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# A MISGUIDED FOREIGN POLICY

How liberal interventionism backfires on the liberal international order.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores in what ways liberal interventionism has backfired on the liberal international order (LIO) by analysing the 2011 Libya intervention, the Syrian civil war and the 2013-2014 Ukraine crises. The research problem concerns the debate on how the LIO is challenged. The study contributes to that debate by bringing liberal interventionism into the equation. The research question is: *in what ways has liberal interventionism backfired in Libya, Syria and Ukraine?*

I develop a theoretical proposition to analyse the cases. It states that liberal interventionism backfires on two notions of the LIO – the UN security structure principles of sovereignty and the authority of the UN Security Council (UNSC). This is because of three reasons that are formulated in three thematic claims. Firstly, liberal interventionism disrupts peace and order, the principle of sovereignty and UNSC authority. Secondly, it backfires on liberalism by actively promoting liberal values. Thirdly, it hurts the legitimacy of the LIO by having illiberal elements. The theoretical proposition is applied in a theory testing case analysis that is followed by a comparative analysis of cross-case variables and outcomes as according to the positive method of agreement. The conclusion is that liberal interventionism in Libya, Syria and Ukraine has backfired in the ways expected by the thematic claims, indicating that the theoretical proposition is applicable, relevant and useful as tool to explain how liberal interventionism backfires.

**Keywords:** *Liberal interventionism, the liberal international order, Libya, Syria, Ukraine.*

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# 1. Research problem and introduction

This thesis explores in what ways the policy of liberal interventionism has backfired on the *liberal international order* (LIO), also known as the American-led order, by analysing the 2011 NATO-led Libya intervention, the ongoing Syrian civil war and the 2013-2014 Ukraine crisis. Liberal interventionism, meaning active promotion of liberal values through interference in domestic affairs of other states to promote regime change, is a long-standing issue of debate among liberals. Richard Cobden, an early advocate for non-interventionism, argues that liberal states should act as role models instead of trying to impose liberalism on others (Waltz, 2000: 13). On the other side of the spectrum, Giuseppe Mazzini defends liberal interventionism, claiming that liberal states have a duty to actively spread and enforce liberalism because liberal norms are universally good (Waltz, 2000: 13).

Contrary to mainstream positions in the debate on challenges against the LIO, I claim that the Western foreign policy of liberal interventionism constitutes a critical challenge because it backfires on the LIO. In the debate, two positions are the most common. The first argues that revisionist actors such as Russia and Iran are the biggest threats to the LIO, especially if they are allowed to play crude geopolitical games without Western protests (Slaughter, 2017). The other camp argues that actors such as Russia and China are challengers but not real spoilers (Ikenberry, 2014: 9). The main threat is usually conceived to come from Western populist politicians such as Donald Trump, which are willing to break with the traditional Western foreign policy of enhancing liberalism (Stokes, 2018) (Nye, 2019: 80).

The research gap of my focus is to bring the liberal interventionism debate into that of the challenges against the LIO. The aim is to illustrate how liberal interventionism undermines important notions of the LIO. By doing so, I contribute to the liberal interventionism debate by defining a critical position. I also contribute to the debate on challenges against the LIO by widening it, bringing liberal interventionism into the equation.

My theoretical proposition, which is also the main argument of this thesis, is that liberal interventionism backfires on two core principles of the LIO. On the one hand, the UN security structure with its emphasis on sovereignty and the authority of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to decide on issues of peace and international security. On the other hand, liberal

values such as human rights. Liberal interventionism backfires on these notions in three ways. Firstly, it disrupts international peace and order, including the principle of sovereignty and UNSC authority. Secondly, it backfires on liberalism itself by actively promoting liberal values. Thirdly, it hurts the legitimacy of the LIO by having illiberal elements.

The implication of the theoretical proposition is that if the West (the US and its allies), wants to further the liberal values of the LIO and contribute to a more peaceful order, it should go back to and defend what Börzel and Zürn call LIO 1, meaning the post World War 2 order that stresses state sovereignty and liberal multilateralism, instead of the post Cold War order (LIO 2) where liberalism is more actively promoted (Börzel & Zürn, 2020: 3-8). This implies upgrading non-interventionism and sovereignty. Conducting a theory test to assess the validity of the theoretical proposition, I apply it to analyse three cases that are often discussed in the debate on challenges to the LIO - Libya, Ukraine and Syria. This leads me to the following research question:

*In what ways has liberal interventionism backfired in Libya, Syria and Ukraine?*

My theoretical proposition is outlined as an expansion of the previous research that is discussed in the coming section. I use a theory developing approach, particularly expanding John Mearsheimer's theory of liberal hegemony policy among other concepts (Mearsheimer, 2018: 120-126). Mearsheimer argues that all Western liberal democracies typically conduct a liberal hegemony policy that destabilizes the international order and backfires on the West. It is the policy of exporting liberalism - liberal democracy, liberal values such as human rights and liberal economic policies - to the rest of the world. This leads the West to promote regime changes abroad, which in turn fuel more illiberal than liberal sentiments in the long run.

## **2. Theory and previous research**

### **2.1 The LIO and liberal interventionism**

I define two core principles of the LIO as being particularly damaged by liberal interventionism. Firstly, the UN security structure principles of state sovereignty and UNSC authority. Secondly, the notion of liberal values such as the universal declaration of human

rights (United Nations 2021a), democracy and the rule of law. This corresponds with common conceptions of the LIO, defining it as a rule-based order that rests upon the UN security structure, multilateral institutions that promote economic openness and the aforementioned liberal values (Ikenberry, 2010) (Nye, 2019: 71-73). I distinguish between the post World War 2 LIO (LIO 1) and the post Cold War LIO (LIO 2) (Börzel & Zürn, 2020: 3-8). The former is based on “liberal multilateralism”, meaning that UN multilateral institutions and sovereignty are central elements. The latter is based on “post-national liberalism”, which means that international institutions are designed to promote liberalism more actively. As I see it, LIO 2 marks a moment when the West chose to downgrade sovereignty and to pursue a more offensive type of liberal interventionism.

I define liberal interventionism as the policy of actively promoting liberal values by interfering in domestic affairs of other states to promote regime change. The concept of liberal interventionism is associated with LIO 2 and the end of the Cold War when many Western leaders began emphasizing democracy promotion as an increasingly important foreign policy objective (Waltz, 2000: 11-12). My definition combines conceptions put forward by Dursun Peksen and Mearsheimer’s theory of liberal hegemony policy. Peksen defines liberal interventionism as a set of policy measures aimed to promote liberalism in non-liberal countries (Peksen, 2012). These measures include military interventions (including humanitarian military interventions), aid, economic sanctions and the use of soft power (Peksen, 2012). These strategies correspond with Mearsheimer’s description of the liberal hegemony policy (Mearsheimer, 2018: 120-126). Mearsheimer emphasizes not only military interventions but also aid, in his terms *democracy promotion*, as an important tool for Western governments to promote liberalism and regime changes in various countries by funding opposition and civil society actors (Mearsheimer, 2018: 174).

I define democracy promotion programs as a liberal interventionist tool. This means programs carried out by organisations to strengthen liberal actors in foreign states (Carothers, 2006). These organisations are often formally independent, but funded and indirectly controlled by Western governments, as is the case with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) that receives funding from the US state department (Carothers, 2006). The activity of NED, which typically reflects US foreign policy goals (Korenke, 2017), is often perceived as a Western

interference tool to promote regime change, which is why some governments in recipient countries try to restrict it (Carothers, 2006). Bolivia is an example where NED programs have been directly used to counteract the ruling MAS party (Burrton & Avilés, 2012). Allen Weinstein, cofounder and then NED president, said in 1991: “A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA” (Ignatius, 1991).

At the turn of LIO 2, the debate regarding the principle of sovereignty has intensified due to the rising norm of military humanitarian interventions. Sovereignty is protected by article 51 in the UN charter, stating that states are only entitled to use violence as a measure of self-defence from armed aggression (United Nations, 2021b). According to chapter VII, the UNSC is the only institution having the right to define whether international peace and security is under threat and hence the only actor that legally can mandate an intervention to protect it (United Nations, 2021b). This implies that every foreign military intervention violating the sovereignty of the target country is illegal unless there is a UNSC approval (Murray & Keating, 2018). Advocates of the concept of military humanitarian interventions typically argue that such humanitarian norms are an integral part of LIO 2 that needs to override sovereignty if human rights are severely threatened, even if there is no given UNSC mandate (Moorman, 2002: 778-779). However, Simon Chesterman argues that there is no loophole in UN law giving any credit to the argument that humanitarian interventions can overrun sovereignty without UNSC consent (Chesterman, 2000: 302).

Military humanitarian interventions existed already during LIO 1, being carried out for instance by India in East Pakistan 1971 and by Vietnam in Cambodia 1978, but the norm became more prominent during LIO 2 (Leveringhaus, 2014: 162-169). It rose up as an informal response to protect human rights and in order to prevent states from committing gross human rights inflictions on its citizens under the shield of sovereignty. Alex Leveringhaus defines a humanitarian intervention as a unilateral act by one state or a bloc of states to intervene militarily in another state, against its will and without UNSC approval, to protect human rights. From the beginning of LIO 2, Western leaders argued that specifically human rights and democracy should be promoted by such interventions (Jamison, 2011). Although some of the LIO 2 interventions, such as the 1991 US-led Iraq intervention, were conducted under UNSC mandate, Matthew Jamison defines them as expressions of liberal

interventionism (Jamison, 2011). Furthermore, NATO's 1999 humanitarian intervention in Yugoslavia against the Serbs on the behalf of Kosovo Albanians was conducted without UNSC approval, (O'Connell, 2000: 73-82) and so too was the 2003 US led invasion of Iraq (Orakhelashvili, 2003).

Like Jamison, I regard military humanitarian interventions to be an expression of liberal interventionism and therefore damaging to the LIO. This is because such foreign interventions are by definition wars of choice, not wars of necessity (wars in self-defence) (Fisher, 2011). Therefore, I regard them as illiberal in nature. However, only unlawful interventions, meaning those that lack UNSC approval or exceed an existing UNSC mandate, undermines UNSC authority. Unlike Leveringhaus, I do not contend that an intervention necessarily needs to lack UNSC consent in order to be called a military humanitarian intervention.

The UN launched the "Responsibility to protect" (R2p) principle in 2005 to formalize the norm of military humanitarian interventions (Leveringhaus, 2014: 162-169). R2P entails that the international community has a duty to protect civilians if their governments cannot afford to prevent or is inflicting grave human rights abuses (Murray & Keating, 2018). Anyhow, an R2p military intervention needs to be authorized by the UNSC (Murray & Keating, 2018). R2p was used for the first time in Libya 2011 when the UNSC authorized a no-fly zone that NATO was allowed to uphold to protect civilians in the civil war (Kuperman, 2013: 105-114).

My position is that the UN security structure principles of sovereignty and UNSC authority enjoy higher legal status than the norm of military humanitarian interventions according to international law. This is because, in order to be legal, all military interventions in another state need to have UNSC approval or endorsement from the government of the target state that enjoys legal sovereignty.

I refer to liberal interventionism by defining the following liberal interventionist tools: direct or indirect military interventions in foreign states, democracy promotion, economic sanctions and other forms of regime change promotion. All these measures interfere in other states to actively promote liberal values by thwarting what is perceived as non-liberal governments, meaning de facto promoting regime changes in the short or the long run. My analysis focuses

on the liberal interventionist policies of Western liberal states, because these are the only actors that are pursuing liberal interventionism in the shape of wanting to actively promote liberal values and enforce liberalism on others.

### **2.1.1 Challenges against the LIO**

Although there is vast research on challenges against the LIO, few authors draw the connection between the particular policy of liberal interventionism and challenges against the LIO.

A common conception is the belief that a less activist and less interventionist Western foreign policy will leave the floor open for illiberal countries to create an illiberal international disorder. In this camp we find Ann-Marie Slaughter who argues that the West should not tolerate seeing Russia and Iran waging a brutal war on behalf of Bashar al-Assad's government in the Syrian civil war (Slaughter, 2017). According to her, American leadership and an active promotion of liberal values are needed to create order within the LIO. Similarly, Doug Stokes believes that the West needs to stick to its traditional policy of liberal internationalism, which in this context means enhancing liberalism (Stokes, 2018). Hence, populists such as Donald Trump challenge the LIO by not respecting liberal internationalism and by rejecting American international leadership (Stokes, 2018).

Although John Ikenberry and Joseph Nye also fear the populist threat against liberal internationalism, they are at the same time part of a more nuanced camp that concedes that the LIO itself needs to reform to cope with some of its inherent tensions (Ikenberry, 2018) (Nye, 2019). Nye concedes that unilateral American actions such as the 2003 Iraq invasion, but also too aggressive forms of democracy promotion, are counterproductive. They both believe that Trump's policy of unilateralism has been a factor that undermines the LIO. Still, none of them look beyond Trump to question the very idea of liberal interventionism and its consequences. Along the same lines, Lake et al identify tensions within the LIO, arguing that collective security based on universal human rights and the principle of sovereignty are parallel norms that sometimes clash (Lake et al, 2021). They recognize that championing universal values might be provocative to those who cherish sovereignty and that such tensions challenge the

LIO. However, they mostly relate these tensions to domestic affairs in liberal states, claiming that nationalist and populist movements are in swing to challenge the LIO.

Another camp focuses on challenges coming from revisionist actors. Slaughter is part of this camp as well, emphasizing Russia who she describes as an illiberal actor conducting revisionist geopolitical activities (Slaughter, 2017). Lake et al also point to the challenge coming from Russia, especially its annexation of Crimea (Lake et al, 2021). However, they moderate this claim by stating that although non-liberal actors like Russia and China do not honour liberal values, they do defend particular aspects of the LIO such as sovereignty (Lake et al, 2021). In a similar vein, Tatiana Romanova argues that Russia does not want to abandon the LIO, but still it challenges the order by wanting to revise it and upgrade sovereignty (Romanova, 2018).

## **2.2 The liberal interventionism debate**

### **2.2.1 Theme 1: Peace and order**

Liberals generally agree that spreading liberalism is not only justified for economic reasons, but also as a service to global peace (Mearsheimer, 2018: 188). However, there is a debate on whether actively promoting liberal values by measures such as military interventions can help to restore order and to provide for peace.

Richard Cobden argues that acting as a good example and standing up for the principle of non-interventionism incentivises others to act peacefully as well (Online Library of Liberty, 2021a). Intervening to protect order with violence only disrupts and brutalizes the order. According to him, if all nations would cherish non-interference in internal affairs of other states, a peaceful order, stable international law and free trade would prevail in the long run (libertarianism.org, 2021) (Online Library of Liberty, 2021b). The need for interventions in other states is often invoked under dubious pretexts of protecting order in the international system, even though the order upheld by the force of great powers (at the time Cobden it was the UK, France and Austria), is often a violent and chaotic order in itself (Online Library of Liberty, 2021a).

Giuseppe Mazzini represents the other side of the spectrum, believing that interventionism is needed to restore order and that democracy sometimes needs to be implemented violently to foster long-term peace (Mazzini, 2009: 1-3). When democracy is spread, democratic nations will flourish and cooperate to achieve peace. Although Mazzini was not a warmonger, he put forward arguments that correspond with the liberal interventionist case for military humanitarian interventions. He argued that states had a duty to react against attacks on people's dignity wherever these take place (Recchia & Welsh, 2013: 256). If one despotic leader gets away with abusing his populations, green light is given for other tyrants to commit the same atrocities. In such cases, decent nations have to step in to protect civilians because when some humans suffer, the whole mankind suffers (Recchia & Welsh, 2013: 256).

Much of this debate is manifested in today's clash between sovereignty and military humanitarian interventions. Fernando Tesón makes the case for the latter, arguing that sovereignty is an instrumental value that is only desirable if there is justice to begin with (Tesón, 2001). According to him, if an unlawful humanitarian intervention may help to protect human rights, such an act must be justifiable. Chesterman has the opposite view (Chesterman, 2000: 303-304). He argues that every time sovereignty is overridden by an unlawful military humanitarian intervention, the legal status of the UN as a multilateral institution for collective action becomes damaged. The authoritative role of the UNSC exists to prevent great powers from unilaterally imposing their will on others. Hollowing out these principles takes us back to an unchecked order where invasions can be conducted easily and often to the benefit of great powers. International law is undermined if it becomes only one of many grounds for which to justify interventions. Furthermore, there are typically self-interested motives behind decisions to militarily intervene in another state (Chesterman, 2000: 303-304).

“Liberal peace theory” derives from Immanuel Kant and is used to defend liberal interventionist efforts to impose liberal democracy on others. It claims that liberal democratic states do not fight each other because they enjoy constitutional constraints on war domestically, a strong ideological attachment to liberal values such as peaceful behaviour, and strong inter-state interdependence due to free trade policies (Doyle, 2005). These factors are often criticized for not being sufficient on their own to produce peace. However, Michael

Doyle argues that taken together, they provide strong empirical support for liberal peace theory (Doyle, 2005).

There are some flaws to the logic that spreading liberalism would provide for peace. Gibler and Owsiak emphasize that when it comes to border wars, states usually fight their most severe disputes before becoming democracies, indicating that peace comes before democratization rather than the other way around (Gibler & Owsiak, 2018: 18-19). Sebastian Rosato points out that liberal states do not act according to peaceful and liberal principles when going to war with non-liberal states (Rosato, 2003). Peace among liberal democracies might be a result of an alliance between liberal nations rather than a casual connection between liberalism and peace (Rosato, 2003).

Along the same lines, Mearsheimer questions whether constitutional constraints and public influence generate peaceful policies (Mearsheimer, 2018: 194-204). If the public opinion were an influential voice for peace, liberal democracies would avoid all sorts of wars, also those with non-democracies. Neither do constitutional constraints appear to stop liberal democracies from going into bloody wars with non-democracies (Mearsheimer, 2018: 194-204).

### **2.2.2 Theme 2: The universalist claim of liberal values**

The liberal interventionism debate relates to the English school of International Relations and the battle between solidarism and pluralism. In this school of thought, an international society is a system of sovereign states, on a global or regional scale, that is bound together by a set of collective norms (Buzan, 1993: 330-331). The degree of political and cultural diversity between the states depends on the varying levels of solidarism and pluralism in the international society (Watson, 2011: 299).

The debate between solidarism and pluralism can be described as a battle between cosmopolitical universalism and communitarian particularism on an international level (Buzan, 2014: 132). Proponents of pluralism argue that nations are naturally diverse from each other and therefore hold their own particular values, which means there are no universal values (Buzan, 2014: 12-16). Therefore, far-reaching collective norms between states are not desirable. No political or economic system can be universally optimal to every nation. Thus,

non-interventionism is a crucial principle that helps protect order in the international system. Proponents of solidarism argue that order is not desirable in itself if not combined with justice (Buzan, 2014: 12-16). Accordingly, nations can and should settle around universal norms such as liberal democracy, human rights and market economy. An attack on the universal right of any individual is a collective security issue for all nations.

Liberals typically agree that their values are universal, but disagree on whether they should be actively promoted and imposed on foreign countries. Cobden takes the rather particularist/pluralist side of this debate. According to him, only non-interventionism will provide the perfect long-term soil for liberal values to grow (libertarianism.org, 2021). He argues that all nations should enjoy the freedom to choose their own form of government (Online Library of Liberty, 2021a). On the universalist/solidarist side, Mazzini does not believe that democracy or republicanism will expand naturally if only given time to develop. Instead, he asserts that history sometimes needs an active nudge in the right direction (Recchia & Welsh, 2013: 246) (Mazzini, 2009: 17).

In Mearsheimer's terms, Cobden would qualify as a "modus vivendi" liberal, while Mazzini could be conceived as a "progressive" liberal (Mearsheimer, 2018: 54-68). The former camp believes that it is impossible to settle on far reaching political principles, which means we should only seek to collectively secure a thin core of concepts such as the right to life and security – values on which we all can agree. Such a particularist notion can be applied domestically but also in international political politics if states agree to settle on a thin set of crucial concepts such as non-interventionism and sovereignty. On the other side, progressive liberals believe that people can reach universal consensus on broader political principles with help of reason. This leads them to conceive the state as an actor that needs to do social engineering in order to secure not only negative rights, which are championed by modus-vivendi liberals, but also positive rights such as equal life opportunities for everyone. Progressive liberalism is part of the liberal hegemony policy in the sense that liberal policies are actively imposed on foreign countries with the belief that the universality of these concepts make them possible to implement by social engineering.

According to Mearsheimer, the liberal hegemony policy of actively promoting liberal values not only leads the West to seek regime changes abroad, it also backfires because of various

reasons (Mearsheimer, 2018: 120-143). Firstly, nationalism has deep impacts on people in target countries, leading them to unite against liberal interventionism, which usually is perceived as a hostile foreign imposition. Humans often prefer stability instead of radical social change, especially if the force for change comes from the outside. Secondly, most states outside the liberal West are guided primarily by protecting their own security and view the liberal hegemony policy as an offensive policy to expand the Western sphere of influence. Therefore, they pursue balance of power politics against it and react by taking geopolitical moves. Thirdly, the fact that nations have different cultural roots means that they have particular values. Because liberal values are not universal, implementing liberalism abroad is naturally met by difficulties. Social engineering practises designed to promote social change sometimes fail even in domestic politics, even more so when applied to construct a liberal society from above in a foreign country.

Along similar lines, Coyne and Blanco argue that because liberal interventionists believe that social engineering conducted by experts can construct liberalism and transform societies abroad on the basis of rationalism, they ignore the notion that societies are complex, evolving slowly and spontaneously (Coyne & Blanco, 2016).

### **2.2.3 Theme 3: The illiberal potential of liberal interventionism.**

Because wars, military interventions and regime change promotion are arguably illiberal means in themselves, there are disagreements on whether such measures to spread liberalism can ever be justified from a liberal perspective.

The liberal interventionist side of this debate justifies military actions arguing that wars conducted by liberal democracies are “liberal wars” because they aim to defend liberal values and its conductors try to minimise collateral damage (Freedman, 2005). According to Lawrence Freedman, abstaining from protecting these values when they are under threat produces illiberal outcomes. Because a world government does not exist, strong states have a responsibility to fight liberal wars to protect the most vulnerable people and their human rights.

In a similar vein, Geis et al argue that liberal wars are special because they are normatively motivated to defend human rights, which in turn corresponds with the self-interest of liberal

states (Geis et al, 2013: 3-10). Liberal democracies are constitutionally designed to cherish liberal values. These constraints mean that liberal leaders need to have a value-based cause for going to war. Hence, normative considerations, not territorial expansion, are the main driving force.

The other side of the debate questions the existence of liberal and normative wars. By emphasizing the fact that democratic institutions, such as media and constitutional checks and balances on executive power, failed to uncover the inconclusive evidence behind exaggerated and untruthful stories that were put forward by the US and the UK governments to justify the war against Yugoslavia 1999 and Iraq 2003, Tim Dunne puts the concept of liberal wars into doubt (Dunne, 2009).

Another set of arguments against using military measures to promote liberal values focuses on that such tactics are illiberal in nature and damages liberalism domestically in liberal democratic states. Coyne and Blanco argue that in order to uphold liberal values in today's world order, the West and the US in particular have found illiberal tools such as torture and other social control mechanisms necessary (Coyne & Blanco, 2016). Waging wars and having to suppress resistance naturally generate an illiberal mindset. Believing that one is fighting for universal truths makes you prone to justify grave violence and illiberal measures with utilitarian arguments. A violent promotion of liberalism is not only illiberal, so are also often its outcomes (Coyne & Blanco, 2016).

Mearsheimer and Cobden have similar objections. Mearsheimer points out that when liberal democracies rely on military means to carry out foreign policy objectives, they jeopardize liberal values at home while also obstructing diplomacy, which is a more liberal policy tool (Mearsheimer, 2018: 156-158). By holding their own values as universal and not backing away from using violence to spread them, liberal states become less prone to use diplomacy with actors that are deemed to be illiberal (Mearsheimer, 2018: 179-180). According to Cobden, liberal interventionism is at odds with liberalism because military interventions typically entail destruction of the invaded country, both in terms of lives and property (Online Library of Liberty, 2021a).

## 2.3 My theoretical proposition

The theoretical proposition of this thesis, which is the same as my main argument, is developed as an expansion of the previous research discussed above. It mainly develops Mearsheimer's theory of liberal hegemony policy but also concepts of other researchers.

My conception of liberal interventionism draws on both Mearsheimer and Peksen, acknowledging that all liberal interventionist tools are designed to promote liberal values actively, meaning aggressively by interfering to de facto promote regime changes in illiberal states.

I formulate my theoretical proposition in the following way: liberal interventionism backfires on two core notions of the LIO. Firstly, the UN security structure with its emphasis on sovereignty and UNSC authority to decide on issues of peace and international security. Secondly, liberal values such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law. More specifically because of three reasons:

*Thematic claim 1: Liberal interventionism disrupts international peace and order, including the principle of sovereignty and UNSC authority.*

*Thematic claim 2: Liberal interventionism backfires on liberalism itself by actively promoting liberal values.*

*Thematic claim 3: Liberal interventionism hurts liberal values by having illiberal elements.*

These claims are somewhat overlapping and link up to the three themes within the literature on the liberal interventionism debate discussed in the previous research section (theme 1: peace and order, theme 2: the universalist claim of liberal values and theme 3: the illiberal potential of liberal interventionism).

Thematic claim 1 (relating to theme 1) concerns that unlawful military interventions undermine the UN security structure, thus creating disorder and eventually hurting global peace. They damage peaceful norms such as non-interventionism and sovereignty that need to be honoured if peace is to prevail in the long run. The UN security structure principles of sovereignty and UNSC authority are part of international law and exists to prevent powerful

nations from imposing their will on smaller ones, as well as to create order instead of an anarchy where interventions are carried out arbitrarily in the service of great powers. This argument takes inspiration from Chesterman's reasoning on the consequences of sidestepping the UN.

Thematic claim 2 (relating to theme 2) highlights that liberal interventionist tools, implemented under the guidance of actively promoting liberal values, produce counter actions by non-liberal actors and often fail to produce liberal outcomes. This argument expands on Mearsheimer's notion of how liberal hegemony policy backfires on the West. Another assumption of this claim is the particularist notion that the active promotion of liberal values through regime change promotion will fail because such actions ignore the existence of particular values, as well as the diversity of cultural and institutional roots in different countries. Promotion of liberal values is not a problem in itself. The problem with liberal interventionism is that it promotes liberal values *actively* by interfering to seek regime changes. Such a strategy is a disservice to those same values that are at the core of the LIO.

Thematic claim 3 (relating to theme 3) recognizes that liberal interventionism bears illiberal elements. This position is based on Mearsheimer, Cobden as well as Coyne and Blanco, which argue that liberal interventionist tools are at odds with liberalism and have illiberal outcomes. One might argue that violence is always illiberal by definition. But wars are sometimes conducted in defence, meaning that all wars are reasonably not necessarily illiberal. I argue that military interventions are an illiberal measure when used to promote liberalism, because such wars are rather wars of choice than wars of necessity. Another illiberal element of liberal interventionism is its illiberal outcomes and the illiberal mindset. As Coyne and Blanco pointed out regarding the illiberal mindset, fighting for universal values makes you prone to promote your goals even with illiberal measures. Similarly, I claim that liberal interventionists, in order to reach their goals, do not back off from using illiberal measures, cooperating with illiberal actors, nor rushing to military action based on inconclusive evidence. Dunne highlighted the point about acting on inconclusive evidence. When those actors that claim to be championing liberal values act illiberal themselves, faith and legitimacy are lost in the LIO notion of liberal values.

The main critic against my theoretical proposition, as discussed in the previous research section, is that some would assert that unlawful military interventions do not damage the LIO UN security structure, arguing that they are legitimate as part of customary law to protect human rights and that there is a norm of military humanitarian interventions which is part of the LIO itself. However, as I see it, such interventions are subordinated to UNSC approval and sovereignty according to international law. This is written in the UN charter. Therefore, I have a less arbitrary way of viewing international law than those who want to upgrade unwritten norms or customary law.

### **3. Research design and method**

The research design is a mix between theory testing and theory developing. Theory development is a deductive process of expanding existing theories, including its concepts and contexts on which they are applied (George & Bennett, 2005: 128-135). This is in line with the way I worked out my theoretical proposition as described above. To explore the validity of the theoretical proposition, I analyse three cases through it. This is the process of theory testing (George & Bennett, 2005: 128-135). I make an argumentative case for whether the application of the theory is successful. Because the theoretical proposition is broad in scope, I apply it by analysing cases on a macro level. Therefore, I look into a limited set of key events where liberal interventionism has been implemented in each case.

The case analysis section operationalizes the theoretical proposition by applying the three thematic claims to each case separately to find out to what extent the implications of the thematic claims are supported. This means assessing whether liberal interventionism has worked or has not worked according to what is expected by the claim, or in case the outcome is partly unknown (as in Syria where regime change has not happened yet), whether or not liberal interventionism has played out or can be expected to play out as according to the claim. In the beginning of each analysis, I lay out the criteria for interpreting whether the material disproves or proves the thematic claim. In the end of each case analysis, I assess to what extent there is ground for giving weak, mixed or strong support to the thematic claim.

Because of the macro analysis approach and the limited scope, this thesis does not assess all relevant data there is to each case, which means that it does not produce an exhaustive test of the theoretical proposition. In order to still do an early but meaningful theory test, the analysis focuses specifically on material relating to the clearest expressions of liberal interventionism because such material is the most relevant in the assessment of the thematic claims. On such a basis, I assess the potential validity of the thematic claims based on material that speaks for and against the claims. Because there are several ways to interpret the material at this stage, I lay out arguments for why one interpretation is better than another in order to conclude whether it is reasonable to say that a thematic claim has support. A bigger future study should analyse more data to cover each case more extensively, including material that do not directly relate to expressions of liberal interventionism but that anyhow could disprove the thematic claims. However, the levels of support for the theoretical proposition when applied to the material of this study still gives significant indications into the validity of it, not least considering that Libya, Syria and Ukraine mark important political LIO 2 events.

To check whether the conclusions from the theory test generated by the case analysis section can be systematically backed up on a cross-case basis, I end the analysis section with a comparative analysis. The approach here rests on the logic of the “positive method of agreement” (George & Bennett, 2005: 169-174). This means that I depict common variables across the cases and connect them to similar outcomes. If the thematic claims are valid in separate cases, it should also be possible to link common cross-case variables (ways in which liberal interventionism has been implemented), to similar outcomes or expected outcomes (the thematic claims about what implications liberal interventionism have).

### **3.1 Case selection**

Selecting Libya, Syria and Ukraine provides for analysing contextually different cases in terms of time, geography and actors involved. When testing a theory in case studies, the researcher should pick cases that facilitate theoretical generalizability (George & Bennett, 2005: 70-90). This means that one should try to strengthen the validity of the theory by testing it in difficult cases or in several contextually diverse cases. All cases in my study concern events in the LIO 2 period because this time marks the moment when liberal interventionism rose to prominence. Still, they differ in contextual characteristics, which should strengthen the

generalizability of my theoretical proposition. It is desirable to test the theory in as many cases as possible. With regards to the scope of this thesis, three cases are within the limits and allow me to do a fairly far-reaching assessment, while four cases would only provide for taking a too thin grip of the cases.

The selected cases of this study mark important geopolitical events in the LIO 2 era. This is crucial for the validity of the applied theoretical proposition. Although the 2003 Iraq invasion is arguably the most important geopolitical event in LIO 2, I choose not to analyse it because, unlike Western actions in Libya, Syria and Ukraine, there seems to be a wide consensus even among liberals that the Iraq invasion was a big failure (Nye, 2019: 68). It bears all signs of a liberal interventionist action that backfires. My selected cases represent a tougher test for the theoretical proposition. The 1999 NATO led Kosovo intervention is also an interesting case with regards to liberal interventionism. I choose not to include it because a similar direct military intervention took place more recently in Libya 2011. The reason why I kept Syria and Ukraine is because they, especially Ukraine, widen the theory test by having characteristics that involve liberal interventionist tools that are less direct and more indirect compared to Libya. The fact that the nature of liberal interventionist measures used across the cases differs contributes to make the theory test tougher.

## **4. Data**

Because various key events are analysed in order to get a macro perspective on each separate case, I assess a mix of primary and secondary material instead of digging deep into a narrow set of primary data. Primary material is for instance the UNSC resolution 1973 on Libya and the US state department's declaration of sanctions against Syria. When it comes to Ukraine, I rely mostly on second hand sources, research reports and articles assessing the events leading up to the 2014 regime change. Generally, in order to create a solid basis to draw conclusions, I bring in previous research on all four cases, meaning scholarly articles, into the analysis. To situate certain key events that are important for the cases, first-hand material is not always available which is why I make use of journalistic articles and reports from various organisations such as human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch, but also UN reports. To grasp the reasoning by important actors, I assess comments such as political

statements from Western leaders.

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1 Case Libya

During Muammar Gaddafi's reign, the West usually conceived Libya as a malign actor and state sponsor of terrorism, although relations started to normalise in the early 2000s (BBC, 2021). In the wake of the so-called Arab spring in February 2011, large protests erupted in Libya against Gaddafi's four decades of totalitarian rule. The government pushed back hard, and parts of the opposition, some of which were aided by Gulf states, engaged in an armed uprising (the first civil war) (Ulfstein & Christiansen, 2013). As the violent confrontation between anti-Gaddafi rebel groups and government forces increased, the UNSC authorized a no-fly zone in March through resolution 1973 (BBC, 2021). It was passed under the notion of R2P and the no-fly zone should protect civilians, which according to reports were victims of brutal violence committed by the government side (Terry, 2015: 162-165). NATO, with the US, France and the UK at the forefront, went on to protect the zone by bombing government targets (Kuperman, 2013). In October, the rebel side won the civil war, killed Gaddafi and the National Transition Council went on to plan for democratic elections, only to see a new civil war (the second civil war) break out between various militia and rebel groups (BBC, 2021).

#### **5.1.1 Thematic claim 1: Liberal interventionism disrupts international peace and order, including the principle of sovereignty and UNSC authority.**

Was NATO's military intervention in Libya an unlawful liberal interventionist act for regime change? Or, to disprove thematic claim 1, was it within the legal framework of the UNSC resolution 1973, benefiting civilians and peace?

The resolution states that the international community calls upon the Libyan state to protect its population, fears that the situation can deteriorate into crimes against humanity and demands a ceasefire as well as a political dialogue (United Nations Security Council, 2011). Moreover, the resolution proclaims that the no-fly zone means a ban on all sorts of military aircraft over Libyan territory, only allowing for aerial provision of humanitarian aid

assistance. A controversial sentence states that outside actors acting under the resolution are authorized “to take all necessary measures” to “protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi...” (United Nations Security Council, 2011).

The resolution leaves room for interpreting “all necessary measures” as a nod to do whatever it takes to protect civilians, including far-reaching push backs and potentially a regime change war against Gaddafi. Meanwhile, the resolution emphasizes the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Libyan state as well as the prohibition of a foreign occupation (United Nations Security Council, 2011). At the time of the operation, the leaders of the US, UK and France (Barack Obama, James Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy) admitted in a joint article that the resolution mandated protection of civilians, not a regime change war (Obama, Cameron & Sarkozy, 2011). However, in the same article they also stated that they saw no future for Gaddafi’s government.

Ulfstein and Christiansen claim that resolution 1973 did not approve a NATO regime change campaign (Ulfstein & Christiansen, 2013). According to them, the resolution outlaws all military measures that are not primarily aimed to protect civilians. They argue that NATO acted lawfully in accordance with the mandate when they conducted airstrikes on government forces trying to take back rebel held cities such as Benghazi, Misrata and Ajabiua, because such actions helped to protect civilians living in these cities. NATO’s targeted killings of some of Gaddafi’s family members and the air strikes against government controlled command and control centres are more controversial, because such actions did not directly protect civilians but helped the rebels (Ulfstein & Christiansen, 2013).

NATO attacks on government facilities and targeted killings indicate that the West sided with rebels to help create regime change, although it could be argued that such efforts were needed to indirectly protect civilians from Gaddafi, and therefore within the mandate. However, NATO did not protect civilians from being killed by rebels (Terry, 2015: 168) and the resolution says nothing about allowing for pre-emptive protection measures.

A more obvious breach of the resolution took place at the end of the civil war when rebels invaded government held cities like Tripoli and Sirte. The rebels were not only helped by

military aid, weapons and assistance coming in from the West and Qatar, but also from NATO air strikes against government forces that were defending the cities (Ulfstein & Christiansen, 2013). Here, NATO conducted military actions that were not aimed to protect civilians. As Ulfstein and Christiansen point out, NATO fought Gaddafi's forces, although it was the rebels, not the government, that were threatening civilians by invading government held cities (Ulfstein & Christiansen, 2013). Along the same lines, Kuperman emphasizes that most people in Sirte supported Gaddafi's regime (Kuperman, 2013). Still, NATO bombed government forces in the city although they were not a threat to civilians, meaning that NATO exceeded its mandate (Kuperman, 2013).

Because NATO helped the rebels to victory by actively aiding them and by striking Gaddafi forces on many instances not to protect civilians, I conclude that it violated the UNSC mandate. This way, NATO undermined Libya's sovereignty and UNSC authority by de facto conducting a regime change intervention. NATO leaders themselves admit that the resolution did not mandate a regime change operation. As a British parliamentary report on resolution 1973 concludes, Western military aid and assistance, in combination with NATO airstrikes were key to the eventual victory of the rebels (House of Commons, 2016). The report also highlights that such aid violated the arms embargo of the resolution, and questions why NATO continued its warfare after Gaddafi's troops retreated from Benghazi if the motive was solely to protect civilians. As Terry states, if protecting civilians, not promoting regime change, was the main objective of the West, NATO would have been less offensive in its bomb campaigns (Terry, 2015). Not only Russia and China but also others like Germany and Turkey have raised similar objections (Ulfstein & Christiansen, 2013: 166) (Terry, 2015: 167).

Considering Gaddafi's brutal warfare and the threat posed by his regime against civilians, is it possible to claim that liberal interventionism disrupted peace and order in Libya? A UN Human Rights Council report states that Gaddafi's government forces were responsible for several war crimes such as torture and systematic attacks against civilians (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2012).

Still, I argue that peace and order have been disrupted by NATO's regime change war. The main problem is not that NATO protected civilians from Gaddafi in rebel held cities. Such

acts in themselves were not illegal according to the resolution and surely helped to protect some civilians. The problem is that NATO only protected civilians from being attacked by the government, and fuelled the war by actively helping the rebels to defeat the government while ignoring what consequences that could follow from the fall of Gaddafi and the fact that rebels were a threat to civilians in government held cities.

Thematic claim 1 has strong support in Libya. The disorder caused by the unlawful regime change operation soon spread to neighbouring countries such as Mali where a Tuareg rebellion destabilized the state (Kuperman, 2013: 128-129). Actors like Russia and Turkey today support different sides in today's Libyan civil war (Robinson, 2020), which further disrupts peace and order. This is a direct consequence of a geopolitical vacuum created by the violent overthrow of Gaddafi. Furthermore, affecting the legitimacy of R2P as a whole, NATO's misuse of resolution 1973 has made Russia and China, who abstained on the Libya vote but still let the resolution pass by not using veto, more sceptic to again allow for similar military humanitarian operations (Ulfstein & Christiansen, 2013: 162). As I see it, unlawful interventions set a dangerous example, enabling others to carry out their own interests illegally and arbitrarily. Undermining the faith in international law makes the international security environment less predictable because international law exists to create order and to protect weak nations from being attacked by stronger ones.

### **5.1.2 Thematic claim 2: Liberal interventionism backfires on liberalism itself by actively promoting liberal values.**

The liberal interventionist case for promoting regime changes is that toppling illiberal leaders is a way to promote liberal values and make target countries better off. Did this logic work in Libya? If it did, thematic claim 2 is disproven.

Liberals are faced with a dilemma when an illiberal leader such as Gaddafi is attacking the human rights of his own people in a way that might deteriorate. One-sided support to the opposition might however be a bad idea. The opposition against Gaddafi was far from uniform in its interests and on some occasions much less liberal than the liberal interventionists hoped. Gaddafi committed various and grave war crimes when fighting the rebels, but parts of the Western-backed opposition were also guilty of war crimes in the first

civil war (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2012), also by torturing and arbitrarily killing Gaddafi supporters in the aftermath of the war (Sengupta & Hughes, 2011).

Considering that Libya was not a happy place before the first civil war, why would regime change not be a service to the Libyan people? Gaddafi kept the country together by suppressing tribal tensions with a divide-and-rule strategy, which is part of why unrest grew to the point of creating the anti-government uprisings of February 2011 (Eriksson, 2015: 10). On the other side of things, many Libyans were more safe during his reign, when economic prosperity was relatively high in the oil-rich country, than in the post-Gaddafi civil war of today where Libya experiences not only a humanitarian but also an economic crisis (France 24, 2021).

October 2011 marked the democratic transition as Libya's National Transition Council created a new government. The divided government soon lost control over big parts of Libyan territory where various militia groups established themselves by taking over state institutions (Terry, 2015: 179-180). In July 2012, democratic elections were held but the new government lasted less than a month after being removed by the parliament (Kuperman, 2013: 125). Libyan democratic authorities failed to halt tribal militias that established themselves during the first civil war, including radical islamists that were kept in check during Gaddafi, meaning that the second civil war came out of control (Kuperman, 2013: 126-132).

Today, the country is divided between a UN recognised Turkey backed government that on the one hand fights a proxy war against the so-called "Libya's National Army" headed by Khalifa Haftar, supported by for instance Russia, and on the other hand local militias including radical islamist groups (Robinson, 2020). The UN has reported on numerous human rights abuses in today's Libya, including open slave trade with migrants (United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, 2018). Some researchers blame Gaddafi's strategy of creating a unified state on the basis of Libya's ethnically divided nations for enabling the second civil war (Eriksson, 2015: 10). However, I would assert that these tensions were part of why the first civil war broke out, while the anarchy brought by the regime change provided the ground needed for such unrest to grow out of control.

The solidarist notion that there has to be justice and acceptance of universal values before creating order is discredited by the case. On the contrary, as the pluralist position asserts, the aftermath of the Libya intervention demonstrates that tearing down institutions informed by values that are particular to the nation, in this case the Gaddafi regime, erases order but do not provide for justice or democracy. Gaddafi's Libya had a lot more order than justice. The fact that the opposition and the international community lacked a post-Gaddafi plan (Eriksson, 2015: 10) did not help to stabilize the country after the democratic transition. Still, overthrowing an illiberal leader did not make things better. It laid the ground for a second civil war in which even more illiberal actors thrived.

Giving strong support to thematic claim 2, the liberal interventionist notion of actively promoting liberal values by creating regime changes backfired on liberalism by a failure in Libya. The prospects of liberal values such as democracy and human rights have collapsed in the turmoil created after Gaddafi's downfall, leading to a state of anarchy that lacks both order and justice.

### **5.1.3 Thematic claim 3: Liberal interventionism hurts liberal values by having illiberal elements.**

To defend the regime change war, one can argue that it was needed to stop Gaddafi from creating a bloodbath and an even more illiberal outcome. If it was a humanitarian success that helped to make the outcomes less illiberal, thematic claim 3 is disproved.

The case for intervening in Libya was the need to defend human rights. Obama, Cameron and Sarkozy spoke in terms of having to counteract the Libyan government, which according to them was in full swing to inflict massacres and bloodbath upon Libyan civilians (Obama, Cameron & Sarkozy, N. 2011). This notion was important for the intervention as a whole.

Although most people agree that Gaddafi waged a brutal war, violated human rights, caused a lot of harm to civilians and committed war crimes, claims that he was launching a bloodbath or a large scale massacre are disputed. Resolution 1973 was passed shortly after Gaddafi announced he would take back Benghazi from the rebels by showing "no mercy and no pity to them" (Reuters Staff, 2011). This made the international community view him as a potential mass murderer. Adding to this, the resolution stated that the Libyan government was

responsible for torture, summary executions and systematic attacks against civilians that might lead to crimes against humanity (United Nations Security Council, 2011). Gaddafi's human rights abuses were also passed on to the International criminal court (Liolos, 2012). Contrastingly, the British parliamentary report on resolution 1973 highlights that casualties were overwhelmingly male combatants when Gaddafi forces attacked the rebel held cities Misrata and Ajdabiya, and concludes that the narrative that Gaddafi ordered a massacre on civilians of Benghazi is not backed up by evidence (House of Commons, 2016).

The regime change intervention has not prevented illiberal outcomes considering that it has not only dragged Libya into a state of anarchy which I would argue is more illiberal than ever, it also fuelled the first civil war by advancing the positions of the rebels and their ability to attack government held cities (Kuperman, 2013: 120-21). If NATO's goal was to act within the frames of the resolution and to protect civilians from all sorts of suffering, including potential massacres, it could have used only defensive military and diplomatic response actions to protect civilians in cities that were under attack, instead of using one-sided pre-emptive and offensive attacks against the government without any form of post-Gaddafi plan.

Liberal interventionist actions to support the rebels by directly intervening militarily on their behalf, and indirectly by providing them with aid and military assistance, carry illiberal elements, considering that the Western backed rebels groups included islamist extremists and committed some grave crimes. For instance, in October 2011 Human Rights Watch (HRW) accused rebels of killing 53 civilian Gaddafi supporters which were found in a hotel in the then newly rebel conquered city of Sirte (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Also, the UK parliamentary report states that proponents of supporting the rebels downplayed risks that such efforts would benefit islamist extremists groups, which in the end turned out to be one fraction of the rebels (House of Commons, 2016).

Warfare is an illiberal tool in itself when used offensively to attack perceived enemies rather than to protect civilians as NATO did to a large extent in Libya. HRW reports that at least 72 civilians were directly killed by NATO air strikes (Human Rights Watch, 2012). In some cases where civilians were killed, HRW reported that the relevant sites lacked signs of any military targets. These HRW figures do not include those civilians that were killed by Western backed rebels in the lead up to Gaddafi's fall and its aftermath (Terry, 2015: 173).

Thematic claim 3 has strong support in Libya. Liberal interventionism had several illiberal elements to it. Not backing off from using illiberal measures such as offensive warfare, killing civilians and aligning with illiberal actors to achieve regime change is a manifestation of an illiberal mindset. Furthermore, these actions produced illiberal outcomes. Liberal values have been hurt because these dynamics delegitimize Western claims of promoting liberal values, demonstrate a bad example to others and call into question the commitment of the West to liberal values.

## **5.2 Case Syria**

The civil war was triggered by anti-government protests in March 2011 against President Bashar al-Assad who took over the presidency from his father in 2000. The Alawite sect dominates his government although the country as a whole has a Sunni majority (BBC, 2016). Assad responded with harsh violence against the unrest and the protests against his repressive rule. Some opposition groups engaged in an armed uprising and a civil war broke out. Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Jordan along with the US, France and the UK supported anti-Assad rebels (BBC, 2016). Jihadist fighters like ISIS and al-Qaida forces were also among a wide range of rebel groups fighting both each other but mainly Assad's government (Hasan, 2019). Russia, an ally of the Syrian government, intervened in 2015 on behalf of Assad in order to fight alleged terrorists along with Iran, although critics say they were fighting a diverse set of rebel groups in order to protect Assad (BBC, 2019). With regards to US foreign policy, Assad is traditionally conceived as a long-time political and ideological enemy to Israel and the US (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007: 263-276).

### **5.2.1 Thematic claim 1: Liberal interventionism disrupts international peace and order, including the principle of sovereignty and UNSC authority.**

Liberal interventionism in Syria has worked in a rather indirect and restrained way, while regional allies to the West have played a more direct role promoting regime change (Gupta, 2016). Still, the West has implemented liberal interventionist tools. Most importantly, it has engaged in an indirect military intervention by funding anti-Assad rebels. It has also launched a smaller number of direct military intervention actions by attacking government targets on Syrian ground and occupied parts of Syrian territory. Thematic claim 1 would be disproven if

these measures had not undermined the UN security structure and if they were to have a positive or no significant impact with regards to peace and order in Syria.

The American congress approved Obama's Train and Equip program for Syria in 2014. The Congressional Research Service describes it as an overt program to arm, train and equip Syrian rebels (Blanchard & Belasco, 2015). 500 million dollars were granted to such opposition groups. Officially, the program should be used to fight terrorist groups, not to create regime change. Also starting during the Obama administration, the US ran a covert program coordinated with regional allies through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), training and arming rebels to defeat the Assad government (Sisk, 2017). Trump cancelled the program in 2017 after reports came in that American weapons had reached not only moderate rebels but also al-Qaeda linked groups (Mazzetti et al, 2017), although many believe it was known from the start that the CIA supported a diverse set of rebels, including islamist extremists, to fight the government of Assad (Walcott, 2017) (Hasan, 2019). The UK and France have implemented similar programs to support rebels fighting ISIS as well as Assad (MacAskill, 2015) (France24, 2014).

Indirect support to forces fighting such an illiberal leader like Assad might look like a reasonable and humanitarian move even if it goes against international law. The UN has reported on various war crimes committed by his forces. They have targeted civilian infrastructure, causing numerous civilian deaths (UN News, 2020). Although the UN has reported on war crimes committed by the rebels as well (UN News, 2020), Assad appears particularly brutal considering that the West and the Organisation for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) have concluded that he has used chemical weapons on several occasions (BBC, 2016).

However, funding anti-Assad rebels is unwise because of a number of reasons. Firstly, it sets a dangerous example that undermines UNSC authority and the sovereignty of Syria. The actions are illegal because they do not rest on a legal mandate (Ogunnowo & Chidozie, 2020). Of course, any such proposed mandate would be rejected in the UNSC by Russia and China. Still, the authority of the UNSC to decide on international peace and security exists to make it hard to inflict on the sovereignty of states, which is a key interest of all UN member states. The dangerous example of funding rebels is that it pulls the international order closer to

anarchy by giving a green card to whichever country to arbitrarily intervene and fight on different sides in conflicts within other states to serve its own interest. Secondly, siding with the rebels does not necessarily help civilians. The Syrian conflict is too complex to assume that Assad is always the bad guy and that all rebels are better than him. Thirdly, the policy of promoting regime change by funding rebels ignores the fact that overthrowing Assad might lead to something worse and a severe disruption of peace and order in Syria and the region.

Assad's possible fall might lead to chaos, although that is not the only possible outcome. If the opposition continues to squeeze him, getting help from regional allies and the West as well, one scenario could be that officials from his own government turn against him and start to negotiate with the opposition (Lesch, 2013: 100). If his fall would become a violent overthrow, those rebel groups that are most likely to benefit are the ones with most weaponry power, meaning Sunni islamist groups (Gupta, 2016: 30). Ranjit Gupta draws on parallels from the 2003 and 2011 regime changes in Iraq and Libya. He argues that, due to the deep sectarian divides within Syria, a violent overthrow of the current regime could jeopardize Syria's existence as a state and have even worse effects than in Iraq and Libya (Gupta, 2016: 37). A 2012 American Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report indicated that extremist groups like al-Qaeda were leading the line in the fight against Assad and that such groups were to gain from Western support to the anti-Assad insurgency in their strive to establish an islamist principality in Syria (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2012).

The West conducted direct military interventions in April 2017 and 2018. In both cases it responded to chemical attacks that were blamed on the Syrian government. However, it did not wait for solid evidence. In 2018, the US, France and the UK fired off 105 cruise missiles against three Syrian government facilities in Homs and Damascus linked to chemical weapons production (Stewart & Perry, 2018). These actions were a response to reports on a chemical attack in Douma, near Damascus, one week earlier. The act constituted a violation of Syria's sovereignty and UNSC authority in the sense that it lacked UNSC mandate. The situation was the same in 2017 when Trump launched missile strikes against Assad's air base in Al Shayrat (Westbrook, 2019). The attack was a response to another chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun just days before, for which Assad is generally believed to be responsible.

As I see it, these missile attacks were dangerous moves. Rather than scaring actors away from using brutal force, violent retaliations are more likely to spur violence, giving Assad a case for responding in turn. Pre-emptive attacks like these that do not directly protect civilians set a bad example because what is a legitimate target of a pre-emptive attack can be arbitrarily expanded too far.

US troops have de facto occupied parts of north-eastern Syria where Syrian Kurd forces have declared the region of Rojava an independent state, although neither the UN nor the Assad government has recognized it (Aziz, 2020). The Kurd-American alliance has together fought ISIS in cities like Raqqa. When Trump decided to draw American troops out of these regions in October 2019, Turkey responded by invading them to fight back Kurds that according to the Turkish president Recep Erdoğan are terrorists (Aziz, 2020). However, the US did not leave all its troops. They remain in north-eastern Syria to protect the oil, which is controlled by Kurdish forces, giving a US firm licence to operate the oil fields without giving revenue to Assad's government in Damascus (Atwood & Browne, 2020).

Although occupying north-eastern Syria while exploiting its oil is a violation of Syria's sovereignty, the dilemma is that the American presence still has been a way to protect the human rights of the Kurds. Hence, leaving the Kurds to be crushed by Erdoğan is immoral. According to international law, it is the duty of Syria's UN recognized government in Damascus, not the US, to protect its own population, including the Kurds. But Assad has a bad record when it comes to protecting his people.

I still argue that militarily backing break-away regions such as Rojava sets a bad example and disrupts order by giving all peoples incentives to break away from their states. To survive, the Kurds had no other option than to affiliate with Assad as they did when Turkey invaded (McKernan, 2019). That is arguably a bad outcome, but a more functioning solution than leaving American troops there illegally in the long term. International actors should rather promote political negotiations, not arbitrary declarations of independence in violation with international law, in order to solve internal conflicts among different actors within states.

Thematic claim 1 has strong support in Syria. The fact that the West is only one of several actors involved in the conflict and that liberal interventionism has worked mostly indirectly

makes it hard to judge how big impacts liberal interventionist policies have had. Still, assessing the policies on the basis of which they have been implemented, liberal interventionist tools have been in line with the implications of thematic claim 1.

Western funding of rebels has contributed, at least to some extent, to a possible violent overthrow of Assad that would likely produce a similar chaos to that in Libya, thereby disrupting peace and order. Just like the air strikes against Syrian government facilities and the actions in north-eastern Syria, funding rebels has also undermined Syria's sovereignty and UNSC authority, setting a dangerous example. If there is a possible peaceful solution to the conflict, these one-sided interference actions have obstructed more than they helped.

My analysis boils down to that liberal interventionism has more negative than positive effects on Syria, which is not to say that the West is a more malign actor than anyone else involved in Syria. Those engaged in direct daily battles have most blood on their hands. These actors are the Syrian government as well as its allies, including Russia, and the rebels. However, Russia is not the main disruptor of peace and order legally speaking. Whatever one thinks of the Syrian government, because it is legally recognized by the UN, it has the sovereign right to invite Russia as it did in order to build a coalition to fight rebels that are conquering territories (Lutta, 2018). Turkey has not only invaded north-eastern Syria illegally. Like several countries in the region, it has also provided extensive backing to rebel groups, including Islamist extremists (Coskun & Al-Khalidi, 2020). The fact that Turkey and other regional powers have been destructive actors in Syria does not reduce the validity of thematic claim 1 because Western liberal interventionism is still in line with the implications of the claim.

### **5.2.2 Thematic claim 2: Liberal interventionism backfires on liberalism itself by actively promoting liberal values.**

In 2011, Obama stated that Assad must leave power due to his inflictions on the rights of his citizens and that America supports a democratic transition by imposing economic sanctions on the regime (The White House, 2011). The liberal interventionist case for promoting regime change in Syria is that getting rid of Assad's illiberal government is a way to promote liberal

values. If liberal interventionism has achieved or is likely to achieve its intended consequences, thematic claim 2 is disproved.

The Western policy has been to fund *moderate* rebels in their fight against Assad, but such backing seems to have benefited extremist elements as well. For instance, the US backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) has links to outright terrorist groups. In 2013, FSA cooperated with ISIS in battling Assad forces to siege the Menagh military airport (Paraszczuk, 2013). Another example is found in 2014 when members of the Syrian Revolutionary Front, supported by the US, joined al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, the al-Nusra Front, taking Western military equipment with them (Sly, 2014). Furthermore, when Turkey invaded Syria in October 2019 to push back Kurdish forces, it did so using mercenaries coming from groups like FSA, previously aided by the US (Hasan, 2019). The then US defence minister Mark Esper accused Turkey and its mercenaries for causing "widespread casualties" and "destruction" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019).

Support to rebels coming from regional actors and the West has probably boosted their capabilities to fight Assad, but helping them to violently overthrow him might well backfire. As the DIA report indicated, Assad's fall could facilitate an islamist takeover. Some of Syria's religious minorities have reasons to fear such evolvments (Gupta, 2016: 30). Despite all his wrongdoings and that he has kept together various religious and sectarian groups to the cost of severe unrest, Assad's secular government offers some minority protection (Karouny, 2012) and has successfully fought not only moderate rebels but also islamist extremist groups (Scherling, 2019: 22).

Although there are more active outside actors than the West in Syria, those liberal interventionist tools that still have been implemented follow the logic of thematic claim 2, giving strong support to it. Trying to get rid of an illiberal leader by helping to facilitate a violent overthrow, the West ignored the real risk of creating an even more illiberal post-Assad Syria, a chaotic power vacuum or a combination of both. Providing weapons and aid to anti-Assad rebels might appear to some as a way to promote a democratic transition, but such actions have backfired because the aid has reached extremists groups. If the West would manage to depose Assad, any prospect of liberal democracy is likely to fail because removing

Assad with force would probably end up in something like a state of anarchy, meaning the same result as in Libya 2011.

### **5.2.3 Thematic claim 3: Liberal interventionism hurts liberal values by being illiberal in nature.**

Has the liberal interventionist campaign against Assad included illiberal elements? Or, disproving thematic claim 3, has it been a successful humanitarian effort to halt human rights abuses?

In June 2020, the US put the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act (the Caesar act), signed by Trump in 2019, into force. The act includes sanctions on actors engaging in providing goods, services, and technologies to the Syrian regime, targets the oil and gas industry and “mandates sanctions on those profiting off the Syrian conflict by engaging in reconstruction activities” (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Moreover, the sanctions are described as a way to cripple the Syrian regime and restrict it from using the global financial infrastructure.

UN human rights rapporteur Alena Douhan criticizes the fact that the Caesar act targets reconstruction efforts, meaning that the sanctions depress civilians of their right of accessing basic infrastructure (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2020). According to her, Syrians’ human rights are damaged and their suffering is prolonged because the sanctions block the rebuilding of facilities such as hospitals, exacerbating the covid-19 crisis. Also, the sanctions obstruct financial transactions and therefore the ability of Syria to receive humanitarian imports (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2020).

As already touched upon, the West rushed to strike missiles against Syrian government facilities in April 2018 and 2017 after alleged chemical gas attacks in Douma and Khan Shaykhun without awaiting conclusive evidence. One can argue that this was a reasonable approach, considering that the OPCW confirmed already back in 2013 that Assad used chemical weapons in Damascus, and has continued to do so on a number of occasions despite joining the Chemical Weapons Convention (Price, 2019). Along the same lines, one can contend that Assad, who most people agree has used chemical weapons on several occasions even in case he did not do it in Douma or Khan Shaykhun, must be deterred when new suspicions arise.

As I see it, acting upon inconclusive evidence is a dangerous move. This is however nothing unusual in conflicts or unique for the West. Still, such actions hurt liberal values by reducing the legitimacy and the perceived authenticity of the Western promotion of liberalism. It gives illiberal actors an open goal to discredit the West while hiding behind their own illiberal actions. It makes the West look more war prone than actually willing to investigate things before assessing moves. If desirable at all, Western missile strike retaliations that do not directly protect civilians should at least wait until conclusive evidence exists.

Assad's possible guilt of using chemical weapons in Khan Shaykhun and Douma does not erase the fact that the West retaliated without having solid evidence. Anyhow, the UN has concluded that both the government side and ISIS have used chemical weapons on other occasions (UN News, 2017). In the case of Khan Shaykhun, HRW and the UN reported that all available evidence pointed to that Assad was responsible (Human Rights Watch, 2017), although some scientists still dissent (Kupferschmidt, 2019). With regards to Douma, the OPCW final 2019 final report concluded that a chemical attack did take place (OPCW, 2019), raising questions over who else could have conducted the aerial attack if not the Assad regime. The leader of the original on site investigative OPCW team has accused the OPCW leadership for inexplicably erasing findings from the initial 2018 report (OPCW, 2018) indicating that the gas attack was staged and that levels of chemical agents in the soil were low (UN Web TV, 2020) (Norton, 2020). OPCW chief Fernando Arias defends the final report and argues that the dissenting views are not backed up by evidence (OPCW, 2020).

Adding factors discussed in relation to thematic claim 1 and 2 as well, liberal interventionism in Syria has hurt liberal values due to its illiberal elements, giving strong support for thematic claim 3. Wanting to thwart Assad's government with whichever measures, by using economic sanctions with severe impacts on civilians and rushing to launch missile strikes without having solid evidence, manifests an illiberal mindset that sets a bad example and raises questions regarding the legitimacy and the credibility of the West's claim of promoting liberal values. The same goes for arming rebels and extremists, which also contributes to illiberal outcomes.

## 5.3 Case Ukraine

In 2010, Viktor Yanukovich was elected president of Ukraine. During the country's deep economic crisis in November 2013, Yanukovich turned down the EU's Economic Association Agreement and opted for a Russian economic rescue deal instead, leading to the large so-called Maidan protests in Ukraine which were cheered on by EU and American politicians (Cohen, 2018: 17). In February 2014, Yanukovich fled the country after escalating protests, leading to a regime change (the Maidan revolution) in which the pro-Western opposition seized power in a transition endorsed by the West (BBC, 2020). The new government included anti-Russian and ultra-nationalist elements (Mearsheimer, 2014). Russia responded aggressively by annexing the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea (BBC, 2020). Then, a civil war that is still ongoing broke out in Ukraine's eastern regions, including Luhansk and Donetsk. Here, the Russian-speaking population is significant in size and pro-Russian separatists, backed by Russia, clash with Ukraine's government forces (BBC, 2020).

### **5.3.1 Thematic claim 1: Liberal interventionism disrupts international peace and order, including the principle of sovereignty and UNSC authority.**

It is clear that peace and order have been disrupted in Ukraine, but if it is all Russia's fault while liberal interventionism had no significant disruptive impact, theoretical claim 1 is disproved.

Regime change promotion appeared to occur in a leaked phone call between Victoria Nuland, responsible for European and Eurasian affairs at the US state department, and the US ambassador to Ukraine, after Yanukovich had left power. Nuland was caught saying: "I think Yatseniuk is the guy who's got the economic experience, the governing experience", apparently discussing who should become Ukraine's next prime minister, who also turned out to be Arseniy Yatseniuk (Chiacu & Mohammed, 2014). During the anti-Yanukovich protests, EU and American politicians protested alongside all segments of the Maidan-movement, including anti-Russian actors like the ultra-nationalist Svoboda Party, and expressed their support for Ukraine to join the EU, only to fuel Russia's claim of Western "meddling" in Ukraine (Milne, 2014).

Democracy promotion has been another tool for regime change. The 2010 election of Yanukovich marked a moment when the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), who invested around five billion dollars in Ukraine prior to the Maidan protests, turned its democracy promotion programs to an almost outright support of the Ukrainian opposition, including political and civil society actors (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Mearsheimer argues that the annexation of Crimea was a reaction to the fact that NATO's expansion has moved enemy troops closer to Russian borders after NATO's incorporation of eleven new member states since the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2014). After the 2014 Ukrainian pro-Western regime change, Russia feared losing one of the few remaining buffer zones and annexed Crimea to stop having to fear a future hostile military base on the strategic peninsula. According to Mearsheimer, the same logic applies to Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, another buffer state for which NATO has expressed a desire to incorporate, as it has done with Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2014).

On the contrary, Michal McFaul argues that domestic motives and anti-Western sentiments guided Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Therefore, it is wrong to blame the 2014 crisis on the West and NATO expansion (McFaul, 2014). He argues that Russia did not react to previous NATO expansion. It was after coming back as president in 2012 and in order to distract growing domestic discontent that Vladimir Putin started to view the West as an enemy and Russia-West relations as a zero-sum game. According to these logics, annexing Crimea and supporting separatists in Ukraine's civil war were power demonstrations that Putin calculated to benefit from.

I argue that NATO expansion is an important factor to Russia's actions in Ukraine. For Russia, EU expansion in its near abroad goes hand in hand with NATO expansion. In the EU's proposed economic deal that Yanukovich rejected, there were writings urging Ukraine to adopt the EU's foreign policy and security interests (Cohen, 2018: 17). Russia is tough on its border, as seen in its 2008 war with neighbouring Georgia. With that in mind, the West should expect a similar outcome when trying to incorporate Ukraine fully to its sphere. NATO's open willingness to bring in Georgia, which had a pro-Western government in 2008, caused separatist uprisings from Georgia's ethnic Russians, and Russia responded

aggressively with a military intervention when Georgia's separatist regions were attacked by Georgia's government (Heritage, 2009).

Thematic claim 1 has mixed support in Ukraine. Although Russia views the regime change as an anti-Russian coup, it is Putin, not the West, that is responsible for undermining UNSC authority and sovereignty by annexing Crimea and backing separatists. Still, liberal interventionism, meaning Western regime change promotion, has played a role to disrupt peace and order by being part of a general Western expansionist policy in which NATO enlargement is the most important factor. How much liberal interventionism contributed to the 2014 pro-Western regime change is hard to judge, but these dynamics were some of many variables leading up to the regime change which in turn disrupted the geopolitical balance and provoked Russia to respond by inflicting on Ukraine's sovereignty. As expected by the claim, liberal interventionism had indirectly more disrupting than positive impacts on peace and order.

### **5.3.2 Thematic claim 2: Liberal interventionism backfires on liberalism itself by actively promoting liberal values.**

The West's active promotion of liberal values in Ukraine has centred on promoting a pro-Western regime change, which was fulfilled in 2014. Disproving thematic claim 2, have these liberal interventionist actions strengthened the long-term status of liberal values in Ukraine? Or have they backfired on the same values?

Already in 2004, Western democracy promotion programs strengthened opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko's presidential campaign, which eventually was successful in winning the election during what is called the orange revolution (Carothers, 2006). They also energized the protests that pushed the Ukrainian Supreme Court to overrule Yanukovich's election win the same year (Carothers, 2006). Practically, the democracy promotion programs helped to facilitate election monitoring, but they also funded and helped to organise civil society actors and opposition parties (Carothers, 2006).

David Korenke's analysis of democracy promotion in Ukraine concludes that such programs were decisive to give the Ukrainian opposition momentum in 2013 and to spur the Maidan protests that eventually forced Yanukovich out of office (Korenke, 2017). NED and similar

American organisations have put millions of dollars into civil society actors and pro-Western media platforms in Ukraine (Korenke, 2017).

Although research on the effectiveness of NED's programs is thin, Orysia Lutsevych makes a case for why democracy promotion is needed and why it should work in Ukraine (Lutsevych, 2013: 18-20). According to her, in order for civil liberties and liberal values to grow strong in East European countries, and to go from being simply electoral democracies to liberal democracies, the civil society must thrive. The state must cease to be the dominant actor in public space (Lutsevych, 2013: 18). Long-term democracy promotion in the shape of foreign aid to civil society actors is fundamental and was successful to mobilize the civil society during the orange revolution.

Although promoting civil society actors in theory might enhance democratic health, it might backfire as well. In 2006, evidence emphasized by NED itself, shows that various governments, many of them in East Europe, were creating legal constraints to restrict foreign funded non-governmental organisations, including state funded organisations like NED (The National Endowment for Democracy, 2006). The leaders of Belarus, Russia and similar target countries view democracy promotion as foreign interference, which in turn has helped them to legitimize taking harder measures to restrict foreign funded organisations in these countries, as well as to gain some popularity (Carothers, 2006).

I argue that democracy promotion has backfired in the context of the orange revolution and the Maidan protests. The influential role played by democracy promotion during the orange revolution gives an open goal for Russia to claim that foreign interference once again helped to promote Ukrainian regime change after the Maidan protests. Because Russia accuses the West of trying to expand its sphere in Ukraine (Baczynska & Hudson, 2014), it is obvious that Moscow views Western democracy promotion as a threat rather than as promotion of benign values. It can delegitimize and accuse all sorts of pro-Western groups in Ukraine and Russia for being foreign agents. Sometimes, it can back up such claims with evidence.

Did the regime change help to enhance Ukraine's long-term democratic prospects? Steven Pifer argues that Kiev has started internal reform processes to become a "normal" European

democracy (Pifer, 2019). Other signs are that Ukraine yet has failed to tackle its huge corruption as well as to lessen the role of oligarchs in politics (Olszański, 2016).

Thematic claim 2 has strong support in Ukraine. Democracy promotion has backfired on liberalism because actors such as Russia do not buy into the universalism of such liberal values and are incentivized to delegitimize liberal and Western-funded groups as foreign agents. Liberal interventionism has neglected the existence of particular values by promoting liberalism and a pro-Western or anti-Russian regime change in 2014, ignoring that Ukraine has a large Russian-speaking minority that opposes the proposition of a one-sided Westernization of Ukraine. Hence, the mobilization of pro-Russian separatists is an indirect consequence of regime change promotion and a clear backlash against liberal values. Also, the failure of democracy promotion to improve democracy in the long term, counter oligarchy and lessen corruption speaks to the particularist notion that democracy is a bottom-up process that needs to grow organically.

### **5.3.3 Thematic claim 3: Liberal interventionism hurts liberal values by having illiberal elements.**

Did democracy promotion, Western backing of the Maidan protests and other regime change promoting efforts help to boost mostly liberal actors and liberal outcomes to disprove thematic claim 3? Or, did these actions rely on illiberal elements?

Although right-wing extremist groups were nowhere near making up a majority of the Maidan protesters, they made up significant fractions. Data show that Svoboda was one of the most frequent single appearing actors among the Maidan protesters, while the Right Sector, an alliance between various neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups, was the most active group participating in scenes linked to violence (Ishchenko, 2016: 16).

Ivan Katchanovski has examined the role of Svoboda and the Right Sector in the Maidan protests and the Maidan violence (Katchanovski, 2020). According to him, in February 2014 when pressure started to mount on President Yanukovich, protesters attempted to force their way through the police barricade in order to launch an attack against the parliament. The Right Sector and Svoboda were a driving force in these attacks that resulted in deadly confrontation between protesters and police. The Right Sector also set the headquarters

building of Yanukovich's party on fire. Volodymyr Parasiuk, an organizer of right-wing protest and militia groups including the Right Sector, informed Yanukovich that he would be removed by force if he refused to resign.

After snipers shot down peaceful protesters during the Maidan massacre, for which the West and the Maidan movement blamed Yanukovich, some representatives of Yanukovich's party changed sides to support the protesters and a parliamentary vote to oust the government (Katchanovski, 2020). However, some of them were allegedly forced by members of Parasiuk's right-wing groups to do so. On February 21, Yanukovich fled the country, having received various death threats from right-wing groups. According to Katchanovski, the crucial role played by such groups to oust Yanukovich explains why four ministers in the new government were Svoboda members. Also, Parasiuk was given a role under the new government as commander in a special task force in close cooperation with the Right Sector.

The new government soon acted in accordance with its anti-Russian fraction to repeal a previously existing law that gave the Russian language official status in Ukrainian regions with a big amount of Russian-speaking people, causing fear not only in eastern Ukraine but also in Moscow where Putin was fast to invoke the need to protect Russians abroad and annex Crimea which is dominated by ethnic Russians (BBC, 2014a). Although the actual implementation of these new language laws has been dragging, criticism has been widespread, for instance coming from the Council of Europe (Radio Free Europe, 2019).

Assessing the other side of the story, there was an agreement reached by Yanukovich and the opposition to ease violence on both sides and return to the 2004 constitution in February 2014 (BBC, 2014b). Then followed the disputed parliamentary vote to oust Yanukovich, which he himself called a coup (BBC, 2014b), but that is however taken as evidence that the processes leading up to his removal were legitimate (Sestanovich, 2014). Stephen Sestanovich argues that the president had already lost his legitimacy and popular support by cracking down violently on peaceful protesters (Sestanovich, 2014). Some point to the humble electoral success of the ultra-nationalists to claim that their role in the Maidan revolution was modest (Shekhovtsov & Umland, 2014) and that the success of the Maidan movement was an overwhelmingly peaceful victory (Ackerman et al, 2014).

Western sympathy for the Maidan movement was important for achieving regime change, especially the positioning of the West with regards to the Maidan Massacre that was a significant event and the beginning of the end for Yanukovich (BBC, 2014c). Western officials and the Maidan movement blamed the massacre on Yanukovich, further delegitimizing his government (Katchanovski, 2020). However, who is to blame is a contested issue (BBC, 2014c) (Katchanovski, 2020: 13). A 2015 international report stated that robust and independent investigations into violent crimes during the Maidan protests have been lacking (International Advisory Panel, 2015).

Regardless of how big a role the ultra-nationalists played in the Maidan revolution, I argue that the West should have been less bold in its Maidan support. Of course, most people of the Maidan movement were no extremists. Still, ultra-nationalists played a big enough role to get not only members in the new government but also an impact on language policy.

Thematic claim 3 has strong support in Ukraine. The West lined up alongside different actors of the Maidan movement, including illiberal ultra-nationalists. It supported the Maidan movement all out, wanting to complete its mission at whichever cost, notwithstanding that Western actions indirectly helped to create a situation in which Yanukovich was forced to flee, something that was probably not possible without the violent threat posed by ultra-nationalists, as well as a situation in which the same extremists were given power in the new government.

The West took a vocal and important stance on the Maidan massacre, despite not having solid evidence. Not backing off from scoring political points on inconclusive evidence is part of the illiberal mindset. Although democracy promotion programs are not illiberal in themselves, they were part of the Western effort to promote regime a change that eventually landed in an illiberal outcome. Despite all flaws of the Yanukovich regime, his failure to recover the economy and his authoritarian tendencies (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2016: 689-692), tensions in Ukraine have escalated into a civil war after he was overthrown, and Crimea has been annexed as a consequence of the context in which he was removed.

Regardless of whether the regime change was a coup or not, the West helped to facilitate something that was not a liberal constitutional power transition. It also indirectly helped to

produce a government with illiberal views on minority protection as seen in the language law controversy. Taken together, the illiberal elements of liberal interventionism in Ukraine have hurt liberal values by making the West appear as more interested in regime change than actually promoting liberal outcomes.

## **5.2 Comparative analysis**

### **5.2.1 Thematic claim 1**

There are several common variables across the cases associated with similar outcomes as those formulated by thematic claim 1 (Liberal interventionism disrupts international peace and order, including the principle of sovereignty and UNSC authority). The West intervened militarily both indirectly and directly in support of the rebels in Libya and Syria, which lead to the outcome that UNSC authority and sovereignty and were undermined. Also, peace and order were disrupted due to the fact that it supported rebels in a one-sided way, boosting the capabilities of the rebels to achieve regime change. This is clear in both cases although it is more obvious in Libya, where the rebels won, than in Syria where the war is still ongoing.

Ukraine stands out because liberal interventionist tools here have not undermined UNSC authority or sovereignty. However, a common variable between Ukraine and Libya is the fact that successful regime change promotion has led to the outcome of geopolitical imbalance and power vacuums, even civil wars with foreign involvement in both cases, meaning disruption of peace and order. Although liberal interventionism played a role in producing such outcomes in both cases, it had a more direct impact in Libya where a military intervention was launched, than in Ukraine where regime change promotion worked more indirectly.

### **5.2.2 Thematic claim 2**

Common variables linked to the outcome of thematic claim 2 (Liberal interventionism backfires on liberalism itself by actively promoting liberal values) are that successful regime change promotion in Libya and Ukraine produced illiberal outcomes. In Libya, the second civil war came out of control, while in Ukraine, the controversies surrounding the transition made it appear as an anti-Russian coup to some, creating unrest and laying the basis for civil war. The successful regime change policy also failed in terms of prospects of democratic

progress in both cases. In Syria, regime change was not achieved. However, considering the closeness and parallels with the Libyan case, regime change would probably have similar implications in Syria, including a potentially even more illiberal post-Assad Syria.

In all three cases, the direct and indirect support to anti-government actors backfired because they turned out to have various forms of illiberal factions. In Syria, moderate rebels fighting Assad were directly boosted by Western support, indirectly leading to an outcome in which Islamist extremists could reap some gains. In Ukraine, Western support to the overthrow of Yanukovich indirectly helped ultra-nationalists to rise. In Libya, the same rebels that were directly supported by the West became prominent actors in the post-Gaddafi civil war.

In Libya, Syria and Ukraine, the liberal interventionist ignorance of particular values held by non-pro-Western people, is another common variable that has backfired on liberalism by sowing conflict and discord as an outcome.

### **5.2.3 Thematic claim 3**

A common variable between all cases linked to the outcome of thematic claim 3 (liberal interventionism hurts liberal values by having illiberal elements) is the fact that the West has directly or indirectly relied on illiberal actors in the strive for regime change, leading to the implication that liberal interventionism expresses an illiberal mindset by wanting to achieve regime change at whichever cost. In Libya, the West directly aided actors that proved to be illiberal. The same goes for Syria, although in a more indirect way. In Ukraine, the West tolerated that its regime change promotion indirectly relied on ultra-nationalists to be successful.

Another variable that in part is common across the cases is the reliance on inconclusive evidence. In Syria, the West rushed to take direct military actions while acting on inconclusive evidence. In Ukraine, the West scored political points on the Maidan massacre without conclusive evidence. This dynamic is harder to depict in Libya, but the West probably benefited from the framing of Gaddafi as willing to impose a bloodbath on his people, although the evidential basis for such a narrative is disputed.

There are other factors as well revealing illiberal elements of liberal interventionism. In Libya, the West supported a violent overthrow of the government in an act that can hardly be described as a liberal one. Similarly, although Western support to the Ukrainian regime change was much less violent, it still was a way to get hands dirty by cheering on what some people call a coup and what could be described at least as a controversial power transition. Military intervention has caused civilian casualties and suffering in Libya, while economic sanctions in Syria also have contributed to civilian suffering, although not direct casualties.

## 6. Conclusions

*In what ways has liberal interventionism backfired in Libya, Syria and Ukraine?*

To answer the research question, I conclude that the implementation of liberal interventionism in these countries has to a large extent backfired in three ways that are in line with the thematic claims of my theoretical proposition. Firstly, it has disrupted international peace and order, including sovereignty and UNSC authority. Secondly, it has backfired on liberalism itself by actively promoting liberal values. And thirdly, it has hurt liberal values by having illiberal elements. As according to the theoretical proposition, this constitutes the ways in which liberal interventionism backfires on two core notions of the LIO – the UN security structure with its emphasis on the principles of sovereignty and UNSC authority, and liberal values such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

The theory testing analysis of Libya, Syria and Ukraine has provided overall strong support to the conclusion that the theoretical proposition is relevant and applicable. However, the few numbers of cases and the limited scope of material in this thesis means that more exhaustive research is needed in order to fully establish its validity and generalizability. The proposition in itself also has limitations. It describes the implications of Western liberal interventionism and how other actors might respond to it. Some would say it overestimates the impact of the West while not explaining why non-Western actors act proactively. Competing theories and perspectives might also be relevant and applicable to the cases analysed in this thesis.

Still, the indications are that the theoretical proposition provides a useful tool to explain how liberal interventionism backfires. The overall material presented in this study signals that the

implications of the thematic claims are relevant. This is not only because the case analysis section provided high levels of support for these claims, but also because there are several common variables across the cases linked with similar outcomes, as seen in the comparative analysis.

A theory test can never be perfect and the levels of support for different thematic claims, and hence the theoretical proposition as a whole, vary across cases. In Libya, the most theoretically affirmative case, all claims found strong support. The same goes for Syria, although it is a harder case because liberal interventionism has been implemented in a more restrained and indirect manner here, which means that the basis for drawing conclusions is thinner. However, based on what we know of liberal interventionism in Syria, my analysis demonstrates clear indications that the way it has been implemented corresponds with the implications of the thematic claims. Ukraine, the least affirmative case, is even harder because a rather narrow set of liberal interventionist tools have been implemented. The illiberal elements and the backlash of liberal interventionism in Ukraine are still apparent, and all claims find strong support except from thematic claim 1 which found mixed support. Thematic claim 1 has anyhow enough overall support not to discredit the theory as a whole. Liberal interventionism has contributed directly or indirectly to disruption of peace and order in all cases, although to varying degrees. It has violated sovereignty and UNSC authority in all cases except from Ukraine.

This study contributes to the LIO debate by expanding the understanding of how the LIO is under challenge. By bringing liberal interventionism into the debate, I have demonstrated how Western foreign policy has counterproductive elements, which is relevant because it has big policy implications. My theoretical proposition also develops a particular theoretical definition of liberal interventionism and applies it to a diverse set of countries. Future research should assess liberal interventionism in even wider geographical contexts, multiple cases and by assessing more extensive material. It could perhaps use more complex or quantitative measures to account for what constitutes a policy related backlash against the LIO.

Although this study assesses only three cases, the fact that they represent important political events and varying contextual characteristics increases the possibility of successfully applying

the theoretical proposition to other cases as well, meaning that there is a potential for external generalizability. The fact that liberal interventionism has been implemented with various degrees of force across the cases is positive for the theory testing process because it makes the test tougher. The theoretical proposition survived not only Libya, but also trickier cases like Syria and Ukraine. This means good indications with regards to the validity of the proposition.

The main implication of my conclusions is that signs are that liberal interventionism is a destructive policy for long-term peace and order, as well as for the liberal values of the LIO. This is not to say that liberal interventionism is the root of all conflicts in today's world. Non-Western actors also have highly destructive impacts on peace and order. The point is that liberal interventionism has more negative than positive impacts. The West has tried to promote liberal values actively by promoting regime changes in Libya, Syria and Ukraine. In this process, it has undermined the UN security structure principles of sovereignty and UNSC authority, supported as well as boosted illiberal elements and interfered to give one-sided support to one party against the other while ignoring that its active promotion of liberal values conflicts with particular values. This way, the West has heated up tensions with non-pro-Western actors, fuelled conflicts and in fact promoted illiberal outcomes. This backfires on the LIO because peace and order are disrupted, not only by the spurring of conflicts but also because the UN security structure is undermined, dragging the world order closer to anarchy.

Liberal values are hurt because pursuing regime changes to promote liberal values makes others fear and fight the imposition of these values. Meanwhile, because this active promotion of liberal values has illiberal elements in itself, credibility and legitimacy is undermined for the overall concept of liberal values. In case some or all the liberal values are universal, adherence to the principles of sovereignty and non-interventionism provides a better soil for them to spread.

What then is the alternative to liberal interventionism? Going back to cherish sovereignty and the principles of LIO 1 is a conceivable option. Critics may point to a dilemma by asking why it is morally right to leave illiberal and human rights abusing leaders in power. My position is that the West can condemn and use diplomatic tools to try to halt abuses committed by foreign governments, but it should not dictate who should and who should not govern other

countries by using liberal interventionist tools. Promoting regime change against illiberal governments is an arrogant thing to do. It ignores that the West is imperfect itself and on many occasions as disruptive to peace and order as illiberal states are. It is also informed by the notion that liberal democracy and Western liberal values are universally superior. That is a legitimate position to take, but a destructive one when applied to foreign policy. Many other nations hold their particular values and do not conceive liberal values as universal. Trying to enforce your own values on others endangers peace and order because it naturally creates violent resistance. Therefore, liberal interventionism creates more conflicts than peace.

When this policy is conducted in breach with sovereignty and UNSC authority, it erodes a crucial principle for peace among nations, namely non-interventionism in the affairs of other states. Violating these pillars of the UN security structure sets a bad example that drags the world order closer to disorder and anarchy. It incentivizes other states, which do not conceive the West to have a special right to break international law because of any values, to do the same disruptive things.

Going back to the LIO 1 does not mean returning to a perfect order, but a better one than the current LIO 2 where liberalism is actively promoted. Halting liberal interventionism will not eliminate all conflicts, but at least help not to spur many of them. I argue that LIO 2 has a bad record. Conflicts and wars are many. Tensions between liberal and illiberal actors are high. So, why not turn away from liberal interventionism and instead try to promote liberal values by acting as a good example and by using non-aggressive measures? Looking at it from a liberal perspective, this would strengthen the credibility and the legitimacy of liberal values. Therefore, it is a service to the liberal values of the LIO as well as peace and order.

Ending liberal interventionism might generate a more tolerant international society in line with pluralism/particularism, protect the legitimacy of international law and the UN security structure and hence increase the chance of seeing the international community coming together in the future in order to tackle exceptionally severe situations such as genocides if they arise. Even if one takes the solidarist position that international law and order must not come before justice, the fact that liberal interventionism is highly prone to backlash by creating even more illiberal outcomes when it succeeds in toppling an illiberal leader, as demonstrated by the cases in this study, constitutes a reason for solidarists as well to reassess

liberal interventionism.

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