

UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE

Faculty of Political Science

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At the meeting of the Department of International Studies, held on August 28, 2025, the Master Thesis Defense Commission (hereby the Commission) for the candidate Spencer Reynolds was formed with the following members: assist. prof. dr Marko Kovačević, assist. prof. dr Marko Dašić and prof. dr Nemanja Džuverović. The Council for the Second and Third Cycle of Studies has accepted the proposal made by the Department.

After reading the master thesis, the Commission is submitting the following report.

R E P O R T

The master thesis of Spencer Reynolds entitled "Peace in Pieces: America's Shattered Mandate and Multipolar Contest" is 69 pages long and comprised of five chapters, along with the Introduction, the Conclusion and accompanying list of references.

This thesis examines how the rise of multipolarity has fractured the liberal peacebuilding consensus that once underwrote American authority, dispersing leverage across rival actors and transforming the conditions under which external interventions shape conflict trajectories and post-conflict orders. It argues that the liberal order's claim to normative universality has eroded, supplanted by plural and competing repertoires of stabilization, sovereignty, and developmental peace that contest and constrain American capacity to dictate the terms of settlement. Through a comparative analysis of Syria and Venezuela, the thesis illuminates how contested multipolar environments transmute decisive power into marginal influence, reconfiguring legitimacy and altering the character of interventions.

The introduction situates the liberal project within a longer arc of American exceptionalism, tracing how ideals of liberty, markets, and law were entwined with the mandate to lead under a liberal vision. From the post-war liberal order through the unipolar moment, the U.S. fused moral authority with material preponderance, institutionalizing its standards through multilateral architectures that defined the terms of legitimate intervention. As unipolar dominance eroded, rival powers advanced alternative models grounded in sovereignty and development rather than liberal conditionality. This shifting terrain fractures

consensus on what constitutes legitimate peacebuilding, diluting normative authority and dispersing leverage across a widening array of actors. The chapter establishes the central problem: a strategic and normative transition in which American capacity to shape outcomes is constrained by pluralized power and legitimacy.

The second chapter develops the theoretical framework and literature review of the thesis, situating liberal peacebuilding within its intellectual lineage and exposing its vulnerabilities. Liberal frameworks rest on a universalist creed: that democratic governance, market economies, and human rights are not only intrinsically peace-promoting but universally transferable. This deterministic vision, operationalized through technocratic templates and external intervention, assumed uncontested normative authority and material primacy. Critical literature highlights ethnocentrism, rigidity, and hypocrisy embedded in this model. Failures in Iraq and Afghanistan punctured its claims to universality and revealed the dependence of liberal peace on hegemonic conditions, while fatiguing liberal interventionism. As multipolarity emerges, new actors advance their own approaches and counter-peace repertoires that weaponize liberal contradictions, exploit its moral asymmetries, and offer alternative frameworks that neutralize U.S. leverage. This chapter also traces the pragmatic turn toward stabilization from the War on Terror as a recalibration from transformative ambition to risk management, further narrowing the liberal mandate and making it vulnerable to rival appropriation and contestation.

The third chapter outlines a qualitative, comparative case study methodology to interrogate how multipolarity affects capacity, authority, and leverage in contested theaters. Syria and Venezuela are selected as illustrative cases that reveal different modalities of contestation: one kinetic, securitized, and saturated with great-power rivalries; the other economic, diplomatic, and normatively fragmented. Using primary and secondary sources, discourse analysis, and process tracing, the chapter examines how rival actors and competing repertoires shape operational access, normative traction, and strategic influence. The methodology is explicitly structured to detect causal mechanisms linking multipolar dynamics to the constraints on liberal influence.

The fourth chapter covers the Venezuela case study. The case examines how a once uncontested sphere of American primacy became a proving ground for multipolar contestation. Washington relied on coercive repertoires centered on sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and the recognition of a parallel government, seeking to compel regime transition through external pressure and normative claims to democratic legitimacy. These instruments collided with rival security, financial, and narrative architectures that sustained the regime.

Russia's oil trading, arms transfers, and hybrid security guarantees, China's loans and infrastructural entrenchment, Cuban intelligence networks, and Iranian and Turkish conduits combined to form a counter-peace ecosystem that privileged sovereignty and regime endurance over liberal transition. American unilateralism and recalcitrance broke liberal coalitions and fragmented coordination, leaving allied states divided over strategy and response. The humanitarian consequences of American coercive measures undercut the moral foundation of liberal narratives and supplied rivals with counter-narratives that cast U.S. policy as punitive and imperial. As leverage dispersed across multiple actors and forums, Washington found its authority diluted and its capacity to shape outcomes constrained. The chapter highlights how plural legitimacy, fragmented coalitions, and rival repertoires produced a durable stalemate that neutralized American influence and created an equilibrium of scarcity and endurance, registering structural shifts in the global contest over norms, authority, and intervention.

The fifth chapter covers the conflict in Syria. It analyzes how a heavily securitized theater exposed the structural limits of American influence in a multipolar environment. The U.S. entered the conflict with liberal transitional objectives, emphasizing human rights, international norms, and multilateral diplomacy. Over time, these objectives were displaced by stabilization and containment strategies that reflected declining leverage. Rival powers deepened their positions: Russia operationalized coercive mediation to secure regime survival and strategic footholds; Iran expanded proxy networks to shape outcomes on the ground; and Turkey leveraged hybrid alignments to advance its regional ambitions. These rival repertoires hollowed out the UN-centered framework and reoriented the conflict around coercive bargains rather than negotiated settlements. The U.S. found its capacity to set terms circumscribed by competing security guarantees, financing, and political sponsorship. Counter-peace practices linked great-power competition with local spoilers, embedding multipolarity directly into the conflict's structure. Rather than serving as pathways toward settlement, stabilization and containment evolved into instruments of geopolitical competition between the U.S. and rival powers, each using them to consolidate influence and shape the balance of power. The result was a stalemated peace defined by negative stability, fragmented governance, and the erosion of American normative and strategic authority. This chapter illustrates how multipolarity not only redistributed material power but redefined the grammar of intervention, replacing universalist claims with negotiated legitimacy.

The discussion chapter draws analytical threads together, examining the cross-case patterns of how multipolar contestation alters the balance of capacity, authority, and leverage.

It shows that both cases reflect a structural environment in which coercive liberal repertoires cannot achieve decisive outcomes when rival actors provide material, normative, and institutional alternatives. Multipolarity multiplies pathways for defection and resistance, driving external interventions toward stalemates rather than settlements. It also reconfigures the discursive field: sovereignty and non-interference are increasingly framed as humanitarian virtues, while liberalism is recast as punitive. For the U.S., this environment constrains its traditional ability to define the terms of intervention, reducing its role from agenda-setter to one actor among many and compelling it to operate through cooperative coalitions rather than through uncontested leadership. The chapter conceptualizes this as a systemic shift from hegemonic universalism to negotiated pluralism, in which liberal frameworks no longer operate as the default or dominant frame.

The conclusion consolidates the findings and reflects on their broader implications for international order. First, capacity in multipolar environments is conditional: formidable toolkits do not translate into decisive influence when rivals can offset effects through diversified patronage networks. Second, authority is contingent on performative coherence: when liberal means contradict liberal ends, rivals can delegitimize and recode intervention as coercion and hypocrisy. Third, leverage is dispersed: alternative finance, arms, and diplomacy blunt the marginal utility of any single actor's pressure. This shift signals a structural transformation of the international system rather than an episodic anomaly. For Washington, this means operating in an environment where power no longer translates automatically into authority, and where rivals can offset coercive and normative pressure with relatively modest inputs. These conditions narrow the scope for unilateral action, increase dependence on fragile coalitions, and expose the gap between material capability and effective influence. Liberal peace is instrumentalized and relativized, functioning within a competitive marketplace of repertoires in which sovereignty, developmental peace, and counter-peace contest its normative and operational primacy. Multipolarity has pluralized legitimacy, fractured consensus, and rendered authority a negotiated resource, producing stalemates in spheres of influence rather than transformative settlements.

Based on this report, the Commission concludes that the master thesis "Peace in Pieces: America's Shattered Mandate and Multipolar Contest" by Spencer Reynolds fulfils all the formal criteria for the public defence.

The Commission:

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