

THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Credit of the Research Work.

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"LIBERAL IDEALISM AS A THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS"

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

To understand the intricacies of the liberal idealism theory of international relations, it is important, even non-negotiable, to trace the historical origin of this school of thought and the multitude of major global events that has shaped it and how it has evolved in relation to paradigm shifts in the international system. Strictly from the lenses of international relations, the seed of this theory was first planted by the philosophical thoughts of scholars like John Locke and Immanuel Kant who were all united in their common disdain for the bloodshed that the Thirty Years' War plastered across Europe.

However, the first real precursor to liberal idealism did not come until centuries later when former American President, Woodrow Wilson, in reaction to the first World War, through what scholars now refer to as Wilsonian idealism, evangelized it. In his January 18, 1918 address to the United States Congress, now popularly known as 'fourteen points', Wilson laid the practical foundation of how liberal idealism should work. In the speech, he made certain proposals – like the need to remove economic barriers between nations, establish a global organization that ensures political order, and a reduction in armaments globally – all of which are at the core of the liberal idealism theory.

Naturally, the horrors of World War I made Wilson's propositions a worthy consideration for scholars who already found the balance-of-power nature of the international system catastrophic. The establishment of the League of Nations solidified the emergence of this theory of international relations. Even though the organization collapsed after the breakout of World War II, – a stamp of its failure to achieve its most important responsibility: Preventing another World War, – this did not mark the end of this theory; rather it was the starting point as the League of Nations became an experiment that shaped how scholars began to redefine its fundamentals.

During World War II, the endless debates between scholars – like Norman Angell and Edward Carr – on the current realities of global politics and the best way forward contributed immensely to the development of this theory and the result of this is evident in the establishment of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions in the aftermath of the war.

2.0 WHAT IS LIBERAL IDEALISM?

The Liberal Idealism Theory of International Relations is a prominent and influential perspective within the field that emphasizes values, principles, and cooperation as essential drivers of global politics. It stands in contrast to the realist approach, which focuses on power, competition, and national self-interest. At its core, Liberal Idealism articulates a vision of a world where interactions between and among states in the international system are guided by shared norms and ethical principles, with the ultimate goal of fostering peace and prosperity.

At the core of liberal idealism is the assumption that global peace can be achieved through the introduction of international organizations responsible for diplomatic relations between states, international trade which will develop a sense of economic interdependence among nation-states, and the spread of democratic states globally which will serve as a gatekeeper against wars as it's against the the overwhelming desire of the citizens who elect those at the helm of affairs.

These assumptions are rooted in the underlying principles of the liberal idealism theory which rejects the realist argument that power politics is the only consideration of international relations, believes that through international cooperation states can develop a mutual and shared interest that transcends power, and that international organizations can serve as an arbiter for conflict resolution and peace in global politics.

3.0 CORE PRINCIPLES AND ASSUMPTIONS OF LIBERAL IDEALISM

The theory of liberal idealism unlike other theories doesn't explain the causes of behaviors of states in the international system, rather it prescribes what ways states should behave in the international system. It provides some ethical principles and moral values that states ought to adopt in order for there to be peace in the international system. The assumptions or core principles of the liberal idealism theory of international relations include and are not limited to; Ethical foreign policy, diplomacy, soft power, global governance, humanitarian intervention, economic corporation, international institutions, norms and laws, democracy, human rights, multilateral democracy, etc. Some of these are highlighted and explained below.

1. Ethical Foreign Policy: Liberal idealism assumes that states should base their foreign policies on ethical principles and moral values. In other words, ethical considerations should guide state actions in the international system. The commitment to ethical principles and moral values is a fundamental aspect of liberal idealism and it influences the theory's core assumptions and policy prescriptions. At the heart of this emphasis lies the belief that states should not be solely concerned with advancing their national interests or maximizing power, instead, it argues that states have a moral responsibility to contribute to the creation of a just and humane international order.

2. Democracy and Human Rights: One of the ethical considerations which this theory prescribes is the promotion of democracy and human rights. Liberal idealism holds that the promotion of democracy and the protection of human rights are essential not only for individual well-being but for global peace and stability. Michael W. Doyle is one of the scholars who has contributed to the advocating of the promotion of democracy as an ethical principle that ought to be adopted by states in the international system. His "Democratic Peace Theory" which draws from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, argues that states that practice democracy tend to be more peaceful with each other. He identified a "zone of peace" among democratic countries, where shared values, democratic governance, and the promotion of individual rights

reduce the likelihood of conflict. Other ethical principles which the theory of Liberal Idealism prescribes include the protection of human rights, international cooperation, justice, etc.

3. Diplomacy/ Soft Power Liberal idealism recognizes the importance of "soft power," which involves the ability to influence and persuade others through attraction and shared values. This approach is grounded in the belief that ethical leadership is more enduring and influential than coercive methods. The emphasis on ethical principles and moral values within liberal idealism aligns with the theory's overarching optimism about the potential for a more cooperative and just international order. It reflects a commitment to making international relations more than a zero-sum game and places importance on the moral dimensions of state behavior. However, critics argue that this emphasis can be idealistic and that not all states share the same ethical principles or priorities. Balancing ethical considerations with national interests during diplomatic processes or negotiations and the complexities of international relations remains an ongoing challenge, but it is at the core of liberal idealism's distinct perspective in the field of international relations theory.

4. Humanitarian Intervention: This is a core principle of liberal idealism in international relations that emphasizes the ethical responsibility of the international community to protect vulnerable populations from severe human rights abuses or humanitarian crises. This principle asserts that states have a moral duty to intervene in cases of mass atrocities or gross violations of human rights. For example, in the case of the recent coup d'etat in Niger, the liberal Idealism theory would support the intervention of the international community in reversing the coup and ensuring the return to a democratic state that has respect for human rights of the citizens of Niger. Samantha Power, a scholar, diplomat, and author of "A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide" is one of the scholars who have contributed to the humanitarian intervention as a core principle or assumption of liberal idealism theory of international relations. Her work examines how the international community often fails to prevent or respond to genocides and mass atrocities, while arguing for a more robust and ethical approach to intervention in cases that require humanitarian intervention.

5. Global Governance Mechanisms: The theory calls for the establishment of global governance mechanisms that can set ethical norms and enforce it. This includes international institutions, laws, agreements, and norms that uphold ethical principles. Global governance refers to the system of rules, institutions, and norms that guide and regulate international relations. These mechanisms aim to facilitate cooperation, manage conflicts, and address transnational issues, such as climate change, human rights, trade, and security. Liberal idealism emphasizes the creation and strengthening of international organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and regional bodies like the European Union. These institutions serve as key components of global governance, providing forums for diplomacy, conflict resolution, and the development of international law. It also prescribes the

establishment and enforcement of norms and laws and rules that guide state behavior. These norms can pertain to issues like human rights, environmental protection, arms control, and trade. They serve as moral and ethical principles that states are encouraged to adhere to. Collective Security, economic interdependence, etc are also aspects of the global governance mechanism which Liberal idealism as a theory of international relations prescribes.

4.0 CASE STUDIES OF LIBERAL IDEALISM AS A THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Contemporary application of liberal idealism in international conflicts involves the promotion of cooperation, diplomacy, human rights, and ethical principles as tools for conflict resolution and the pursuit of global peace. Here are a few examples of how liberal idealism has been applied in today's international community.

LIBYA 2011 KOSOVO CONFLICT

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, which embodies liberal idealist principles, has been invoked in situations like the Kosovo conflict and the 2011 intervention in Libya. In 2011, there was an uprising in the form of protests by the masses against the four-decade rule of Muammar al-Qaddafi. The protesters were protesting against the arrest of a human rights lawyer Fethi Tarbel, demanding that Qaddafi steps down. Instead of democratically addressing the agitations of the people, Qaddafi instead launched military attacks against its own citizens, using weapons like water canons, rubber bullets to disperse protesters. The protesters were undaunted and continued spreading in different states like Benghazi and Tripoli to drive home their demands, the government of Qaddafi retaliated and began firing live ammunition at protesters, this led to lots of deaths and injuries. The protesters were also attacked with tanks and artillery from the air with warplanes and helicopter gunships. The regime further restricted communications, blocking the Internet and interrupting telephone service throughout the country.

In response to this stifling of democratic process and fundamental human rights, the international community responded by imposing sanctions, joining the citizens of Libya to ask the undemocratic government to step down. Specific military intervention from the National Atlantic Treaty Organisation NATO helped the forces protesting against the government to seize power. Many countries like France, UK and US also sent military advisers to the forces in order to conquer the government. Eventually, Qaddafi fled and was caught in his hometown. This is one of the many examples of application of the principles of liberalism in the global system.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

In the area of economic cooperation, one of the principles that liberal Idealism advocates for, the establishment of international institutions like the European union is one of the applications of liberal

idealism. The European union was established by the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and the 'European Union' officially entered into force on 1 November 1993. It was created to promote economic cooperation, peace and stability among European countries. The union of these countries have helped many countries of Europe in their economic pursuits. It's main economic achievement is the single market. The single market has enabled most goods, services, money and people to move freely throughout most of the continent. It has become much easier to move around Europe – all EU citizens have the right to study, work or retire in any EU country. As an EU national, for employment, social security and tax purposes, every EU country is required to treat you exactly the same as its own citizens. Also, the Euro currency– used by over 340 million EU citizens, has eliminated the risk of currency fluctuation and exchange costs, and strengthened the single market – to the benefit of us all. Telephone & digital services can also be used at no extra cost across the EU.

Other areas of application in the world today include in diplomatic negotiations and multilateral forums to address international conflicts. The Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) is an example of a diplomatic effort to address a contentious issue through multilateral negotiations: The protection of human rights. Various organizations and states continue to advocate for human rights in conflict zones and hold violators accountable through mechanisms like the International Criminal Court. The emphasis of Liberal idealism on economic interdependence can also be seen in efforts to strengthen trade ties between nations. Economic cooperation, as in the case of the European Union, is promoted as a means to foster peace and stability, et.c.

It's important to note that the application of liberal idealism in contemporary conflicts is not without challenges. Realist perspectives, national interests, and power politics often come into play, leading to debates and tensions. The next section discusses these criticisms.

5.0 CRITICISMS AND CONTROVERSIES

The major criticisms leveled against 'Idealism' and 'Liberal Idealism' are put forward by Realists. Both theories have contrasting core principles - where, Liberal Idealist Approach advocates morality as the means for securing the desired objective of making the world an ideal world, Realism accepts and advocates the complete primacy of power and incompatibility of interests in international relations. Liberal Idealism gained its historical relevance during the interwar period (1919 -1939) when leaders like Woodrow Wilson sought to build cooperative global order but this quickly became a 'political schmuck' when the League of Nations fell. The publication of E. H. Carr's " *The Twenty Years' Crisis* " had a devastating impact on the discipline as it provided **the framework for realist criticism** against 'liberal idealism' as the predominant mode of thinking in international relations. Some of these are:

1. Utopian and Unrealistic Expectations: Realist, Edward Hallett Carr. H. crafted the popular synonym 'utopian' because the central fallacy of liberal idealism is its tendency to indulge in imaginative aspirations at the expense of rigorous empirical analysis, to the point of a tendency to ignore what was and is in his conception of what should be. He thought they held a hopelessly naive view of international politics. What the liberal idealists hoped to accomplish by believing they could radically transform world politics and create a peaceful and ethical international order where states no longer cared about the balance of power was what realists like Carr called 'utopia' (making them 'utopians'). These Utopians refuse to see and address the limitations in the ability and effectiveness of international institutions, law and norms. Their overemphasis on abstract principles instead of real facts led to the inability, especially in the Anglo-American world, to understand and control international events during the interwar period. Collective security, compulsory adjudication of disputes, national disarmament, open diplomacy and international accountability – the most cherished policy prescriptions of liberal idealists revolve around considerations of power and national interest rather than morality and global tendency and they are the subconscious reflections of national policy that are based on an interpretation assigned to the national interest at a certain time. Meaning, these principles are not absolute and change could not come through ethical values alone because achieving consensus between states with different interests and values is difficult.

2. Lack of Realism: Critics argue that liberal Idealism fails to recognise the realities of power and self-interest in the international system. States are motivated primarily by their own security and survival and will often pursue their interest at the expense of other states or the international community as a whole. Liberal idealists ignore this reality and choose to focus on ethical principles and values that are not shared by all states. Edward Hallett Carr made a case that power is an essential ingredient in international politics; for it is impossible to eliminate power from it. The chances of war can be reduced, the power struggle can be managed through devices like diplomacy, disarmaments, arms control etc., but it cannot be eliminated. Security and promotion of self-interest come from power and peace can only be preserved by power management and balance of power in the international system. Although, the liberal idealists maintain that realism should be enunciated as it justifies the scourge of war and power struggle, realists like Carr posit that pure realism (naked struggle for power) does not truly exist in international politics and any sound political thought pays attention to ideals as well as power – not only pursuing international morality.

3. Having an International Community that strictly operates by moral codes is impossible: Liberal Idealism has faced real problems in the international reality, and one of the most important of those obstacles is that such an ideal system can only appear in the event that the international community follows ethical principles, instead of using force, and the opposite of this condition happens often in

states. In order to bring such a system to reality, totalitarian regimes must be eradicated by any means and replaced with only democratic systems, and this is something that has not yet happened and may never happen. A world government must be established to implement these principles and monitor states. The International organizations and laws put in place have limited power and authority making this utopian logic unrealistic.

4. The Aftermath of World War II and the Cold War: The aftermath of the two World Wars did indeed lead to a shift in international politics, prompting a re-evaluation of the idealistic approach in favor of more pragmatic and realist strategies. The failure of the League of Nations and the onset of the Cold War highlighted the limitations of liberal idealism in achieving lasting international peace and security. These events emphasized the importance of power dynamics, national interests, and the complexities of global politics. As a result, the international community witnessed a resurgence of a focus on balance of power, deterrence, and strategic alliances.

The emphasis on national interests and security considerations took precedence over purely idealistic or moral aspirations, as countries prioritized their own survival and protection in an increasingly complex and competitive global environment. This shift led to the development of international institutions and agreements that aimed to balance power dynamics and manage conflicts through diplomacy and negotiation. While idealistic elements still play a role in international relations, the emphasis on pragmatic and realist approaches continues to shape the dynamics of global politics in the contemporary era.

5.1 THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURAL AND ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Both cultural and ethical relativism emphasize the importance of understanding and respecting diverse cultural and ethical perspectives without imposing one's own beliefs as superior or universal. These concepts encourage individuals to consider the cultural and historical contexts that shape people's beliefs and behaviors, promoting a more nuanced and tolerant approach to understanding different societies and their moral frameworks. Liberal idealism often advocates for the universal recognition and protection of human rights, emphasizing the importance of fundamental liberties such as freedom of expression, equality, and the rule of law. This stance can challenge cultural and ethical relativism by asserting the existence of certain rights that should apply universally, regardless of cultural context.

One contemporary example of liberal idealism affecting cultural and ethical relativism is the ongoing global conversation about LGBTQ+ rights. Many liberal democratic societies have increasingly advocated for the recognition and protection of the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, including the rights to marriage, adoption, and non-discrimination. This advocacy often clashes with cultural and ethical relativism in societies where traditional norms or religious beliefs oppose the acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities.

Cultural and Ideological differences is one of the major obstacles of liberal idealism. Prioritizing international morality and universal democratic values and code of conduct is near impossible because states have different ideals and notions. Also historical legacies like colonialism, imperialism, genocides and so on have created a skepticism towards western ideals and notion on liberal values. Powerful nations freely prioritize their national interests and maintain pseudo-control of the international organizations that make and enforce these 'liberal values' and this further displays the realist standpoint on global power dynamics and struggle. Morality is a product of power and these challenges demonstrate the complexities and obstacles involved in the practical application of liberal idealism.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Implementing liberal idealism in the contemporary world faces several challenges, many of which stem from the complexities and realities of international relations. While liberal idealism emphasizes cooperation, human rights, and ethical foreign policy, it encounters obstacles that can hinder its application, one is the principle of sovereignty which remains a cornerstone of international relations, my states are sensitive to the idea of external intervention, even for humanitarian purposes, they assert that intervention can undermine their sovereignty and territorial integrity, another is that states and international actors often have divergent interests and values, making it challenging to achieve a consensus on ethical principles. What one state considers ethical or just may not align with the views of another state.

Despite these challenges it faces, liberal idealism continues to influence the development of a more interconnected and cooperative global community, promoting the advancement of human rights, democratic governance, and international peace. One could argue, in fact, that idealism is more influential today than it was in the late 1930s. The argument on 'utopia' and 'outlandish' aspirations has evolved as today, liberal idealists now believe in the use of discourse to shape practice and behavior. It has also retained its significance in influencing global discourse through advocating for peaceful resolutions and encouraging the use of multilateral agreement to address global security issues and threats.

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