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Post-legitimacy and post-legitimisation: A convergence of western and non-western intervention

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Bio:

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Abstract

This contribution makes the point that we have entered an era of post-legitimisation whereby intervening states invest little energy into justifying their international interventions. Non-western intervening states are often accused of offering very minimal justifications for their presence and actions overseas. Where justificatory statements are made, they are often short and bland. In an interesting convergence, leading proponent states of the liberal peace have followed suit and no longer offer lengthy justifications of their actions. At the high-point of liberal internationalism in the 1990s and early 2000s, immense diplomatic capital was expended on justifying intervention. Now that is not the case. Where justification is made, it deploys the language of security and stabilisation.

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Introduction

A criticism made of non-western interventions is that they occur with minimal explanatory justification. In a sense, non-western interveners, whether Chinese peacekeepers in Mali, Iranian or Qatari engineers in Lebanon, or Saudi forces over Yemen, get on with their tasks with a minimum of justificatory verbiage. There might be bland statements about helping and order, or reference to security and stability but that is about it. This contrasts with the highpoint of liberal peace interventions, now over a decade and a half ago, when the intervening western states went to extraordinary lengths to legitimise their interventions. The US, UK and their allies invested enormous energy into publicly legitimising their interventions. Nowadays, they don't bother.

It is the contention of this short contribution that we have seen a convergence of western and non-western intervention styles towards post-legitimisation in which intervening states and organisations invest only minimal energy in justifying their interventions and their support for certain regimes. What is particularly noticeable is the retreat from justificatory articulation by western powers. This contribution begins by making the case that the justifications for the interventions at the high point of the liberal peace – in the 1990s and the early 2000s – were actually detailed and quite sophisticated. It then contrasts these justifications with the absence of justification and

or the compression of justification into often very simplistic articulations around stabilisation and security. In its third section, the contribution returns to the convergence of western and the non-western interveners in legitimisation-lite.

The justification heyday

Liberal peace interventions of the 1990s and early 2000s can be criticised for many things but those behind the interventions took seriously the task of justifying them. They worked hard to construct multi-layered narratives to legitimise their regime change, humanitarian and stabilisation interventions.[1] This legitimation work was aimed at their own parliaments, publics, political parties and press, as well as – to some extent – the populations in the sites of intervention. Tony Blair's 1999 Chicago speech is probably the best-known detailed articulation for liberal internationalism, although there were a host of other speeches and statements too.[2] Many of these foreign policy speeches and statements sought to connect the interventions with broader ideologies and responsibilities. The democracy promotion strategies of the Clinton administrations were accompanied by voluminous texts anxious to make the case that democratisation was appropriate and necessary. Even the George W. Bush White House went through the UN route before the 2003 Iraq invasion. Despite the many criticisms of that administration and the 'coalition of the willing', very considerable diplomatic capital was expended to legitimise the invasion.

Attempts to finesse the liberal peace in the 1990s and early 2000s, a period that can be described as the 'heyday of the liberal peace', involved significant intellectual scaffolding. The idea of human security, and the diplomatic and civil society movements that eventually led to UN Security Council Resolution 1325, 'the

responsibility to protect' and a host of other initiatives were accompanied by considerable articulation. Arguments were made, speeches were given, texts were produced, and foreign policy heavyweights like John Bolton and Jack Straw worked the late-night politics shows. There was no shortage of justificatory verbiage and a readiness to make the case that interventions – and in some cases wars – were necessary. Often there was a sense that the protagonists had a sense of mission and a 'vision thing' that saw their ministrations as part of a wider global strategy. Appeals were made on the grounds of humanitarianism, emancipation, justice, and the need to respect international norms. That era of justification seems to be over.

The absence of justification

The efforts by western states to justify and legitimise international intervention in the 1990s and early 2000s can be contrasted with the more recent absence of effort to justify interventions. It is not that the earlier justifications have been replaced by alternative explanations that connect with a different set of philosophical tropes. Instead, justifications for intervention, involvement for war, and support for cooperative – though rarely palatable – regimes are simply not made or made only in very shallow ways. Where articulations are made they rely on simplistic narratives of security and stabilisation. Gone are references to democracy, forms of emancipation, rights and even statebuilding. Instead there is legitimisation-lite.

Consider, for example, UK involvement in post-Gaddafi Libya. Granted, the UK, French and other governments did engage in a media and justification campaign to accompany their regime change military campaigns. Compared with the experience of regime change in Iraq a decade earlier, however, the justificatory verbiage

marshalled in favour of toppling Gaddafi was small beer. But even that was expansive compared with current (as of mid-2018) attempts to explain intervention in Libya. It should be noted, of course, that the extent of western intervention is curtailed precisely because the earlier intervention to oust-Gaddafi has resulted in instability.

The UK, a state that assumes itself to be a global player, does not have a permanent diplomatic presence in Libya. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office justification for its current role in Libya is most significant for what it does not say. The British Embassy in Tripoli website (the actual embassy is in Tunis) proclaims that, 'We remain committed to working with Libya to find a permanent, political solution to the current instability.'[3] The nature of that permanent political solution is not made clear. There is no mention of democracy, rights or emancipation. Indeed, given Libya's two governments, neither of which has more than a passing claim to actually govern much territory, it is not clear what Libya the British government is 'working with'. The Embassy's Facebook page contains a number of videos in which the new Ambassador to Libya does little to elaborate the justifications for the UK's role in Libya. In the first video, made during a trip to Benghazi, the Ambassador opens by saying that he knows a lot about terrorism given that he has spent three and a half years in Iraq. In his address to the Libyan people (in English) he does not venture beyond the language of security and stabilisation.

In the absence of a functioning government (one the British played a role in toppling) an interesting formulation has crept into the justificatory diction. The FCO statements and videos make repeated references to 'the Libyan people', 'the people of Benghazi' and such like. It is not clear who 'the people of Libya' might be (surely 'peoples'?), how they might be contacted, and what representation they might have.

European Union justification for its role in Libya is not much more expansive than that of the UK:

> Through diplomatic action and concrete support, the EU is assisting Libya's political transition towards a stable, functioning country and is supporting the UN led mediation efforts in this regard. The EU underlines the importance of inclusiveness of the political process and Libyan ownership, notably through the participation of all legitimate Libyan stakeholders.

Here the references to inclusiveness, Libyan ownership and participation are laudatory if vague. But consider the ambition of EU efforts: a stable, functioning country. The phrase ‘stable and functioning’ can be applied to a wide range of states that are positively injurious to their own citizens but they function like a state and do not threaten international stability.

What explains the absence of expansive articulations to justify intervention? Certainly much of it stems from the curtailed nature of the intervention. There are not thousands of UK troops stationed in Libya, nor body bags coming home. To the extent that Libya features in mainstream UK political discourse it is as a transit point for Europe-bound African migrants. This worries ‘Middle England’ and feeds into nativist discourses, but understandings of the situation in Libya are shallow. The chief reason for the absence of expansive articulations by western states relates back to the legacy of the Iraq and Afghan wars. Despite the blood and treasure thrown at both places, the result has been deeply insecure and corrupt regimes. The UK public suffers war fatigue, especially in relation to far away places about which it knows

little. Any government articulation based on the idea of emancipating a population and engaging in a major statebuilding operation would likely receive a poor reception. The political elite spent much of their political capital on Iraq and Afghanistan and realise that a fresh mobilisation of the public and parliament would be difficult.

It is also worth noting that the Trump administration has invested little in foreign policy articulation, and its allies have not felt the need to fill the void. President Trump's main foreign policy speech in his first year in office cannot be described as connecting with any philosophical lineage beyond nativism and militarism. His speech on Afghanistan and South Asia noted 'frustration over a foreign policy that has spent too much time, energy, money — and most importantly, lives — trying to rebuild countries in our own image instead of pursuing our security interests above all other considerations.'[4] It can be read as the closing speech of the liberal peace – or a form of order and intervention that is justified in terms liberal rhetoric.

Implications

What is interesting about the declining investment by western powers in intervention justification is that it is in line with many non-western interveners. Among possible reasons for many non-western states investing little energy into the public justification of their own interventions is that the nature of many of the regimes are autocratic. Saudi Arabia, for example, has little need for parliamentary approval and public endorsement of the monarch's will. Moreover there may be public resentment at domestic resources being spent overseas. Iran, for example, can ill-afford its overseas interventions (whether military or humanitarian); a fact not lost on a weary public.[5]

On this issue of legitimisation-lite, there seems to have been a convergence of western and non-western interveners. Where justificatory rhetoric is deployed, it tends to be bland or couched in the language of security and stabilisation. In one way, there is honesty about such bluntness and there can be few expectations in host or recipient countries that emancipation, justice or other liberal notions are coming their way. The convergence calls into question the distinction between western and non-western. Such binaries have always been suspect, but western states over many centuries have invested significant energy into highlighting their own distinctiveness, superiority and 'civilisation'. That mission seems to have ended.

Moreover, the retreat from justificatory investment by western powers, and the lack of interest of non-western powers in playing that game, contains an important lesson on the value that interventionist actors attach to legitimacy. In short, it suggests that legitimacy – especially among constituencies in the target of the intervention – does not matter much. We seem to be inhabiting an era of post-legitimacy in which realist frames of power are more effective in helping us interpret international trends.

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Endnotes

[1] Holland and Aaronson, ‘Dominance through coercion’.
[2] Blair, ‘The doctrine of the international community’.
[3] https://www.gov.uk/world/organisations/british-embassy-tripoli
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