

The Rumours of the Crisis of Liberal Interventionism Are Greatly Exaggerated

Gorm Rye Olsen 

Department for Social Sciences & Business, Roskilde University, Denmark

Correspondence: Gorm Rye Olsen (gormrye@ruc.dk)

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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 bipartisanism 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 Hooff 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% (Cerde, 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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About the Author



Gorm Rye Olsen is a professor in international politics at the Department of Social Sciences and Business, Roskilde University, Denmark. He has published extensively on development issues, Europe's role in international affairs and most recently on American foreign policy and the transatlantic alliance. He has published in the *Journal of European Integration*, *European Security*, *Politics and Governance*, *International Politics*, *European Politics & Society*, *International Peacekeeping*, and *Defence Studies*.