was seen as less prone to abuse. POC within peacekeeping predates the intervention in Libya, but its agenda has gained substantial momentum over the last decade, with authors arguing that the future of R2P and human protection now heavily depends on this contiguous normative agenda (Hunt, 2019). States have even enhanced UN peacekeeping POC with limited enforcement elements. UN peacekeeping, which operates according to the principle of consent, is legally understood as part of the second pillar

instruments of R2P (assistance to the state). However, similarly to Hammarskjöld's description of UN peacekeeping as belonging to "Chapter Six and a Half" of the Charter of the United Nations, UN peacekeeping POC can be conceived as belonging to the non-existent "Pillar Two and a Half" of R2P. While most peacekeeping activities are conducted in support of the host government, the Chapter VII mandate allows peacekeepers to employ force when the host government endangers its population. Such an approach to POC is based on an understanding of impartiality as "even-handedness towards the parties." It can be implemented in a principled manner without making distinctions between different sources of threats to civilians.

This understanding of impartiality can be seen in how POC has developed both in practice and policy since Libya. In 2013, after the outbreak of civil war in South Sudan, the UNSC overhauled the mandate of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) into a POC mission (UN, 2013b). Prior to this, the mission had been tasked with supporting the peace process implementation and helping the newly independent state develop its institutions. When the civil war broke out, South Sudan's situation became reminiscent of Rwanda two decades earlier, when a pre-existing mission had an inappropriate mandate for the situation on the ground. This time, however, the UNSC reacted. While UNMISS was deployed to South Sudan with the host government's consent, as the state became the perpetrator of violence against civilians, the mission was tasked not just to assist the government in developing protective measures, but also to physically protect civilians when the government was endangering them. This mandate was much more explicit than in previous missions, bringing peacekeeping closer to the third pillar of R2P. The mission has had mixed results, with its core protective mechanisms of "POC sites" heavily criticized (Munive, 2021). Implementation of human protection through UN peacekeeping was always going to be highly problematic, but what is important to note is not only a relatively swift and resolute action making human protection the core of the UNMISS mandate but also that some of the key implementing actors have come from states not typically associated with human protection. After the change of mandate, China more than doubled its peacekeeping troops in the mission and is now the biggest troop contributor of all permanent UNSC members (He, 2019).

Over the last decade, the UN also developed and revised policies to institutionalize and operationalize POC within peacekeeping (UN Department of Peace Operations, 2023). Many of these policy developments were responses to operational failures, including within UNMISS. Today, more than 95% of peacekeepers are mandated to protect civilians (UN Peacekeeping, n.d.). Unlike the broad R2P framework, which is an overarching political commitment to protection, POC is more technical and circumscribes the use of force. It is tactical and operational guidance to respond to threats to civilian safety in the context of armed conflicts (Hunt, 2019, p. 636). Although a far cry from how many liberal actors were imagining humanitarian intervention in the 1990s, peacekeeping POC presents another attempt to safeguard the norm of human protection and, at the same time, ensure that this is not subject to abuse by powerful actors. In that, UN peacekeeping has become the last bastion in ensuring collective implementation of human protection. This development was undermined by the introduction of stabilization mandates.

4. Stabilization Missions: Undermining the Principled Nature of UN Peacekeeping

Stabilization tasks entered UN peacekeeping mandates in much the same way as POC did, via UNSC debates on what roles outside actors can play in what was previously considered internal matters of states. Non-state threats to state authority, as an issue that should be considered a threat to peace and security and thus

necessitate a collective response, entered UNSC discussion through debates on whether the right to self-defence should apply to threats emanating from non-state actors. After 9/11, the UNSC accepted the US and the UK's claim to self-defence when they removed the Taliban government, as the regime was unwilling to deal with non-state threats emanating from its territory (Tams, 2009, pp. 378–379). The 2003 Iraq intervention complicated the debates due to multiple justifications, which included not just self-defence but a claim that previous UNSC resolutions authorized a peace enforcement action (Gray, 2002). Regardless of their legality, these were interventions conducted without the consent of host governments. But once the Taliban and Saddam Hussein's regimes were removed, the threat posed by non-state actors did not disappear. However, the newly elected governments were more amenable to international assistance. This international assistance, conducted with the consent of host governments, was extended to states unable to deal with non-state threats against state authority. This was primarily achieved through bilateral and coalition measures in the form of stabilization missions. These missions have been described as failures of liberal actors and a downfall of the LIO, especially after the Taliban regained power in 2021 (see Younus, 2024).

UN collective instruments have been auxiliary in efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq were established quickly at the request of the new Afghani and Iraqi governments in 2002 and 2003, respectively, and are both special political missions (SPMs). SPMs are Chapter VI collective instruments. They incorporate peacemaking and peacebuilding tasks, thus performing a similar function as the UN peacekeeping but without the military component. The majority of UNAMA tasks involve daily mediation and humanitarian assistance. As these tasks were perceived as impartial, the mission continued operating in Afghanistan even after the Taliban returned to power. This ensures some collective monitoring of human protection remains in place even under the worst of circumstances.

In contrast to Afghanistan and Iraq, where the military component remained outside the scope of collective instruments, approaches to non-state threats to state authority in Africa over the last decade started incorporating a military stabilization component within UN peacekeeping missions. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) all have stabilization in their name and their mandate. They all operate alongside UNSC-authorized regional or unilateral military assistance to these countries, whilst containing a military component themselves. The reason for collectivizing the military response was likely cost-sharing with UN stabilization mandates championed by Western states, who carried the brunt of the cost in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the military stabilization component remained outside UN missions (Guichaoua, 2020).

Within UN debates, the introduction of stabilization mandates into UN peacekeeping was treated as the next logical step in ensuring human protection, as host governments were seen as unable to counter threats to their authority or their populations (Gallagher et al., 2022). UN peacekeepers were supposed to assist them in this task. But the switch away from defensive POC and towards offensive action to eliminate these threats was a qualitative one and moved UN peacekeeping closer to peace enforcement. These missions' mandates mirrored lessons from operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (Karlsrud, 2015, p. 44), making the UN one of the combatants, in a similar way to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. This was reflected in their capabilities: MONUSCO was enhanced with a Force Intervention Brigade (FIB),

tasked with neutralizing a defined list of armed groups in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and MINUSMA incorporated a large European contribution, which introduced sophisticated intelligence capabilities and counter-insurgency methods (Koops & Tercovich, 2016). Local governments were initially receptive to such support. UN peacekeepers were asked to assist them in not just securing military victories against their opponents, but also extending their political authority in contested areas.

Stabilization mandates in UN peacekeeping have been a subject of much debate and both scholars (Curran & Hunt, 2020; Karlsrud, 2015; Peter, 2015) and states (UN, 2013a) cautioned against their potential negative externalities when they were established. These have now been realized, undermining the instrument of peacekeeping and human protection. These negative externalities have been amplified because of the global fragmentation, where "the West" is no longer the only credible security provider alongside a UN mission (see Jacobsen & Larsen, 2024).

UN stabilization missions have not been able to deliver on the promise of human protection. UN peacekeepers were never going to be the most effective fighting force: They are comprised of soldiers from multiple states, with different military cultures, and a unified command is therefore a permanent challenge. Early on, peacekeepers delivered a few tactical wins. The MONUSCO, FIB, and the DRC military successful pushback against the M23 militia, which had been endangering population centres in the Eastern DRC for years, was hailed a major success (Vogel, 2013). However, the missions were unable to eliminate the broader threats, with M23 returning to the region by 2017. Similar to ISAF's inability to eliminate the Taliban, these missions were not able to eliminate non-state armed groups militarily. However, the robust nature and an offensive mandate of UN peacekeeping raised expectations of protection, with all these missions meeting resistance from the local population when these expectations were not met. MONUSCO has been particularly badly affected, with July 2022 protests occurring in several cities and leading to multiple deaths among protestors and UN peacekeepers ("Protestors demand," 2022). Faced with an increasingly hostile local population, who saw the missions as ineffective in delivering on their mandate, UN peacekeepers' ability to engage in other protection tasks, such as monitoring of abuses, became compromised.

In addition to not delivering human protection, UN stabilization missions also heavily damaged the symbol of the UN as an impartial force. By using the instrument of peacekeeping for enforcement measures against non-state actors and labelling these actors as the ones to neutralize, the missions abandoned the principle of impartiality, understood as "even-handedness towards the parties." This, in turn, meant that UN peacekeeping missions lost their moral authority and their ability to act as honest brokers and convene negotiations (Haspeslagh, 2021). In response to the UNSC decision to deploy an intervention brigade in the DRC, M23—who was listed as one of the groups to be neutralized—left the Kampala talks between the armed group and the DRC government ("UN envoy tells Security Council," 2013). Similarly, in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), the day-to-day local-level mediation and brokering of ceasefires, one of the core tasks of UN missions (Bell & Wise, 2022), became increasingly difficult as the mission was seen as siding with the government authorities. But it was not just the targeted armed groups who accused the UN missions of partiality. As time moved on, the unwillingness of UN peacekeepers to support host governments unconditionally in their military efforts against all non-state actors turned host authorities against them too. The Malian minister of foreign affairs, in a UNSC debate, accused the mission of being selective in its choices on when and who to engage, thus not helping its fight against terrorism. The mission was accused of "fuelling inter-community tensions" (UN, 2023). Similarly in the DRC, after MONUSCO

attempted to broker local agreements with armed groups, the government accused the mission of collaborating with M23 and forcing it to negotiate with terrorists (Kniknie, 2022).

Finally, and perhaps the most consequential for human protection, stabilization components of UN peacekeeping missions came into an untenable clash with other parts of the human protection mandate, especially the monitoring of abuses by the state. While governments wanted UN peacekeepers to help them neutralize non-state threats, these same governments were using measures that UN peacekeepers were there to monitor and prevent. Enforcement, and monitoring and prevention, as two components of their mandate were increasingly in conflict with each other. MONUSCO, MINUSMA, and MINUSCA have all received a high number of so-called "denials of request," with the host governments refusing UN peacekeepers access to sites where government forces could be implicated in civilian abuses. The monitoring role has become increasingly hard to fulfil due to the diversification of outside security assistance that governments can now rely on. In Mali, France had been the preferred partner of authorities alongside MINUSMA until early 2021. While restrictions on freedom of movement by MINUSMA existed during this period, the mission had shed light on numerous civilian abuses, by both French and Malian forces (Jezequel et al., 2022). However, following the May 2021 coup and the subsequent failure to organize democratic elections, the French started disengaging from Mali. In turn, Mali started seeking other partners and invited the Russian Wagner Group to help its security efforts (Drozdiak, 2022). They have been operating in the country since. This substantially restricted MINUSMA's ability to monitor abuses, with Mali refusing to grant access to sites where its joint operations with the Wagner Group likely involved mass human rights abuses (Jezequel et al., 2022). MINUSMA has now been asked to withdraw, with the UN deployment set to end on 31 December 2023 (Lewis & Mcallister, 2023). Unlike Afghanistan, where the SPM UNAMA managed to stay above the fray retaining the veneer of impartiality, Mali might find itself without any UN monitors. By incorporating military stabilization components within UN peacekeeping, human protection, even if imperfectly practiced, became undermined.

5. Conclusions

Human protection is now a firmly established norm within the global order. We can see this from repeated attempts to continue developing and implementing policies around it, intensified when powerful actors were seen to be overstepping their bounds. These attempts were often driven not by liberal states, but by other actors, showing the broad purchase of the norm. It is also a norm that is incredibly difficult to implement in a principled manner, especially when it involves the use of force. Concerns about powerful states using human protection as an excuse to further their particularistic interest are at the crux of this debate. In addition to skepticism of Western states around Kosovo and Libya, Chinese participation in peacekeeping has also been met with suspicion, due to its oil interests in South Sudan (Lanteigne, 2018). Because the human protection norm is well established but highly susceptible to abuse, the implementation became progressively more regulated and circumscribed. Following the concerns with R2P implementation in Libya, UN peacekeeping remained the only viable instrument through which human protection with the potential for (limited) use of force against offending governments could be exercised collectively. The normative future of the LIO therefore heavily rests on the continued existence of this instrument.

The incorporation of offensive stabilization mandates into UN peacekeeping was envisaged as a logical next step in human protection. The goal was for UN missions to help host governments deal with non-state threats

to their authority. But like the Western failed efforts in Afghanistan, UN peacekeepers failed in this task in Mali and the DRC. However, this was not just a practical failure but also one that damaged the symbol of peacekeeping. By merging peacekeeping with peace enforcement and then not delivering on the enforcement component, collective instruments opened themselves up to criticism by host governments. The symbol of an impartial actor was tarnished. As witnessed in both Mali and the DRC, host governments, which have been endangering civilians, have also been able to delegitimize UN operations, thus preventing them from performing their core peacekeeping tasks—monitoring and prevention, both required for human protection. Global fragmentation is facilitating the resistance against UN missions, as host governments can maintain that they are swapping one partial actor with another. But at least the second partial actor is supporting them in their fight against non-state threats; Mali today is a case in point.

Collective instruments have been the cornerstone of a post-World War II rules-based order. They have always been implemented imperfectly. Human protection is no different, especially when considering that UN peacekeeping forces are pooled from different troop-contributing countries, each with its own protection culture. But collective instruments hold not only a practical but also a symbolic value. They are used to address legitimacy gaps within the order itself. To maintain their value and protect the rules-based system, they need to be seen as impartial. UN stabilization mandates have undermined that. To protect a rules-based order, and with it the core of the LIO, their impartiality needs to be reaffirmed. The UN is not starting with a blank slate, but if the past eight decades are anything to go by, after an ebb, the majority of states will continue reaching for collective instruments to maintain the order and the values within.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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ARTICLE

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

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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

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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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ARTICLE

The Failure of Liberal Interventionism: Deconstructing Afghan Identity Discourses of "Modern" and "Tradition"

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Abstract

In Afghanistan, the crisis of liberal intervention unfolded in the failure to establish democratic structures as a solution to terrorism and extremism in the aftermath of 9/11. Following the emergency withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan on August 30, 2021, President Ashraf Ghani discreetly left Kabul, enabling the Taliban to regain control and form a new government in the country. The recurrent pattern of intervention and the subsequent return of the Taliban highlights a failure of the liberal project, which is a significant concern addressed in this article as the main question: Why has liberal intervention failed in Afghanistan? The answer lies in deconstructing the hegemonic discourse of "modern" Afghan to understand how it was resisted and replaced by the alternative discourse of "tradition," subsequently, leading to the failure of the liberal project. The "modern" discourse, rooted in the US social context, aimed to civilise the perceived primitive and traditional Afghans. Conversely, the Taliban, drawing upon the Afghan social context, contested the "modern" discourse with an alternative discourse of "tradition" portraying liberals and their supporters as "occupiers" and "oppressors," thus, justifying their armed resistance (jihad) against occupying forces. Framed within a critical social constructivism, the text, interviews, speeches, and statements of prominent Taliban leaders and the US presidents, apprise how specific identities have been employed to naturalise the "modern" discourse as justification for intervention. Critical discourse analysis explicates how the "tradition" discourse denaturalised the former and, subsequently, facilitated the establishment of the Taliban's power in Afghanistan.

Keywords

Afghan identity; critical discourse analysis; critical social constructivism; failure of liberal intervention; Taliban; US policy failure; war on terrorism

1. Introduction

In the post-Cold War period, the disintegration of the Soviet Union was hailed as a triumph for liberal democracy. Ideas such as liberal democratic peace, free trade, and global governance placed greater emphasis on the liberal project. To ensure their own security, the West sought to extend this project with the aim of eliminating war from the world (Doyle, 2012; Fukuyama, 1992). Similarly, after 9/11, a liberal democratic process was initiated to transform the non-democratic traditional Afghan society into a modern and democratic one to counter terrorism and extremism.

After the happening of 9/11, US President George W. Bush (2001a, p. 85) declared the terrorist attacks as a threat to Western civilisation and, by extension, the liberal world order. In response, a military intervention followed by a democratisation process was initiated, which, surprisingly, failed and culminated in the return of the Taliban to Afghanistan.

The existing literature offers several explanations for the failure of liberal intervention in Afghanistan. A major stream of literature points to sanctuaries on the Pakistani side of the border which provided the Taliban with an opportunity to regroup and launch a resistance movement against the liberal forces in Afghanistan (Farrell, 2018; Miller, 2021; Riedel, 2013). Some have identified the failure of state-building projects, corruption, and incapacity of Afghan democratic governments and security forces as significant factors ending the intervention (Aquil, 2023; Maley, 2018). Others have problematised the US military strategy of fighting Taliban insurgency where the latter was perceived as a loosely structured umbrella organisation instead of a resilient, adaptive, and well-coordinated adversary (Farrell, 2018, 2022, pp. 736–738; Farrell et al., 2013).

The present study does not reject the above explanations, however, it enriches our understanding by asserting that the failure of liberal intervention needs to be evaluated in the peculiar Afghan social context. To respond to one main question: Why did liberal intervention fail in Afghanistan? It is argued here that US-led liberal forces justified the intervention by constructing an Afghan identity discourse of "modern" which was challenged and replaced by an alternative discourse of "tradition," articulated by the Taliban, which, consequently, precipitated the failure of the intervention in Afghanistan.

The present study is framed within a critical social constructivism which believes in the social construction of reality through language. It argues that the socially constructed reality "entails naturalized power relations" which should be denaturalized (Rowley & Weldes, 2012, p. 180). Reality is constructed through "meaningful practices," where meanings are largely drawn from culture through a process of meaning production called discourse (Rowley & Weldes, 2012, p. 180). Critical social constructivism believes in multiple realities of social and social agents, which are situated in various discourses. These discourses are naturalised by an intelligent deployment of language and exhibited through representations. The US-led liberal forces constructed an identity discourse of "modern" where Afghanistan was represented as "tribal" and "primitive" that had to be "democratised" and "civilised" through the intervention.

Borrowing from critical discourse analysis (CDA), the present research examines language as a social practice, "socially shaped, but is also socially shaping, or *constitutive*" (Fairclough, 1993, pp. 134–135, emphasis added). It helps in understanding how discursive practices, events, and texts appear, how they are shaped, and how they serve the interests of the powerful or hegemon. The Taliban denaturalised and

replaced the hegemonic discourse of "modern" with an alternative discourse of "tradition," which was widely accepted and consented by diverse social groups and, eventually, culminated in the failure of liberal intervention in Afghanistan. Since CDA explores the relationship between discourse and reality within a particular social context, therefore, when investigating social and political realities, two steps must be considered: (a) establishing the association between a social context and discourse over time, and (b) identifying the process through which discourse has tangible effects (Halperin & Heath, 2012, pp. 310–317). These two steps serve as a guide for conducting CDA in this study.

CDA aims to study the discursive nature of social power relations (Golbasi, 2017). It is explanatory and interpretative where different studies lead to different interpretations (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, pp. 271–279; van Dijk, 1993). To depict how, when, and why the Afghan identity discourses were constructed, challenged, and replaced, excerpts from US presidential speeches and remarks (2001–2021) were obtained from the White House archival web page. Regarding the Taliban leaders, I primarily relied on interviews available on YouTube. Most of these interviews were conducted after the Taliban's return to Kabul in 2021, possibly due to security concerns that prevented the Taliban from appearing in the media. Additionally, most of the excerpts are taken from English translations of their remarks on their resistance movement, democracy, and the US presence in Afghanistan. The empirical data (books, reports, and journal articles) also informed about various discursive realities of intervention in Afghanistan. This research acknowledges that discourses selectively and reductively construe aspects of the world, and the reality they construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct is inherently subjective, reflective, and interpretive in nature.

This article is organised as follows: Section 2 examines the discursive construction of the "modern Afghan." It elucidates how the reality of 9/11 was discursively interpreted within the American social context and led to the construction of "modern Afghan" identity discourse for the justification and widespread support for US intervention and democratisation in Afghanistan. Section 3 explicates the failure of liberal intervention to highlight how the discursive construction of "modern" was contested by an alternative discourse of "tradition" constructed by the Taliban, ultimately resulting in the failure of the liberal intervention and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. Sections 4 and 5 provide a discussion and key takeaways.

2. The Discursive Construction of "Modern Afghan"

2.1. The American Social Context

The identity discourse has shaped American foreign policy for centuries (Rowley & Weldes, 2012). American liberal values refer to certain basic political ideas and ideals that are supported by most elements in American society with no or little change since the late eighteenth century which continues to play a central role in shaping American political identity (Huntington, 1982, p. 1). In most accounts, these values stand for constitutionalism, individualism, democracy, and egalitarianism—and by extension, a perceived obligation to promote these values via the US foreign policy.

Democracy promotion is rooted both in the instrumental maximisation of the US material interest and a moral commitment to its values and institutions abroad (Ikenberry, 2009). At the societal level, liberty, equality, private ownership, individualism, free trade, and the rule of law under the Constitution are some of

the values most dear to the American people. Since most Americans are socialised by the same political culture, over time, these values have become the powerbase of American foreign policy disguised by democratic promotion abroad. As President Ronald Reagan stated, "Our democracy encompasses many freedoms...these are rights that should be shared by all mankind" (Wittkopf et al., 2008, p. 244).

Another popular idea in the American social context is taking democracy as a mission to transform the nature of the international political system. Here, one can see the Puritan influence as one of the important sources (D. L. Larson, 1965). It is a conviction that the "United States was the chosen instrument of God, divinely appointed to introduce a government and society on the American continent" and to spread it everywhere (Monten, 2005, p. 121). According to Lafeber (2002, p. 551), the Puritans believed that Americans were an elect people, more immediate to God than others. This Puritan tradition viewed the US as engaged in a test case that would determine whether humanity could live on Earth following God's will. President Abraham Lincoln encapsulated this exceptional aspect of the American self-image when he referred to it as the "last best hope of mankind" (Deudney & Meiser, 2012, p. 22).

2.2. The Communicative Event

In the aftermath of 9/11, US President George W. Bush (2001b, para. 5) represented the terrorist attacks as an "act of war." As a result, terrorists, Al-Qaeda, and its leader Osama bin Laden were articulated as the enemy who was "imposing its radical beliefs" and resolving indiscriminate killing of " all Americans" (Bush, 2001c, paras. 14, 15). His reference to "crusade" eventually constructed the terrorist attacks in terms of a series of wars between Christians and Muslims, as was witnessed in medieval times (Bush, 2001b, para. 17). According to the Gallup Survey-2001, this construction provided President George W. Bush with the required public support to plead for a "long war" against the terrorists in Afghanistan (Newport, 2001, para. 1).

President George W. Bush (2001a, p.85) constructed the identity of the US and its allies, and Al-Qaeda and its supporters (Taliban), in the binary of civilised and uncivilised. He declared that these attacks were on the "freedom" and "way of life" of America and the "civilised world" at large (Bush, 2001c, paras. 24, 26, 35). He articulated that the civilised Western "self" does not fight but for defensive purposes and chooses "lawful change" over "coercion," "subversion," and "chaos" (Bush, 2001a, p. 85). Their mission, he explained, is to project "hope," "order," "law," and "life," which forges unity all over the world (Bush, 2001a, p. 85).

Al-Qaeda and Taliban were indistinguishably constructed as the uncivilised "others" whose objective was to cultivate "fear" and "death" (Bush, 2001c, paras. 19, 20). Initially, the president demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden and his associates, release and protect all foreign prisoners, and permanent closure of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. When the Taliban refused to comply, President George W. Bush ensured that the Taliban must share the fate of the terrorists. Therefore, by articulating them as "aides," "allies," "murderers," and "terrorists," he launched the "war on terrorism" against them in Afghanistan (Bush, 2001c, para. 19). He pressed on the fact that the Taliban "oppressed" and "brutalised" the Afghan people (Bush, 2001c, paras. 18, 19). Therefore, the "war on terror" was represented as a war to "liberate" Afghans with a promise of assistance and minimum civilian casualties (Bush, 2001a, p. 86). He declared this war as a mission of "courage defeating cruelty and light overcoming darkness" (Bush, 2001a, p. 90). President George W. Bush (2004, paras. 9, 14; 2002a, paras. 18–20) asserted the US was an "ally" and "partner" to Afghans and "promised" to support a post-Taliban government that represented all the Afghan people, in other words, democracy in Afghanistan.

President George W. Bush's narration of the 9/11 happening and the construction of American identity was in covariation with the American social context. Constructed in the language of liberal values and norms, President George W. Bush's discourse was intelligible and acceptable to the American audience and people at large, which eventually naturalised his discourse and provided the legitimacy to launch the "war on terror" in Afghanistan.

2.3. Discourse in Practice

The "war on terror" was launched in the name of Operation Enduring Freedom on October 7, 2001. By November, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were defeated and flew away to take refuge on the Pakistani side of the border (Rashid, 2009, pp. 96–99). After ousting the Taliban, an interim government under the leadership of Hamid Karzai was established in November 2001. At the time, President George W. Bush (2002b, para. 2) delivered a victory speech and described it as a moment of "justice." He stated that:

> In four short months...a great coalition captured, arrested, and rid the world of thousands of terrorists, destroyed Afghanistan's terrorist training camps, saved a people from starvation, and freed a country from brutal oppression....America and Afghanistan are now allies against terror. We'll be partners in rebuilding that country.

Furthermore, he congratulated Afghans on "the rebirth of a vibrant Afghan culture," a democracy (Bush, 2004, para. 6)

The process of rebirth of Afghan culture was interpreted in terms of cultivating a discourse of "modern Afghan" through a democratic state structure. To this end, the first Afghan Constitution was approved by Loya Jirga (grand tribal council) in 2004. Subsequently, four governments (Karzai in 2004 and 2009 and Ashraf Ghani in 2014 and 2020) were elected to ensure continuity in the democratic process. The Afghan National Army, police, and border forces were recruited, trained, and equipped to maintain peace and stability in Afghanistan. Many local warlords also joined this cultural reform project along with their soldiers and weapons and, in return, received generous monetary assistance from the US and its allies (I. Khan, personal communication, January 18, 2023; Sharan, 2022). Traditionally, Afghans have been more loyal to local rather than to national leaders (Gallup, 2023). Therefore, when the Taliban initiated an insurgency against the US and its foreign and local allies, the democratic Afghan government was largely confined to Kabul and could not ensure governance in remote or rural Afghanistan.

President Barack Obama (2009, paras. 8, 9) acknowledged the unfavourable situation in Afghanistan, stating that the Taliban has gained momentum. However, he outlined a three-pronged approach to address it. Firstly, he decided to send an additional 30,000 troops to improve the law-and-order situation. Secondly, he aimed to enhance the capacity of the Afghan government to deliver services and assume responsibility for Afghanistan. Lastly, he sought to dismantle terrorist safe havens in the border region of Pakistan. Despite these measures, President Obama's intention to end the war was evident when he urged coalition partners to coordinate efforts to "end this war successfully" (Obama, 2009, para. 23). This objective, he urged, must resonate with American values of "freedom," "justice," and "opportunity" (Obama, 2009, paras. 46, 49).

He envisioned an inclusive government as part of the end strategy, stating that America would support initiatives that bring reconciliation among the Afghan people, "including the Taliban" (Obama, 2009, para. 27). In 2012, after killing most of al-Qaeda leadership, including bin Laden, President Obama, during his address to the nation from Afghanistan, launched the idea of "negotiated peace" to affirm the possibility of negotiations with the Taliban. The President stated: "My administration has been in direct discussions with the Taliban. We've made it clear that they can be a part of this future if they break with al Qaeda, renounce violence and abide by Afghan laws" (Obama, 2012, para. 12). Furthermore, he clarified that the real objective of the US-led foreign presence in Afghanistan was neither to "build a country" nor to "eradicate every vestige of the Taliban" but to "destroy al-Qaeda" (Obama, 2012, para. 14). It reflected that amidst the increasing influence and control of the Taliban and the prolonged war, President Obama distinguished the Taliban from Al-Qaeda and portrayed them as stakeholders in the Afghan political system. For this purpose, he even allowed a group of Taliban to move to Qatar to establish its "Doha office" for negotiations with the then-President Karzai administration ("The history of the Taliban," 2021). In the end, Obama's narrative not only revised the official US stance but also paved the way for future one-on-one talks with the Taliban.

President Trump (2017, para.13) continued supporting the policy of ending the war by stating that "the American people are weary of war without victory. Nowhere is this more evident than with the war in Afghanistan, the longest war in American history—17 years." He clarified that the main objective of the US was not "nation-building" but "killing the terrorists" (Trump, 2017, para. 33). Therefore, to pursue an end to the Afghan war, the Trump administration initiated direct talks with the Taliban in Doha in 2018.

In this context of war weariness, the US–Taliban peace deal was concluded, without taking on board the incumbent Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani, on February 29, 2020. The deal broadly provided for a ceasefire between the US and the Taliban, safe passage for US and allied troops from Afghanistan, guarantees from the Taliban that the Afghan land would not be used for terrorism in future, prisoner exchange between the Taliban and Afghan security forces, lifting of all sanctions, and an invitation to the Taliban to join the intra-Afghan negotiations for a political solution in Afghanistan ("Joint declaration," 2020). President Trump endorsed this deal by saying that it was "time to bring our people back home" and, consequently, announced the withdrawal of all US troops by May 2021 ("Afghan conflict: Trump hails," 2020, para. 1). He added that the US has completed its job by killing "thousands" of terrorists and now, after the withdrawal, the Taliban must take up this responsibility ("Afghan conflict: Trump hails," 2020, para. 8). President Trump was criticised for an unconditional and hasty withdrawal policy, without any vivid plan for the evacuation of the US troops and their Afghan allies (The White House, 2023, p. 2). Nevertheless, Pew Research Survey revealed that 54% of the US adults viewed the withdrawal policy to be the "right" decision as compared to the 42% who regarded it as a "wrong" move (van Green & Doherty, 2021).

With the apprehensions of Afghans about the return of the Taliban, the US started withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan ("What to know about the Afghan," 2020). By the time, the newly elected US President Joe Biden took office, "the Taliban was in its strongest military position since 2001" (Biden, 2021, para. 24). When the final US troop extraction was executed, the Taliban had already captured Kabul and reinstated their government in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, President Biden (2021) announced the ending of America's "longest war" by arguing that America could not stay indefinitely and that it had already accomplished its objective: eliminating Al-Qaeda

leadership. The dramatic withdrawal of the US forces and their Afghan allies and the Taliban's resurgence to power poses a big question: What made the US failure and the Taliban's return possible in Afghanistan? I will now turn to Section 3 for the answer.

3. Discourse of "Tradition": Contesting the Discursive Reality of "Modern" Afghans

3.1. The Afghan Social Context

The Afghan social context is divided into various ethnicities and groups. The Afghan population (of almost 32.9 million) has been classified into multiple ethnic communities, Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, where Pashtuns form 40% and Tajiks 30% of the total population. Most of the Afghan population, almost 70%, are settled in rural areas.

Despite the ethnic diversity, Afghanistan may largely be defined as the land of Afghans (Dupree, 1980, p. xvii). Traditionally, a sense of Afghan unity has been generated in the name of Islam (Hamid, 2021). In the presence of foreign "occupying forces," religion becomes the most defining feature of Afghan society. Rubin (2007, p. 57) strongly asserted that Afghans have always rejected foreign occupation. Historically, they fought three wars with the British colonial power and, afterwards, the Soviet forces by articulating both as foreign occupiers. They represented themselves as "soldiers of God" to wage "jihad" against the invaders (Bearden, 2001, pp. 20, 24). Arguably, this radical jihadism can be attributed to Wahabi-Deobandi seminaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan (A. Khan, personal communication, May 15, 2023).

One may observe multiple interpretations of Islam, Sunni, and Shia; however, Sunnis form the majority in Afghanistan. Despite varied interpretations, Afghans take pride in their "Muslimness" and have been performing religious rituals adamantly. The Afghans are not orthodox Muslims; however, they believe in religious practices and symbolism, including prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, beard, lawful and unlawful rites prescribed in Islam (halal or haram), burqa or veil or women covering the head, etc. The Afghans hold great value in fighting a holy war (jihad). This value has generally subsumed in the Afghan tribal tradition of fighting for honour, for instance, women, protection of their guests, usurpers, occupiers, infidels, or avenging blood, etc. (Rubin, 2002, p. xxii). Among other subjects, a substantial part of Afghan folklore and legends have been based on the narration of figures and events from Islamic history (Dupree, 1980, pp. 112–131). Afghan Islam, therefore, is not orthodox but local and symbolic (Lee, 2018, p. 40). Along with traditions and culture, Islam is perceived as a guiding code of behaviour in Afghanistan.

3.2. The Communicative Event

The terrorist attacks in the US were perceived as a catastrophe and were condemned by the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abul Salam Zaeef. He said, "We want to tell the American children that Afghanistan feels your pain. We hope the courts find justice" ("Taliban diplomat condemns," 2001, para. 2). Zaeef made it clear that the Taliban hold respect for human life and condemn the indiscriminate killing of humans irrespective of religion. His response was in accordance with what bin Laden had explained in an interview before 9/11, that he was not against the "American people" but "policies" of the American government, which he regarded "unjust, criminal, and tyrannical" (KellyWurx Films, 1997).

Similarly, the Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omer ("Transcript: VOA," 2001) condemned the killings of innocent civilians in the US. He asserted that neither the Taliban gave "permission" to use their land for any terrorist activity, nor did bin Laden accept responsibility for the attacks. While completely rejecting the possibility of handing over bin Laden to the US, he regarded this demand as a violation of "Islam" and the "Afghan tradition" of hospitality and honour. By asserting that Islam believes in justice, he insisted America should "investigate" this matter. He asked for the "evidence" of bin Laden's involvement in the terrorist attacks so that he could be tried by the Afghan Supreme Court, or by clerics from any three Islamic countries, or may be placed under the observation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which the US utterly rejected (Omar, 2001). Since bin Laden was a guest and the Afghan tradition of hospitality demanded the protection of the guest, he could not be handed over to the US. Nevertheless, the Taliban tried hard for a diplomatic solution to US concerns. To avoid war, the Taliban, in a grand Jirga (tribal procession) of around 800 members, were even successful in seeking an agreement that bin Laden must leave Afghanistan (Tehelkatv, 2013). However, President George W. Bush was not convinced and had already decided to invade Afghanistan.

The central spokesperson for the Taliban, Zabihullah Mujahid (CTV News, 2022), articulated that the "war on terror" was "imposed" on the Afghan people. He completely rejected the American construction of the Taliban as "terrorists, killers, and savages." He explained that the Taliban are "civilised" and want to live "freely" in their country like any other nation in the world. He constituted the Taliban identity as "Muslims," "Afghans," and "reasonable" people who wanted to negotiate to avoid the war. Instead, he declared the US-led foreign forces as "occupiers" who have been involved in "transgression against Afghan people." Anas Haqqani (TRT World, 2021a), a senior Taliban leader, explained the transgression as excessive bombing, which led to indiscriminate civilian killings in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Zabihullah contended that Afghanistan is for "Afghans only" and no one has the right to occupy it. He justified the Taliban resistance (jihad) as a legitimate act in defence of the Afghan land and its traditions (TRT World, 2021b).

3.3. Discourse in Practice

The Taliban framed their resistance against the US-led foreign forces in the name of jihad. In an interview, Sirajuddin Haqqani (CNN, 2022), the deputy Taliban leader and present interior minister of Afghanistan, informed about this framing. By doing so, he constructed legitimacy for the Taliban resistance and framed this struggle as "jihad" (holy war against foreign, non-Muslim occupiers). The Taliban represented their fighters as "mujahideen" to craft a resemblance between the US "war on terror" and the Soviet invasion of 1979 (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 17). He asserted that the US did not get anything from this war, but it destroyed its reputation of a free society by committing serious violations of human rights in Guantanamo and Bagram prisons and in their conduct of the war in Afghanistan. To naturalise this discourse, the inmates narrated stories of their sufferings and widely circulated them among the Afghan public (International Crisis Group, 2008, pp.18–19).

In their counter-narrative to the liberal intervention, the Taliban articulated the process of democratisation as an "alien" concept and regarded that the foreigners came up with their own "agendas" which they wanted to "implement by any means … It's over now, and the puppet government is eliminated now" (TRT World, 2021a). In a media campaign, the Taliban explained the Western agenda by stating, "Non-Muslims and Westerners are implementing their own laws to spread immorality and corruption throughout Afghanistan and other Islamic

countries" (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 12). As revealed in the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit's study, Afghans understand democracy in terms of "unlimited and immoral freedoms" that have been largely associated with Western society (A. Larson, 2012, para. 6). Therefore, by declaring the democratic Afghan governments as "puppets," the Taliban warned that "We will never forgive those people who brought the Americans to our territory and those who entered Kabul supported by American warplanes, because the nation will never forgive them: they have sold their Afghan identity and freedom" (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 22).

On the other hand, in practice, the Afghan democratic government was inefficient and marred by corruption allegations. In one of the reports of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2016, pp. 19, 77), it was acknowledged that by "legitimizing warlords with political and financial support, the United States helped empower a class of strongmen at the local and national levels who had conflicted allegiances between their own power networks and the Afghan state." Consequently, the US faced resistance to its political and economic reform projects in the local Afghan context (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2021, p. 73).

Picking up on this, Amir Khan Muttaqi (Geo News, 2021), senior Taliban commander and the present minister for foreign affairs, asserted that whatever reforms or democracy the US initiated, it was rejected as an alien or foreign idea and, therefore, could not resolve the problems of Afghans. He believed that the foreigners disrespected Afghans, especially women, and their traditions. He represented the Taliban as guardians of Afghan traditions and claimed that the Taliban governed for the betterment of Afghan people and in accordance with Afghan "traditions and Islamic principles." For him, Taliban have been the most "successful experiment" as they ousted the "external powers" and brought unity, security, and peace to Afghanistan. Moreover, he insisted that the Afghans only aspire for peace and stability, and no one could deliver it except the Taliban.

Interestingly, the Taliban kept themselves relevant and visible in society without participating in the democratic process. The democratisation was largely confined to cities; however, in rural settings, the Taliban and their political and judicial systems were the ground reality (A women aid worker in Kabul, personal communication, January 5, 2023; O'Hanlon, 2010; Raghavan, 2021; "Taliban rule sparks hopes," 2021). Their narrative was empowered further by the deteriorated law and order situation (a large number of suicide attacks, remotely detonated bombing incidents), indiscriminative killings of Afghan civilians in the prolonged war, and the poor performance of corrupt Afghan democratic governments. It mounted anti-US sentiments in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, therefore, constructed the discourse of "tradition" in reflection of its culture. Framed in the language of Islam and Afghan tradition, the Taliban's narrative successfully resonated among most of the rural population, and with sustained armed resistance, they regained Kabul on August 15, 2021. The foreign forces concluded a peace agreement with the Taliban and consequently accepted them as a "reality" of Afghanistan.

4. Discussion: Identity Discourses of "Modern" and "Tradition" and Their Meaning for the Failure of Liberal Interventionism

In this study, the failure of liberal intervention is explained by looking into how the discourse of "modern" was challenged and replaced by another identity discourse of "tradition" in the context of Afghanistan.

The hegemonic discourse of "modern" articulated and represented by the US-led liberal forces not only constructed a justification for intervention but also naturalised a specific "reality" which, consequently, provided legitimacy to stay and establish a democratic structure in Afghanistan, albeit it failed. To explain, it is important to analyse how, when, and why this discursively constructed reality was denaturalised; challenged and consequently replaced, by another reality, discourse of "tradition," articulated and represented by the Taliban.

The discourse of "modern" became powerful by naturalising the "reality" of liberal intervention as just and legitimate in the wake of 9/11. Along with material factors, power has ideational and normative orientations, generating consent or common agreement to accept it (Lears, 1985, pp. 568–569). In this vein, Laclau and Mouffe (2014) named this process of consent generation as discourse. Therefore, it can be argued that the "reality" of liberal intervention has been nothing but meaningful practices (discourse) to establish power relations. The "modern" discourse was articulated in the language of "terrorism" and "oppression" with an aim to liberate Afghan people from the tyrannical rule of the Taliban. In doing so, a specific identity of the Taliban was constructed as "oppressors" and "uncivilised," posing a threat to global peace and order. By linking these meanings with the larger liberal discourse of "individual freedom," the "modern" discourse partook the institutional power and, therefore, became hegemonic, accepted as "reality" by the majority of people. By articulating socially intelligible meanings and representations, the "modern" discourse and the discursive identity of the Taliban as "others" (terrorists and oppressors) were produced and naturalised in Afghanistan.

On the flip side, Laclau and Mouffe (2014) suggest that social change requires an alternative discourse that could frame power and inequality as "oppression." The discursive change entails a process where newly articulated meanings (a common thread which is socially interpreted) generate support from a larger and diverse audience and can provide a viable alternative (how an alternative society looks like). Laclau (1991) warns against viewing social and the social agent in terms of fixity. In fact, the social is situated in an "infinitude of meanings and differences" (various discourses), and so is the identity of a social agent, which is "nothing but the unstable articulation of constantly changing positionalities" (Laclau, 1991, pp. 25–26). The impossibility of fixing meanings or associating a deterministic character to the social and the identity of the social agent brings about the change. Therefore, when social (discourse) changes, it also produces and naturalises new identities of the social agent (actors). It implies that, instead of questioning the social change as true or false, right or wrong, (un)just, (in)appropriate, the ultimate test of a discursive reality is acceptability and a shared agreement among diverse social groups in a given context.

In the Afghan context, the Taliban denaturalised "modern" discourse by framing it as "oppression," and "occupation." As described in Section 1, the Taliban have demonstrated agility or adaptability in the battleground. By recruiting other ethnic minority groups (non-Pashtuns) as part of their resistance movement, they garnered more acceptability and, consequently, power to the discourse of "tradition" (Bezhan, 2016; Farrell, 2022; Giustozzi, 2010). Moreover, by ensuring security, and providing speedy justice, they offered a viable administrative alternative to the corrupt, incapable, and exclusive Kabul-based Afghan government (Coburn, 2016; Dorronsoro, 2009; Thomas, 2021). They represented the Afghan government as "puppets" or "stooge" of the West and therefore did not strictly represent the people of Afghanistan (Jones, 2020). Later, by associating the "tradition" discourse with the existing larger discourses of Afghan identity (Islam, Afghan culture, and resistance to foreign occupation), the Taliban earned more acceptability among

most of the diverse social groups and, consequently, the discourse of "tradition" became powerful enough to won over the discourse of "modern." Carter Malkasian (2021, pp. 5–6), a former advisor to the US military commanders in Afghanistan, in his book *The American War in Afghanistan*, elaborated that:

> The Taliban exemplified something that inspired, something that made them powerful in battle, something closely tied to what it meant to be Afghan. In simple terms, they fought for Islam and resistance to occupation, values enshrined in Afghan identity. Aligned with foreign occupiers, the government mustered no similar inspiration. It could not get its supporters, even if they outnumbered the Taliban, to go to the same lengths. Its claim to Islam was fraught. The very presence of Americans in Afghanistan trod on what it meant to be Afghan. It prodded at men and women to defend their honor, their religion, and their home. It dared young men to fight. It animated the Taliban. It sapped the will of Afghan soldiers and police. When they clashed, Taliban were more willing to kill and be killed than soldiers and police, or at least a good number of them….The Taliban's tie to what it meant to be Afghan was necessary to America's defeat in Afghanistan.

It reflects that the Taliban superimposed the discourse of "tradition" and constructed the reality of "war on terror" in the social context of Afghanistan, which was largely understandable to most of the local Afghans. Articulated in the language of Islam and Afghan culture, the diverse Afghan masses largely accepted the discourse of "tradition" and eventually weakened the competitor discourse of "modern." It made the relevance or legitimacy of the Taliban in the Afghan context, provided them with domestic support in their armed resistance against the US and NATO forces, and eventually paved their way to power.

As a result, when the US declared the end of its "longest war," the Taliban emerged as the most influential political authority in Afghanistan. This reality was further solidified when the US, without involving the incumbent democratic regime in Kabul, reached an agreement with the Taliban for the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan (Dobbins et al., 2019). Following an unconditional surrender by the Afghan security forces and the discreet departure of President Ashraf Ghani, the Taliban successfully seized control of Kabul on August 15, 2021.

The "modern" discourse articulated the reality of the "war on terror" in a language of American values and basic freedoms (democracy) and was intelligible for the American and Western liberal audiences at large. Once operationalised, it became performative and provided legitimacy to both liberal intervention and interventionists. This discourse was practised widely at the institutional level and got naturalised and later hegemonised over time. In the event of the Taliban as an unchanging ground reality, the US official narrative was revised, and so was its foreign policy behaviour.

The knowledge production practices in the Anglosphere where Afghanistan was imagined in the self-reflection of the West, facilitated the "modern" liberal project in Afghanistan. The Afghans were represented in tropes of "tribal," "racist," "dangerous," "isolated," "antiforeign," and "economically impoverished," which justified not only the intervention but also the establishment of democratic structures in Afghanistan (Hanifi, 2011; Machanda, 2020; Savic, 2020). The liberal discourse of "modern," which constructed democracy as a solution to war, was specific to the Western context. Therefore, when it was employed in the non-Western context—Afghanistan—it did not work.

5. Conclusion

The study of language in context provides insights into the question of the US-led liberal intervention, negotiations, failure, and withdrawal, as well as the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. It establishes the relationship between context, text, and practices through the lens of CDA. The analysis of text; interviews, speeches, and statements from prominent leaders on both sides, liberals and the Taliban, inform on how specific identity discourses have been constructed, naturalised, and denaturalised. Both sides have strategically utilised the interpellation process by institutionalising their respective discourses, thereby, making them appear as common sense to the audience. The discourse and discursive identities appeared to be in flux, situated in an infinitude of socio-cultural meanings. Once meanings are discursively changed and socially accepted, it brings about the change. It highlights how the discourse of "tradition" challenges and replaces the discourse of "modern" and, ultimately, facilitates the failure of liberal intervention in Afghanistan.

Bringing social context into discourse, the failure of the US-led liberal intervention demonstrates that it had a very poor understanding of Afghan society and its traditions, and the Taliban vividly exploited this weakness of the US and NATO forces. It reflected that the military power failed to deliver in front of social forces. The discourse of "tradition" overpowered the discourse of "modern" and, subsequently, facilitated the return of the Taliban to power. Taliban's rhetoric of traditional Afghan values, Islam, and jihad against the "occupied forces" appealed to most of the Afghan social groups, who happened to be less educated and more traditional and religious as opposed to the modern, educated, and secular urban minority. Hence, the Taliban intelligently used this factor as a power base of their narrative against the liberal intervention and won more support in Afghan society, helping them come to power in the event of US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Wagner Group Flows: A Two-Fold Challenge to Liberal Intervention and Liberal Order

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Abstract

Focusing on Wagner Group (WG) forces, liberal interveners too readily dismiss the scope of WG's Africa engagements, including economic and political "flows" that, in combination, challenge liberal interveners' taken-for-granted access in several states on the African continent. Operationalising the notion of "flows," we present an analysis that foregrounds both the scope of WG's Africa engagements and the challenges. We portray WG as a broad enterprise by attending to military, economic, and political flows. This broadening is relevant to how WG is understood to challenge liberal interveners. Besides country-specific challenges to liberal interveners' access (notably in states where they have been asked to depart or co-exist with WG), a broader reading of WG's Africa presence also foregrounds challenges at a different level, namely to liberal interveners' assumptions about the inevitable attractiveness of the liberal international order. A liberal order that Russia has utilised WG's Africa presence to contest. As such, challenges at the level of liberal order go beyond WG's Africa presence and must, therefore, be viewed alongside other challenges to liberal intervention and order, from the Taliban's takeover of Kabul to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. If liberal interveners' missteps and historicity, as well as the scope of WG's Africa engagements, remain underappreciated, then various challenges specific to the WG, but also broader challenges to liberal interveners' assumptions about liberal order as self-evidently attractive, are too readily dismissed. Liberal actors' dismissiveness may invite misguided responses and unintentionally become an enabling factor for WG's influence in Africa.

Keywords

Africa; flows; liberal intervention; liberal order; Wagner Group

1. Introduction

Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine (since February 2022) and the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan (August 2021) illuminate how multiple crises confront liberal interveners and the liberal international order. In different ways, "Kabul" and "Kyiv" (the theme of this thematic issue) deepen liberal interventionism's longstanding crisis. Linked to Ukraine in origin and presence is the Russian-owned paramilitary Wagner Group (WG), whose growing presence in Africa illustrates key challenges confronting liberal interveners. Such challenges are, however, not "only" about WG but also about Russia. Not only has the presence of WG in Africa shifted from "plausible" (Rabin, 2019) to "implausible" deniability (Stronski, 2020) in terms of the discernibility of its links to the Kremlin, a shift can also be observed in how some African leaders represent WG and Russia as interchangeable and announce increasingly more openly when they choose to partner with WG—in a move that often simultaneously implies de-selecting liberal interveners in favour not just of WG but of Russia. In several ways, WG's Africa presence challenges the liberal order that Russia also opposes when invading Ukraine. Thus, assumptions about liberal interveners as self-evidently attractive representatives of the global liberal order add to longstanding challenges that were accentuated much earlier, for example, with the fall of Kabul after two decades of liberal intervention presence (Dodge, 2021). As such, the presence of WG in Africa forms part of broader challenges to an often taken-for-granted narrative about liberal order and liberal values as self-evidently desirable, which is neither the case in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan nor in African states that partner with WG while asking liberal actors to leave.

Whilst WG activities in Ukraine changed immediately after WG leader Prigozhin's mutiny attempt (24 June 2023), no major changes were observed in WG engagements on the African continent during the two months between the mutiny attempt and the death of Prigozhin (23 August 2023). Initially, several indications suggested that WG would, at least in the short term, remain a relevant player in Africa, and continue to serve as a tool through which to boost Putin's global ambitions. These indications included Prigozhin being spotted at the July 2023 Russia–Africa Summit, shaking hands with Ambassador Freddy Mapouka, advisor to the president of the Central African Republic (CAR; "Prigozhin: Wagner boss spotted in Russia during Africa summit," 2023); no withdrawals of WG from Africa being observed (indeed, additional WG forces arrived in CAR prior to the July 2023 referendum; "Wagner forces arrive in CAR before referendum," 2023); and no African leader terminating their collaboration with WG. However, the future of WG's Africa engagements was seriously challenged with the death of Prigozhin. Nevertheless, despite these dramatic developments, analysing WG's Africa engagements still offers significant insights into a specific hybrid governance model, combining private and public actors. This model is one that, so we argue, will remain important beyond questions about the future of WG in Africa. Understanding the combination of military, political, and economic flows that have characterised WG's manifold engagements in Africa provides insights into how WG (or a similar actor) has come to represent an attractive alternative to liberal interveners, to their presence, and to the liberal order which their presence represents. Also, whilst the future of WG has been cast into doubt, nothing suggests a diminishing of Putin's ambition to challenge precisely that liberal order through means and in locations beyond the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine.

This article examines the political and economic dimensions of WG's Africa engagements beyond WG forces, arguing that WG is more than a successful enterprise, indeed a more widely applicable model. We then deepen the analysis of WG flows by looking at conditions that enable WG flows, including increasing sympathy for Russia's broader appeal to an alternative to the dominant liberal order, whose supposedly

undeniable appeal served as a taken-for-granted premise of liberal interveners' invitation to engage in African states. By appreciating the military, economic, and political dimensions of WG's African presence through an analytical lens that also foregrounds questions about enabling conditions vis-à-vis these flows, it becomes possible to recognise two ways WG's African presence adds to longstanding challenges confronting liberal intervention. The combination of military and political instruments offered by WG in return for access to economic resources (from mining to forestry) might be an attractive combination of factors. However, that attractiveness cannot be understood in isolation from external enabling factors, including anti-colonial sentiments and failures of liberal intervention to deliver improved stability, combined with the interest on the part of Putin in augmenting such dissatisfaction to buttress both WG and Russia's influence in an increasing number of African states. As such, WG may represent a potentially attractive and self-financing alternative not only to demands (elections), gaps (in security provision), and failures of some of liberal interventionism's Africa engagements but also to the global liberal order that these liberal interveners represent, and within which African states have long voiced a desire for genuine recognition. The WG model may likely be continued or copied by other private military companies (PMCs), either related to Russia or other countries, and hence, the analysis presented in this article remains valuable despite the unknown future of WG's Africa engagements. Importantly, the model has proven useful for Russia in gaining influence and access across the African continent. It is, therefore, likely that Russia (and other states) may continue using this model, whether the name is WG or not. Furthermore, challenges to and shortcomings of liberal intervention will also remain relevant to address, irrespective of the future of WG.

2. Situating WG: PMC Debates and Critique of Liberal Intervention

Focusing on WG, this article contributes to a field of scholarly work on both Russian private security and private security actors in Africa. Bátora (2021, p. 1445) argues that a recent tendency for states to use PMCs to challenge opponents by getting "involved in various aspects of war without necessarily following all the norms and rules traditionally associated with war." Operating between private markets, military establishments, and cooperate governance, PMCs sometimes bypass norms and rules traditionally associated with war (Bátora, 2021). Spearin (2018, p. 40) argues that while many governments hire private security actors, Russian PMCs are utilised specifically concerning Russia's "grey zone challenge." Earlier work on private security stresses how PMCs sometimes become integrated into the economy of the countries with which they engage. Leander (2006), for example, points to the executive outcomes model, where security is de facto swopped for extractive rights in the country (Leander, 2006, p. 60). Others show how outsourcing, privatisation and public–private partnerships have become normal ways for governments to reduce spending and bureaucracy within the security and military sector (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2009; Eichler, 2014). Much of the work on private security has focused on the political nature of the private security sector, in its interconnectedness with governments that employ them. Abrahamsen and Williams (2007) argue that private security actors do not entirely oppose state power but draw legitimacy precisely from their links to the state. This linkage entails a hybrid form of governance involving private, public, and local and global actors (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2007).

This article contributes to this literature by analysing WG in Africa as not only a military but also an economic and political player, foregrounding often-overlooked dimensions of WG's African presence. Focusing on WG's economic and political (also great-power political) dimensions allows us to unpack how WG's Africa engagements challenge liberal interveners in specific African states but also vis-a-vis broader

assumptions about the liberal order as self-evidently attractive. Attending to military, political, and economic dimensions challenges how the scope and variety of WG's Africa engagements may be underestimated if the focus is more narrowly on "semi-state security forces" (Marten, 2019, p. 181), i.e., WG forces that are or have been present in a handful of African states (so far Libya, CAR, Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan). Whilst the growing presence of WG forces in Africa is important, this dimension must be understood in collaboration with the *political* and *economic* dimensions of WG activities. Conceptualising WG as "more than mercenaries" (Ehl, 2023) not only presents a different map of WG's Africa presence but also highlights additional (e.g., economic) links between WG and Ukraine, and posits challenges to the liberal order. Pokalova (2023), looking at four African country cases, argues that WG is best described as a quasi-state foreign policy agent of influence working for Russia. She further argues: "Instead of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Kremlin has relied on Wagner to spread authoritarianism and illiberalism" (Pokalova, 2023, p. 16).

Moreover, the map of WG's Africa engagements changes significantly when including the political and economic dimensions of WG's engagements. Rather than a handful of African states with WG mercenaries, a map that incorporates political/economic engagements of WG covers more than twice as many states, including Madagascar, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and several others (Stanyard et al., 2023). Finally, including these additional dimensions demonstrates how WG is an enterprise whose footprints in Africa entail links of significance beyond the African continent, including economic dimensions that may finance WG activities in Ukraine (before the mutiny attempt and subsequent death of Prigozhin) and/or help Russia endure despite sanctions.

Regarding the focus on liberal interveners, this article draws not only on PMC literature but also on critical scholarship on liberal intervention, stressing how the challenges represented by WG are best understood in a broader context of a longstanding critique of liberal interventionism, as argued in scholarly work, for example, on the neglect of African agency and related calls to decolonise liberal interventions (Sabaratnam, 2017). Our analysis critically unpacks key logic underpinning liberal interveners' explanations of WG's growing footprints in Africa. Adding this dimension makes it possible to underscore a broader tendency to neglect the *multiplicity* of crises that liberal interveners confront. Alongside misleading representation of WG are repeated flaws in liberal interveners' shifting accounts of WG's attractiveness in some African contexts. Nevertheless, focusing narrowly on WG risks externalising key reasons for liberal interventions' challenges. The repeated phenomenon of liberal interveners becoming un-invited in favour of WG cannot be explained simply as resulting from a great power vacuum created by liberal interveners downscaling or by Russian disinformation alone—which also erroneously risks portraying African partners as falsely informed in their choices. Across liberal interveners' shifting explanations—from vacuum to disinformation—is a shared logic. Both explanations deny African states significant agency *and* neglect the need for liberal interveners to address internal shortcomings.

In using the term "liberal interveners," the article neither intends to belittle differences between intervention actors as diverse as the US, France, and the EU nor to reinforce any simplistic idea of these actors as flawlessly liberal actors. We have unpacked a critique of their shortcomings elsewhere (Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023). The point here is to stress that we will be specific and mention the EU when we, for example, discuss specific EU Training Missions in CAR or France, where we discuss Mali. That said, it is at the same time important to note that where WG's Africa presence challenges the influence of specific liberal interveners in specific African states, there is simultaneously a degree to which doing so serves a broader Russian ambition

of challenging not any single liberal intervener, but the liberal order which they represent (imperfectly). Interpreting the WG as challenging only the US or only France risks missing that broader picture of how the WG instruments have worked or been useful for Putin's Russia in undermining liberal order, challenging US, French, *and* European allies' areas of operations.

3. A Flows Framework

To make an argument about expanding WG footprints in Africa and about the logics that underpin liberal interveners' explanations thereof, we operationalise the notion of "flows" into a two-fold framework. As an analytical concept, "flows" has been used in various literatures, from anthropology to infrastructure scholarship, criminology, and migration studies. However, limited attention has been paid to the value of this concept in critical intervention studies and debates about the crisis of liberal interventionism. Analysing WG through a lens that stresses *material* and *immaterial* flows (Larkin, 2013; Law, 2006) foregrounds often overlooked links between Kabul (liberal interventions manifold crisis) and Kyiv, where WG partakes in the war in Ukraine and in Russia's global efforts to challenge the liberal world order—including via WG engagements in Africa. Few scholars have focused on flows in intervention contexts. Such scholarship includes analyses of specific nodes in material intervention flows—like ports (Hönke & Cuesta-Fernandez, 2018; Stepputat & Hagmann, 2019) or roadblocks (Schouten, 2022)—or analyses with a thematic focus—e.g., on financial flows and counterterror (de Goede, 2018) or humanitarian intervention and data flows (Jacobsen, 2021). We build on this scholarship when analysing WG flows. Applying this analytical lens helpfully demonstrates the scope of and enabling conditions underpinning WG engagements in Africa.

Specifically, we draw on the notion of "flow" developed in Larkin's account of "infrastructure debates" in anthropology (Larkin, 2013). Larkin stresses the importance of attending to both material and immaterial flows, to concrete flows (like mining equipment) and less visible flows (like expectations), and to how such flows are enabled or disabled by infrastructures understood as socio-technical platforms for mobility (Larkin, 2013). Contextualising the analysis of WG flows vis-à-vis questions about "enabling conditions" underpinning those flows helps situate how WG engagements in Africa challenge liberal interveners not just at the level of flows but also at the level of enabling conditions. This contextualisation helps place WG's Africa presence alongside other developments that also challenge assumptions about liberal order as undeniably appealing, including challenges posed by the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. Together, several developments challenge liberal interveners' ways of seeing themselves, including taken-for-granted assumptions. Instead of allowing the focus on WG to displace attention to challenges posed, for example, by the fall of Kabul, considering failures in Afghanistan alongside WG's increased engagements in Africa suggest a broader challenge to the assumption of liberal values and liberal order as self-evidently appealing, and as an entry-guarantee to liberal interveners.

In short, we explore three types of WG flows (military, economic, and political) and combine intervention studies and infrastructure insights. We suggest that the challenges these flows represent must be appreciated at two levels: the level of concrete flows and how they challenge liberal interveners' access, and the level of conditions and assumptions underpinning such access, with challenges at that level, jeopardising not only access but liberal order and the seemingly self-evident appeal of the liberal approach. Put differently, we operationalise flows as a lens through which to offer a broader reading of WG's Africa presence (three flows) *and* a broader reading of challenges at the level of enabling conditions underpinning liberal access—challenges

that WG is only one example of and which liberal interveners must appreciate not in isolation from, but as adding to, a wider set of challenges to the liberal order, which brings our argument back to Kabul and the takeover of the Taliban. This latter point is developed by taking seriously Larkin's focus on enabling conditions, which highlights a second type of challenge: not only to liberal access in a particular (African) state but to the broader attractiveness of liberal order as key conditions enabling the intervention presence through which that order is (re)produced—or not.

Based on this conceptualisation of flows and enabling conditions, the subsequent analysis first explores material and immaterial WG flows. Next, it explores enabling conditions to explain the broader significance of these flows. This two-fold analysis shows how challenges to liberal intervention presence are not reducible to WG but best understood by placing WG's Africa engagements alongside, rather than in isolation from, a broader set of challenges confronting contemporary liberal intervention and liberal order.

4. Analysing Military, Economic, and Political WG Flows

WG is an irregular military formation, consequently referred to as a PMC in Russia. The group previously worked largely as a shadowy (Larsen, 2023) grey-zone force, i.e., not completely state-owned but with too close ties to the Russian state to be considered solely a private entity. Yet, this changed during Russia's war in Ukraine, where WG, along with its founder Yevgeniy Prigozhin, took a more public position after acknowledging his role regarding WG. Initial reactions to Russia's war in Ukraine included voices arguing that this would end Russia's African presence. Yet this situation does not seem to be the case. WG flows not only sustain WG with soldiers, knowledge, equipment, and economic resources but are also enabled by, and at the same time strengthen, the Russian narrative of Russia as an alternative to a world order dominated by the liberal West, broadly understood.

4.1. Military, Political, and Economic Flows

In analysing WG flows that include military, political, and economic flows, we draw not only on the above-mentioned PMC scholarship but also on scholarship which has paved the way for attending to the influence of expertise and knowledge in the domains of international development (Fouksman, 2016) and security (Berling & Bueger, 2015)—not only in Western contexts but also in what others refer to as "South–South" knowledge travelling (Moe & Müller, 2018).

4.1.1. Military Flows

Apart from the Russian WG soldiers that flow from Russia to some African countries as WG fighters, WG also has an established modus operandi of recruiting "third country nationals" to their engagements worldwide. This recruitment method has sent Syrians to Libya ("Exclusive: Russian hiring of Syrians to fight in Libya," 2020) and soldiers from CAR, Syria, and Libya to fight on behalf of WG in Mali (Etahoben, 2022). Reports also suggest that WG was sending soldiers from CAR and Syria to fight on behalf of Russia and WG in Ukraine (Obaji, 2022b; "Ukraine: Wagner Group begins relocating Syrian fighters," 2022). Syrians for Truth and Justice ("Ukraine: Wagner Group begins relocating Syrian fighters," 2022) confirms these military flows of WG fighters from Syria to Libya, establishing how thousands of fighters recruited in Syria were sent to work for WG in Libya (Assad, 2020; "Exclusive: Russian hiring of Syrians to fight in Libya," 2020). Not only do

soldiers "flow" between different battlefields, but recruitment models—as a type of immaterial military flow—also shift between locations. Since WG began recruiting in Russian prisons, reports suggest that WG have also been recruiting from prisons in CAR, giving detained rebels the choice of going to trial in CAR or going to Ukraine to fight for Russia (Obaji, 2022a). Thus, attending also to immaterial WG military flows highlights how not only mercenaries but also recruitment models flow between different contexts where WG engages.

4.1.2. Economic Flows

Whilst WG forces are indeed important, focusing too narrowly on military flows risk neglecting other aspects that give a different account of WG's engagements in Africa and of how—besides mercenaries moving between Russia, Ukraine, and Africa—these WG engagements in Africa also have other links to Ukraine, including funding streams. Scholars have argued that the economic side of the WG operations is "a well-entrenched economic system through which the group funds its operations as opposed to being financed through the Russian government" (Pokalova, 2023, p. 17).

CAR is currently the country where WG has the largest, most diverse, and most visible economic footprint (Stanyard et al., 2023). Since WG arrived in CAR in 2017, Prigozhin and WG, for example, took over parts of CAR's diamond mining (All Eyes on Wagner et al., 2022; Laruelle & Limonier, 2021). WG is also engaged in various other economic activities in CAR, from timber production and export ("Come follow the redwood trees," 2022) to gold mining (US Department of the Treasury, 2023), collecting coffee taxes (Etahoben, 2022), as well as producing and selling alcohol to local markets in CAR (Oliver, 2022). WG operates alongside the local forces (FACA) in areas where they use military power to secure access to natural resources, for example, near mines or forests ("Come follow the redwood trees," 2022). Joseph Bendounga, head of the opposition party Democratic Movement for the Renaissance and Evolution of Central Africa, said about Russia's economic presence: "In all areas that bring in money, including customs and taxes, the Russians are the masters" (Ehl, 2023). The economic embeddedness of WG in CAR indicates that—even given Prigozhin's death—WG or a similar group is likely to stay and may have found a "business" model that could serve as inspiration elsewhere (Larsen & Jacobsen, 2023).

CAR is not the only country where WG has set up local branches of mining companies. The extraction of natural resources is part of WG's modus operandi. Local mining companies are also set up in Sudan, Mali, and Madagascar. Russia and WG's operations in Sudan similarly point to large illicit economic activity. Russian-owned companies, like the Kush E&P and the formerly Prigozhin-linked company M-Invest, have signed contracts in Sudan for gold extraction (Owen, 2022). Gold is allegedly smuggled out of Sudan to Russia, enabled by Russia's close relationship with Mohamed "Hemedti" Hamdan Daglo, the deputy of the Sovereign Council of Sudan (Collins, 2022; "Sudan's Burhan sacks RSF head," 2023).

4.1.3. Political Flows

Why are Europe and the US so concerned about WG? Because WG represents more than just a business enterprise that uses violent methods as their standard operating procedure. The WG model also includes political aspects, like information campaigns, political strategists, and diplomatic agents (Dossier Center, 2019; Pokalova, 2023). The flows of such information campaigners were coordinated between Prigozhin's

"head office" in Saint Petersburg and local offices in CAR. Likewise, campaigns to keep the then President of Sudan, al-Bashir, in power were buttressed by inspiration from similar campaigns from Russia (Popkov, 2019). Prigozhin also financed Russian political scientists from Saint Petersburg who worked under the frame of "the Africa Project" ("Kommersant: Yevgeniy Prigozhin finansiruyet rabotu," 2018) in countries like Madagascar, South Africa, and Kenya during periods preceding elections. The previously Prigozhin-related Foundation for National Values Protection (FZNC), run by Maksim Shugalei and Aleksandr Malkevich, creates opinion polls that, for example, show France, the US, and the West as increasingly unpopular whilst presenting the country's heads of state as well as Russia as increasingly popular. That foundation is or has been operating in Mali, CAR, Sudan, and Afghanistan (according to FZNC's website, which has, since the time of writing this article, been taken down) and it is under sanctions from the US for facilitating Prigozhin's international influence, also in Africa (US Department of the Treasury, 2021).

The anti-Western narratives that both WG-related entities and official Russian channels deliberately spread in Africa are highly critical of European states' colonial histories and current interventions. They portray Russia and WG as supporting African states' fight for sovereignty and recognition vis-à-vis former colonial powers and the dominance of Western states. Such narratives have, for example, circulated in carefully crafted animation videos, portraying WG as saving African states from the French depicted as zombies or greedy rats leaving the African population to starve, and as pythons terrorising Africa (Souley, 2023). Similar narratives are conveyed via movies produced by Prigozhin, for example, the Hollywood-style action movie *The Tourist*, produced in CAR, featuring local actors alongside Russian actors and portraying WG as saving CAR (Di Roma & Valade, 2022). The lead character, a Russian PMC member, distinguishes American interventions from Russian ones by explaining how "Americans say they fight for democracy; Russians fight for justice" (Shukla, 2021). Prigozhin would later repeat this phrase, for example, in his accounts of WG as an ideological army (e.g., on Telegram in 2023).

4.1.4. Military, Economic, and Political Flows Combined: A "WG Model"?

Not only is the future of WG mercenaries tasked with providing security assistance to several African states uncertain but so is the future of WG's "broad network of shell companies and financial intermediaries," including many in Africa (Doxsee et al., 2023, p. 1). Whilst these economic flows are important in their own right, it is significant to note, for the argument presented here, that they form part of a WG model that combines economic, military, and political flows into attractive combinations—for African leaders and as a flexible influence tool for Putin's global ambitions.

For African leaders, combining economic and military dimensions in ways that enable the flow of mercenaries without an immediate bill is attractive, especially in cases where the rights granted to WG were not benefitting the leader much anyway. As in an example from CAR, one of "Wagner's most significant gold mining operations" (Doxsee et al., 2023, p. 2) was granted to WG after CAR's 2019 cancellation of two licences granted to Canadian firm Axmin (Stanyard et al., 2023). Not only was the combination of military and economic flows key in ensuring access to the mine in areas beyond government control, where mining companies need the state to guarantee their safe access to a mining area, WG offers to secure that access themselves. As reported, WG forces encountered casualties when confronting the rebel groups in the mining areas (Salih & Burke, 2023).

Furthermore, the cancellation also potentially indicates that CAR regarded WG's offer as more attractive, likely owing to how that offer was tied to an inflow of WG mercenaries to CAR to secure mining access and the security of the regime ("After a false start, the fate of the Ndassima mine could be settled in Abidjan," 2021). Another combination offered by the WG model, which is attractive for some African leaders, is the combination of military flows and political flows (e.g., political strategists), where the latter does not (in contrast to liberal interveners' security assistance) demand democratic elections as a condition for providing security, but may offer military assistance in tandem with political influence tools through which to help heads of states stay in power—rather than risk their position in a democratic election. Crucially, this is not meant to glorify democratic elections but also ones that liberal actors have applauded. Consider, for example, that sometimes elections are "won" not only with the most votes but also by violence.

Looking at military, economic, and political WG flows illuminates how WG is much more than mercenaries and foregrounds the significance of appreciating, for example, how WG serves as a political tool that feeds off, as well as boosts, the appeal of anti-Western narratives, and—also in that regard—challenge liberal access and liberal order via means that add to and are often used in combination with WG's economic and military flows into several African contexts.

4.2. WG Flows Challenge not Only the Liberal Intervener's Access but Also the Liberal Order's Attractiveness

Crucially, WG is also a tool of great-power politics, which, in that capacity, challenges not only access in an increasing number of African states but also the same assumptions about the liberal world order's presumed attractiveness that Russia's war in Ukraine challenges, albeit in quite different ways. Indeed, WG poses significant challenges to otherwise taken-for-granted assumptions by liberal interveners. Russia has long sought to establish itself as an alternative to a Western-dominated, liberal order, and this challenge did not begin with the war in Ukraine. However, appealing to the desirability of a new and more inclusive international order and placing Russia as an attractive alternative to liberal dominance has been an important part of Russia's strategy in its recent return to Africa.

4.2.1. WG Political Flows and Russia's Anti-Western Narratives

Narratives of this type also circulate in official Russian discourse. For example, in the declaration from the 2019 edition of Putin's Russia–Africa Summit, the signatories expressed their:

> Firm intention to fully contribute to achieving international peace and security and to building a more just and equitable system of international relations based on the principles of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs of states, preservation of national identity and civilizational diversity. (The Roscongress Foundation, 2019)

Signatories furthermore agreed to develop a dialogue based on a shared commitment to a "multilateral world order" (The Roscongress Foundation, 2019). The position of Russia and the US in these anti-Western world order narratives was spelt out in President Putin's address on 24 February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. Several passages from Putin's speech illustrate how Russia intends to create an alternative to the liberal (US-dominated) world order and how that intent is tied to narratives that challenge liberal

interventions, going back to before WG even existed (Putin, 2022). Articulated at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, this narrative is not new. At least since 2007, Putin has stressed how "the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world" (Putin, 2007), adding how "one state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations" (Putin, 2007).

Russia's narratives challenge the West directly and indirectly by positioning Russia as protecting African sovereignty and negatively pointing to European colonial history and US dominance. These narratives have gained resonance in several African states. In Mali, for example, Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop said that "by choosing to strengthen cooperation with Russia, Mali...wants to show and demonstrate that we are not going to continue to justify ourselves for our choice of partners" ("Mali says no need to justify Russia as partner," 2023). In CAR, the link between WG and Russia is obvious. As Fidéle Gouandjika, advisor to the president of CAR, explained:

> We accept them [WG forces], and we would love to have France's Foreign Legion, the mercenaries from France or the US, as in Iraq, to come and support us. We would have no problem with that. We don't choose the colour of the water that puts out the fire in our country. (Di Roma & Valade, 2022)

Such statements illustrate how WG serves an important political function for Putin: If the President of CAR and his advisors do not distinguish between Russia and WG, inviting WG and welcoming their presence means prioritising a partnership with Russia—rather than with "liberal" interveners.

Although mobilised widely by WG in several African states, narratives of anti-colonialism and liberal interveners' missteps, shortcomings, and disrespect for sovereignty were, however, not invented by either WG or Russia. Critical narratives had already formed, for example, the feeling that France, as the old colonial power of Mali, has betrayed Mali in recent years by focusing primarily on its own interest (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2023), which is crucial to explaining their resonance and the echoes that WG and Russia have contributed to creating, further augmenting existing challenges to the appeal of liberal world order. Appreciating the links to these broader Russian narratives about world order and how WG's Africa presence is both enabled by and helps accelerate these political flows suggests that WG is also a political tool for Russia—enabled by and simultaneously enabling Russia's global political influence. Enabling Russian narratives of alternatives to liberal intervention and liberal order is another crucial aspect of WG's African presence. Put differently, insofar as WG at once enables and is enabled by political flows that call for a different world order, WG challenges liberal actors in ways that go beyond what a focus on mercenaries and military flows conveys.

5. So What for Liberal Interveners?

Analysing WG through a lens that focuses on flows that make up this heterogeneous actor not only offers a different account of the scope of WG's Africa presence but also invites asking how liberal interveners fit into that analysis, including how they may themselves risk unintentionally enabling further WG presence, for example, if historical and contemporary missteps remain unaddressed by liberal interveners, and if the liberal approach is not revisited to accommodate calls for an amended international order. If liberal actors dismiss the importance of engaging with African states around this question of a revised but still liberal alternative

to the current international order, such dismissal may boost—rather than undo—the anti-colonial echoes and thereby further "enable" WG access and also further "enable" the appeal of Russia's proposed alternative to the current global order.

Liberal interveners' explanations of Russia's and WG's expanding footprints in Africa were initially informed by a vacuum logic. As explained elsewhere (Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023), this vacuum logic implies that where liberal actors withdraw, Russia fills the vacuum. Accordingly, sustained or up-scaled liberal intervention presence will prevent further Russian expansion. Considering the internal flaws of that vacuum explanation and the significantly expanded Russian footprint in Africa, the phenomenon that calls for explanation has changed. Russian presence has not only materialised in contexts where liberal interveners have left a vacuum, in the case of Mali, for example, France and several allies were asked to leave. Observers referred to a "traffic jam" to illustrate a situation not only in Mali but in the Sahel more broadly, which was not characterised by an absence of liberal interveners (Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen, 2020; Cooke et al., 2017). What must now be explained is the more difficult question of how Russia, largely via WG, has successfully managed to displace liberal interveners even from states where they wanted to be present but where they are no longer invited or invited but on terms they cannot accept.

5.1. Unpacking Liberal Intervention's Manifold Crisis

Interestingly, a change can be observed whereby liberal actors' accounts of Russia's attractiveness in Africa have shifted. Russian disinformation is now a dominant explanation. Disinformation does take place and may indeed represent significant challenges. We have seen that information campaigns have consequences for UN soldiers, French troops, and populations in African states where elections are influenced in non-transparent ways. Nevertheless, the idea that Russia's increasing influence can be explained as resulting from successful Russian disinformation risks underestimating the extent to which disinformation "sticks" cannot be understood in isolation from liberal interveners' own missteps (Blankenship & Ordu, 2022). Granting too much explanatory power to accounts suggesting that WG is invited to partner with African states as a result of disinformation both overlooks African agency and liberal interveners' own shortcomings as key to why disinformation efforts stick.

While disinformation and broader weaponisation of information in Africa is an increasing tendency, presenting that as an explanation for WG's growing presence in Africa entails at least two flawed assumptions. Disinformation as the dominant explanation of why Russia is attractive and why liberal actors are losing attractiveness creates a comfortable distance between Russian approaches and liberal actors themselves, leaving little space for critically reflecting on gaps and shortcomings in liberal interveners' own approaches and missteps—historically and contemporary. Not only have liberal interveners' approaches and security assistance entailed gaps (for example, when soldiers in CAR and Mali received training but no weapons; Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023), there have also been abuses and other missteps. For example, in CAR, allegations emerged in 2016 of international forces, including French peacekeepers, abusing children "in exchange for food or money" (UN News, 2023). Second, explaining WG's growing presence solely as a result of Russian disinformation also disregards the agency of African heads of state by assuming that they are ill-informed and, hence, do not make decisions on behalf of their country on correct, well-informed grounds (implying that this was the case when liberal interveners were invited in as partners). This explanation falls back on a well-known dismissal of African agency and a longstanding debate in the literature. Explaining

choices to partner with Russia as a result of misinformation risks failing to pay attention to African agency and thus repeating (rather than amending) a longstanding shortcoming on the part of liberal interveners.

Paradoxically, these flawed assumptions may unintentionally help Russia gain further ground. Suppose Russia's increasing influence is only ascribed to disinformation. In that case, liberal interveners risk dismissing the importance of confronting their own role in bringing about conditions where Russia seems appealing, and—in explanations that carry on dismissing African agency—also risk affirming Russia's accounts of liberal actors as not recognising African partners as equals. Blinded by deceptive assumptions about liberal interveners' presumably self-evident appeal, dismissal of the agency of African heads of state, and an inability or unwillingness to engage with views that challenge the appeal of the liberal order, all risk leaving liberal interveners worse off, for example, where such dismissals create "blowback" effects for liberal interveners or where they are de-selected and/or accused of colonial and imperial mindsets in their cooperation with African states. Such "blowback" effects may unintentionally enable further WG presence on the African continent, for example, where liberal actors' manifold dismissals are used to present the WG and Russia as favourable partner choices. Elsewhere, we have argued that the vacuum logic rests on similar assumptions: a dismissal of African agency and the presumably universal appeal of liberal intervention actors (Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023). It is necessary to challenge those shared underlying assumptions to the extent that both of these quite different explanations of why Russia is seen as an attractive partner share similar assumptions rather than searching for another explanation.

6. Conclusion

This two-fold analysis of WG flows and conditions that enable those flows (including liberal intervention's missteps) sheds light on the scope of WG engagements on the African continent by attending to flows that are often overlooked in accounts that primarily attend to WG mercenaries and fail to challenge underlying assumptions about WG's and liberal actors' own presence. By discussing these two dimensions in parallel, it becomes possible to highlight a paradox: When liberal interveners dismiss the scope of WG, the significance of African agency, and their own shortcomings and missteps, for example, in explanations that largely accredit growing WG presence to Russian disinformation, such dismissals risk unintentionally serving as an enabling condition for further WG expansion. Crucially, such dismissive explanations are important because they *invite misguided responses*, for example, about the extent to which WG's expanded African presence can be countered by increasingly focusing on countering Russian disinformation. Besides the risk that liberal interveners may become "not very liberal" in their countermeasures, an overarching risk is the temptation to forefront explanations that allow liberal interveners to continue omitting more difficult, but crucially more important, discussions about their own missteps.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

Grasping Foreign and Security Policy Change: Patterns and Conditions of Change Among Liberal Democracies

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been perceived as a fundamental shift at the international level, triggering reorientation in foreign and security policy, in particular among liberal democracies. At the same time, beyond such external shocks, states may incrementally adapt their positioning towards international affairs. To shed light on these dynamics, this article aims to quantitatively explore longer-term patterns of foreign and security policy in liberal democracies. In doing so, we make two contributions to the literature: First, we propose a quantitative operationalization of foreign and security policy change, combining military and non-military aspects, to explore the patterns of continuity and change over time (1988–2021), considering 20 liberal democracies. Second, we leverage insights from public policy analysis, in particular the punctuated equilibrium theory, to make sense of the identified patterns. Accordingly, we find support for the proposition that foreign and security policies typically change incrementally and that major change is rare. Moreover, while incremental shifts can be explained by domestic politics and institutional settings, major changes disrupt this pattern. In conclusion, the article discusses the plausibility of the quantitative analysis given the current policy shifts among democracies following Russia's war in Ukraine.

Keywords

foreign policy; foreign policy change; liberal democracies; public policies analysis; punctuated equilibrium theory; security policy

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1. Introduction

Students of IR are typically keen on analyzing critical junctures, crises, and other seismic shifts at the international level, which oftentimes coincide with major adaptations of foreign and security policies by individual states. Russia's war in Ukraine is a pertinent example of an event altering the security environment for Europe. Several NATO member states quickly announced the increase of their defense expenditures, ended long-held policies regarding arms exports, and started to adapt their energy policy strategies. Non-NATO members, such as Sweden and Finland, are pursuing a U-turn in their alliance policies in view of Russia's behavior.

Against this backdrop, there is no shortage in the literature of IR and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) to investigate cases of major policy change. However, most of these studies focus on specific decisions or events, such as the end of the Cold War, 9/11, or, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic (see, i.a., Haar & Pierce, 2021; Hermann, 1990; Ziv, 2011). In addition, a substantial part of the literature deals with shifting patterns of foreign policy over time—yet, mostly regarding a circumscribed area of foreign policy, such as nuclear strategy or foreign aid, and, again, in single-country studies (see Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021a for an overview). Important theoretical contributions (see Legro, 2005; Welch, 2005) also use case studies and qualitative methodology in contrast to large-N analysis. Hence, the current literature can still be enhanced by inspecting longer-term patterns of continuity and change across countries and policy fields. In particular, there are only a few studies which apply quantitative methods to scrutinize patterns of foreign and security policy change with an eye on aggregate measures and indicators that consider military as well as non-military policy components. In that regard, our article takes up the recommendation of a recent literature review (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021a, p. 489): "Scholarship should start examining foreign policy change in a more systematic way across countries, foreign policy domains and over time."

The aim of the article is, therefore, to explore changes and continuities of foreign and security policies in liberal democracies from a comparative perspective by inspecting quantitatively the longer-term patterns in this policy area. In doing so, we make two main contributions to the literature: First, we propose a quantitative operationalization of foreign and security policy change, combining military and non-military aspects over time (1988–2021), and considering 20 liberal democracies. Second, we leverage insights from public policy analysis, in particular, the punctuated equilibrium theory (PET), to make sense of the identified patterns. Accordingly, we find support for the proposition that foreign and security policies typically change incrementally and that major change is rare. While incremental shifts can be explained by domestic politics and institutional settings, major changes disrupt this pattern. In conclusion, the article discusses the plausibility of the quantitative analysis given the current policy shifts among democracies following Russia's war in Ukraine.

2. State of the Art and Theoretical Argument

The literature on foreign policy change took off after the end of the Cold War, a period of structural change at the international level, with several conceptual studies on how to assess adaptation in states' choices. The typological work of Hermann (1990) and Rosati (1994)—distinguishing between different levels of change, e.g., "intensification," "refinement," "reform," and "restructuring" (Rosati, 1994)—was particularly important as it influenced subsequent scholarship which applied these typologies to a number of cases.

Overall, as Haesebrouck and Joly (2021a) report in their overview article, researchers were mainly interested in understanding major changes instead of smaller and more incremental shifts. Many of the studies focused on events that led to significant foreign and security policy decisions within single states. More recent examples include Israel's foreign policy turn regarding the Middle East peace process (Ziv, 2011), France's decision to rejoin NATO (Ostermann, 2019), or Britain's international role change after Brexit (Beasley et al., 2021). There is also a substantial literature focusing on change over time, mostly for single countries (see Tsygankov, 2019; Werle, 2013). Far less common, scholars apply a comparative perspective. Notable exceptions include edited volumes with single-case studies (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021b; Rosati et al., 1994); Welch's (2005) monograph on critical junctures and decision-making processes with seven case studies on different countries; Chryssogelos and Martill's (2021) analysis of the evolution of détente strategies during the Cold War era in Germany, France, and UK; and an assessment of foreign policy change among Latin American countries by Merke et al. (2020), which is also one of the few quantitative studies. Hence, summing up the empirical state of affairs, while we do know a lot about single cases, we lack both genuine comparative studies (beyond some notable exceptions) and a systematic operationalization of policy change that can be applied to the selected countries.

In terms of theoretical explanations for foreign policy change, previous studies have discussed a broad array of possible drivers and (to a lesser extent) inhibitors of change. Borrowing Waltz's (2001) concept of the three images in IR research may help to sort potential sources of change and distinguish between international, domestic, and individual factors. At the international level, structural factors, such as changing degrees of polarity after the end of the Cold War (Volgy & Schwarz, 1994) and declining hegemonic power (Lemke & Werner, 1996) have been put forward as drivers for new policies. Moreover, non-structural sources for change, such as singular events (Brexit and Russia's war in Ukraine) have also been found influential as they impact the domestic decision-making arena (Hermann, 1990; Lee, 2012). On the state level, a number of analyses suggest that domestic factors such as budgetary constraints (Brummer & Oppermann, 2021, p. 322), bureaucratic structures (Allison, 1971; Joly & Richter, 2019), and veto players (Oppermann & Brummer, 2018), for example, within coalitions (Kaarbo, 2017) or legislatures (Böller, 2022), matter for foreign policy decisions. Besides, changing governments (Hagan & Rosati, 1994), advocacy coalitions (Haar & Pierce, 2021), or ideologies of domestic actors (Merke et al., 2020) may also affect policies. Finally, change may also be connected to individual leaders and their belief sets (see, i.a., Gustavsson, 1999), e.g., leaders' cognitive orientation (Welch, 2005).

While we can derive insights on the drivers and inhibitors of change from general IR perspectives, there are also more specific concepts aiming at a theory of foreign policy change (see, i.a., Legro, 2005; Palmer & Morgan, 2006; Welch, 2005). One important conclusion from this part of the literature is that change may seldom be triggered by one source (at the systemic or sub-systemic level), but rather that a complex interplay of domestic and international factors shapes the policy mix of states in non-trivial ways. A second conclusion of these specific theories of foreign policy change is to focus not only on major shifts but also to pay attention to continuities (see Welch, 2005, p. 72) and incremental adaptations (see Sinha, 2018).

To sort the laundry list of potential sources and develop theory-informed arguments, we suggest combining the literature of public policy analysis with those of IR and FPA. We contend that it may be fruitful to leverage insights regarding public policy for the case of foreign policy—a connection which received more attention only recently (see Brummer et al., 2019)—since the former is traditionally focused on the ebbs and flows of

policies and the shifting patterns of the policy cycle, while the latter may be better equipped to account for the idiosyncrasies of the policy field and the developments at the international level.

Against this background, we bring together insights from FPA and public policy research to provide a conceptual starting point for grasping foreign and security policy change and to build a theoretical argument about possible factors that may be associated with this change. While we present our proposal for conceptualizing policy change in a way that makes it useable for the comparative analyses below, we briefly discuss how general theories of policy analysis can help us explain patterns of foreign policy.

To do so, we start from the fundamental wisdom of public policy analysis that indicates that policies are usually made in policy subsystems, where experts meet in policy communities to discuss and address policy-related issues (see for instance Baumgartner et al., 2009; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). These policy communities are rather stable and members share common policy ideas. As a result, policies change only incrementally for longer periods (equilibrium), however, they are sometimes interrupted (punctuations) by a major change. To explain these punctuations, theories of the policy process usually point to changes in external conditions, such as focusing events, or internal aspects, such as the composition of policy subsystems (e.g., due to government changes).

We argue that such "stick-and-slip" dynamics should also apply to foreign and security policy (see, for instance, Joly & Richter, 2019). In fact, second-image theories of FPA emphasize that foreign and security policies are driven by domestic interests within specific institutional settings (Kaarbo, 2015). Also, defense and military policies are governed by large bureaucracies (see Allison, 1971), and are often prepared in stable expert communities that produce reports and white papers to justify their proposals. In turn, this contributes to security policies' path-dependency, for example, through "doctrines" or, when it comes to the procurement of weapons. At the same time, it is plausible that this pattern of incremental change is punctuated at certain points in time. External shifts and shocks that are beyond the immediate control of governments (such as the end of the Cold War, 9/11, or Russia's invasion of Ukraine) can be catalyzing events, triggering such rare but substantial changes. From theories of public policy analysis, and PET in particular, we can thus infer that stick-slip dynamics are to be expected in the area of foreign and security policy—with long periods of incremental changes, due to the subsystem-dominated policy process, and a few disproportionate outbursts as the result of the built-up adjustment pressures. Hence, our first proposition reads as follows: Changes in foreign and security policy should follow the general pattern of "punctuated equilibrium" with many small adjustments and some major policy changes (Proposition 1).

In addition, it is also apparent that the mechanisms that bring about incremental adjustments and major changes are different, although PET can explain both aspects. According to the theory, major changes go along with systemwide attention to a problem—and are mostly driven by external shocks. In FPA, international factors (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021c, p. 10) are the most broadly discussed "external shocks" as they "may lead to a re-conceptualization of security threats and challenges, a re-prioritization of foreign policy objectives, and the emergence of new means of action and foreign policy options" (Blavoukos & Bourantonis, 2014, p. 488).

In contrast, smaller adjustments to foreign and security policies are, according to PET, driven by the policy subsystems and the daily policy-making practices. Policy researchers have, for instance, pointed out the

relevance of party politics (Jensen, 2014; Wenzelburger & Böller, 2020) when studying policy changes. Similarly, trade-offs between budgetary positions (i.e., the famous "guns vs. butter" debate) have been shown to influence foreign policy decisions (see Whitten & Williams, 2011). However, the mechanisms that influence this routine work should, according to PET, be found in the machine room of the policy-making process—quite different, then, from major changes that are expected to be mainly driven by external events. Summarizing these insights from policy theories and FPA scholarship, we can thus posit our second research proposition:

Major change in foreign and security policy is triggered by significant international events whereas smaller adjustments are influenced by party politics and the dynamics of the domestic policy process (Proposition 2).

3. Exploring Quantitative Patterns of Foreign and Security Policy Change

3.1. Operationalization of Foreign and Security Policy Change

In order to quantitatively explore foreign and security policy change, the first step of the empirical analysis aims to develop an operationalization of foreign and security policies that allows to identify patterns over time and between countries. While our approach will enable us to have a bird's-eye view of policy changes and detect some general patterns, aiming for a quantitative exploration also comes with some disadvantages. Importantly, our research strategy cannot account for relevant qualitative changes in foreign and security policy that are not picked up by quantitative indicators. If, for instance, a government decides to follow a new doctrine in foreign policy or to forge a new alliance, this will not necessarily be caught by quantitative measures. In other words: We can only spot changes in degree, not changes in kind. However, going for a large sample of countries and a rather extended period of time (more than 30 years) does allow us to identify regularities that reach beyond single cases or small-N comparisons that have dominated the literature hitherto.

Reflecting this aim, our operationalization of foreign and security policy change differs from qualitative typologies, such as the influential one proposed by Hermann (1990). Most notably, we do not consider programs and goals of foreign policy, but focus on quantitatively measurable instruments and outputs of foreign and security policy. Although we do not go as far as Most and Starr (1984)—who emphasize that foreign policy may involve several substitutable elements of foreign policy, mentioning, e.g., alliance formation and defense expenditure increases (Most & Starr, 1984, p. 387)—we conceptually build on the general idea that foreign and security policies involve both non-military and military aspects that can be seen as "two sides of the same coin" (Wenzelburger & Böller, 2020, p. 6). To operationalize this conceptual idea, we include four indicators: (a) on the military side, the number of armed forces and military expenditures; and (b) on the non-military side, foreign aid spending and membership in IOs (see Figure 1). The choice of these indicators is driven by empirical and theoretical considerations. On the empirical side, a major criterion was the availability of reliable time series data for at least two decades. We have collected the data from different sources—mainly via the World Bank dataset (military expenditure and strength of armed forces), the OECD (spending on foreign aid and development), and the CIA Factbook (hand-coded data on membership in IOs). Regarding the case selection, we focus on OECD countries, as we are primarily interested in liberal democracies (within the focus of this thematic issue), but exclude the US. As the sole superpower after the end of the Cold War, the US can be considered exceptional in terms of military instruments of power, which could lead to a bias in our analysis.
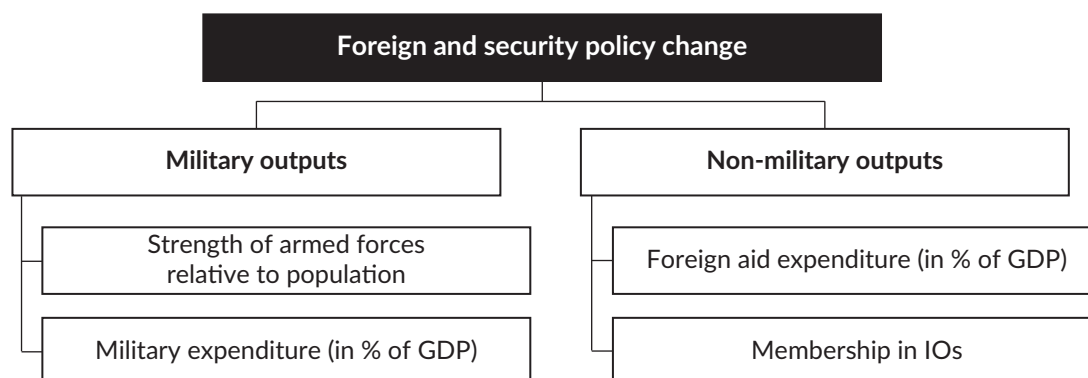
Figure 1. Operationalizing foreign and security policy change.

Conceptually, our indicators clearly relate to the military and non-military domains, but at the same time tap at least partially into different aspects of each of the domains. For instance, concerning the military, it is clear that public defense expenditure will indeed be related to the strength of armed forces, measured via military personnel (r = 0.5). However, expenditure is a broader measure and should also take up other aspects of the military side of security policy. Similarly, membership in IOs and spending much on development aid are hardly correlated (r = 0.045). In sum, the correlations between the indicators seem to capture somewhat different aspects of each domain (for an overview of the indicators, see Table 1 of the Supplementary File). We thus argue that this operationalization, on the one hand, recognizes the central role of military means in defending states and providing security. On the other hand, foreign and security policy is broader than military defense and encompasses other instruments, such as foreign aid and committing to IOs, to bolster states' security and pursue national interests (see Palmer et al., 2002).

Based on this operationalization, we can see whether the indicators indeed grasp the two sides of foreign and security policy change as previously argued. A systematic way to identify a structure in a set of variables is to perform a factor analysis. We use principal component analysis (PCA) as our main interest is to reproduce a data structure while reducing the set of factors. PCA is a technique to reduce the dimensionality of data by transforming interrelated variables into new hypothetical variables ("principal components"), which are uncorrelated and orthogonal to one another (Salkind, 2010). Following our theoretical and conceptual discussion, we would expect the four indicators to load on two different factors representing the military and non-military sides of foreign and security policy.

Table 1 shows the factor loadings generated by PCA and a pattern matrix after orthogonal rotation. It is evident that the analysis suggests that our four variables can be combined into two factors that together explain around 70% of the variance. Judging from the differences in the eigenvalues, a solution with two factors seems most appropriate (see the difference between Factor 2 and Factor 3 in Table 1). Moreover, the pattern matrix illustrates that the two factors indeed reflect the two theoretical dimensions that we had in mind when conceptualizing foreign and security policy change, whereas the third factor is related to several of the factors from different dimensions. Therefore, we stick with a two-factor solution, where the first factor takes up the military dimension and the second factor is mainly related to non-military foreign and security policy.

Table 1. Results of PCA.

Factor loadings				
Factor No.	Eigenvalue	Difference	Proportion	Cumulative
Factor 1	1.72999	0.71232	0.4325	0.4325
Factor 2	1.01767	0.12173	0.2544	0.6869
Factor 3	0.89594	0.53953	0.2240	0.9109
Factor 4	0.35641	—	0.0891	1.0000
Pattern matrix (rotated)				
Variable		Factor 1	Factor 2	Uniqueness
Strength armed forces		0.8606	−0.0449	0.2573
Military expenditure		0.8908	0.0861	0.1990
Development aid expenditure		0.0315	0.9646	0.0686
IOs		−0.4362	0.2870	0.7274

How have foreign and security policies developed over time if we compare the factor scores for the military and non-military components in the 20 countries under review here? The patterns visible in Figure 2 show a rather path-dependent development of foreign and security policy over time. While some larger changes do occur in individual years, the over-time variance is mostly rather sticky. A notable example of this stickiness is the "peace dividend," which is clearly visible after the end of the Cold War in many countries of Western Europe (such as Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and Sweden) and has led to a gradual decrease in military spending. This pattern suggests that the systemic reconfiguration after the end of the Cold War was translated into a gradual change rather than a swift transition in many countries. Major changes can be observed more clearly in the non-military component: In 2015, the Swedish government, for instance, increased foreign aid spending substantially, driven by the number of refugees arriving in 2014 and a respective upsurge of in-donor-refugee expenditure (OECD, 2019). In Portugal, we can also observe a spike in net development aid spending, which occurred in 2004. This was due to a significant debt relief that was granted to highly indebted poor countries (Instituto Camões, 2015, p. 22). Hence, from sheer eyeballing, Figure 2 seems to lend some initial support to Proposition 1—foreign and security policy development over time seems to be characterized by many small adjustments and few major changes. However, at the same time, it is also interesting to see that there are no visible common shocks that may have led to strong adjustments in all countries (apart from the longer-term decrease of military spending due to the "peace dividend" after the end of the Cold War)—although such common shocks have existed, e.g., with 9/11.

This observation does point to the relevance of national specificities in how governments respond to shifts at the international level and overall country profiles. Figure 2 indeed shows substantial cross-national differences: Denmark, Sweden, and Norway as well as the Netherlands score substantially higher on the second factor (related to non-military security policy) than on the first (military component), whereas Greece and (to a lesser extent) Portugal reach higher values on the first factor which points to a dominance of the military side of foreign and security policy. This may be traced back to the strategic cultures of countries, such as the traditional focus on non-military foreign policy instruments among Scandinavian countries (see Ingebritsen, 2002), or country-specific rivalries, such as in the case of Greece and Turkey. It may also be tied to the ideological dominance of certain parties in the respective governments, for example, among Nordic countries, the dominance of social democratic parties (Wenzelburger & Böller, 2020).
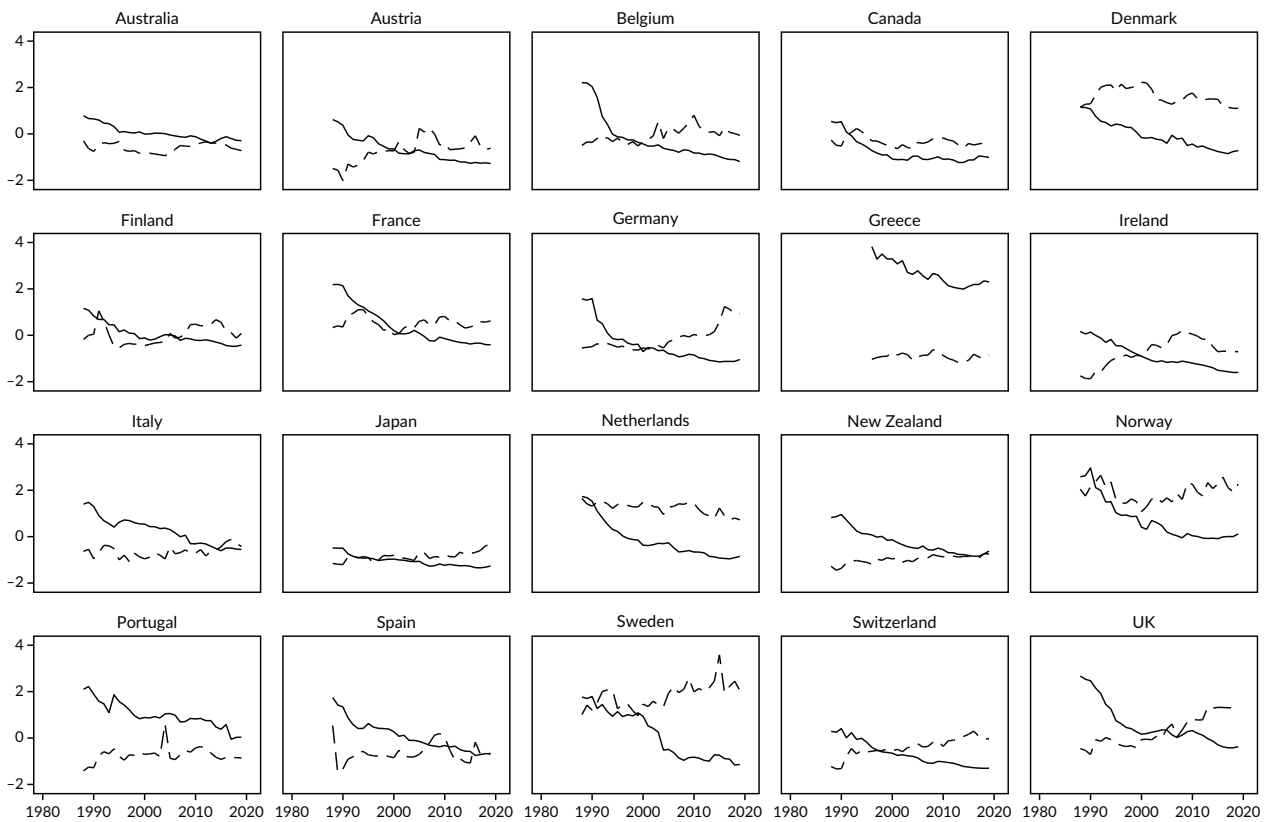
Figure 2. Development of military and non-military components of foreign and security policy. Note: The plain line corresponds to Factor 1 (military) and the dashed line corresponds to Factor 2 (non-military).

3.2. Zooming in on Stick-Slip Dynamics

The first central interest of this article is to identify patterns of continuity and major changes in foreign and security policies during the last 34 years. As previously theorized, public policy approaches, such as PET, argue that policies change only incrementally over longer periods of time before they are punctuated by major reforms (the so-called stick-and-slip dynamics in PET parlance). Hence, theoretically, if we want to focus on major policy changes and analyze why they may occur, first, we have to identify these changes and separate them from the minor incremental adjustments that result from policy-making in subsystems.

A common way to inspect these patterns is to visualize the distribution of the data at hand and to see whether the characteristic pattern of many small adjustments and several large changes emerges. Figure 3 shows that both distributions follow the expected pattern of fat tails, small shoulders, and a high peak which characterizes the distribution of policy change found in many other policy areas. More concretely, we see many incremental adjustments (factor values around 0), a "smaller than normal" number of medium-size changes, but several important and substantial instances of policy change that lie clearly outside the bell curve of the normal distribution.

To get an impression of the size of the "peakedness," PET scholars usually analyze the L-kurtosis, as a kurtosis measure is less influenced by outliers (Breunig & Jones, 2011). Given that a normal distribution has
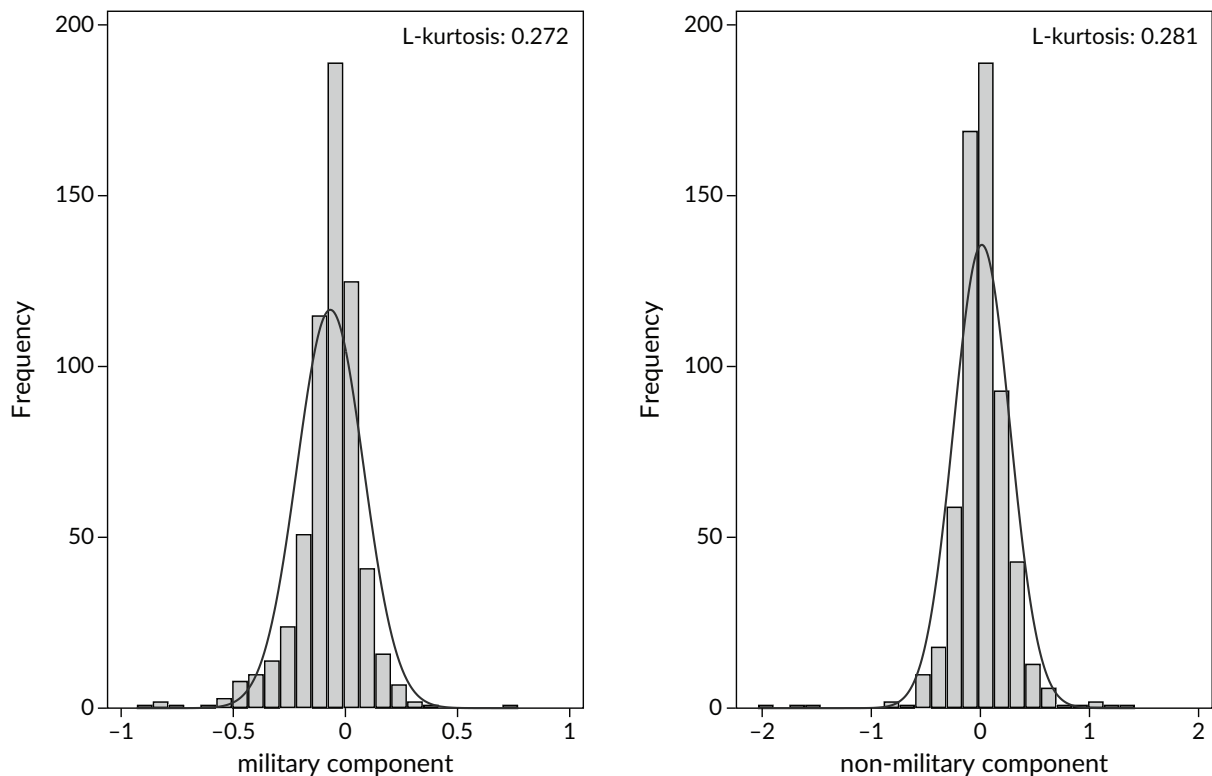
Figure 3. Distribution of foreign and security policy change.

an L-kurtosis of around 0.123, the measures for our two components indicate that foreign and security policies in general seem to follow stick-and-slip dynamics. In fact, the distribution of the military component reaches a value of 0.272 and the non-military component of 0.281, which indicates that the changes are not normally distributed, although they are far from the high L-kurtosis reported, for instance, by Breunig (2006, p. 1078) for public spending (between 0.37 for the UK and 0.49 for the US). Instead, the dynamics of foreign and security policy changes resemble what Brouard et al. (2009, p. 398) have found for legislative activity in a more recent comparative analysis (between, roughly, 0.2 and 0.25). Overall, we can conclude that our analysis of foreign and security policy change broadly resembles the dynamics found in other policy areas and confirms the expectation of Proposition 1, although distributions of public spending change usually show a higher L-kurtosis than we report here (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

4. Explaining Foreign and Security Policy Change

After having assessed the general patterns over time, this section aims to investigate possible associations with changes to foreign and security policies. To do so, we run two sorts of regressions. First, we analyze the annual changes in our two dimensions of foreign and security policy to identify possible general patterns that may explain their development by estimating time-series-cross-section regressions using panel-corrected standard errors to account for heteroskedasticity (Beck & Katz, 1995). We do not include fixed effects as unit heterogeneity is modest due to the use of changes in the factor scores as dependent variables (first differences). Following Proposition 2, we would expect party politics and variables related to the domestic policy process to matter most.

Second, we focus on major changes in the two components to see whether the pattern looks different. We define as major changes all those changes that are higher than one standard deviation from the mean of the respective distribution in a certain country. We additionally differentiate between increases and decreases of the respective policy in the domain (e.g., more/less military spending or armed forces). This leaves us with around 33% of the observations coded as major expansions (for both components) and 5% (military) and 11% (non-military) of observations as major decreases. On this dichotomous dependent variable, we estimate logistic regressions (Y = 0 in country–years without major change, and Y = 1 with major change). As the data varies over time (34 years) and cross-sectionally (20 countries), we follow the proposition developed by Beck et al. (1998) and Beck and Katz (2001) and account for time dependency (serial correlation) by introducing a series of dummies and for heteroscedasticity by using robust standard errors (Huber-White). A possible way of dealing with cross-sectional heterogeneity would be to include unit fixed effects and estimate a conditional logistic regression model (Chamberlain, 1980; Verbeek, 2004). However, Beck and Katz (2001, p. 488) warn that "the use of fixed effects is clearly a bad idea for the binary dependent variable case," which is why we do not estimate a conditional logit model.

To examine Proposition 2, we include several independent variables that can be expected to account for the international and domestic levels—see the Supplementary File for detailed operationalization of the variables and data sources.

To model the impact of factors at the international level, we account for the end of the Cold War as a structural shift, which can be expected to trigger adaptation by states (Volgy & Schwarz, 1994). Moreover, we also include a variable for military alliances (membership in NATO), an indicator that identifies countries with nuclear weapons, and the embeddedness of a country in the international economy (openness of capital markets). Systemic theories of IR, neorealism and institutionalism (in particular, regarding economic interdependences), would expect these factors to matter as they concern states' material capabilities and their positions in the system. As a non-structural external shock at the international level, we account for the years after 9/11 (see Brummer & Oppermann, 2021, p. 317). Clearly, following our theoretical argument derived from PET and Proposition 2, we would expect international factors to be more strongly associated with major security policy change than domestic policy variables.

Regarding domestic factors, we account for economic drivers and inhibitors as well as factors within the political system. These variables follow insights from sub-systemic IR approaches, which highlight the importance of the "second image" in shaping foreign policy decisions (Kaarbo, 2015). In particular, we consider the debt rate and economic growth rate of a country as permissive or constraining factors, as spending on military means, for example, may be restricted in times of fiscal and economic crisis. We also include an indicator for social transfer levels, to gauge the potential "guns vs. butter" trade-off (see Whitten & Williams, 2011). In terms of the political system, we consider the impact of institutional constraints on the ability of governments to implement change, as suggested by both FPA and public policy perspectives (Oppermann & Brummer, 2018; Schmidt, 1996). Moreover, the ideological orientation of the parties in government might affect the foreign policy mix of states and, thus, patterns of change (Hofmann & Martill, 2021), which is why we include the programmatic positions on the military and internationalism. Finally, to capture the effect of leadership change within countries (Gustavsson, 1999), we add a dummy variable for new governments.

Table 2 shows the results of our regression analysis, namely the prediction of positive and negative changes to foreign and security policies on both the military (Models 1–4) and the non-military side (Models 5–7). For each of the components, we first present the results for the general pattern including all annual changes (Models 1, 2, and 5) and then move on to the results for the dichotomized variable of major changes (Models 3–4 and 6–7). To check for overspecification, Model 2 is a more parsimonious model excluding very insignificant variables.

Looking at the military component first, our general expectation that domestic factors are more strongly associated with annual changes, and international forces more strongly with major changes, is reflected in the data. Models 1 and 2, which take up the annual variance of the military factor, include a significant coefficient for the "party politics" variable. Governments with a more pro-military ideology indeed increase this part of security policies—and so does a new government. Similarly, high social transfer seems to limit increases in the military component, indicative of a "guns vs. butter" trade-off. However, the international environment also plays a role, as the years after the end of the Cold War are significantly associated with decreases in the military component, which indicates that countries may indeed have sought to cash in a "peace dividend" after 1991. Another interpretation of this finding is, as indicated above, that states seem to adapt their military components rather incrementally, even in view of systemic reconfigurations, such as the end of the Cold War. The analysis also shows that NATO membership is associated with a decrease in military expenditure, which may reflect that NATO members are particularly open to reducing military capacities due to free-riding on the US (see Kinne & Kang, 2023). Interestingly, open capital markets are associated with a strengthening of the military component, which may indicate that these countries also assume more military responsibility to uphold open trading routes.

The picture changes if we look at major changes only: Most clearly, almost all of the coefficients for the domestic politics variables are no longer significant—neither for major expansions nor for major reductions of the military component. Only institutional constraints seem to limit major increases in the military component. However, apart from the index for the openness of capital markets and NATO membership, no clear-cut picture of a dynamic driven by international factors emerges. Indeed, the finding regarding NATO is most interesting, as it shows that NATO membership may be used by the governments in our sample to decrease their military capacities incrementally (see the negative coefficient in Models 1 and 2), but not drastically (see the negative coefficient for major decreases in Model 7). Additionally, we have to concede that the value of the model for major decreases is somewhat limited, given that some of the interesting variables (e.g., "end of the Cold War" or "time after 9/11") are omitted due to a perfect correlation with the outcome (that is: no major decreases in the years after 9/11, the years after the end of the Cold War, and in countries with nuclear weapons).

In sum, the main takeaway from the analysis of the military component is that while domestic politics seem to be relevant for the general trajectories of foreign and security policies, they are not significantly associated with major changes in these policies. Indeed, these major reversals of policies seem to follow distinct causal dynamics—which cannot be grasped with variables that measure international factors either. This observation hints at the relevance of unique critical junctures, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Whereas the findings for the military part of security policies do at least support Proposition 2 to some extent, the results for the analysis of the non-military component do not point to any particular pattern. Neither do we

Table 2. Results of regression analysis.

	(1) Change in the military component	(2) Change in the military component	(3) Major increase in the military component	(4) Major decrease in the military component	(5) Change in the non-military component	(6) Major increase in the non-military component	(7) Major decrease in the non-military component
Initial level the of military component	−0.0023 (−0.24)	−0.0033 (−0.39)					
Initial level of the non-military component					0.045** (2.48)		
NATO membership	−0.021* (−1.69)	−0.021* (−1.67)	0.46 (1.51)	−1.23*** (−3.31)	−0.027 (−0.93)	−0.22 (−0.95)	−0.085 (−0.32)
Time after 9/11	0.010 (0.40)		−1.35 (−1.28)		0.019 (0.36)	−2.22** (−2.15)	−0.45 (−0.72)
End of the Cold War	−0.091*** (−6.53)	−0.093*** (−6.99)	−0.35 (−1.12)		0.034 (1.27)	−0.30 (−1.23)	0.15 (0.60)
Change of debt ratio	−0.000079 (−0.07)		0.0014 (0.07)	−0.083*** (−3.00)	0.0021 (1.15)	0.046** (2.12)	−0.055* (−1.73)
Economic growth, t--1	−0.0019 (−0.86)		0.091 (1.53)	0.11** (2.12)	0.0022 (0.47)	−0.077 (−1.50)	0.068 (1.38)
Social transfer spending	−0.0024** (−2.04)	−0.0021* (−1.76)	0.0077 (0.17)	−0.036 (−0.72)	−0.0022 (−0.76)	0.021 (0.71)	0.0091 (0.25)
Institutional constraints	0.0012 (0.34)		−0.75*** (−3.28)	0.080 (0.57)	0.016 (1.50)	0.19** (2.02)	−0.40*** (−3.84)
Openness capital markets	0.075* (1.85)	0.077** (1.98)	−7.64*** (−8.94)	5.12*** (2.65)	−0.11 (−1.41)	−1.84*** (−2.65)	−1.87*** (−2.77)
Nuclear weapons	−0.013 (−1.04)		−0.11 (−0.27)	−	0.027 (0.90)	0.43 (1.13)	−0.10 (−0.23)
New government	0.020* (1.69)	0.020* (1.73)	−0.32 (−1.08)	−0.032 (−0.07)	−0.027 (−1.04)	−0.51* (−1.78)	0.14 (0.48)
Military position government	0.0042* (1.89)	0.0042** (1.98)	0.041 (0.51)	0.055 (0.59)			
Internationalist position government					−0.0067* (−1.67)	−0.018 (−0.37)	0.030 (0.62)
Constant	−0.068 (−1.64)	−0.077** (−1.99)	6.40*** (4.72)	−6.40*** (−2.95)	0.12 (1.31)	−0.16 (−0.18)	0.49 (0.56)
(adj.) R^2	0.1368	0.1347	0.3688	0.1488	0.0304	0.0646	0.0879
N	598	598	625	333	602	629	625

Note: Significance levels of * 90%, ** 95%, and *** 99%.

see that domestic factors are related to the general development of non-military foreign and security policies, nor do international events trigger major changes in these policies. If at all, very open capital markets seem to be related to both major decreases and increases in the non-military foreign and security policies—a result which may point to the fact that countries with very open economies may not create insecurity in the markets with abrupt changes of foreign policies. Similarly, countries with many institutional constraints are associated with major increases in non-military spending (and vice versa for decreases and also almost significant for the annual changes in Model 5), a finding that hints at Lijphart's (1999) idea that consensus democracies are "kinder and gentler" (i.e., are more active in non-military foreign and security policies). However, overall, we interpret the unsuspicious findings of the regression as a sign that decisions in non-military foreign and security policies (e.g., membership in an IO) follow dynamics that cannot be well explained by the search for quantitative regularities in data, but may necessitate looking qualitatively at the individual decision-making process, including the effect of perceptions and risk propensity (see Welch, 2005).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article we provided a systematic assessment of foreign and security policy change over time, comparing 20 countries between 1988 and 2021. The analysis yields several insights: First, the long-term patterns clearly indicate a stick-and-slip dynamic, as suggested by PET. Foreign and security policies thus resemble other domestic policy fields, with many small adjustments and few major changes. This also highlights the necessity to look beyond instances of radical restructuring, as the majority of the literature on foreign policy change did (see Brummer & Oppermann, 2021, p. 312), and rather confirms earlier studies on inertia and path-dependency in this policy field (Hagan & Rosati, 1994, p. 271). Second, tapping into the sources of change, we find limited support for Proposition 2, which held that major change is related to factors on the international level and states' international position. Domestic factors and institutional constraints seem to play a minor role in triggering substantial policy change, but they do influence policy outputs in general, especially on the military component. The fact that we were not able to detect major shifts in the military and non-military components following the attacks on 9/11, as well as the identified pattern of incremental adjustments after 1991, indicate that major international events and reconfigurations are refracted by states through their political systems, which constrain the scope of policy shifts. However, more research is necessary in this regard given the partially surprising findings in the regression models and limitations given our quantitative research design. In particular, we were not able to capture potentially relevant variables, such as threat perception and public opinion due to limited data availability. The quantitative research design also hampers the ability to assess the role of individual leaders (see Hudson, 2005), the impact of norms and other non-material factors (including collective ideas and narratives, see Krebs, 2015; Legro, 2005), and the effect of idiosyncratic events within specific countries, for example, policy failures (see Kruck et al., 2018; Welch, 2005). Therefore, our article offers a limited "proof of concept" for a quantitative research design to explore patterns of change and continuity in foreign policy among liberal democracies, inspecting long-term trends and correlations, without claiming to detect causal mechanisms.

Nonetheless, in view of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the following foreign policy adaptation in several European states, we contend that our results seem plausible. Overall, Russia's invasion is a prime example of a shock at the international level, which upends the pattern of incremental adjustments of foreign and security policy. This certainly applies to countries, such as Germany, Finland, and Sweden, where

decision-makers responded to the war with major policy changes. In the German case, Chancellor Olaf Scholz swiftly announced policy changes, including the delivery of lethal weapons to a conflict zone and a significant increase in the defense budget. While the "Zeitenwende" decision was a response to an external shock, its implementation followed traditional paths of domestic politics. For example, contested parliamentary debates on the types of military aid to Ukraine revealed persisting partisan differences and bureaucratic hurdles protracted the procurement of new weapons in contrast to the announcement (see Bunde, 2022; Karnitschnig, 2023; Mello, 2024). Unsurprisingly, despite the announcement of a defense budget surge, military expenditures measured in percentage of GDP remained almost unchanged for Germany in 2023 as well as for most NATO member states, with Poland being a notable exception ("Canada's miserly defence spending," 2023).

Similarly, regarding Sweden's and Finland's decision to join NATO—a major foreign policy change following the Russian invasion—it is also evident that external shocks do not result automatically in policy decisions. Rather, notable shifts in public attitudes towards NATO membership in both countries paved the way towards the change in alliance politics (see Kanniainen, 2022). In Sweden, the end of non-alignment was enabled by the reversal of Social Democrats' positioning regarding NATO, while the Greens and the Left continued to oppose the membership application (Aylott & Bolin, 2023). These examples are in line with our overall finding that important external shocks are at least refracted through domestic transmission belts and that systemic events do not determine states' responses.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to report.

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ARTICLE

Zeitenwende: German Foreign Policy Change in the Wake of Russia's War Against Ukraine

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Abstract

Russia's war against Ukraine has severely damaged the European security architecture. This article examines the consequences of this rupture for German foreign and security policy. Just a few months before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Germany saw the transition to an unprecedented three-party coalition government of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals. In a special address to the Bundestag three days after the invasion, Chancellor Olaf Scholz described Russia's war initiation as a historical *Zeitenwende* ("watershed") that called into question long-held beliefs about European security. In the wake of this, Scholz proclaimed far-reaching changes, including the announcement that military expenditure would be drastically increased, additional military capabilities would be procured, and new deployments would be committed to NATO's eastern flank. This article argues that the *Zeitenwende* amounts to an international orientation change in German foreign and security policy. Apart from identifying areas of significant change, the article also documents political contestation over the *Zeitenwende*'s nature and extent as well as gaps between proclaimed changes and actual implementation.

Keywords

arms exports; defense procurement; foreign policy change; international security; party politics; political contestation; security policy

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1. Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine has severely damaged the European security architecture. The Russian invasion constituted a brazen violation of the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act, and the Charter of Paris, not to mention numerous other norm violations, while challenging the authority of international institutions at large

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(OSCE PA, 2023, p. 34; UN, 2022). The legal justifications put forth by the Russian leadership all failed to meet the criteria of the *jus ad bellum* and, specifically, legal exceptions to the general prohibition on the use of force (Green et al., 2022; Heller, 2022). Moreover, Russian forces have evidently been violating the *jus in bello* with disproportionate uses of force and attacks on civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, residential buildings, and other targets prohibited by international humanitarian law (OSCE, 2022).

This article examines the consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine for German foreign and security policy. Just a few months before the attack, Germany saw a government transition from a grand coalition of Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD) under Angela Merkel to a new government led by Olaf Scholz, heading an unprecedented three-party *Ampel* ("traffic-light") coalition of SPD, Greens, and Liberals (FDP), inaugurated in December 2021. To the surprise of many observers, Russia's attack on Ukraine prompted Chancellor Scholz to proclaim far-reaching changes in German foreign and security policy. He described Russia's war initiation as a historical *Zeitenwende* ("watershed") that called into question long-held beliefs about German and European security.

Key points in Scholz's special address to the Bundestag, on February 27, 2022, entailed the announcement that Germany would drastically increase its military expenditure including a one-time surplus budget of €100 billion (which required a constitutional change) and permanent increases in the defense budget, so that "more than 2%" of GDP would be spent "year by year" (Bundestag, 2022a, p. 1350). Moreover, Scholz declared that Germany would acquire additional military capabilities such as F-35A fighter jets to further participate in NATO's nuclear sharing and armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), like the Israeli Heron drone, both of which had long been the subject of controversial debates among political actors in Berlin, especially among Social Democrats (e.g., SPD, 2021). Scholz also emphasized, in February 2022, that his government would initiate new European arms projects on battle tanks and fighter jets, in cooperation with France and other partners, and that Germany would expand its military deployments on NATO's eastern flank.

The term *Zeitenwende* introduced by Scholz in his Bundestag address and reiterated in a *Foreign Affairs* article (Scholz, 2023a) has become a shorthand for foreign policy change even though its original meaning was to describe the implications of Russia's war against Ukraine for international politics. As Scholz himself admitted in an article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, "ascertaining a watershed moment is not in itself the same as setting an agenda" (Scholz, 2023b, translation by BKAmt). That said, the *Zeitenwende* has been intensely discussed in German politics and political commentary ever since. Numerous publications have observed and analyzed the *Zeitenwende* and the ensuing changes in German foreign policy (e.g., Blumenau, 2022; Bunde, 2022; David-Wilp & Kleine-Brockhoff, 2022; Driedger, 2022; Mader & Schoen, 2023; Matlé, 2023; Riemann & Löfflmann, 2023; Tallis, 2023).

While there is no consensus on how to assess these developments, it appears that early observers were more enthusiastic about the proclaimed changes in German foreign policy than later evaluations. For instance, following on the heels of Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech, David-Wilp and Kleine-Brockhoff (2022, p. 1) opined that Germany "has undergone a dramatic transformation, shedding its reluctant and dovish foreign policy and committing itself to drastically increase defense spending." Blumenau (2022, p. 1913, original emphasis) concluded that "*Zeitenwende* represented a clear break with convention," as seen in the delivery of heavy weapons and the sweeping increase in military expenditure. In a similar vein, Bunde (2022, p. 2) argued that "the Russian invasion will likely trigger a more far-reaching overhaul of German foreign policy beliefs," but he

also noted debates among German elites about "whether change already goes too far," which foreshadowed obstacles to the implementation of further changes.

As time passed and the war in Ukraine continued, the evaluations of Scholz's pronounced foreign policy changes have become more critical. In stark contrast to her own prior assessment, David-Wilp (2023, p. 4) concluded, in April, that "in the 14 months since Scholz spoke, it is apparent that the effort has come up short." And Karnitschnig (2023) simply stated that "the best way to describe Scholz's much-ballyhooed slogan is with a blunt Americanism: bullshit." In a more nuanced evaluation, Tallis (2023) argued that the *Zeitenwende* does not constitute a "fundamental change" but "a policy adjustment in some areas...and a course correction in others." By contrast, Matlé (2023, p. 33) reasoned that "Germany has fundamentally changed its security, defence, and energy policies in reaction to Russia's renewed and fully-fledged war of aggression against Ukraine." Nonetheless, Matlé (2023, p. 34) came to an overall negative assessment because Germany's "self-asserted aspirations do not match its deeds." Turning to potential reasons for the observed inertia, Masala (2023, p. 8) contended that the German defense establishment and bureaucracy acted as one would expect during peacetime but not with a war in close vicinity. Finally, some analysts have examined whether the *Zeitenwende* had an impact on policy attitudes toward foreign and security defense policy. Based on panel data analyses before and after the Russian invasion, Mader and Schoen (2023, p. 542) identified "no *Zeitenwende* at the level of German public opinion (yet)." Nonetheless, their study documented substantive growth in public support for increased military spending (Mader & Schoen, 2023, p. 536).

In this article, I argue that the *Zeitenwende* not only marks a watershed moment in international politics but also an "international orientation change" in German foreign policy (Hermann, 1990). This resonates with one of the aims of this thematic issue, namely to comparatively examine foreign policy change in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine (see Baciu et al., 2024; Böller & Wenzelburger, 2024; among others). The observed foreign policy change sets the *Zeitenwende* apart from the post-Cold War era, throughout which Germany "adjusted its position and reinterpreted its role in international affairs" (Mello, 2021, p. 175), yet these adjustments were not interpreted as instances of international orientation change (on the debate about German foreign policy throughout the 1990s see Peters, 2001). I apply the criteria of Hermann's (1990) classic conceptual framework of foreign policy change to show that, in the wake of the *Zeitenwende*, there have been modifications in Germany's international role, program and goal changes in the country's foreign policy, and policy redirection in many issue areas (for comparative assessments using similar criteria, see the contributions in Joly & Haesebrouck, 2021). In a short timespan since February 2022, the German government has made a range of far-reaching decisions in security and defense, including several policy reversals and modifications of its own role conception, but the *Zeitenwende* also caused an overhaul of the country's energy and trade policies and international cooperation at large, with further implications for other policy domains.

To substantiate my argument, I analyze recent German foreign and security policy, applying Hermann's (1990) conceptual framework. While much has been written about the *Zeitenwende*, this article makes a twofold contribution. First, it establishes a connection between the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) literature on foreign policy change and contemporary analyses of German foreign policy. Second, this article draws on a broader empirical basis as opposed to analyses that were conducted in the immediate aftermath of Scholz's Bundestag address. Hence, this allows for re-assessments of previous claims in light of new empirical evidence. That said, one caveat remains, namely that the processes of change that were initiated in the wake of the *Zeitenwende* are by no means complete and uncontested, which invites future research.

The remainder of this article has five parts: The next section provides a conceptualization of foreign policy change together with criteria to assess whether the *Zeitenwende* has led to an international orientation change in German foreign policy. This is followed by sections on the respective criteria, involving role change, program and goal change, and changes across policy domains. A concluding section draws together the findings, situates them in the literature, and provides a brief outlook.

2. Conceptualizing Foreign Policy Change to Assess the *Zeitenwende*

For observers of German foreign policy, the government's response to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine raises the question of whether the changes in the wake of the *Zeitenwende* amount to a foreign policy reorientation or whether these should rather be seen as adaptation amidst broad contours of foreign policy continuity. Since reunification, over the past three decades, Germany has continuously adjusted its foreign policy stance (Brummer & Kießling, 2019; Mello, 2021; Peters, 2001). In the late 1990s, the first red-green government had to reconcile Germany's traditional role as a "civilian power" with the realities of humanitarian crises in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere (Harnisch & Maull, 2001; Maull, 1990). Among others, this led to foreign policy "goal change" (Hermann, 1990), where Germany redefined the role of its armed forces to allow for active participation in multinational operations, which also required clarification of the constitutional requirements and the role of parliament in authorizing military missions (Wagner, 2017). The adjustments and adaptations since the 1990s have been accompanied by studies that sought to explore whether Germany's foreign policy role as a civilian power had changed through the country's involvement in military interventions with increasingly more "robust" mandates (e.g., Böller, 2022; Gaskarth & Oppermann, 2019; Geis, 2013; Hellmann, 1996; Malici, 2006; Mello, 2019; Rathbun, 2006; Stengel, 2020).

According to a review of German foreign policy between 1990 and 2020 (Mello, 2021, pp. 174–175), Germany's policy adjustments never amounted to an "international orientation change," which is understood as the most extensive type of foreign policy change in Hermann's (1990) classic conceptual framework that further includes "adjustment change," "program change," and "goal change" as lesser forms of foreign policy change (see also Joly & Haesebrouck, 2021). As Hermann (1990, pp. 5–6, emphasis added) defined it, international orientation change involves:

> The redirection of the actor's entire orientation toward world affairs. In contrast to lesser forms of change that concern the actor's approach to a single issue or specific set of other actors, orientation change involves a basic shift in the actor's international *role* and *activities*. Not one policy but *many* are more or less simultaneously changed.

Based on Hermann's (1990) definition, *international orientation change* thus requires the presence of three indicators: modifications in an actor's international role, changes in an actor's international activities involving program and/or goal changes, and foreign policy redirection in many issue areas. The first criterion (role change) is demanding to satisfy empirically, but it can find expression in the redefinition of an actor's role conception (Breuning, 2023; Cantir & Kaarbo, 2016). *Roles* are commonly defined as "social positions" that are founded on "ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organized group" (Harnisch, 2011, p. 8). Hence, to fulfill this criterion, changes in an actor's self-conception or the expectations of others would have to be identified (on the latter, see, for example, Wehner, 2015), for instance, through their expression in security doctrines, policies, or political declarations. The second

criterion, *activities*, entails the output dimension, which boils down to the means of foreign policy and the material basis on which foreign policy is conducted. This can find expression either in changes regarding the "methods or means by which the goal or problem is addressed" or it may comprise the entire replacement of a foreign policy goal (Hermann, 1990, p. 5). Finally, the third criterion is relatively straightforward, as it requires substantive changes not just on a single foreign policy issue but in numerous policy domains. With this conceptualization of international orientation change in place, the following sections turn to German foreign policy in the wake of the *Zeitenwende*, examining (a) changing role conceptions, (b) changes in the means and goals of foreign policy, and (c) changes across policy domains.

3. Role Change: Germany as Guarantor of European Security?

The *Zeitenwende* provided evidence of changes in Germany's national role conception, as articulated in speeches by cabinet members and in government documents of the traffic-light coalition. This entails the *self-conception* of Germany's foreign policy role, shared among many political decision-makers and elites, as well as the role expectations of relevant others, foremost Germany's European and Atlantic allies and partners. A comprehensive analysis of the latter is beyond the scope of this article; hence I will focus on four, non-exhaustive examples to illustrate modifications in the self-conception of Germany's national role.

The first example is Scholz's *Foreign Affairs* article, published in January 2023, where he rang the familiar theme but elevated it to a global level: "the world is facing a *Zeitenwende*: an epochal tectonic shift" marked by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, which has "put an end to an era" (Scholz, 2023a, p. 22, original emphasis). While one may rightfully question whether this notion is shared equally across the globe (cf. Jagtiani & Wellek, 2022), Scholz's article is instructive in how it (re)conceptualizes Germany's foreign policy role, also in relation to its allies:

> For its part, Germany is doing everything it can to defend and foster an international order based on the principles of the UN Charter. Its democracy, security, and prosperity depend on binding power to common rules. That is why *Germans are intent on becoming the guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be*, a bridge builder within the European Union and an advocate for multilateral solutions to global problems. This is the only way for Germany to successfully navigate the geopolitical rifts of our time. (Scholz, 2023a, p. 22, emphasis added)

This quote expresses a role conception that is undeniably rooted in Germany's familiar role of socialization as a civilian power, as evident in the underlining of multilateralism, the UN Charter, democracy, and an international order with common rules (Harnisch & Maull, 2001; Maull, 1990). However, the phrase *guarantor of European security* clearly modifies the civilian power role conception by introducing a notion of hard security, and by implication, military power and conventional deterrence. The emphasis on maintaining order in the international system resonates with the tradition of thought of Germany as a "reluctant hegemon" that adopts a leadership role and exercises power, but only through multilateral frameworks (Bulmer & Paterson, 2013; Gaskarth & Oppermann, 2019).

The second example ties in with the previous one in its emphasis on military leadership. It is from a speech by then-Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht in September 2022, on the occasion of the forthcoming National Security Strategy (NSS; which was eventually published in June 2023, see example four below). In a

much-quoted passage that directly refers to Germany's foreign policy self-conception, Lambrecht (2022, BMVg translation, added emphasis) explained that Germany ought to be considered a leading power, also in military terms:

> It has become clear by now that at its heart, this debate is about *how Germany understands its role as a nation*, as a neighbor, as a democracy, as an ally....Germany's size, its geographic location, its economic power, in short: its heft *makes it a leading power* whether we want to or not. And that *includes the military domain*.

The third example are the *Guidelines for Feminist Foreign Policy* (henceforth referred to as *Guidelines*), published in March 2023, by Annalena Baerbock's Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt, 2023). When the coalition government was inaugurated in 2021, this raised expectations of new directions in German foreign policy. Two of the coalition parties had been in opposition for a considerable time. The Greens had not been in government since 2005, whereas the FDP had been part of Merkel's second cabinet, until 2013. The Greens, especially, had been vocal about their "value-based" foreign policy agenda, which included a decidedly feminist approach to foreign policy (Aggestam & True, 2020; Henshaw, 2023), and a more assertive position vis-à-vis human rights violations and authoritarian regimes like China and Russia, as articulated, among others, in the party's election manifesto (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2021). In their coalition agreement, the parties stressed that their foreign policy would be "feminist" and "value-based" in multilateral cooperation and develop a "strategic solidarity" with democratically governed partner states, also in the context of "systemic competition" with authoritarian regimes (SPD et al., 2021, p. 113). With the publication of its *Guidelines*, Baerbock's foreign office took a step in that direction, underscoring that "in the coalition agreement, we committed to feminist foreign policy [FFP]," which "centres gender equity and human security more strongly in foreign policy activities. This makes it an essential component of values-led foreign policy" (Auswärtiges Amt, 2023, p. 3, 13). Through this policy initiative, Germany has joined about a dozen countries that expressly pursue FFP (UN Women, 2022). Undoubtedly, this has modified the country's national role conception, because six guidelines have a direct effect on foreign policy activities. The extent to which FFP remains contested became visible in a heated exchange between Baerbock and CDU leader Friedrich Merz, in which Baerbock strongly underlined the importance of a feminist perspective on security policy, also in light of the current war in Ukraine (Bundestag, 2022b, p. 1968).

Finally, the fourth example is the NSS, published in June 2023, under the banner of "integrated security" (Bundesregierung, 2023d). The 76-page document was presented at a press conference with the chancellor and the ministers of defense, foreign affairs, interior, and finance—a novum in German politics, which underlined the significance but also the political contestation surrounding the doctrine. In their coalition agreement, the SPD, Greens, and FDP had announced that a "comprehensive" national security strategy would be published "within the first year" of the new government (SPD et al., 2021, p. 114). Yet, the publication date had been postponed repeatedly, apparently because the parties could not agree on its contents (Lamby, 2023). Among others, while there seemed to have been an agreement about the creation of a national security council, similar to the National Security Council in the US, it was disputed where this institution was supposed to sit in the organizational hierarchy of the government. Both the chancellery and the foreign office sought to claim it for themselves and, eventually, the idea was buried (von Hein, 2023). Substantively, the NSS reflects the changed European security architecture. There is a clear emphasis on territorial defense and Russia is labeled "the biggest threat" to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area,

while China is simultaneously described as a "partner," "competitor," and "rival" (Bundesregierung, 2023d, p. 12). Concerning defense spending (see also the next section), the NSS entails the curious formulation that NATO's 2% goal shall be reached "also through the surplus budget...on average over several years" (Bundesregierung, 2023d, p. 33). Hence, the commitment is weakened because it's unclear over which period the government seeks to attain the defense spending goal and it is also a step back from Scholz's earlier announcements, where the surplus budget was supposed to add to an already increased regular budget.

The four examples illustrate modifications in the self-conception of Germany's international role, as defined by government actors. The notions of Germany as a "guarantor of European security" and "military power" evidently shift the country's understanding of its role towards being a (reluctant) European hegemon that exercises power to maintain international order. Nonetheless, this changed role conception remains firmly embedded in multilateral frameworks, foremost the EU and NATO, which continue to be essential for Germany's self-understanding. The adoption of a FFP has added another layer to existing normative frameworks, which also feature prominently in the new national security strategy. That said, these examples should neither imply that the observations were entirely novel nor that the expressed role conceptions were uncontested politically. Arguably, the idea that Germany ought to take on more international responsibility has a long pedigree (e.g., Schoeller, 2023). Politicians have repeatedly argued in favor of this. Yet it appears that the *Zeitenwende* has ushered in a qualitative change in political rhetoric. Concerning political contestation, the picture becomes more fine-grained if one looks at party-political differences and coalition dynamics. Clearly, the coalition parties are not entirely on the same line when it comes to Germany's envisaged role conception, as evident in the conflict over the NSS. Moreover, we know from research that party-political differences also appear in foreign policy (Haesebrouck & Mello, 2020; Hofmann, 2021; Wagner et al., 2018).

4. Program and Goal Change: Security and Defense Policy Reorientation

Without a doubt, the most striking modifications in the wake of the *Zeitenwende* were program and goal changes. This entailed the creation of a surplus defense budget of €100 billion, major increases in the regular defense budget, and extensive arms deliveries to support Ukraine, including heavy weaponry like howitzers and battle tanks. Finally, Germany also substantially bolstered its military commitment to NATO's eastern flank, announcing a permanent deployment of 4,000 soldiers to Lithuania. I address these in turn.

Announced in Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech (Bundestag, 2022a), the surplus budget (*Sondervermögen*) of €100 billion required a constitutional amendment, introducing a new clause into the *Grundgesetz* (Art. 87a) that enabled a one-time additional debt to strengthen alliance and defense capabilities. This was necessary to circumvent the constitutional "debt brake" (*Schuldenbremse*) that was enacted in the Constitution in 2009. The military *Sondervermögen* was unprecedented in the history of the Federal Republic and qualifies as a "program change," according to Hermann's (1990) conceptual framework. The constitutional change was affirmed on June 3, 2022, with subsequent ratification from the second chamber of parliament (Bundestag, 2022c). The parliamentary approval had been preceded by intense debates about how to spend the *Sondervermögen* planned for the *Bundeswehr*. Some SPD and Green MPs had suggested that it should also be used to acquire other capabilities, such as for cyber defense and the protection of critical infrastructure. Meanwhile, the conservative opposition had declared that it would only agree to the required constitutional

change for the additional budget if the money would be solely devoted to the core tasks of the armed forces. Eventually, an agreement was reached, so that cyber defense and other requests would be financed from the regular budget, while the surplus budget would be dedicated to core defense capabilities ("Einigung auf Sondervermögen," 2022).

Even though the formal hurdles of a constitutional change had been passed to make way for the surplus budget, this was not matched at the implementation stage. Newspapers reported that despite substantial military equipment given to Ukraine since the invasion, the defense ministry had neither ordered replacement ammunition nor much-needed military hardware ("Bundeswehr bestellt Ukraine-Material," 2023). While the announcement was made in February 2022, it was not before December 2022 that the first procurement agreements were submitted to the parliamentary budget committee, which must approve defense spending above €25 million. On another note, in July 2022, the Bundestag passed into law a defense ministry initiative, then still under the leadership of Lambrecht, to speed up procurement for the armed forces. In April 2023, the ministry reported that €32 billion of the surplus budget had been dedicated to new procurement projects, including the acquisition of the F-35A fighter jet, on which a contract had been signed in December 2022 (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 2023a, p. 49).

The second area concerns the regular defense budget, where Scholz had pronounced major increases to permanently lift defense spending so that NATO's stated goal of 2% of GDP would be met or even surpassed (Bundestag, 2022a, p. 1353). Since the late 1990s, Germany's defense spending has continuously wavered around 1.2% of GDP (Mello, 2021, p. 167). At first, it appeared that the government aimed to spend the surplus budget and, on top of that, would increase its yearly defense expenditures. However, it soon became apparent that the surplus budget was meant to get closer to the 2% goal and the regular budget would not see further increases (Matlé, 2023). Figure 1 shows Germany's relative defense spending as a share of GDP, compared to average NATO and EU spending, based on Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI; 2023) data for the years 1990–2022. It is evident that Germany's expenditures, despite increases in recent years, currently hover around 1.5% and thus far from the 2% goal, which was even further strengthened at NATO's Vilnius summit in July 2023, where member states pledged to "invest at least 2%" of GDP on defense (NATO, 2023). Given current financial planning, the 2% goal could be reached temporarily for 2024, and possibly for another two years, but only if the surplus budget and defense-related expenses from other ministries are added to the regular defense budget for calculation purposes. In 2027, once large parts of the surplus budget have been spent, there would be a gap of €25 billion towards the 2% goal, and this would grow further in the ensuing years (Dorn & Schlepper, 2023, p. 26).

The third area concerns arms deliveries to Ukraine. Here, the government has made a complete policy turnabout in the weeks and months after the Russian invasion, departing from Germany's longtime dictum to never send weapons into conflict zones. Arguably, this dictum was never as rigid as it was sometimes made to be (also by government officials), because there are several cases where Germany did indeed export weapons to countries that were involved in armed conflict. Moreover, the political guidelines on weapons exports include exceptions for cases of self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter. That said, it was remarkable and unprecedented how Germany, despite its traditional military reluctance, became one of the strongest international supporters of Ukraine, in terms of total commitments but also in military terms. Table 1 shows this, based on commitment data from the Ukraine Support Tracker through July 31, 2023 (Trebesch et al., 2023). Accordingly, Germany follows the US and EU in total bilateral commitments, but its
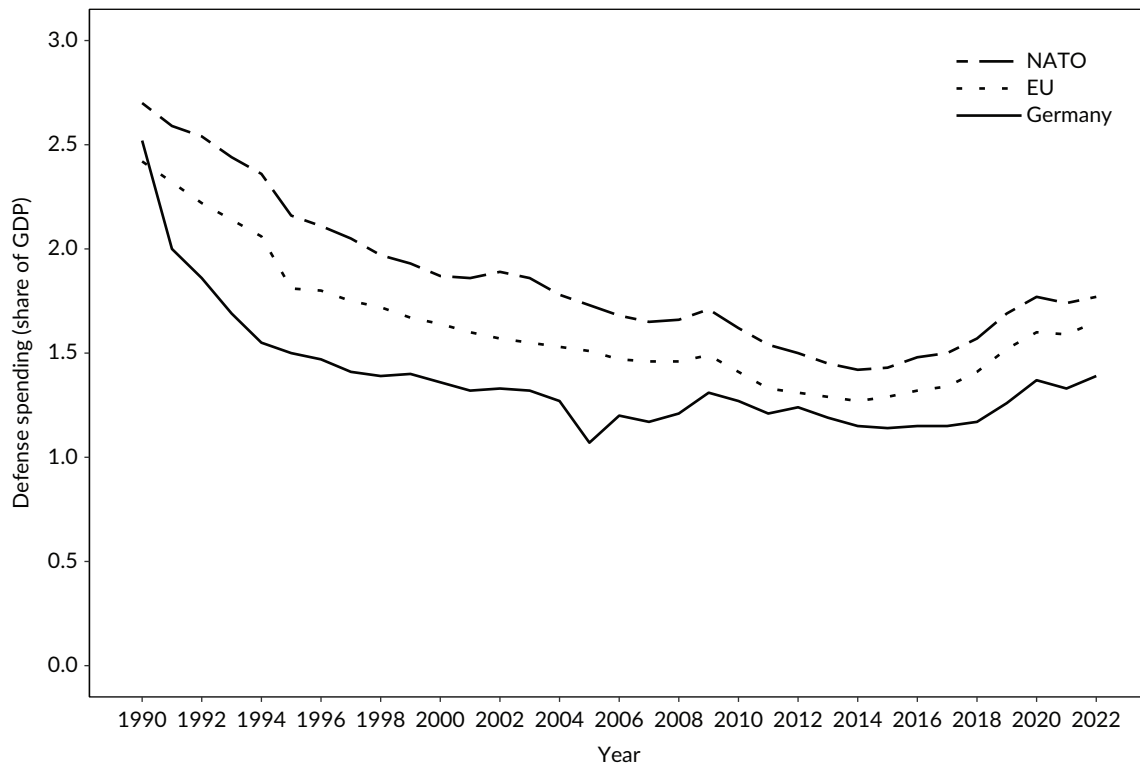
Figure 1. Germany's annual proportional defense spending, as share of GDP, compared to average NATO and EU spending (1990–2022). Source: SIPRI (2023), own illustration.

relative share exceeds the US (0.54% of GDP, as opposed to 0.33%). In military terms, Germany is the second largest contributor after the US, with all other European countries far behind. The right-hand column of Table 1 additionally shows countries' share in EU commitments, measured based on countries' relative contributions to the EU budget.

Table 1. Support for Ukraine: Top five countries across three dimensions.

Total bilateral commitments (in billion euros and % of GDP)		Military commitments (in billion euros)		Share in EU commitments (in billion euros)	
EU (Commission and Council)	76.9 (0.50%)	US	42.1	Germany	15.5
US	69.5 (0.33%)	Germany	17.1	France	13.0
Germany	20.9 (0.54%)	UK	6.6	Italy	9.4
UK	13.8 (0.49%)	Norway	3.7	Spain	9.1
Norway	7.45 (1.71%)	Denmark	3.5	Netherlands	6.1

Source: Trebesch et al. (2023).

As indicated, Germany's military support for Ukraine started cautiously, and initial efforts focused on financial and humanitarian support, as well as defensive gear. Defense minister Lambrecht's announcement of January 26, 2021 (and thus before Russia's full-scale invasion), that Germany would show its solidarity with Ukraine by sending 5,000 helmets had caused much ridicule, also among NATO allies, and was seen as an indication that Berlin politics was out of step with the gravity of the situation in Ukraine ("Polen kritisiert," 2022). Yet, it must be recalled that before the Russian full-scale invasion, there had been a tacit consensus among politicians from across the political spectrum that Germany would not provide lethal weapons to

Ukraine. Still, Ukrainian representatives were vocal in demanding military support from Germany. Arms deliveries started reluctantly but slowly grew to cover a wider spectrum of weapons systems. On June 21, 2022, the German federal government eventually released a comprehensive list, updated ever since, of "lethal and non-lethal military support" to Ukraine, distinguishing further between those items that had been delivered and those that were "in preparation/process" (Bundesregierung, 2023c). This process was accompanied by heated debates in the media and public sphere about whether Germany should provide further weapons and which weapons systems the country would be able to deliver.

Debates about weapons culminated in the controversial discussion surrounding the potential delivery of German-made Leopard 2 battle tanks. This had first been suggested by Spain in June 2022 and later also by Poland, but both countries required the German government's approval to export the German-made tanks. Yet, despite mounting pressure and public criticism, the chancellery rejected such proposals. This caused substantial friction within the coalition because the Greens were in favor of delivering heavy weapons to Ukraine, including battle tanks. Foreign Minister Baerbock vocally supported the delivery of Leopard 2 tanks but was apparently called to order by the chancellor (Pausch & Stark, 2023, p. 4). Many months later, on January 25, 2023, the chancellery announced that Germany would prepare the delivery of a first batch of Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, a decision that was coordinated with the US pledge to send M1 Abrams battle tanks (Bundesregierung, 2023b).

Finally, in his *Zeitenwende* speech, Scholz announced that Germany would expand its contribution to NATO's eastern flank, where Germany has been leading a battlegroup in Lithuania since 2017. In June 2023, the new Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, who had succeeded Lambrecht in January of the same year, announced that Germany would increase its commitment in Lithuania to a brigade-size deployment of about 4,000 soldiers, which would be permanently based in Lithuania (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 2023b). This came as a surprise because a "permanent stationing of substantial combat forces" marks a departure from the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which referred to "the current and foreseeable security environment" (as of 1997) and also underlined that "Russia will exercise similar restraint in its conventional force deployments in Europe" (NATO, 2009). Evidently, these conditions are no longer given, as also lined out in the national security strategy, but Germany had long been among those NATO member states that insisted on honoring the principle of non-permanent deployments. Hence, the recent decisions constitute clear evidence of policy change.

5. Changes Across Policy Domains

The third indicator for international orientation change is the observation of substantive changes not just on a single foreign policy issue but in numerous policy domains. This can be affirmed when looking into economic and trade policy, energy policy, and refugee policy, as policy domains where changes have been most visible. First, in a general sense, the extent and dependency on economic relations with autocratic states were called into question, where previously rather naive notions of *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade) had often motivated political decision-making in Berlin. In itself, this had been a banalization of Willy Brandt's motto "change through rapprochement" (*Wandel durch Annäherung*), which had motivated Brandt's *Ostpolitik* from the 1960s onward, first as mayor of Berlin and later as chancellor. In response to the Russian aggression and as part of coordinated EU measures, Germany supported extensive and unprecedented sanctions against Russia. By Spring 2023, the EU had issued ten sanctions packages, covering a wide array of financial and

economic measures, including the removal of Russian banks from the SWIFT electronic payment system, as well as bans on commodities such as iron, steel, coal, and oil. The only major element missing was a complete gas ban, which had been increasingly called for by commentators and analysts, but which had also met stiff resistance from industry representatives and several European governments ("Gas aus Russland," 2022). Yet, since the outbreak of the war, Germany largely replaced its gas imports from Russia with resources from the Netherlands and Norway, and increasingly through liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports, arriving at three newly built LNG terminals, the first of which opened in December 2022. The LNG terminals are part of the German government's initiative to reduce its energy dependency, together with increased investment in renewable energy (Bundesregierung, 2023a).

Relatedly, a striking policy turnabout was the stopping of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. This had been a bone of contention for many years because Nord Stream 2 provided the Russian Federation with direct access to Germany, effectively circumventing Poland and Ukraine as transit countries. Because of its geopolitical implications and environmental reasons, the Greens had been the most vocal critics of the pipeline, urging in their election manifesto for the project to be stopped (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2021, p. 24). Yet such statements did not enter the coalition agreement and the SPD position holding that the pipeline was a "purely economic enterprise," as Scholz had repeatedly declared, prevailed for the time being ("Scholz: Entscheidung über Nord Stream 2," 2021). However, on February 21, 2022, the Russian Duma recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in Eastern Ukraine as "independent states." This constituted a breach of the Minsk agreement and violated reassurances Putin had given just a few days earlier, when Western leaders, including Scholz, had shuttled back and forth to Moscow to find a diplomatic solution to the escalating crisis. The German government responded by announcing that the approval process for Nord Stream 2 would be stopped, which effectively put an end to the pipeline (Bundesregierung, 2022).

Finally, observers have attested to a "paradigm change" in refugee policy, as a response to the Russian invasion and the humanitarian crisis this has caused (Ohliger, 2022, p. 3). As of September 2023, Germany has admitted well above 1 million Ukrainian refugees, by far the largest group across EU member states (followed closely by Poland, with all other countries at some distance). While this created considerable challenges for the swift integration of large numbers of people into education systems and labor markets, it has not led to the same kind of polarization and conflict as the increased migration in 2015 and 2016, which was then caused by the war in Syria. One major difference is that in 2022, the EU activated its Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), to give shelter for Ukrainian refugees. The TPD aims to provide immediate, temporary protection for displaced persons from outside the EU. It was introduced in the wake of the wars of Yugoslav succession but had never been activated, also not during the years 2015 and 2016. While the swift and effective response to the situation in Ukraine has been encouraging, the evident difference in the treatment of refugees from other parts of the globe has also led to justified criticism (e.g., "Europe welcomes Ukrainian refugees," 2022).

6. Conclusion

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine marks a watershed moment in international politics that caused an *international orientation change* in German foreign policy. To substantiate this point, I applied the criteria of Hermann's (1990) classic conceptual framework on foreign policy change, including modifications in an actor's role, changes in an actor's international activities, and foreign policy redirection in many issue areas. First, the empirical analysis showed that the self-conception of Germany's foreign policy role is changing, as can be

gleaned from the new security strategy, the Chancellor's *Zeitenwende* speech, the adoption of a FFP, and other documents and statements. Accordingly, Germany's role is moving further away from its traditional foreign policy identity as a "civilian power" (Harnisch & Maull, 2001), which has had a lessening imprint throughout the last two decades (Mello, 2019), towards "becoming the guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be," as Scholz (2023a, p. 22) proclaimed. To be sure, this new role has not fully materialized yet, but steps towards it have been taken (cases in point are the European Sky Shield Initiative and NATO's Air Defender exercise under German leadership). In 2019, Gaskarth and Oppermann (2019, p.102) still concluded that due to the prevailing traditions of thought in Germany, it was "unlikely" that the country would become "a more consistent and reliable provider of military security...anytime soon." Arguably, the *Zeitenwende* has changed this.

Second, in terms of program and goal changes, Germany has completely changed its position on weapons deliveries from a cautious focus on non-lethal assistance (which was still the prevailing position in early 2022) to the wholesale support of Ukraine with heavy weaponry, including howitzers, battle tanks, and air defense systems (on the wider implications of this for liberal interventionism, see Olsen, 2024). Likewise, Germany has seen drastic increases in defense spending, including a €100 billion surplus budget, that even required a constitutional change and major increases in the regular defense budget. Finally, Germany has also strengthened its military deployments on NATO's eastern flank, including the announcement that the Bundeswehr would permanently place a brigade in Lithuania, rather than continuing a rotating deployment.

Third, it is apparent that major changes have been introduced not just in the defense and security sectors but also in other policy domains. A major decision was the stopping of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which constituted a policy reversal for the SPD who had long maintained that the pipeline should be considered a "purely economic enterprise," despite sustained criticism from the Greens as their coalition partner. Because of the Russian war, Germany had to diversify its energy imports and make significant changes in the energy and trade sector. Finally, refugee policy has seen major changes, mostly because of the activation of the EU's TPD but also because of changes at the local and regional levels.

While I showed an international orientation change in German foreign policy, this should not be taken to imply that the observed changes are uncontested and unalterable. Nor does it mean that all announced changes have also been implemented. Clearly, the analysis provided evidence of party-political contestation over the nature and extent of the initiated changes. For instance, the delayed decision-making on the NSS bore witness to contesting conceptions of how the political institutions should respond to the challenges of the international environment. In consequence, the NSS publication represents the smallest denominator that the coalition government could agree on (von Hein, 2023). Likewise, the issue of weapons deliveries to Ukraine caused substantial friction within the government, particularly between the SPD and Greens, and the budget considerations have resulted in a compromise solution that will help Germany to attain NATO's 2% goal in the coming years but not thereafter, given current financial planning (Dorn & Schlepper, 2023, p. 26). The gaps between the proclaimed changes and the delayed and incomplete implementation have led some observers to reject any notion of change in German foreign policy (David-Wilp, 2023; Karnitschnig, 2023). But such assessments miss the strides that German foreign policy has made in a short time span. Apart from the qualitative changes in departing from long-standing political dictums, the quantitative indicators (see Table 1) tell a different story. In the wake of the *Zeitenwende*, German foreign policy has indeed undergone an international orientation change, according to Hermann's (1990) conceptual framework.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

From Counterterrorism to Deterrence: The Evolution of Canada's and Italy's Defense Postures

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Abstract

How do US democratic allies perceive and adapt to the multiple challenges associated with the rise of multipolarity and the return of major war in Europe? This article examines how two US allies—Canada and Italy—have adapted their defense postures from the professed beginning of the shift in the balance of power in 2008 to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. More specifically, it provides a comparison of three major dimensions of defense postures: threat perceptions, patterns of foreign military deployments, and military expenditures. This article argues that both allies have undertaken a shift from liberal interventionism towards a defense posture increasingly geared towards deterrence vis-à-vis Russia. However, the shift did not occur analogously and simultaneously, as the two allies' adjustment was shaped by differing levels of domestic inter-party contestation. This article highlights the extent to which US allies' international security adaptation follows political-party threat perceptions more than the traditional left-right dichotomy. Shared inter-party threat perceptions of great power revisionism are found to shape the degree of defense policy adaptation toward great power competition.

Keywords

Canada; defense posture; deterrence; foreign military deployments; Italy; liberal order; threat perception

1. Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is yet another important indicator of the contestation of the liberal international order. It has amplified the debates over the emergence of a "new Cold War" and the rise of a multi-order or multipolar system (Abrams, 2022; Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022). The debate has been ongoing for some years now, with scholars deciphering Chinese and Russian willingness and capacity to

reverse the international status quo (Chebankova, 2017; Turner, 2009) whereas others attempt to demonstrate the ability of the international order to cope with the shocks (Bollfrass & Herzog, 2022). Neglected from current discussions on the fate of liberal international order is the response to this challenge by US allies. Having striven to help build the current order, which brought stability and growth for over 70 years, how do US democratic allies perceive and adapt to the multiple challenges associated with the rise of multipolarity and the return of major war in Europe? While the last great power transition occurred within the English-speaking world, when the US peacefully replaced Great Britain as the leader of the liberal hegemonic order (Vucetic, 2011), the current transition is likely to generate a profound shift that could lead US democratic allies to redefine their interests, objectives, and strategies.

This article examines how two US allies—Canada and Italy—have adapted their defense postures from the professed beginning of the shift in the balance of power in 2008 to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. More specifically, it provides a systematic comparison of three major dimensions of defense postures: threat perceptions, patterns of foreign military deployments, and military expenditures. Italy and Canada represent most similar cases as they are both middle powers, liberal democratic NATO allies with parliamentarian political systems, and they value their relationship with the US. Both countries are indeed committed to their role as faithful allies of the US (Massie, 2009; Nuti, 2003) and share an attachment to the US-led international liberal order, despite the rise of populist parties in Italy. Yet structured and focused comparisons of Canadian and Italian defense postures are rare in the literature. This study examines two democratic US allies facing an increasingly fractured international order, whose willingness and capacity to support US hegemony is crucial to its endurance in the context of US relative power decline (Massie & Paquin, 2020).

What shapes US allies' varying levels of commitment to US international leadership? Scholarship finds that hard power, geography, government ideology, and domestic constraints explain variance in US democratic allies' degree of burden-sharing in US-led military operations (e.g., Davidson, 2011; Mello, 2014; von Hlatky, 2013; Wagner, 2020). Against this backdrop, this article finds that the two most similar US allies have differed significantly in terms of threat perceptions, force employment, and defense expenditures. It argues that the varying level of inter-party agreement explains the differing speed to which they have adapted to great power competition. We contend that both Canada and Italy have undertaken a shift from liberal interventionism, typical during the so-called "unipolar moment," towards a defense posture increasingly geared towards deterrence vis-à-vis Russia, but that the shift has not occurred analogously and simultaneously, as the two allies' adjustment was shaped by differing levels of domestic inter-party contestation. This article highlights the extent to which US allies' international security adaptation follows political-party threat perceptions more than the traditional left–right dichotomy. Shared inter-party threat perceptions of great power revisionism are found to shape the degree of defense policy adaptation toward great power competition.

2. Canadian Threat Perceptions

Canada's first white paper (Government of Canada, 2008) adopted during the period under investigation mostly emphasized low-intensity sources of threat. The "Canada first" white paper (Government of Canada, 2008) noted that Canada faced an unstable and unpredictable environment characterized by 15 different types of threats, including international terrorism, failed states, and civil wars. Neither Russia nor China were

mentioned by name. The former was entirely ignored, while the closest reference to the latter stated that the "ongoing buildup of conventional forces in Asia-Pacific countries is another trend that may have a significant impact on international stability in coming years" (Government of Canada, 2008, pp. 4, 6). Tellingly, the major military investments in new fleets of combat aircraft and ships were justified not by the threats posed by great powers, but by the need to take part in international operations (Government of Canada, 2008, p. 17).

Terrorism remained the most significant threat even after Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for secessionist rebels in the Donbas. For instance, during the 2015 election, Prime Minister Harper's right-oriented conservative government highlighted "radical jihadism" as the main threat against Canada. It did emphasize the "risks to Canadian interests and security" caused by Russia's aggression, but these were of second order compared to combating jihadi terrorism (Conservative Party of Canada, 2015). On China, the Harper government publicly accused Beijing of conducting digital espionage and cyberattacks against Canada (Mackinnon, 2013). Yet it emphasized Canada's "traditional role of being an honest broker" in the Asia-Pacific region (Clark, 2013), and signed a cooperation agreement with Beijing to strengthen bilateral engagements at various levels, from academic exchanges, maritime security cooperation, reciprocal visits of government and military officials, and annual defense cooperation dialogues.

The election of a left-oriented liberal government in 2015 led to the crafting of a new defense policy. The 2017 defense strategy marked a shift by emphasizing state-based threats above terrorist groups. It stated that the global security environment was henceforth "marked by the shifting balance of power, the changing nature of conflict, and the rapid evolution of technology" (Government of Canada, 2017, p. 14). More specifically, the defense policy noted that:

> Military threats across a range of systems such as advanced fighters and anti-access area denial (A2AD) surface-to-air missile systems, in addition to evolving cyber threats, are making the environment within which the Canadian Armed Forces operates more lethal and complex. (Government of Canada, 2017, p. 38)

There was no doubt as to which states represented the greatest threat to Canada: both China and Russia were explicitly identified as the main challengers of the rules-based international order upon which Canada's security and prosperity rest. Despite recognizing that "the United States is still unquestionably the only superpower," the 2017 defense strategy nevertheless stressed that the "re-emergence of major power competition has reminded Canada and its allies of the importance of deterrence" and the need to develop "advanced conventional military capabilities that could be used in the event of a conflict with a "near-peer" (Government of Canada, 2017, pp. 14, 38, 50).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 entrenched this perception shift towards deterrence of great power revisionism. Defense Minister Anita Anand declared that "Canada's geographic position no longer provides the same protection that it once did" (Anand, 2022a). She underscored the emergence of new threats, such as advanced cruise and hypersonic missiles, that require a re-examination of the threat assessments that underpinned the 2017 defense policy (Anand, 2022b). In the upcoming defense policy update, it is safe to expect that Russia will be deemed a major threat to Canada, as the deputy prime minister stated that "democracies around the world, including our own, can be safe only when the Russian tyrant and his armies are defeated" (Freeland, 2022).

Most importantly, all Canadian parties backed the Liberal government's decision to increase military spending, provide weapons to Ukraine, and boost its presence in Eastern Europe following the invasion of Ukraine. Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre described Russia's aggression as "the result of a failed Western policy" and called for military and humanitarian support, comprehensive sanctions, expelling Russia's ambassador to Canada, and military build-up (Poilievre, 2022). In that vein, Conservative Shadow Minister for National Defence James Bezan declared: "No matter the cost, no matter what roadblocks Russia tries to put up, there can be no excuses. Canada and the West must do whatever it takes to support Ukraine. Nothing should be off the table" (Bezan, 2022, p. 2914). This position is in line with the Conservative Party's insistence to provide weapons to Ukraine following the annexation of Crimea, ahead of the Trudeau government's decision to do so in August 2018.

In short, despite the country remaining at a relatively safe distance, Canadian threat perceptions shifted from low-intensity menaces to high-intensity state-based threats following Russia's annexation of Crimea, a shift accelerated by Russia's full-blown invasion. The differential threat perceptions between the right-oriented Harper government (2006–2015) and left-oriented Trudeau government (2015 to date) owed less to partisanship than to the evolution of the strategic environment. The two governing parties have expressed similar threat perceptions before and after the shift towards great power competition. This bipartisan consensus, at odds with the traditional emphasis on political party divergences, is driven by a common perception of the threat posed by Russia.

3. Italian Threat Perceptions

Like Canada, Italy's defense policy was oriented toward counterinsurgency in the first decade of the 2000s and began shifting towards deterrence in 2015, albeit slowly. The 2015 white paper on international security and defense, the first real strategic policy document since 1985 (Sabatino, 2017, p. 3), acknowledges that the transition to a polycentric or a-centric world may result in political, economic, and military challenges (Italy, 2015, pp. 22–23). Yet, despite this recognition, the main threat perceived by Italy remained international terrorism, especially in the Mediterranean region, where the country decided to devote most of its future efforts (Renzi, 2015, pp. 3–5).

A shift has been perceptible more recently, with the explicit recognition of the threat posed by interstate wars. The Italian military anticipates all-domains conflicts, with limitations in maneuverability with anti-area technologies and dependence on technology (Esercito Italiano, 2019a, pp. 9–10, 2019b, p. 8). Nevertheless, the perception of Russia has remained, until very recently, relatively positive. Analyzing Italian prime ministers' and foreign minister's speeches, Siddi (2019, p. 126) shows that the belief that Italy should play a mediating role between Russia and the West has been constant since the early 2000s. Following the Crimean annexation, Italian Prime Minister Renzi preferred to continue his predecessors' policy of special relations with Russia rather than stand with the US, which was pushing for more sanctions (Brighi & Giugni, 2016, p. 22). Italy eventually sided with its allies and approved sanctions against Russia, while calling for the sanctions to be limited, non-punitive, and temporary (Coticchia & Davidson, 2019, p. 74; Natalizia & Morini, 2020, p. 53). In contrast with Canada, Italy opposed Ukraine's entry into NATO and the strengthening of sanctions against Russia. This was followed by several visits of Renzi to Moscow and Putin to Italy in which the Italian prime minister refrained from criticizing Russian policy in Ukraine (Coticchia & Davidson, 2019, pp. 74–75).

The positive representation of Russia began to dissipate following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi told the Italian parliament in March that Russia's aggression meant "the end of the illusion" of sustainable peace on the European continent (Camera dei Deputati, 2022, p. 17). The prime minister added that the unjustified aggression was an attack on democracy, the values of liberty, and the international order. "Tolerating a war of aggression against a sovereign European state would mean jeopardizing, perhaps irreversibly, peace and security in Europe" (Camera dei Deputati, 2022, p. 18). With this statement, Draghi recognized Russia as a threat to the European Union and the international liberal order.

Yet there remained some inconsistencies between this new threat perception and the actions taken in response to this threat. After former Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio declared that the allies needed to heavily weaken Moscow (Guerzoni, 2022a), Italy announced, in May 2022, a peace plan for Ukraine that included neutrality for Ukraine, autonomy agreements for the Donbas and Crimea, the end of sanctions, and the normalization of relations with Russia (Sylvers, 2022). This approach, which favors Russia, is partly explained by the perception of Italy's international role as a mediator between the West and Russia and by the perception that Russia is an indispensable strategic partner for Italy (Caffarena & Gabusi, 2017). Another explanation would be that this plan was proposed to please Italian public opinion and the main parties in the ruling coalition, notably the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega Nord. Italian public opinion would be ready to make this kind of concession if it meant an end to hostilities with Russia, especially among voters from the two parties mentioned (Alcaro & Mikhelidze, 2022). In contrast with the bipartisan consensus on Russia's threat in Canada, these inconsistencies reflected political divergences within the Italian government. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, pro-Russian positions have continued to be advocated by elected officials, including former Interior Minister Salvini (right-oriented Lega Nord party) and former Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio (neither left nor right-oriented populist Movimento 5 Stelle party; see Corbetta & Colloca, 2014). While the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega Nord insisted on the importance of maintaining relations with Moscow, Italy ended up siding with its allies. While there are no details on why Italy ended up voting with the rest of the EU countries, it may be explained by Italy's unshakeable loyalty to the European Union, which has been consistent in its foreign policy for many decades (Caffarena & Gabusi, 2017, p. 132).

The election of a center-right coalition government at the end of 2022, formed mainly from traditionally pro-Russian and Eurosceptic parties, may have surprised many. Instead of reconsidering the pro-Ukrainian position of the former prime minister and questioning Italy's support for Ukraine, the new government has pursued and even accentuated its support to Kyiv. While it may seem surprising that a traditionally pro-Russian populist coalition decided to increase aid to Ukraine after its election, at least two explanations can be advanced. Firstly, a change in threat perception following the Russian invasion that brought the war back to Europe led these parties to renew their commitments to European and transatlantic allies (Bordignon et al., 2022, p. 383). The second factor is the reputational cost within the West of maintaining such a pro-Russian stance (Coticchia & Verbeek, 2023, p. 141). The agreement between the parties forming the government coalition reaffirms the importance of belonging to Europe and NATO and support for Ukraine as the priority ("Per l'Italia," 2022). Italian Prime Minister Meloni has repeatedly reaffirmed Italy's unwavering support for Ukraine, despite criticism from the opposition Movimento 5 Stelle party (Amante, 2023; Italian Government, 2022). She notably stated that:

It is Italy's duty to fully contribute, because, whether we like it or not, freedom has a cost and that cost, for a nation, is its ability to defend itself and prove it is a reliable partner within the framework of alliances to which it belongs." (Italian Government, 2022)

Those in favor of maintaining Italy's role as a reliable Western ally have thus won, for now, the political competition against those pushing for a mediator role (Brighi & Giusti, 2023; Caffarena & Gabusi, 2017; Rosa, 2014).

In sum, Italy has been slower than Canada in recognizing Russia as a threat because of party-political divergences and, more specifically, pro-Russian radical parties contesting Italy's longstanding role as a faithful NATO ally. While Prime Ministers Draghi and Meloni sided with the Atlanticist positions expressed by the US, NATO, and the EU, the stability of this alignment is undermined by the importance of inter-party disagreements. As a result, we should expect greater ambivalence in Italy's defense policy adaptation to great-power competition than Canada.

4. Canadian Military Deployments

As Figure 1 shows, Canadian military deployments have decreased significantly since 2011, following the decision by the right-oriented Conservative government to put an end to Canada's combat mission in Kandahar before the termination of NATO's mission in Afghanistan (Massie, 2016). The same government committed Canada a few years later to the US-led coalition against the Islamic State from 2014 to 2016. Following the election of a left-oriented Liberal government in 2015, Ottawa put an end to its airstrike operations against the Islamic State. The Liberal leader, Justin Trudeau, believed that "Canada can make a more helpful contribution to the international effort to combat ISIL than a few aging warplanes" (Trudeau, 2014, p. 8230). Upon becoming prime minister, he put an end to Canada's combat mission and compensated by increasing troops dedicated to training and advising Iraqi security forces (Panetta, 2015).

Furthermore, Canada's greatest military commitment abroad since 2016 has been its contribution to NATO operations, most prominently its command of a battlegroup as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia to deter and defend against potential Russian aggression. Ottawa has deployed an average of 865 troops in NATO operations since 2016, in contrast to 226 in US-led operations and 106 troops in UN-led missions. Canada's contribution to NATO's deterrence posture has thus clearly supplanted its commitments to fighting international terrorism and peace operations. This contrasts with the pre-2016 period, where counterterrorism in Iraq and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan dominated Canadian military deployments overseas. Thus, the 2015 threat perception shift towards deterrence has indeed materialized in military operations.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, Canada increased its military contribution to NATO's deterrence posture. It further deployed an M777 artillery battery and an electronic warfare unit, consisting of approximately 165 soldiers, bringing the Canadian military contingent in the battlegroup to 695. In addition, a second frigate was deployed to Europe and a CP-140 Aurora long-range patrol aircraft has been repurposed to augment NATO forces in the Euro-Atlantic region. In March 2023, Canada announced it would be accelerating the acquisition of defense equipment for the NATO battlegroup it leads in Latvia. This includes portable anti-tank missiles, counter uncrewed aircraft systems, and air defense systems, deemed necessary

to meet the threats in "the changed global security environment" (Shakil, 2023). Three months later, Ottawa further announced it would deploy 15 Leopard battle tanks with an additional 131 personnel to Latvia, as part of NATO's plan to boost the enhanced forward presence battlegroup to brigade-size level.
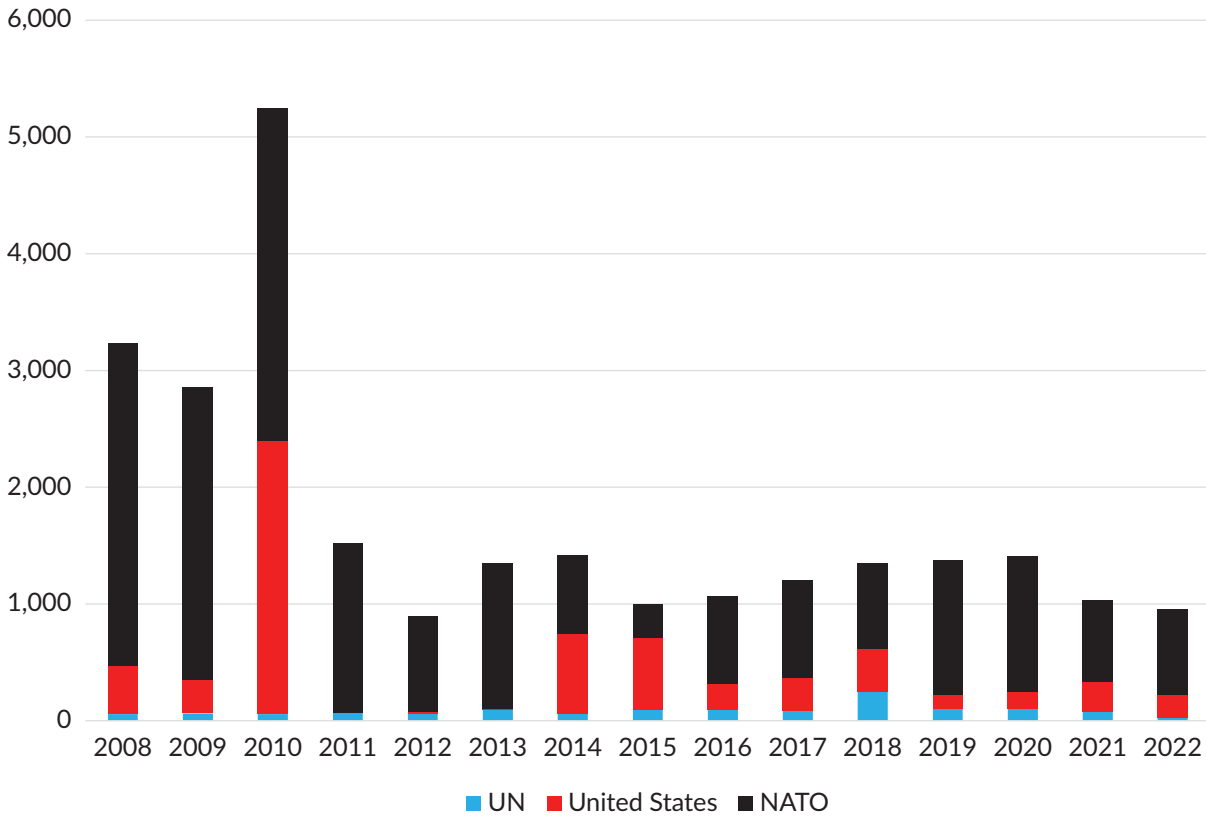

Figure 1. Canadian military deployments by leadership. Source: IISS (2008–2022).

Canada was one of the few allies to deploy troops to Ukraine to help train them before the 2022 invasion. Although it limited its material assistance to non-lethal military equipment, on February 14, 2022, Ottawa agreed to provide light weapons to Kyiv. It was not until after the invasion that Ottawa approved supplying Ukraine with heavy weapons. The left-oriented Trudeau government first offered 100 Carl Gustav anti-tank weapons systems and 2,000 rockets. Three days later, Ottawa added 4,500 M72 rocket launchers and 7,500 grenades (Massie, 2022). These weapons were welcomed by Kyiv but judged insufficient. The Ukrainian president asked for heavy artillery, tanks, air defense systems, armored vehicles, helicopters, fighter planes, and missiles (Trevithick, 2022). However, Canada's defense minister declared it had "exhausted" its weapons inventory and that the Canadian forces were facing "capability problems" (Maurya, 2022). After weeks of international and political pressure, the Trudeau government announced the delivery of four M777 howitzers from the 37 batteries it acquired from the US in 2005, as well as eight main battle tanks. In addition, armored personnel carriers, cameras for drones, and satellite imagery have been delivered. During his visit to Kyiv, Prime Minister Trudeau stated that Canada would continue to do "whatever is necessary" to support Ukraine, which pleased President Zelensky, who in turn stated that he could not ask for more since Trudeau had already provided him with "everything he had." While Canada is the 8th largest contributor of military aid to Ukraine, it is only the 20th most important relative to GDP (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2023).

Thus, while Canada is offering notable support to Kyiv, its assistance remains limited and below what is necessary to achieve Canada's political objective in Ukraine, namely the total repelling of the Russian invasion. The left-oriented Liberal government was indeed criticized by the right-oriented Conservative leader for having failed to provide Kyiv with weapons before the invasion (Poilievre, 2022). Since 2015, the Conservatives have continuously supported Canada's NATO military deployment in Latvia. However, the new Conservative leader's main critique of the Canadian government's response to the Russian invasion has not focused on the timid military assistance, but on his desire for Ottawa to sell more liquefied natural gas to Europe (Tasker, 2022). This muffled criticism can be explained by the shrinking support amongst Conservative voters towards providing military aid to Ukraine. Between May 2022 and February 2023, Conservatives thinking that Canada is providing too much support to Ukraine rose from 19% to 26%, while those in the opinion that Canada is not lending enough decreased from 43% to 23% ("Russian invasion: 55%," 2023). While defense policy is rarely an electoral issue, in Canada, due to significant inter-party consensus on threat perceptions, if public support for Ukraine continues to dwindle among Conservative voters, it may become a divisive issue.

5. Italian Military Deployments

Italian military deployments demonstrate both elements of change and continuity. According to Coticchia and Moro (2020), Italy has gone from a period of enthusiastic interventionism following the end of the Cold War to a period of relative retreat since 2014. Indeed, as Figure 2 shows, Italy deployed over 8,800 troops abroad from 2008 to 2014, in contrast with 6,250 since 2015, a 30% decrease. The Libyan experience, which still haunts Italian political elites, partly explains this trend. But, more than a retreat, it is above all a repositioning of Italian military posture to focus on Italy's strategic neighborhood, the enlarged Mediterranean. The prime minister stated in 2015 that "the Mediterranean is the heart of the next decades of development of Italy and Europe. The Mediterranean is the center" (Renzi, 2015, pp. 3–5).
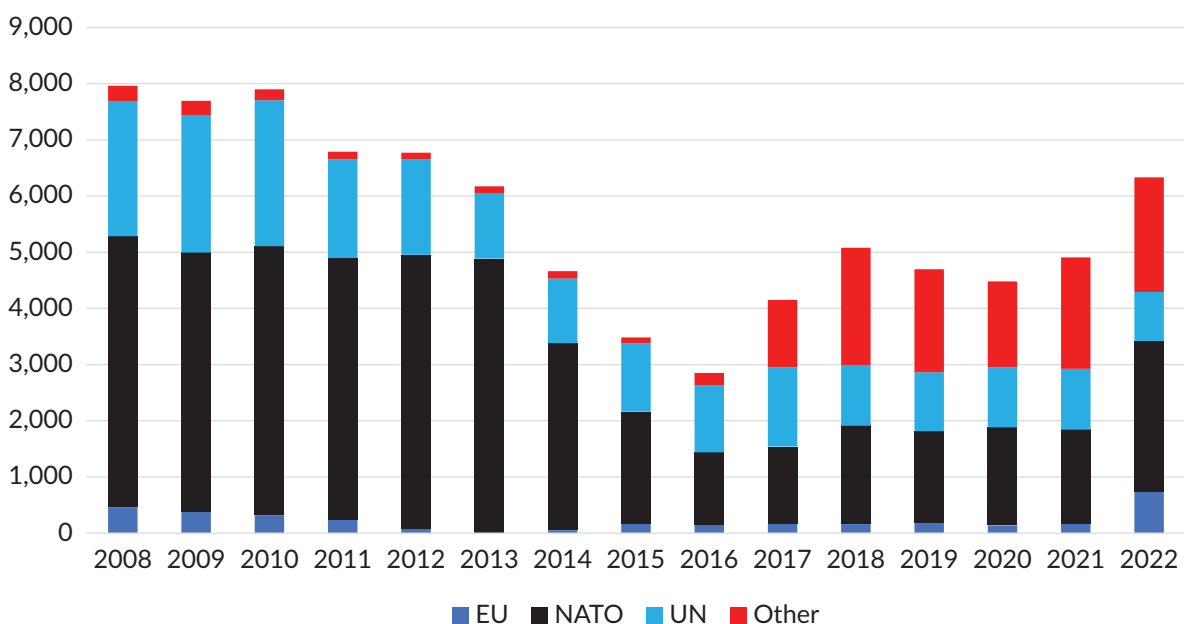

Figure 2. Italian military deployments. Source: IISS (2008–2023).

Although Italy took part in the US-led coalition against ISIS, it refused to conduct airstrikes despite requests and pressure from the US and France (Coticchia & Davidson, 2019). Here again, the Libyan experience seems to have played a role. As the prime minister stated in 2015: "if someone imagines solving the problem of Syria by saying 'this morning I get up and decide that we do the bombing there,' good luck! But it will not solve the problem. Libya is there to prove it" (Renzi, 2015, pp. 3–5). Opposition to Italy's combat participation in Iraq and Syria was trans-partisan, but especially salient in the Movimento 5 Stelle and Lega Nord. These positions are consistent with Italian strategic culture, which favors a defensive and restrictive use of military force while framing military operations abroad as humanitarian or peacekeeping operations (D'Amato, 2019; Ignazi et al., 2012; Rosa, 2014).

On the other hand, there is also some continuity in Italian military deployments. Most current deployments follow past deployments focused on counterterrorism and stabilization. In May 2022, Italy assumed the command of NATO's mission in Iraq, with an expansion of the allied contingent. Africa and the Middle East still figure as the regions with the highest number of Italian missions (Gozzini & Ezzamouri, 2022; Ministero della Difesa, n.d.).

However, the invasion of Ukraine has brought a slow evolution towards a greater deterrence posture against Russia. First, the Italian army was already planning in 2019 to strengthen deterrence capabilities by 2025, as well as to prepare for "high-intensity conflict, against conventional and hybrid threats, also with the purpose to safeguard the integrity of the Alliance in every possible domain" (Esercito Italiano, 2019b, p. 10). The war in Ukraine has accelerated this trend. In addition to continuing to contribute to NATO's deterrence posture in Eastern Europe, Italy participates in the new NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (for rapid deployment of troops) and is preparing to substantially contribute to the newly established enhanced vigilance activity battlegroups in the four NATO allies on the Southeast flank, mostly in Bulgaria and Hungary (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, n.d.). In this context, at the end of February 2022, Italy confirmed the deployment of about 1,350 military personnel to Hungary and Latvia within the NATO framework, the dispatch of 130 military personnel and 12 fighter aircraft to Romania, as well as 235 personnel, two ships, and one fighter aircraft to the Black Sea. Italy also maintains about 2,000 troops available for deployment to the Eastern front if needed (Fubini & Sarzanini, 2022; Sarzanini, 2022).

Italy also decided to provide weapons and ammunition, such as Stinger anti-aircraft and Spike anti-tank missiles, to Ukraine after February 24, 2022. While approved by most political parties, this decision faced numerous criticisms from the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega Nord. Both parties voiced skepticism about weapons deliveries to Ukraine, calling instead for renewed peace talks with Putin. Since taking office, Prime Minister Mario Draghi has gradually dismantled the pro-Russian attitudes and policies of previous governments, preferring to side with European allies, despite facing mounting opposition by the Movimento 5 Stelle and Lega Nord (Albanese & Speciale, 2022). However, once in government, the Lega Nord fully endorsed supplying arms to Ukraine. Even the main opposition parties, such as the Partito Democratico and the Movimento 5 Stelle, voted in favor of sending weapons ("Armi Ucraina, ok," 2022; see also Coticchia & Moro, 2023). The Movimento 5 Stelle is more critical of this type of contribution and frequently changes its position (Guerzoni, 2022b). Since October 2022, Italy has sent two M270 multiple rocket launchers, six 155mm PzH 2000 self-propelled howitzers, 20 to 30 units of 155mm modernized M109L self-propelled howitzers, dozens of M113 armored personnel carriers, and several FH-70 Howitzers to Ukraine ("Cannoni e mezzi hi tech," 2022; "New FH-70 Howitzers," 2022). Overall, Italy is the 14th largest provider of military aid

to Ukraine and 22nd relative to GDP, ranking slightly less than Canada (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2023).

This suggests that the degree of pro-Russianness influences Italian political parties' threat perceptions and force posture preferences. When there was strong pro-Russian sentiment across the political spectrum and among the electorate, Italy was reluctant to see Russia as an enemy and attempted mediation. When this pro-Russian sentiment gradually dissipated after the 2022 invasion, Italy's position changed towards a more deterrence-focused posture. This contrasts with Canada, where no such pro-Russia sentiments exist amongst elected representatives, and where, consequently, there has been a trans-partisan consensus since 2015 on the threat posed by Russia and the need to shift towards a deterrence-oriented defense posture.

Furthermore, while acknowledging the threat and challenges posed by Russia and the need to help Ukraine, the country's defense strategy is still articulated around the concept of the enlarged Mediterranean. It is not clear at this time how Italy can reconcile the two strategic priorities. Besides, the Italian prime minister, a strong supporter of Ukraine and of sending arms, is in a fragile political position. If support increased toward NATO after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with now 68% of Italians in favor of protecting NATO allies if attacked, 45% of Italians and 47% of Meloni's party supporters are against supplying Ukraine with arms, and only 34% in favor (Amante, 2023; Djinis, 2023; Marrone, 2022). It is not certain how long the prime minister's position can hold, especially if the political costs of such support become too high when the traditionally pro-Russian political parties in the governing coalition begin to challenge this posture (see De Maio, 2023).

6. Canadian Military Expenditures and Acquisitions

Canada's defense expenditures declined from 2009 to 2014 but have been on an upward trend since Russia's annexation of Crimea. Under the 2017 defense policy, considerable new investments have been made towards maintaining and enhancing Canadian military capabilities, for a total worth $553 billion from 2016–2017 to 2036–2037. However, the largest increases are also the furthest away. Military expenditures decreased from 2017–18 ($30.8 billion) to 2019–2020 ($29.9 billion) but are projected to reach $36.3 billion in 2022–2023 and $51 billion in 2026–2027 (Parliament Budget Officer, 2022a). Given the rampant inflation and the inability of the Department of National Defence to fully spend its annual budget (almost $10 billion was not spent between 2017 and 2021), the increase in Canada's military budget may be much smaller than projections suggest (Parliament Budget Officer, 2022b, p. 3).

Planned budget increases will not allow Canada to reach the NATO target of 2% of GDP, as Figure 3 shows, although the gap between defense spending and NATO's target is expected to decrease over the next five years if the planned budget increases are implemented. While military expenditures as a share of GDP rose by about 40% from 2014 to 2021, it is not projected to exceed 1.59% in the coming years. Canada would have had to invest an additional $18.2 billion in 2022–2023—and $75.3 billion more from 2022 to 2026—to reach NATO's 2% target (Parliament Budget Officer, 2022a). This is almost 10 times more than the planned reinvestments. On the contrary, the Trudeau government has asked the Department of National Defence to cut close to $1 billion of its annual budget for 2023–2024 (Brewster, 2023). Canada's chronic under-investment in defense has long irritated the US, which has criticized Canada for not paying its fair share of the defense burden (Panetta, 2022). Canada ranks 25th among NATO allies in terms of military spending relative to its gross domestic product (NATO, 2023).
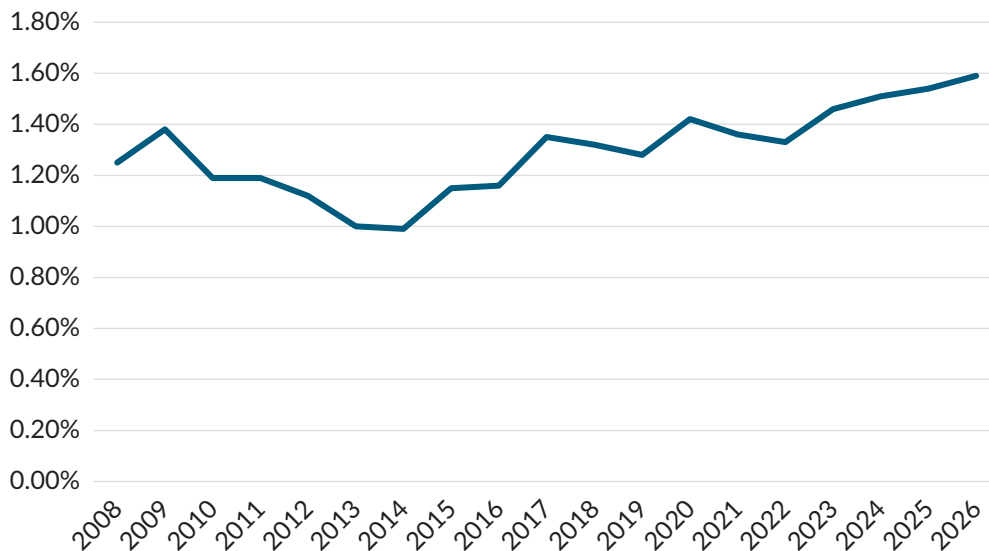
Figure 3. Canadian defense expenditures (% of GDP).

Additionally, a significant portion of Canada's defense reinvestments are aimed towards North American continental defense. Among the $8 billion new funds announced in the 2022 budget, over five years, over 61% of this amount will be used to modernize the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD; Brewster, 2022a). Indeed, the 2017 defense policy did not include a budget for the modernization of the North Warning System, a chain of radars along the Arctic Ocean to monitor airspace, which the former NORAD commander said was becoming obsolete (Berthiaume, 2021). Canada now appears ready to invest in the modernization of NORAD, for an estimated $40 billion in additional spending over the next 20 years.

The modernization of NORAD highlights the priority towards enhanced deterrence in response to the changing world order. In Defense Minister Anand's (2022b) words: "as autocratic regimes threaten the rules-based international order that has protected us for decades, and as our competitors develop new technologies like hypersonic weapons and advanced cruise missiles, there is a pressing need to modernize Canada's NORAD capabilities." The modernization of NORAD will include radar systems and a network of sensors to enhance early warning coverage, advanced air-to-air missiles for the planned acquisition of 88 new F-35 fighter jets, additional air-to-air refueling aircraft, the development of ground-based air defense capabilities, as well as infrastructure upgrades for military bases in Canada's North. Canada is thus investing significantly in its deterrence by denial capabilities to face the threats posed by Chinese and Russian advanced strike capabilities (Charron & Fergusson, 2021). The former commander of NORAD and deputy director of operations argued that North America is no longer a sanctuary:

> [China and Russia] plan to take the fight to North America so that they don't have to fight in Europe or the Western Pacific, or at least to ensure that any fight will be against one with reduced participation by the US military. (O'Shaughnessy & Fesler, 2020, pp. 6-7).

Furthermore, Canada's most costly investment resides in the acquisition of 15 Type-26 frigates in the early 2030s, worth over $77 billion (Parliament Budget Officer, 2021). The Canadian Surface Combatant (CSC) will be Canada's only true warship. It is intended to conduct a wide range of functions, including long-range air

defense, anti-surface, anti-submarine, and information warfare, across a spectrum of high-to-low-intensity operations. Its main task will be to defend Canada's three coasts alongside the US, as well as to deploy up to four ships internationally as part of larger formations. The CSC's combination of long-range Standard Missile 2 and close-range Evolved Sea Sparrow will provide layered air defense against incoming missiles. It will thus be an integral part of Canada's defense against advanced missile systems. The CSC will also be capable of conducting offensive operations, notably with Tomahawk missiles, which provide an anti-ship capability as well as a precision-guided capability against land targets (Lloyd & Perry, 2021).

What remains unclear, however, is Canada's investments in the capabilities of its three mechanized brigade groups, including the one on alert for NATO's Response Force, first activated in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Given the discussions at NATO regarding the reinforcement of military contingents in Eastern Europe, which could result in the pre-positioning of troops permanently, it is unclear whether Canada is anticipating the true costs that this could represent (Brewster, 2022b, 2023). It is doubtful that the projected investments in Latvia—doubling the size of its battlegroup, including the deployment of 15 tanks, and purchasing anti-tank missiles, air defense systems, and counter-drone equipment—will suffice to equip the Canadian Forces for the requirements of high-intensity interstate warfare.

In sum, Canada has begun the process of transforming its military from a focus on counterterrorism towards multidomain deterrence. However, absent political willingness to substantially increase its defense budget towards NATO's 2% target, the Canadian military will lack the capability to contribute meaningfully to deter and help defeat a peer or near-peer adversary due to a lack of personnel, ammunition, readiness, and capability. Thus, the bipartisan consensus on the threat posed by Russia amid the return of full-scale war in Europe has permitted significant reinvestments in the Canadian military, but not to the level required by the new security environment.

7. Italian Military Expenditures and Acquisitions

Italy's defense spending has remained relatively stable between 2008 and 2019, with a slight increase in 2020 and 2021, but still below NATO's 2% target, as shown in Figure 4. Italian military spending follows roughly the same trend as Canada's, with one noteworthy difference: Italy's parliament voted on March 2022 to raise the defense budget to 2% of GDP, increasing the defense budget to €37 billion for four years, starting in 2023 (Lanzavecchia, 2022). The objective was originally to reach 2% by 2024, but it was strongly opposed by the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega Nord. The 2% will be supposedly reached in 2028 (Balmer & Amante, 2022). Both parties wanted to invest in the country's domestic economy first. However, Italy had already begun increasing its military spending since 2020, including under a Movimento 5 Stelle government. Under Meloni's coalition government, the appeal of increased military spending is even clearer (Kington, 2023).

Italy has been planning an evolution of its defense posture through military procurement for a few years now. These acquisition projects are designed to deal with future high-intensity interstate warfare. Rome will notably invest in air defense systems, with the first development phase of the Common Anti-Air Modular Missile Extended Range ("The Italian army signs contracts," 2022). Italy's Defense Multi-Year Planning Document 2021–2023 also includes the launch of 85 new procurement and modernization programs and the updating of the 115 ongoing programs, among which some of the strategic importance, such as a defense cloud concept, a new amphibious vehicle, an enhancement of air and anti-ballistic defense, new radars for air defense missile

systems, and new air defense destroyers. The latter will be equipped with anti-ship and deep land-attack weapon systems (Peruzzi, 2021).

Figure 4. Italian defense expenditures (% of GDP).

Italy's Defense Multi-Year Planning Document 2022–2024 gives three main reasons for enhancing defense capabilities: competitiveness vis-à-vis potential contenders, credibility vis-à-vis partners, and attractiveness to countries that share areas of priority national interest (Ministero della Difesa, 2022, p. 35). Rome plans the development of a Ballistic Missile Defence program, jointly with France as part of the NATO Ballistic Missile Defence, aimed at building a ballistic threat defense capability, as well as the acquisition of Bergamini Class frigates and Thaon de Revel Class multi-purpose offshore patrol vessels, the initiation of the development of a new Destroyer Class, the mid-life modernization of the Horizon Class destroyers, the initiation of plans to acquire a new Class of light patrol vessels, the acquisition of a new class of next-generation mine destroyer, the acquisition of the new TESEO MK2/Evolved missile, the 127 mm VULCANO artillery guided munitions, and the New Heavy Torpedo. Italy is further planning to acquire two additional FREMM frigates given the increased Russian presence in the Mediterranean (Rasio, 2023). In 2023, several high-ranking military officials stated that they wanted more military capabilities. For example, Air Force Chief General Luca Goretti said Italy required 41 extra F-35 fighters, while Navy Chief Admiral Enrico Credendino told lawmakers his force lacked drones and submarine-spotting aircraft. Army chief General Pietro Serino said the HIMARS rocket launcher, used by Ukraine against Russian invaders, was on his shopping list (Kington, 2023).

These new acquisitions come from decision-makers' realization of the changing international environment (Fish, 2021). According to the Italian Chief of Defense Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, there is a pressing need for a modernization of the Italian defense to deter adversaries, most notably Russia and China. He stated that, for Italy, the invasion of Ukraine "has shown what can happen to an army that does not value proper

training, doctrine, and professional military education," and that Italy "should consider technological superiority as a key element of effective deterrence" ("The future of Italy's armed forces," 2022).

In short, similarly to Canada, Italy's force development is moving from an anti-terrorist focus to greater attention devoted towards enhanced deterrence. That said, Italy's force development is investing much greater sums than Canada. While Italy expects to reach 2% of its GDP in military spending within the next five years, Canada has no plan to reach NATO's target. The inter-party divergences on threat perceptions and force employment have not been as great on force development. Whereas force employment has been generally consistent with differential threat perceptions, force development seems to be devoid of a similar politicization that has plagued Italy's defense posture amid the return of high-intensity warfare in Europe.

8. Conclusion

Italy has not undertaken a similar shift as Canada from counterterrorism to deterrence. Given its greater military capabilities, Rome has been able to increase its commitments to NATO's deterrence posture while maintaining a significant presence in other theaters. Both Rome and Ottawa have furthermore significantly reduced their military commitments abroad, exemplifying a reluctance to engage in combat operations abroad. But in contrast with Canada, military support to Ukraine in Rome is a fluctuant political issue with relatively low public support. As a result, the shift from counterterrorism to deterrence has not occurred simultaneously, as the two allies' adjustment was shaped by differential political-party threat perceptions. On the one hand, Italy faces greater inter-party divergences, with pro-Russian parties undermining Rome's ability to commit resources to deter and defend against Russian aggression. Canada, on the other hand, exemplifies greater inter-party consensus on threat perceptions, but it is significantly reducing its level of troop deployments and underinvesting in force development, thereby limiting its capacity to sustain military support to Ukraine and achieving its political objective: the defeat of Russia in Ukraine.

The two countries have adjusted differently to the challenges posed by great power competition to the liberal international order. While Canada is more hesitant than Italy to adapt in terms of force development, Ottawa has been much keener to adjust its force employment to the new security environment. This suggests that force development and employment are not similarly driven by inter-party threat perceptions. Force employment against Russia has spurred greater political divisions in Italy than in Canada due to pro-Russian sentiments amongst some political elites. In contrast, force development has not been subject to similar political debates, with Rome willing to commit more resources to adapt its military than Ottawa. This suggests that the crisis of liberal interventionism has contrasted effects among Western allies. Future studies would do well to investigate the sources of inter-party (dis)agreement and its varying impact on defense policy, for allied commitment levels are key to the sustainment of the US-led international order amid the decline of US relative power.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

The Rumours of the Crisis of Liberal Interventionism Are Greatly Exaggerated

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Abstract

The Western reactions to the Russian assault on Ukraine in 2022 were surprisingly united and tangible. This article argues that the intervention in the Russia–Ukraine war was a continuation of other liberal interventions that took place earlier in the current century. This article claims that there is no crisis of liberal interventionism because foreign policy decision-makers in the US agree that (liberal) interventions in foreign countries can serve the national interests of the US as well as the interests of the people in the countries affected. There is no crisis because the transatlantic partners in Europe backed the US in the interventions. Finally, there is no crisis of liberal interventionism because the domestic opposition in the US and Europe is too weak to restrain the liberal interventionist mood among Western governments. Liberal interventionism is still on the agenda.

Keywords

democratic peace theory; foreign policy elite; liberal interventionism; national strategic culture; public opinion; solidarity

1. Introduction

The Russian assault on Ukraine in February 2022 was not only about the future of Ukraine. It was about the basic rules and norms of international relations, as argued by prominent liberal scholars like John Ikenberry and Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 2022; Ikenberry, 2022, p. 19; Mulligan, 2022). The Western reactions to the invasion were "far more unified and significant than anyone expected" (Way, 2022, p. 12). The unified and forceful response of the West can be seen as a manifestation of the strong adherence to the core characteristics of the liberal international order among EU and NATO members. The liberal international order is characterized by its support of a rules-based order and its multilateral nature with openness,

representation and, for some, the promotion of democracy (Hout & Onderco, 2022; Ikenberry, 2020; Lake et al., 2021; Mearsheimer, 2019; Paul, 2021; Ruggie, 1992).

This article claims that the reactions of the West not only reflected adherence to the liberal international order. The Western reactions also reflected an incoherent and inconsistent, but nevertheless stable, adherence to the idea of liberal interventionism, implying that the rumours of a general crisis for liberal interventionism (cf. Chandler, 2012; Charbonneau, 2021; Cooper, 2007; Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023, p. 259) are greatly exaggerated. The doctrine of liberal interventionism states that national and international goals can be advanced by intervening militarily in the domestic affairs of other states (Lipsey, 2016, p. 416). Such interventions can be justified by references to national interests and to the interests of the people of the country concerned, especially where the denial of human rights plays a crucial role (Lipsey, 2016, p. 416). This article asks why the support for liberal interventionism has been present among Western governments on several occasions since the turn of the millennium, stressing that the support has not been without exceptions (cf. Deudney & Ikenberry, 2021, pp. 78–81).

The first argument of this article states that there is not a general crisis of liberal interventionism because the American foreign policy elite continues to agree that interventions in foreign countries can serve the interests of the US. The second argument states that there is not a general crisis of liberal interventionism because European foreign policy decision-makers recognize the dependency on the US to provide security for Europe. Therefore, the alliance with the US figures prominently for the European decision-makers, giving them motives for backing Washington and for showing solidarity with the US. The third argument states that within the Western alliance, a major threat to the liberal international order and liberal interventionism comes from domestic nationalist-populist opposition in the US and from radicalized nationalist groups in Europe, implying that this article does not address the potential external threats to liberal interventionism that may come from non-Western actors such as Russia and China. Each of the arguments is addressed in three separate sections.

The Western countries' interventions and support of Ukraine shared several features with other Western interventions that have taken place in the current century. First, the Ukraine intervention was about the national interests of the intervening countries in their own security, and maybe it was also about their national interests in maintaining a liberal international order (cf. Ikenberry, 2022, p. 72). Second, it was also about the people living in Ukraine and their right to sovereignty and independent choice of domestic political systems (cf. Ikenberry, 2022, p. 72). Third, the instruments of the intervention in the Ukrainian crisis were in many respects like those used in other previous Western interventions. The core exception in the Ukrainian case was the absence of direct military intervention involving Western boots on the ground. Apart from this, the Western intervention comprised economic support, deliveries of weapons, training of local armed forces, and, very importantly, the outsourcing of fighting to local armies. Other elements characterizing liberal interventionism, promotion of liberal values, liberal institution-building, and democracy played a far smaller role in the Ukrainian case. Nevertheless, it should not be neglected that the Ukrainian fight against Russia was often presented by Western political leaders as a defence of democracy and of the liberal values of the "West" (J. R. Biden, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2022; interviews, Washington DC, April 19, May 30, June 1, June 5, June 7, 2023).

This article is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework, neo-classical realism, is presented. Second, several recent cases of intervention are introduced to indicate that liberal interventionism has not been in

(a general) crisis in the current century. However, it has to be recognized that the policy has not been pursued coherently. It is followed by an analysis showing that the foreign policy elite in Washington agreed on the benefits to the US of pursuing an interventionist foreign policy. Subsequently, this article presents an analysis of European partners' support for the transatlantic alliance and American interventionist policy. Finally, it addresses the argument that the threat to liberal interventionism comes from radical nationalist domestic groups within the US and Europe.

2. Theoretical Framework: Neo-Classical Realism

This article is inspired by neo-classical realist reasoning because the framework suggests taking into account both the changing international structures and the domestic variables that may or may not influence decision-making on interventions in third countries (Ripsman et al., 2016; Rose, 1998). It is characteristic of neo-classical realist thinking that the international systemic conditions are filtered and interpreted via four domestic intervening variables: leader perceptions; strategic culture; state-society relations; and domestic government institutions, before being turned into foreign policy decisions (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 58–79; Rose, 1998, pp. 157–160).

When it comes to the international systemic variables, there is a debate about the contours of the current international system and not least about the strength of the US. One position argues that the international system is in its final stages of transforming from a global rules-based order into a new global architecture characterized by diversity and plurality. The new global situation will be characterized by multiple orders, which is not equal to a multipolar world. One of the orders in the coming multi-order world is expected to be the American-led liberal order, but there will emerge at least three other orders (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022). The continuation of the liberal world order seems close to the position that maintains that the US is no longer capable of playing the role of international hegemon (Ikenberry, 2018; M. Smith, 2018).

A second position is represented by a surprising agreement between two of the most prominent US IR scholars, John Ikenberry and John Mearsheimer. Ikenberry's (2022) recent position maintains that the US is still the leading global power because of its ability to build international coalitions and its ability to work with other democracies to shape global rules and institutions. Mearsheimer (2019, pp. 28–33), for his part, argues that even though US hegemony has been "going downhill" since 2004/2005, the US is still a prominent and extremely powerful international actor capable of influencing international development and change.

As far as the domestic factors are concerned, the perceptions of foreign policy decision-makers are assumed to be highly relevant because the beliefs, ideas, and misunderstandings of these individuals can result in decisions that may be implemented. Important foreign policy decision-makers usually refer to the head of government and the foreign minister. Often, the concept is expanded to include ministers of defence, trade, development, economy and finance, and their top civil servants. This group of people is described as the "foreign policy executive" (Hill, 2016, pp. 62–64; see also Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 58–79; Rose, 1998, p. 157). Recent research strongly indicates that the personality of the foreign policy maker makes a clear difference in foreign policy (Kaarbo et al., 2023). The perceptions of the foreign policy executive are not only influenced by the leaders' personal ideas and ideological preferences. Equally important, when the focus is on foreign and security policy, the decision-makers' perceptions are framed by the strategic culture.

The concept of strategic culture refers to "deeply embedded conceptions and notions of national security" shared by the country's political leaders and foreign policy decision-makers, i.e., the foreign policy executive (Götz & Staun, 2022, p. 482). "It is expressed in discourses and narratives rooted in socially constructed interpretations of history, geography and domestic traditions," building on a strong historical dimension (Götz & Staun, 2022, p. 482; see also Silove, 2018, pp. 31–32). Strategic culture is a highly path-dependent phenomenon, implying that it does not change overnight. It is supposed to constrain the behaviour of governments and, not least, their freedom of action (Porter, 2018, pp. 9, 11; Silove, 2018, pp. 31–32).

The third intervening variable refers to "state-society relations" that comprise phenomena such as public opinion, and for the analysis here, the "polarization" of both American and European politics is assumed to be particularly relevant (Meijer & Brooks, 2021, p. 8). Fourth, domestic government institutions are considered intervening variables (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 75) because they not only participate in making foreign policy decisions but also they are crucial for implementing the decisions taken.

The theoretical framework is used to structure the following analysis. The intermediate variables are used as inspiration for formulating assumptions to focus the separate analyses in three sub-sections. In the first sub-section, it is assumed that perceptions of the members of the American foreign policy elite are important because they may result in decisions that may be implemented. The second assumption states that the absence of a (general) crisis for liberal interventionism is linked to the fact that the European transatlantic partners share the perception that a strong NATO serves their interests. The Europeans also share the perception that liberal interventions can serve their interests. The analysis in the third sub-section is guided by the assumption that the most serious threat to liberal interventionism comes from radicalized domestic political opposition in the US and Europe.

The analysis here builds on academic studies, including analyses produced by think tanks and recent journalistic sources published by recognized international media. The analysis is buttressed by 14 semi-structured interviews made in Washington DC by the author during April and throughout June 2023. The interviewees are former high-ranking government officials and academic analysts mainly based in think tanks but also in university departments. The interviews are used to update and, after triangulation, to adjust assessments and information obtained from the other sources mentioned.

3. No Crisis in Liberal Interventionism

The resolute reaction from a united West against Russia's assault on Ukraine in February 2022 came in the wake of several crises and interventions that took place in the current century. Following the terrorist attack on the US on 9/11, NATO applied Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, resulting in 20 years of Western military involvement in Afghanistan (Hallams, 2009; Sperling & Webber, 2012). On the one hand, there was a unilateral operation run by the US. On the other hand, there was a NATO mission that originally focused on rebuilding government institutions and training the Afghan security forces (Carati, 2015, pp. 206–208). At one point, The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)–NATO force included more than 130,000 troops from NATO and partner countries (Olsen, 2020, p. 62; Sperling & Webber, 2012).

Notwithstanding the unilateral American invasion of Iraq in 2003, leading to one of the most serious crises in the transatlantic relationship after WWII (Garey, 2020), only took a few years before NATO members agreed

that NATO should take over the training of the Iraqi defence forces. The training mission was established in 2008 with three overall goals: capacity building, non-combat training, and the stabilization of Iraq to prevent terrorism and the re-emergence of ISIS (Hallams, 2009, pp. 51–53; Olsen, 2020, pp. 69–70).

Soon after 9/11, Africa, especially West Africa, became one of the geographical regions where multilateral cooperation was considered an important tool for fighting terrorism and spreading liberal values such as the importance of free elections and democracy (Chivvis, 2016, pp. 44–48; Dieng, 2019; Wing, 2019). Following a unilateral French military mission in Mali in early 2013, the UN launched state-building activities and training of local security forces. The multinational UN stabilization mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was tasked with supporting the political process and carrying out security-related stabilization missions with a focus on protecting civilians, extending state authority, and preparing for free and inclusive elections (Craven-Matthews & Englebert, 2018).

Shortly before the French intervention in Mali, several transatlantic countries in 2011 launched a military campaign against the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi based on a responsibility-to-protect-mandate (Davidson, 2013; Dunne & Gifkins, 2011). Although the military campaign resulted in a change of regime that later ended in total chaos and civil war, the intervention itself reflected the strength of liberal interventionism as the explicit reasons behind the American, British, and French decision to intervene were concerns for human rights and the aim to prevent a potential genocide (Blomdahl, 2016, p. 152; Ostermann, 2016).

In early 2022, the Biden administration intervened in the mounting crisis between Russia and Ukraine, and it was highly active in finding a solution to the conflict to prevent a Russian invasion of its neighbour (Crowley & Troianovski, 2022; Rankin, 2022). When the invasion was a fact, the Western responses were dressed in arguments about self-defence and self-interest and often supplemented with arguments linked to the defence of freedom and democracy (U.S. Department of State, 2022; Wertheim, 2022).

In brief, the Western intervention in the Ukraine–Russia war suggests the continued viability of liberal interventionism despite its many failures in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and West Africa that have led to claims about liberal interventionism being in crisis (Charbonneau, 2021; Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023; Pouliot, 2006). The absence of a crisis does not imply that the Western liberal states, including the US, are eagerly interventionist. The pattern of American interventionism and Western interventionism has been quite mixed (Deudney & Ikenberry, 2021, pp. 78–81). The passivity during the civil war in Syria is an obvious example of non-intervention, but it is far from the only one. On the other hand, and most important for the discussion here, the tools used to support Ukraine were like those used in other interventions in this century. The support contained supplies of military equipment and training of the local armed forces with the aim that they performed the actual fighting on the ground.

4. The American Foreign Policy Elite Agrees on the Goals and Aims of Liberal Interventionism

The first argument of this article states that there is no crisis because the American foreign policy elite continues to agree that intervention in foreign countries serves the interests of the US (Ikenberry, 2018, 2020; Ikenberry et al., 2018; Jahn, 2018). The following analysis builds on the assumption that perceptions

of American foreign policy decision-makers are important, and so is the strategic culture of the US. The strategic culture of the US is particularly important because the strategic understanding of political leaders and elites has proven hard to change (Porter, 2018, pp. 8, 11). Therefore, it is expected to contribute to constraining radical changes in American foreign policy. In brief, there is a set of dual assumptions guiding the following analysis.

The bi-partisan agreement within the foreign policy elite (cf. Bryan & Tama, 2022) can be explained by the members' strong and persistent adherence to a common understanding of the strategic position of the US, which had remained unchanged for the first 70 years following WWII (Porter, 2018). The common understanding was that the US had to be militarily preponderant and that Washington should seek to integrate other states into US-designed institutions such as NATO, the UN, and the free market system under the auspices of the WTO (Porter, 2018, p. 9). After the end of the Cold War, both Republican and Democratic administrations continued to share this strategic understanding, which was further buttressed by the myth of American exceptionalism and by the common understanding of the need for American superiority, technologically and militarily (Bryan & Tama, 2022; Löfflmann, 2023).

From the early 1990s onwards, liberal internationalist thinkers stepped forward with a new type of foreign policy argument building on the theory of democratic peace, stating that democracy could spread to other countries by force of arms (Heinze, 2008; T. Smith, 2022, p. 20). Emboldened by the so-called "unipolar moment" or the "liberal moment" (Ikenberry, 2020, p. 255), the US also accepted another liberal concept, the "just war doctrine" (Heinze, 2008, p. 118; T. Smith, 2022, p. 22). The members of the American foreign policy elite demonstrated that they shared a common belief in the theory of democratic peace, and, therefore, the promotion of democracy abroad became an important element in the debate about how to strengthen American national security. The consensus on the potential benefits of the democratic peace idea allegedly developed into a general adherence to interventionism (Beauchamp, 2021; Clarke & Ricketts, 2017, pp. 368–370; Mead, 1999), ending in a "robust, crusading and theoretically confident liberal interventionism" (Parmar, 2009, p. 178; see also MacMillan, 2019, p. 577).

In brief, the strategic culture went hand in hand with the ideological currents of American liberal internationalism that strongly emphasized the value of cooperation among democratic governments (Ikenberry, 2022). Likewise, the strategic understanding was in line with the demands for economic openness, negotiation, international institutions, and, not least, the American willingness to assume responsibilities for the community of liberal democratic peoples aimed at creating "a zone of pacific peace" (Heinze, 2008, p. 118; Ikenberry, 2022; T. Smith, 2022, p. 17). It was not until Donald Trump became president of the US that serious doubts were raised about the value of multilateralism and liberal interventionism and the benefits to the US of collective security, hinting that the international liberal order was in crisis (Mead, 2017, p. 2).

During the presidency of George W. Bush (2001–2009), the crusading liberal interventionism was reinforced by the overlap between the proponents of liberal "democratic peace theory" and neo-conservative thinking (Heinze, 2008, pp. 115–120). The two different lines of foreign policy reasoning share the belief in the essential goodness of American power and in the necessity to use it for global betterment. Representatives for the two different types of thinking on US foreign policy demonstrated their underlying consensus during the run-up to the controversial Iraq war, where the liberals tended to agree with the so-called Bush doctrine (Garey, 2020;

Heinze, 2008, p. 115; Parmar, 2009, p. 204). The rhetoric of the liberals was different, but their politics and policy preferences coincided and complemented one another as they did in the years following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Heinze, 2008; Parmar, 2009, p. 203).

The Presidency of Barack Obama (2009–2017) emphasized the continuity in its foreign policy priorities from the Bush era (Parmar, 2009, p. 203). The "Obama doctrine" combined the liberal idea of the value of internationalism with conservative realist thinking, resulting in a foreign policy strategy that accommodated engaged multilateralism and military restraint (Löfflmann, 2020). In the 2015 National Security Strategy, President Obama repeated, "strong and sustained American leadership is essential to a rules-based international order....The question is not whether America should lead, but how we lead" (Löfflmann, 2020, p. 592; White House, 2015). The strategy and the statement by the president reconfirmed the basic tenets of the bipartisan "Washington consensus" on national security and foreign policy (Löfflmann, 2020, pp. 592–596). Obama pursued a policy of interventionism that served the conservative as well as the progressive agenda by combining pragmatic and principled approaches to international conflict, as was demonstrated in the intervention in Libya as well as in the non-intervention in Syria (MacMillan, 2019, p. 590). The passivity during the civil war in Syria war was a clear illustration of the mixed record of liberal interventionism and the shifting adherence to the principles of the R2P concept.

Donald Trump's worldview differed significantly from those of both Bush Jr. and Obama. Nevertheless, Trump only succeeded in changing two important elements of American foreign policy. First, his government undermined the international trade system, particularly the WTO, NAFTA, and the Transpacific Partnership Agreement. Second, the Trump administration upset the relationship with Iran by abolishing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement on nuclear enrichment. Apart from these two examples, Trump generally failed to make drastic realignments of US foreign policy and he failed to institutionalize his anti-global agenda (Locatelli & Carati, 2022, p. 2; Parmar, 2019; Parmar & Furse, 2021). This confirms the assumption that strategic culture is difficult to change and, therefore, it is often a constraint to radical policy change. The bottom line is that Trump had limited influence on American foreign policy because of his personal style, his poor impulse control, his lack of a political strategy, and his black-and-white view of the world (Drezner, 2019, 2020; Locatelli & Carati, 2022, p. 8). Nevertheless, during his four years in the White House, his populist policy statements led to an erosion of the discursive dominance of the Washington consensus, forcing both major parties into an intense debate over the future of US foreign policy (Löfflmann, 2020, p. 600).

Before being elected president, Joe Biden stressed that by joining forces with "fellow democracies," the strength of the US would double (J. Biden, 2020, p. 68; Ikenberry, 2022). The statements clearly brought the US back to its traditional foreign policy course, at least in words. When Biden became president on January 20, 2021, he inherited a favourable situation for strengthening the transatlantic alliance, one of his core priorities (Smeltz, Wojtowicz, et al., 2022). The new administration reversed Trump's decision to reduce the number of US forces in Europe. Instead, it provided a modest boost to the American military presence. The EU and the US also made tangible progress on improving bilateral security and defence cooperation as they sought to strengthen the strategic partnership between the EU and NATO (Adebahr et al., 2022).

When Russia started to threaten Ukraine during the fall of 2021, the US diplomacy launched several initiatives aimed at persuading Moscow not to attack its neighbour. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken

engaged in active travel diplomacy, meeting and talking with Russian officials (Crowley & Troianovski, 2022; Rankin, 2022). It clearly reflected the personal perceptions of President Biden and his administration and their personal commitment to transatlantic cooperation. There is no doubt that the war in Ukraine was a game changer for increased American support not only for the transatlantic alliance in general (interviews, Washington, April 19 and June 1, 2023) but also for the so-called "strategic autonomy" of European defence (Binnendjik et al., 2022; interviews, Washington, June 1 and June 5, 2023). The new post-Ukraine position meant that the Biden administration shifted the previous American position on European defence from discursive support to a much more active policy aimed at developing an independent European defence capability (Binnendjik et al., 2022; interviews, Washington, April 19 and June 1, 2023).

In sum, it is remarkable that the American foreign policy elite, to a large extent, agreed about the benefits to the US of pursuing an active interventionist foreign policy inspired by the democratic peace theory. The bipartisan understanding reflected the strength of a common understanding of the strategic culture in the country that was characterized by increasingly bitter partisan fights between political groupings and parties about domestic political issues (Bryan & Tama, 2022). The bipartisan agreement on American foreign policy may question the assumption of the impact of the perceptions and personal ideas of the foreign policy elite. Instead, it points towards the strategic culture being the most important explanation for the bipartisan agreement in US foreign policy as it seems to unify the foreign policy elite irrespective of individual political leanings or party affiliations. The bipartisanship in US foreign policy may also be explained by the fact that "we [the Republicans] know we might enter government in the future, and then, we would be forced to make the same type of decisions" (interview, Washington May 30, 2023).

5. The Transatlantic Partners Supported the American (and French) Liberal Interventionism

The second argument of this article states that because the transatlantic partners in Europe were willing to support Washington (and France) when they decided to intervene militarily, there is no (general) crisis neither for the idea nor for the implementation of liberal interventionism. The argument assumes that the transatlantic partners in Europe share, with reservations, a minimum of liberal thinking and some elements of a common strategic culture. The Europeans also share and support the liberal idea that interventions abroad may serve their national interests as well as the interests of people in the countries where they intervene.

There is not a common strategic culture in Europe or the EU, implying that "the national elites" are still "deeply ingrained in national mindsets" (Mi, 2022, p. 21). Despite national differences in strategic cultures, however, the individual transatlantic partners in Europe all recognize that they are heavily dependent on the US for providing security in Europe and there is general support for each nation's membership in NATO (NATO, 2023; Wike et al., 2022). Most recently, the significant European strategic dependency on NATO and, thereby, on the US was underlined by the Russian assault on Ukraine (Binnendjik et al., 2022; Witney, 2022, p. 2). The strong dependency on the US makes it urgent for European foreign policy decision-makers to maintain cordial relations with Washington. They tend to demonstrate solidarity with the big transatlantic ally in situations of great crisis, suggesting that the support of the US may not only be about sharing an ideological belief in the possible benefits of intervention in other countries. It may also be about showing symbolic support, such as when European NATO powers, France, the UK, and Germany deploy naval ships in and around the disputed South China Sea (van Hooft et al., 2022).

Starting with the Afghanistan situation, NATO and, thereby, the transatlantic partners were present in the country almost from the start of the American campaign in October 2001 (Garey, 2020, p. 213). The ISAF–NATO mission to Afghanistan was deployed in Kabul to defend government institutions and was conceived to help rebuild government institutions and train the Afghan security forces (Carati, 2015, p. 207; Garey, 2020, pp. 214–220). The European governments' backing of the intervention in Afghanistan indicates their adherence to liberal interventionist ideas, but it also demonstrated solidarity with the US. On the one hand, the situation in and around Iraq was much more complicated because of the strong resistance to the American invasion from France and Germany, in particular (Emmott, 2021; Garey, 2020, p. 212; Hallams, 2009, pp. 51–53; Schmitt, 2015, pp. 104–137). On the other hand, the quick return of the sceptical European governments in support of the US and the transatlantic alliance suggests that they shared a fear of upsetting the big ally, which motivated them to change their policies.

When it comes to Libya, the attempts to promote a liberal agenda in the country were clear from the beginning of the international debate on the looming crisis in the country (Blomdahl, 2016, p. 142; Davidson, 2013; Dunne & Gifkins, 2011). Once again, the intervention was founded on transatlantic cooperation between the US and many European countries, not only France and the UK. The swift transition of power in Libya following the killing of the dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, led to no less than three national elections in 2012, which only served to deepen the existing political divisions in the country. Attempts to set up political institutions together with a national reconciliation dialogue were skipped while the interests of most European countries in the situation in Libya soon disappeared (MacMillan, 2019, p. 590; Villa & Varvelli, 2020, p. 158; cf. Schmitt, 2015, p. 18). The Libya case suggests that many European governments had a shared belief in the potential benefits of intervening in foreign countries to promote stability, democracy, and respect for liberal values such as free elections.

In January 2013, France launched its Operation Serval in Mali with the official aim of stopping the advance of radical Islamist rebels moving towards the capital (Erforth, 2020, pp. 572–575). Only a month after the start of the intervention, the EU, France, and the USA pushed the Malian authorities to hold elections as soon as possible. Elections both for president and parliament were held in 2013 (Wing, 2013, pp. 483–485). These steps could be interpreted as an expression of the strength of the belief in liberal democracy as a tool for promoting stability. Many European governments involved themselves in stabilizing Mali, and the EU established no less than three multilateral missions (Pirozzi, 2013, pp. 16–17). The European decision-makers apparently shared a belief in the potential benefits that could follow from promoting security in Mali by fighting terrorism and from promoting liberal ideas such as the importance of free elections and democratic government.

When Russia assaulted Ukraine in February 2022, the transatlantic alliance proved its strength through the resolute and common reactions of all European governments and the US government. Despite disagreements about burden sharing (Erlanger, 2022; Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2022), there was general support for backing the Ukrainian defence and thus supporting a highly militarized form of liberal interventionism. At the same time, for the first time in its history, the EU announced a grant of €500 million to purchase armament and defence equipment for Ukraine, a country involved in a bloody war (De La Baume & Barigazzi, 2022). The decision suggests that the EU member states, despite different national strategic cultures, shared some basic ideas and values that resulted in the common decision to support Ukraine. The values may be linked to upholding the existing liberal order, or they may be linked to a belief in the potential benefits of liberal interventionism.

Summing up, the European backing and participation with military means were remarkable in all the interventions analyzed in Section 3. They reflected a willingness to support the US and France when they decided to intervene under the banner of liberalism. The readiness of the European partners to back the US and participate in intervention abroad also reflected their recognition of the strong dependency on the US. It motivated many foreign policy decision-makers in Europe to demonstrate solidarity with the US when it intervened abroad.

6. The Threats to Liberal Interventionism Come From Within the US and Europe

The third argument of this article states that the most serious threat to liberal interventionism comes from domestic political opposition in the US and Europe (cf. Chandam, 2022). The argument builds on the assumption that public attitudes towards foreign policy can impact decision-makers. It is, however, a highly questionable assumption, as many surveys show that foreign policy issues figure low on the priorities of most voters (Foyle, 2017; Friedrichs & Tama, 2022). Thus, the focus in this section shifts from strategic culture as a main explanatory factor to the potential significance of state–society relations and domestic government institutions.

After four years with Donald Trump and his "America first" rhetoric, only 35% of American voters supported the typical Trump position that the US should stay out of international politics and not join alliances and international organizations (Smeltz et al., 2021, p. 8). When it came to Ukraine, American public opinion became increasingly divided. Traditionally, the Republican party was split between an isolationist and an internationalist or establishment faction. The radical and isolationist wing was against sending huge sums of financial support and weapons to Ukraine, whereas moderate establishment Republicans and Democrats agreed that supporting Kyiv was important (Desiderio et al., 2022; Martin, 2022). Bryan and Tama (2022, p. 877) conclude that "most foreign policy elites across the two parties share broadly similar internationalist outlooks" (Smeltz, 2022).

Public opinion surveys conducted during January 2023 showed that the share of Americans who found the US was providing too much aid to Ukraine had grown to 26%, up from 12% in May 2022. Around 50% of Americans stated that the amount was about right or not enough. The surveys also indicated that a growing share of Republicans found that the US provided too much aid, whereas Democrats were much more favourable towards aiding Ukraine. Overall, at the beginning of 2023, 26% of US adults disapproved the Biden administration's response to the Russian invasion, whereas six months later the figure had risen to 28% (Cerda, 2023). Despite declining support among Republicans for giving military aid to Ukraine (Cohen & Gentile, 2023, p. 2; Smeltz, Kafura, & Sullivan, 2022), there were no real signs of Ukraine fatigue at the beginning of 2023 (Cohen & Gentile, 2023, p. 20).

As the Republican primary race for the 2024 presidential election gained momentum during the spring of 2023, former President Donald Trump and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis openly questioned the American support to Ukraine, arguing that it was not in the national interest of the US (Stanage, 2023). Non-partisan political observers in Washington DC were convinced that if Biden remained in the White House, the American backing of Ukraine would not be discontinued. Moreover, the Republican opposition against supporting Ukraine would not gain increasing support because most mainstream Republican officials and Republican voters shared the view that it was in the best interest of the US to back Ukraine against an aggressive Russia (interviews, Washington DC, April 19, May 30, June 1, June 5, June 7, 2023).

In early 2023, there was public support in Europe for Ukraine, though the Europeans were increasingly impatient to achieve peace (Directorate-General Communication, 2023). A separate study based on a two-wave survey conducted in March and again during June 2022 showed that the majority of Europeans (60%) remained in favour of delivering weapons to Ukraine (de Vries & Hoffmann, 2022, p. 11). The survey also documented that, over time, EU citizens were overwhelmingly stable in their favourable attitudes towards continued support (de Vries & Hoffmann, 2022, p. 20).

The positive attitudes towards Ukraine can be explained by the general changes in European public opinion that took place in the wake of Russia's invasion. These changes expressed increasing trust in strengthened European cooperation, and they also manifested themselves in a welcoming attitude towards inviting Ukraine to become a member of the EU (de Vries & Hoffmann, 2022, p. 14). These sentiments can be interpreted as increasing support for liberal ideas and values, including support for democracy and freedom, which seems substantiated by data published by the European Social Survey (Klymak & Vlandas, 2023). In brief, as of mid-2023, there were no strong challenges to the European support of the liberal interventionist policies aimed at Ukraine.

Summing up, during the first half of 2023, there was no strong threat or opposition to the significant involvement of the American government and the European governments. The observation suggests that there were no immediate domestic threats to liberal interventionism. Opinion surveys seem to indicate continued support, though it might be waning mainly among Republicans in the US, whereas the European public's support of Ukraine was stable. Data from the European Social Survey even indicated increased support for democracy, freedom, and a positive view of immigration (Klymak & Vlandas, 2023). These figures are interpreted as general public support for the existing European policies towards Ukraine and the legitimization of these policies.

7. Conclusion

This article argued that the rumours of a crisis of liberal interventionism are greatly exaggerated. Most recently, the viability of liberal interventionism has been demonstrated by the strong and unified Western support to Ukraine in its war against Russia. This article argued that the intervention in the Ukraine–Russia war was a continuation of several liberal interventions that took place during the first two decades of the current century. One of the characteristic features of these interventions was the Western support of the local armed forces and the expectation that they did the actual fighting on the ground.

The viability of liberal interventionism is explained by several circumstances. First, the foreign policy decision-makers in the US agree that interventions in other countries may serve national interests. Based on a remarkable bi-partisan backing by the foreign policy elite to the theory of liberal democratic peace, the US has, from time to time, launched interventions in other countries despite the lack of success. It started during the presidency of George W. Bush and lasted through the following presidencies when liberal interventions were carried out more randomly. This article showed that the general agreement about the possible benefits of liberal interventionism is framed by a common strategic understanding of the interests and the role of the US in international affairs. The analysis suggested that the strength of the common strategic culture seems to trump the impact of the perceptions of the individual members of the foreign policy elite.

The absence of a crisis for liberal interventionism was also buttressed by the fact that the transatlantic partners in Europe backed the US in the interventions analyzed here. This article argues that despite differences between the individual European countries, they all seem to prioritize cooperation with the US regarding security and defence. Because they recognized their profound dependency on the Americans, the Europeans were ready to demonstrate solidarity with the US and back Washington when it decided to intervene abroad. It does not, however, exclude that the belief in the liberal peace ideology was the decisive factor in some European countries.

Finally, the analysis turned towards state–society relations to focus on the possible domestic opposition to the implementation of liberal interventionism. No doubt, there was opposition both in the US and in Europe. However, the analysis demonstrated that as of mid-2023, the opposition was far from strong enough to block or restrain the liberal interventionist mood among Western governments, which resulted in massive support for Ukraine after February 2022.

In sum, it appears that the rumours of a crisis for liberal interventionism are exaggerated. During the current century, there was, in the US and Europe, a readiness to intervene on certain occasions. The readiness to intervene does not imply that there was or is a general willingness to intervene coherently and consistently. Neither does the lack of consistent and coherent policies mean that liberal interventionism was or is in crisis (cf. Pouliot, 2006). It only means that liberal interventionism is still on the agenda among Western governments.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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