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The Downfall of Liberal International Order: A Case Study of Russia and Ukraine War



Abstract: We have been living in a liberal international order for the past seventy-five years. The world has enjoyed the advantages of a system fostering cooperation and preventing the recurrence of devastating wars since WWII. However, the liberal international order, rooted in liberal theory, faces a current threat of diminishing influence. There are multiple reasons for the downfall but the recent Russia-Ukraine war was the final nail in the coffin. This paper seeks to explore the downfall of the liberal international order and explain how the international institutions have failed to prevent or stop the Russian and Ukraine wars. This paper also highlights the failure of Democratic peace theory and liberalism in the context of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Lastly, the paper concludes that a global response and efforts from international institutions are required to stop the threat of the largest military conflict since WWII.

Key Words: Russia-Ukraine War, Liberalism, Liberal International Order, Democratic Peace Theory, International Institution

Introduction

In the past the world faced two deadliest wars, World War I and World War II. Both had horrible consequences and brought disaster and destruction to people, ending the peace and bringing unimaginable violence. The countries decided to come together and collectively work to bring peace so the world does not face the same destruction and terrible pain. Multiple international institutions and agreements were made to ensure cooperation in areas related to trade, security, and politics. A new system was created to improve relations, and cooperation between states and to ensure peace known as the Liberal international order. Liberal international order is a combination of all three kinds of liberalism including political liberalism, economic liberalism, and liberal institutionalism (Longley, 2022).

The system was designed on the principles provided by liberalism that focuses on international institutions, like the World Trade Organization, United Nations, etc., and talks about

cooperation over conflict or war. It also includes human rights, equality, liberal democracy, and collective security. For the last seventy- five years this system has been controlled and led by the United States. Throughout this time the world has experienced peace until the 2000s (Berman, 2018).

After the WWII ended, the world was divided between two sides. On one side there was the US leading the liberal world order and on the other side there was the Soviet Union opposing the liberal order. In 1945, the Cold War started in which both countries fought indirectly over economic, military, and political powers for almost forty-five years. The cold war finally ended in 1991 when the Soviet Union disintegrated and it also ended the illiberal order led by them. The rest of the countries started to join the liberal world order led by the US making it stronger. There were still ongoing conflicts going on in different regions like Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe but at the end of the 1990s many international organizations and efforts were made to ensure peaceful, democratic, and stable states. Through the increased cooperation the world economy

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increased six times larger than before. The world became a better place to live in (Longley, [2022](#)).

Following in the 2000s, the liberal international order success started to shake. The order started to get weak and multiple challenges started to arise which the world and international institutions both failed to resolve. The liberal order became less liberal. The human rights violations around the world and states responsive behavior are only one of the many factors for the end of the liberal order. Other factors include the end of democracy in many countries, the rise of authoritarianism like in Russia and China, the failure of international institutions, and the invasion of states into other countries by disregarding their territorial integrity are major examples of the challenges faced by the current liberal international order. The US itself is leading and controlling this system and has used this order as a cover to achieve its interest by ignoring the liberal values, invading countries like Afghanistan, and Iraq, which led to misery and pain and also ended millions of lives. The US is known to do anything for its interest and to control the world. US since WWII has thrown more than 50 states, tried to kill state leaders, and hindered 30 countries' democratic elections, all in the name of protecting democracy in the world (Blum, [2013](#)). Another example is when Ukraine was invaded by Russia in 2014 and Russia annexed the Crimea peninsula territory of Ukraine. The only piece missing in ending the liberal international order was the war. Since WWII, the Russia and Ukraine war are the first direct war on a large scale between two democratic states (Meiser, [2018](#)).

Understanding Liberal International Order

The world is facing a great threat since the end of WWII. Liberal democracy is declining, US is challenged by the rising authoritarianism in China and Russia. According to the prime minister of Hungary, there is now a popular view around the world that "The era of liberal democracy is over" (Berman, [2018](#)). With democracy being challenged, other concepts are now being criticized. The liberal international order is said to be failing with the disappearing values once implemented by the theory of liberalism. Liberalism itself is a very broad area. It includes multiple concepts. This paper focuses on cooperation and democratic peace theory. A government based on dictatorship or monarchy means the unaccountable practice of

power therefore, it cannot protect its people. Thus, liberalism provided the idea of institutions to protect, limit, and enhance cooperation among states (Global Conflict Tracker, [2022](#)).

The very idea of liberalism is now being challenged by the states' desire for territorial development or imperialism. Which can be defined as when states try to turn into empires by claiming other territories through force. These situations then turn into wars that involve military and weapons causing terrible destruction. Liberalism seeks to protect states and individuals from such external threats by establishing a democratic liberal political system.

Liberalism's key role has been coming with the Democratic peace theory. Which states that democratic states hardly go to war with each other. There are multiple reasons that democratic states are considered to have internal limits on their power, they tend to choose cooperation when faced with conflicts, and lastly, democracies do not see each other as a threat (Meiser, [2018](#)). The basis of democratic peace theory comes from the writings of the famous German philosopher Immanuel Kant. The concept of Democratic Peace Theory was first encouraged by the United States by implementing the Monroe Doctrine. The objective was that no North or South American state would be colonized by the European monarchies.

President Woodrow Wilson, once said that there should exist a safe world for democracy. The very idea of this is criticized with the question of whether is democracy enough to keep states at peace. As seen leaders are less likely to be willing to resolve conflicts in international institutions. Other concepts and arguments included in Democratic peace theory are that democracies do not view other democracies as a threat or danger. Democracies are the ones typically owning more wealth as compared to other states so they avoid war to reserve resources they own. It is also stated that citizens have a voice to convey their opinions over legislative decisions like going to war with another state (Longley, [2022](#)).

All the concepts stated by the Democratic Peace theory have been seen to fail with time. The theory has been criticized for not being able to prove a causal relationship between wars between states and their type of government. There have been

wars between democracies which has questioned the idea of this theory. The same number of wars has been fought between democracies as compared to the number of wars that can happen between non-democracies. This was concluded in a study conducted in 2002 (Longley, [2022](#)).

The recent war between Russia and Ukraine can also be seen through the same lens. Both states are democracies but are still involved in one of the largest wars after World War II. This is not new, as Russia has invaded Ukraine before. This shows that the very basis for peace cannot be defined by the type of government. With the declining liberal international order, and key concepts of liberalism, the international institutions have also failed to maintain cooperation and peace. Therefore, the idea of democratic peace theory has also failed concerning the Russia-Ukraine war (Berman, [2018](#)).

Institutions in an International Order

International institutions have also been unsuccessful in bringing states to collectively work together to solve issues that require cooperation and participation from all states for example the violence and conflicts spreading globally to the spread of nuclear weapons that are the key threat to peace. The world is in complete disorder. This requires a new international order and new rules. With half the states going less liberal and establishing their order like China which is emerging as the next superpower, threatening the hegemony of the United States is seeking to create its world order. China is slowly but creating its dominance over different regions by investing in economics and the military, working on development and infrastructure projects that will bring peace and prosperity, which is missing in the world right now. China might be challenging US power but China is not a supporter of democracy or liberalism (Blum, [2013](#)).

For decades the United States has enjoyed the status of a superpower and greatest ally of liberal international order that has decreased with time. The perception among people inside has changed about the US actions and its interests. The American supporters now have less trust in US defense if there is an outbreak. With the US losing its significance and trust among other states there is no other country to take the US position to lead

the liberal order. The liberal international order is doomed to fail. Moreover, international institutions are criticized for not being able to hold countries responsible for breaking international law. The power of international organizations is limited when it comes to powerful states so this is one of the many reasons that the United Nations Security Council has failed to stop Russia or many other states from invading other states or violating international laws or human rights. These international organizations are working on new and more urgent issues like climate change and COVID-19 that also require global collaboration and world attention. The only solution now left is that the US recognizes its role and responsibility required to revive the dying liberal international order. It needs to ensure cooperation and coordination among states to address the prevailing challenges or it will bring more destruction and violence into the world making it less peaceful (Braumoeller, [1997](#)).

Russia-Ukraine War

On 24 February 2022, Russia conducted a full-scale invasion of Ukraine after weeks of increasing military along the border of Ukraine. Russia's decision to build a huge military is considered to be an act of aggression that can lead to one of the largest military conflicts in Europe. Russia-Ukraine war marked a new chapter in the ongoing "eight-year war" in the east side of the country. Which has already ruined the livelihood of hundreds of people. "Peace on our continent has been crushed, we now have a war on such a scale in Europe that we assumed belonged to the past." Said the Secretary General of NATO after the invasion (Reals & Sundby, [2023](#)). This war has created a new humanitarian crisis and a refugee crisis in Europe. It has not only destroyed the infrastructure but has also killed millions, and forced the rest to leave their country (Deneen, [2020](#)).

A Brief History of Russia and Ukraine Conflict

In the 1700s, under Catherine the Great, most of the Ukrainian territory came under the Russian Empire. Ukraine decided to fight for its independence but was defeated so it became part of the Soviet Union. Despite being under the

soviet rule, Ukraine always had its own separate identity and its language. In 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union Ukraine finally got the chance to announce its independence. At that time Ukraine had the world's third largest atomic arsenals. Both Russia and the United States felt threatened and decided to demilitarize Ukraine. After multiple diplomatic agreements Ukraine at last decided to hand over its nuclear arsenals to Russia in exchange for a security guarantee that Russia would not harm Ukraine (Jen Kirby, [2022](#)).

The trust or guarantee was kept until 2014 when Russia decided to invade Ukraine and annex the Crimean Peninsula part of Ukraine. The international community did not recognize the annexation but still Russia has controlled the area since 2014. Putin also supported the pro-Russian separatists in carrying out rebellion in the Donbas region. Russia at that time protected itself with the excuse that it was not an attack rather it was an act of defense led by ethnic Russians who were against the pro-western government in eastern Donbas (Howlett, [2022](#)).

The Russia and Ukraine conflict has been going on since then. A series of negotiations took place on both sides to settle the dispute but ultimately failed. For example, Russia and Ukraine along with Germany and France tried to end the hostility and ongoing violence through the "Minsk Accords." The agreement highlighted the removal of the substantial arsenal, control of the conflict zone given to Ukrainians, and the requirements needed for a ceasefire. This agreement however failed to achieve any success (Global Conflict Tracker, [2022](#)). The United States also participated in 2018, by imposing sanctions on Ukraine and other companies involved in the eastern Ukraine conflict (Jen Kirby, [2022](#)).

All these efforts were not enough to stop Russia from achieving its objectives. Many predicted the Russian invasion of Ukraine before the war in 2022. Before the invasion by Russia, President Putin had presented few demands. These demands included NATO not adding any new members including Ukraine and other previous soviet states. It also emphasized that NATO should pull back its forces from states close to Russia. These demands were rejected by NATO and the United States mutually (Makarychew, [2022](#)).

Russian objective behind the invasion is

assumed to be regime change by many experts. Putin wants to bring a pro-Russian regime instead of the current government. Russia's main objective is to revive its status as a super superpower. It is only taking measures for the long term. Russia in the past has been unable to accept the liberal international order and its norms like democracy and international laws which have been controlling internal and external affairs. If Russia accepts these changes or the norms provided by the current order then it would ultimately end in regime change in Russia. This shows that the main objective behind Moscow's decision to challenge the current liberal order (War in Europe: Responding to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, 2022)

Russia saw the US being occupied with its rivalry with China, with its power being on the decline west, is not as powerful as it once was. This came as an opportunity for Russia, with the liberal international order trembling they wanted to bring their order. Another threat that motivated Russia to take the bold move against the international rules and norms according to the former ambassador of NATO "Ivo Daalder", is the fear of democracy prevailing peacefully and successfully in Ukraine. This posed a risk to Russian rule as people might rise in Russia to oppose its repressive rule one day (What Is the Liberal World Order?).

If Russia does not back off and succeed in taking control of Kyiv and throwing the current government of Volodymyr Zelenskyy which many believe that Russia will soon, this shows that protecting Kyiv has become the most important task for Ukrainians. But there is also a counterargument that Russia cannot win this war through military means. The Putin government will face the cost in both domestic and international spheres. According to the president of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, war is not remote. It will always affect the aggressor and the victim together. The aggressor might not be aware of it right now but it will one day understand it and suffer. The US along with other European countries are also increasing sanctions on Russia which will impact Russia's economy in the future making it weaker. This war has allowed Western alliances to grow stronger (Reals & Sundby, [2023](#)).

The world is looking at the same kind of dangers once faced at the time of WWII. The same kind of bombing and killing of civilians through the use of

weaponry and rockets. A humanitarian and refugee crisis rising with the cities getting destroyed can be observed. “This seemed like it was not possible again but we are facing it in the region now”, According to Poland's former ambassador Daniel Fried. International law violations and war crimes are being conducted by Russia against Ukraine, Ukrainians in response are trying to protect their independence and using the full force of military and civilian resistance including volunteers against Russian atrocities (The Ukraine War and the Struggle to Defend Democracy in Europe and Beyond, [2022](#)).

According to the United Nations, millions of Ukrainians were evacuated from Ukraine during the eight-year-long war in Donbas. Further Russian invasion has caused about 6.5 million people to be misplaced within Ukraine and around 9.8 million had to leave until now. Many Ukrainians have been taking refuge in neighboring countries for example Poland, Romania, and Moldova. This refugee crisis has become the biggest since WWII. Multiple NGOs including the United Nations are working to help these people but the damage caused by war is getting worse day by day (The Ukraine War: A Global Crisis?, [2022](#)).

World Response to the Russian Aggression

The world now faces Europe's largest war after centuries. So far, the negotiations and diplomacy have failed to reach a solution or to reverse the crisis. The real responsibility lies with Russia which is bent on aggressive policies and to do destruction and with Ukraine to try to negotiate and sign a peace treaty. This requires global attention, other must do their part to prevent future destruction by presenting more solutions for Ukraine.

The real challenge is for Ukraine, President Zelensky needs to take measured decisions as it will be crucial to decide the world's future including the future of Ukraine. Ukraine is outnumbered and hardly surviving the ongoing war. Ukraine wanted to become part of NATO, also one of the reasons Russia attacked. This wish was to get protection from NATO from such threats and situations Kyiv is facing now. European countries could not send troops to help because Ukraine was not a part of NATO. But to help Ukraine they supported it with cash and military equipment including diplomatic backing (Berman,

[2018](#)).

The world reacted and sided with Ukraine right after the invasion. Countries including Western states labeled the act as unforgivable and an attack on world international order, peace, and stability. The act was stated as a “terrible loss of life” by President Biden of the US. The EU's chief executive described the act as barbaric. It is assumed that Russia now will not stop at any cost as its only goal is to gain more power by controlling Ukraine. West has united in putting sanctions on Russia but it will soon have to think of different ways like involving militarily. This is not only a threat to the liberal order led by the US but also to European security as Russia will not stop by taking Ukraine only. Both the EU and the United States need to talk to Russia and negotiate rather than putting sanctions. Russia needs to understand the actions of its acts and their consequences in the future for the world and Russia itself (War in Europe: Responding to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, 2022).

The United States faced a difficult position in the Russian decision to invade Ukraine. The US had no interest in Ukraine, it was not a trading partner nor was a threat to the US in any way the only sole reason to go against the Russian border. It was the past rivalry and fear of expansion of Russia once gained. Russia has been known for its evil doings from its annexation of Crimea to known as helping break a brutal war in Syria by supporting the Assad government (Reals & Sundby, [2023](#)).

The purpose behind the world response to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine might be because of the fear of the outbreak of World War WWII or inspired by fears related to economic and regional peace rather than worrying over the situation and peace in Ukraine. The most impact the war has on civilians like in Ukraine, it is the civilians that suffer the most due to Russian bombings and killings. This threat of war between these two states also highlights an important point that we need to understand peace is viewed differently by the international community. It depends on their interest and what they want to defend. Also, this case of the Russia and Ukraine war shows that there have been situations that threatened peace or the liberal order war is not the only factor its absence does not ensure peace (Howlett, [2022](#)).

The international response also shows how political interests and factors play a role in every situation. Responding to the Russian and Ukraine war. These factors also include geopolitical, security, economic, or domestic concerns. Sometimes states use the excuse of sovereignty to exceed their precise wish. For example, Mexico to show its support for Ukraine and its understanding of the cause has decided to put aside its aim to increase trade with Russia. But there are also opposite cases where states have kept their interest at the top and due to their economic or political collaborations with Russia they have refused to go against Russia and support Ukraine. This war might be a global concern and crisis but states have still chosen to keep their goals and interests a key priority (Deneen, [2020](#)).

Conclusion

Russian invasion of Ukraine is most likely to become the biggest European conflict since WWII. This requires both global and Western efforts and attention to control the damage. Countries especially the West did show their interest by condemning the acts conducted by Russia but have done little to stop it. Russia's decision to carry out this special military operation against Ukraine included the throwing of bombs and missiles on civilians and infrastructure to demilitarize Ukraine. This threatens the international liberal order including the peace of the world. This needs global cooperation and efforts to limit the damage. The world has so far raised its voices but done little practically to stop Russia from putting sanctions on Russia. The sanctions can be increased to further drain the Russian economy but it can only work to a certain limit. What it needs is global unity and collaboration to revive liberal international order, and to bring peace and stability to the world again including the European region. The ongoing war

between Russia and Ukraine poses a threat to future Russia and US relations. Both have a long history of rivalry and conflicts. It is assumed that this invasion will also impact Russia and NATO country's relations badly. Moreover, this will also affect future global agreements on security, arms control counter-terrorism, nuclear reduction, etc. The world needs to realize how valuable the current liberal international order is. After the collapse of communism and the rise of capitalism and liberal democracies, it is evident that stability can be achieved in diverse economic communities led by capitalism. This focuses on the task that states need to protect and revive the system. The system has been trembling slowly but for decades. The system was called "fragile" by President Joe Biden once. Similarly, President Vladimir Putin of Russia stated the idea of liberal order has already outlasted its purpose. Whereas China is working to bring its very own order into the world. The decline of international rules established after the world war can be seen clearly in the international response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This seemed impossible to many but now it is there and happening one predicted the revival of Russia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This emergence of war can also be seen from a positive point of view. It can be taken as an alarm to wake the world to stand up, unite, and fight against the rising authoritarian order. The US once again needs to take the leading role to unite the world powers to collectively stop the Russia-Ukraine war. This war is seen by the different regions and the world as a test for the seventy-five-year-old system once led by the US and liberal democracy. The US might be facing multiple other challenges like from other states but Ukraine is seen as being in a dreadful situation which shows that the US is also falling and is no longer the superpower it once was. This might mark the end for the United States and the rise of a new multipolar order.

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