

ASSESSING THE LIBERALIST SCHOOL'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

The study of International Relations (IR) is marked by diverse theoretical approaches, each providing unique explanation and perspective on global politics. This study therefore critically explores, examines and explains the evolution and application of the liberalist approach in international relations, which is one of the theoretical approaches. The liberalist approach emphasizes fundamental concepts like: Democratic Peace Theory, Complex Interdependence and the role of International Institutions unlike realism which views international politics as struggle for power and influence among states. The study employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on secondary sources such as scholarly articles, books, and case studies of international organizations with focus on how they address global issues in today's geopolitical landscape. Anchored on Liberalism as the theoretical framework, the study examines how democratic governance, economic interdependence and international institutions contributes to reducing conflict and bolstering global cooperation and a more cooperative world order. Findings demonstrate that Democratic Peace Theory holds substantial validity, as democracies have consistently shown lower tendencies toward conflict and war with one another, largely due to similar political norms and values, shared languages, a system of accountability and checks and balances within, the system like the legislative bodies, the judiciary and electoral institutions. Additionally, the study reveals that Complex Interdependence effectively mitigates the likelihood of war, as states have interconnected governance structures which increases interconnections through economic, environmental, and diplomatic relationships, making conflict economically and politically expensive and hurting. The analysis of international institutions further highlights their role in creating platforms for dispute resolution and norm-building, mitigating the anarchic tendencies of the international system. The study concludes by recommending the continued promotion of democratic governance globally, strengthening of international institutions, and enhancing multilateral cooperation to address transnational challenges like climate change, terrorism, and pandemics. Not to forget peaceful diplomacy and sustainable development of the liberalist approach and its potential to continue to influence contemporary International Relation practices. These recommendations reinforce the liberalist idea that peace is achievable through cooperation, interdependence, creating solid international institutions and adherence to international norms.

Keywords: Liberalism, Democratic Peace Theory, Complex Interdependence, International Institutions, Global Governance

Introduction

The liberalist approach to international relations has its roots in the Enlightenment period, with philosophers like **Immanuel Kant** advocating for perpetual peace through republicanism and international cooperation (Kant, 1795). This perspective laid the groundwork for modern liberalism, which emphasizes that human rationality, democracy, and free markets are essential in maintaining global peace and reducing the likelihood of conflicts. Unlike realism, which is based on the assumption that states act purely in their self-interest within an anarchic international system, liberalism views the international arena as one where cooperation can flourish through mutual benefits (Keohane, 1984). Key to the liberalist theory is the concept of interdependence, which suggests that as states become more economically and politically interconnected, the cost of conflict becomes prohibitively high. This view is supported by Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane (1977), who developed the theory of "complex interdependence," arguing that multiple channels of interactions—economic, environmental, and diplomatic—have transformed global politics, making military conflict less central. Furthermore, the role of international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) is crucial in promoting cooperation, resolving disputes, and establishing norms that discourage unilateral aggression.

The Democratic Peace Theory is another core component of liberalism, positing that democracies are less likely to go to war with one another, as they share norms of peaceful resolution and accountability to their citizens (Doyle, 1986). This theory has been influential in shaping post-Cold War international relations, where the spread of democracy and free markets has been linked to reduced interstate wars and enhanced global cooperation. However, despite its contributions, liberalism faces challenges in explaining conflicts involving non-state actors, authoritarian regimes, and regions with weak institutions, which this paper aims to address. This study explores the liberalist approach, examining its key concepts and relevance to contemporary international relations.

Conceptual Review

Liberalism: Liberalism in international relations is a theory that emphasizes human and individual rights and freedom, democracy and democratic institutions, free trade and economic interdependence, international cooperation and institutions and peaceful resolution of conflicts among states. Rooted in the Enlightenment ideals of reason, freedom, and progress. Liberalism opposes the realist notion of anarchy and the use of power as means of achieving an end to dominate the international system. Instead, it postulates that states and non-state actors can cooperate to achieve mutual benefits and outcome through diplomacy, trade, and the rule of law (Keohane & Nye, 1977). The core tenets of liberalism are democracy, international institutions, economic interdependence, and human rights. One of the fundamental principles of liberalism is the belief in the democratic peace theory, which posits that democracies are less likely to go to war with each other.

This theory, first proposed by Immanuel Kant in his 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace, and Cosmopolitanism* states that democratic governments are more accountable to their citizens, making them less prone to wage wars for personal or elite interests (Kant, 1795). Michael Doyle (1986) further expounded this theory, expressing a stand point that democratic states share norms of peaceful conflict resolution and have institutional checks and balances that prevent sudden wars. Economic interdependence is another central concept in liberalism. Liberal theorists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo put forward the argument that free trade creates mutual benefits among states, mitigating the likelihood of conflict (Smith, 1776; Ricardo, 1817). This idea was later

expanded by Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane (1977) through their concept of complex interdependence, which highlights the importance of economic, social, and environmental ties that bind states together, making war a costly and undesirable option. Finally, liberalism stresses the role of international institutions like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization in promoting cooperation and resolving conflicts. These institutions establish rules and norms that guide state behavior and facilitate diplomacy, trade, and collective security (Keohane, 1984).

Methodology

Using a qualitative approach, this study mostly draws from secondary sources. To examine how liberalist concepts are used, scholarly books, reports, and articles on liberalism and international relations were examined. Key concepts and trends in how liberalism influences international cooperation were found through a thematic analysis, with case studies offering empirical support for the theory's influence.

(Keohane, 1984).

Literature Review

The basic philosophy of international relations, liberalism has changed significantly since its inception, adapting to changes in the world order and influencing approaches to leadership, cooperation, and peace. Immanuel Kant's writings laid the foundation for liberal concepts in the realm of international affairs during the Enlightenment, which is where this all began. Through historical developments and scholarly contributions, liberalism has persisted in highlighting the significance of peace by advancing democratic governance, economic interdependence, and institutional cooperation. This has influenced international organizations and norms to lessen conflict and create a stable global system.

Kantian Foundations: The Roots of Liberalism in International Peace

Immanuel Kant laid the philosophical foundations for liberalism in international relations, particularly in his essay *Perpetual Peace* (1795). Kant stated that countries with a republican form of government, which is ruled by laws and representatives, would be less likely to engage in wars because the people, who are directly impacted by the outcomes of war, would prefer peaceful solutions. Kant envisioned a future with not just the expansion of republican states, but also a union of independent states collaborating to maintain peace and prevent disputes. This idea foreshadowed the Democratic Peace Theory, suggesting that democracies are unlikely to go to war with each other according to later scholars (Kant, 1795).

Kant's theories have had a profound impact on liberal political figures and intellectuals in the centuries that have followed, influencing liberal strategies for promoting world peace and harmony. The theoretical underpinning for later liberalist frameworks was this Kantian vision of a peaceful international order based on democratic government, especially as countries started to investigate institutional mechanisms for structured cooperation. In the centuries that followed, liberal philosophers and political figures were greatly impacted by Kant's theories, which shaped liberal strategies for promoting world peace and cooperation. The theoretical underpinnings of later liberalist frameworks were supplied by this Kantian ideal of a peaceful international order based on democratic governance, especially as countries started to investigate organized collaboration through official organizations.

Wilsonian Idealism: Liberalism in the League of Nations and Collective Security

The U.S. President Woodrow Wilson developed Kantian liberalism in the early 20th century, advocating for global democracy and collective security as essential to bringing about peace. Wilson's support of the League of Nations, which was founded following World War I, was the first significant effort to form an international organization devoted to using multilateral cooperation to

avert future hostilities. Despite its eventual failure to stop World War II, the League stood for the liberal idea that collaboration and international institutions may avert conflict and advance peace (Ikenberry, 2001). Wilson's Fourteen Points reaffirmed the liberal emphasis on self-determination, diplomacy, and openness in international relations. His views, particularly those advocating for openness and respect among nations, laid the groundwork for cooperative approaches in global governance. The United Nations was established in 1945 as a result of the League's failure, which demonstrated the limitations of early liberal concepts but also more closely mirrored Wilsonian ideals with a greater emphasis on human rights and international security.

Post-War Liberalism: Complex Interdependence and Global Cooperation

Following World War II, the idea of complex interdependence—promoted by academics Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane—further developed liberalism. According to their 1977 book *Power and Interdependence*, states are becoming more intertwined over social, diplomatic, and economic spheres, making unilateral measures less successful and more expensive (Keohane & Nye, 1977). International organizations, which mediate state-to-state relations and lessen the probability of violence, global trade, and technical improvements all contribute to this dependency. According to Keohane and Nye, interactions between states are no longer the only factors influencing world politics; a variety of entities, including multinational corporations, international organizations, and civil society, are also involved. The realist idea of a chaotic global system where governments put their own survival and self-interest first is called into doubt by this point of view. On the other hand, liberalism contends that international organizations are involved in creating and enforcing laws that support stability and that countries can achieve mutual benefits through cooperation. This point of view highlights how a more cooperative international system has resulted from economic interdependence and the growing influence of global institutions, discouraging aggressive behavior and war.

Institutional Liberalism: The Role of International Organizations

Liberalism's emphasis on institutions is particularly evident in the establishment and functioning of international organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Established in 1995, the World Trade Organization plays a crucial role in promoting free trade and resolving trade disputes, bolstering the notion that economic interdependence fosters peace by bringing nations' interests together in cooperative frameworks. By lowering trade barriers and encouraging economic exchanges, the WTO exemplifies how liberal institutions use economic stability to avert disputes and advance interdependence. Similarly, the United Nations, through its several bodies, including the Security Council, General Assembly, and International Court of Justice, strives to advance peace, security, and human rights around the world. An international community's set of rules is reflected in the UN's peacekeeping operations, humanitarian relief efforts, and diplomatic channels, which show faith in the capacity of international organizations to prevent violence and preserve international standards. These organizations serve as both platforms for diplomacy and instruments for upholding international norms, which limits the disorderly actions of the international system, according to John Ruggie (Ruggie, 1998).

Liberalism and Human Rights: A Focus on Individual Protection

Liberals' focus on individual rights has been a major factor in shaping current international life. After the atrocities of World War II, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights—which emphasized the protection of individual liberties and rights worldwide—became a cornerstone of liberal internationalism. The core liberal belief in the intrinsic worth of individuals and the need to defend their freedoms is consistent with this commitment to human rights. Liberalism thus regularly emphasizes the role of international law in preserving fundamental rights, further proving its dedication to world peace by respecting individual liberties. NGOs, international human rights organizations, and legal frameworks such as the ICC show how committed liberalism is to

protecting people's rights from abuses by both governmental and non-governmental actors. By encouraging accountability and equity, these groups work to establish a world where cooperation and adherence to international norms lead to stability and peace.

The Continuing Relevance of Liberalism in Global Politics

In conclusion, liberalism has evolved from the philosophical concepts of Kant to Wilson's idealism and, ultimately, to the interconnected world that Keohane and Nye portray us in. Despite its setbacks, especially in regions where genuine power politics are prevalent, liberalism continues to influence international governance and the formulation of public policy. Organizations like the UN and WTO serve as examples of liberal ideals by providing forums for nations to collaborate, communicate, and resolve conflicts without resorting to force. By emphasizing democracy, economic cooperation, human rights, and global governance, liberalism provides a stark contrast to realism's anarchic and conflict-prone view of the world system. Liberalism is still significant in today's more globalized and linked society because it influences laws that encourage cooperation and lower the likelihood of conflict. By establishing institutions, defending human rights, and promoting economic interdependence, liberalism offers a blueprint for a more peaceful and secure international order. As a result, liberalism in international relations continues to be an essential framework for understanding and addressing contemporary global concerns.

Theoretical Framework

Complex interdependence, democratic peace theory, and the significance of international institutions are among the core tenets of the liberalist approach to world affairs. These pillars emphasize the need of cooperation, diplomacy, and rule-based governance in maintaining global peace and stability, as opposed to realism's conflict centered view of the global system. According to the Democratic Peace theory, democracies are unlikely to go to war with one another. According to this hypothesis, democratic nations shared political structures such as checks and balances, accountability to the people, and transparency make them less prone to initiate conflicts. Since public opinion greatly influences the decision-making process, democratically elected governments should exercise greater caution while deciding whether to go to war (Doyle, 1986).

Furthermore, it is believed that democracies also have common attitudes towards peaceful conflict resolution, which helps decrease the likelihood of war breaking out among them. Michael Doyle (1986) notably put forth the theory that the worldwide increase in democratic governance would improve international peace. Critics argue that although democracies may sidestep wars with each other, they may still be inclined to get involved in conflicts with non-democracies (Russett, 1993). In 1977, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye developed the theory of complex interdependence, which holds that modern countries are interconnected through a variety of channels, including diplomatic, social, economic, and environmental relations. Conflict is less likely as a result of this interaction since war would disrupt the intricate web of mutual benefits created by these connections. Complex interdependence contends that in a world where states depend on one another for trade, investment, and cooperation on global issues like climate change and security, the drawbacks of conflict outweigh any potential advantages, in contrast to realism, which views states as unified players primarily focused on security in a zero-sum competition. Political objectives can be achieved with less military force under this kind of system, and nations are more likely to seek diplomatic and diplomatic means of resolving disputes.

International organizations are crucial to the liberalist paradigm. The World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations (UN), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) serve as forums for fostering cooperation, settling disputes, and setting guidelines for state behavior. By providing guidelines and dispute resolution procedures, these organizations contribute to reducing the disorderly nature of the international system and, eventually, the likelihood of war (Keohane, 1984).

International institutions can be used by states to enforce compliance with agreements and international laws. The UN Security Council, for example, plays a vital role in maintaining global peace by supporting peacekeeping missions and imposing sanctions on nations that violate international norms. In a similar vein, the WTO helps settle trade disputes between nations to keep economic rivalry from degenerating into hostilities.

Additionally, global organizations help promote collaboration on global issues such as climate change, human rights, and pandemics that necessitate unified efforts across national boundaries. This system of institutions is crucial for tackling worldwide problems and averting conflicts resulting from lacking resources, environmental damage, or humanitarian emergencies (Ruggie, 1998). The effectiveness of these organizations in encouraging peace and collaboration strengthens the liberal idea that global governance systems can alleviate the inherent disorder in the global system. Overall, liberalism's focus on democratic peace, economic interdependence, and international institutions offers a strong foundation for explaining how countries can attain enduring peace. The interconnected nature of states in today's world, along with shared governance norms and the presence of institutions, reduces the attractiveness of conflict and increases the possibility of cooperation.

Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that liberalism as an ideology has been crucial in reducing international conflict and promoting international cooperation. International organizations like the United Nations have played a critical role in efforts to maintain peace and resolve conflicts during global crises. As evidenced by institutions such as the World Trade Organization, economic interconnectedness has encouraged cooperation and reduced the likelihood of disputes between significant economic

actors. The empirical data demonstrates that democracies are actually less likely to wage war on one another, supporting the democratic peace theory. However, the study also suggests that liberalism cannot deal with authoritarian regimes, non-state actors, and protracted conflict in regions with weak political and economic systems.

Conclusion

The liberalist approach to international relations provides a useful framework for understanding how democracy, institutions, and collaboration contribute to world peace and stability. The theory's focus on international institutions and interdependence is still significant in today's global politics, despite its shortcomings, particularly when it comes to handling conflicts with non-state actors and authoritarian nations.

Recommendations

1. Strengthening International Institutions: To improve their ability to settle disputes and more successfully enforce international law, global institutions such as the UN should undergo reform.
2. Fostering Democracy and Good Governance: Since democracy promotes peace, efforts should be undertaken to assist the growth of democratic institutions in governments that are prone to conflict.
3. Growing Economic Cooperation: More trade and investment policy liberalization can increase economic interdependence and lower the likelihood of conflict.

4. Handling Non-State Actors: Theories of international relations, such as liberalism, need change to properly handle the problems that non-state actors in international politics, such terrorist organizations and multinational businesses, present.

5. Improving Human Rights Enforcement: Liberal objectives can be better served by bringing international cooperation and conflict realities into line with global human rights enforcement mechanisms.

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