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**Peace in Pieces:  
America's Shattered Mandate and Multipolar Contest**

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## Introduction

A patriot dream, envisioning cities of alabaster radiance unaffected by turmoil, has long inspired America's sense of purpose, casting the nation as a beacon of unity, liberty, and human flourishing. This poetic ideal has illuminated the nation's global mission, framing America as a harbinger of hope and a custodian of peace. From the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which wove expansion into a divine calling to spread freedom and civilization, to the heights of unipolar dominance in the post-Cold War era, the United States has embraced a role as both exemplar and architect of a just and harmonious liberal world order. Central to this vision has been the pursuit of peacebuilding, the propagation of democracy, and the advancement of free-market capitalism as pathways to stability and prosperity. Yet, as its alabaster cities of influence once gleamed with unrivaled brilliance across the global stage, the dawn of multipolarity casts deepening shadows. The mandate to lead, heretofore unquestioned, now falters against rival powers and contending visions of governance and progress.

The erosion of unipolar dominance and the rise of competing actors in "global peace processes" have placed mounting strain on the U.S.-led liberal order. Such trends have unsettled long-held assumptions about what constitutes "legitimate and effective peacebuilding."<sup>1</sup> As global power shifts and influence disperses, peacebuilding enters a competitive multipolar market with the potential for more inclusive, pluralistic, and effective agendas. Such geopolitical shifting, however, gives traction to more contested, repressive, and prolonged processes. Yet liberal peacebuilding and U.S. involvement in peace operations remain tarnished by a legacy of uneven results. Thus, peacebuilding in a multipolar order risks further marginalizing U.S. influence by empowering alternative frameworks that constrain U.S. autonomy and erode its arguably already retracting moral authority in global governance. Moreover, heightened rivalry among external actors fosters potential for intensified contestation over influence and strategic advantage, fragmenting interventions, undermining coherent agendas, and exacerbating humanitarian crises. As actors advance competing models, Washington will struggle to shape post-conflict terms,

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<sup>1</sup> Kazushige Kobayashi, et al., "(Re)Setting the Boundaries of Peacebuilding in a Changing Global Order," *Contemporary Security Policy* 46, no. 2 (2025): 227

ceding strategic leverage to competitors, and will find its ability to promote stability and protect its security and economic interests increasingly constrained.

## 1. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

While the end of the Cold War was celebrated as a triumph of democracy and capitalism, the collapse of the Soviet ballast engendered unipolarity under American hegemony. With this investiture, the United States heralded itself as both the architect and steward of global stability. As the “indispensable nation,” the U.S. embraced a role defined by maintaining order and enforcing norms.<sup>2</sup> This also marked the end of ideological bipolarity, prompting the globalization of the West’s post-WWII liberal order under American stardom.<sup>3</sup> The already blurred lines between American and liberal hegemony, and the Liberal International Order (LIO) became increasingly opaque in institutions and practice, as liberalism became the “foundation” for expanding influence.<sup>4</sup> For the Western liberal order, unipolarity ushered in an international “spirit of liberal triumphalism” among many liberal states and international organizations, invigorating a “conviction” in political and economic liberalism as ultimate and universal solutions to global challenges.<sup>5</sup> Buoyed by feelings of liberal security, the 1994 US National Security Strategy for engagement and enlargement likewise indicated “a world composed of free trading democracies as conducive to US economic prosperity and physical security.”<sup>6</sup> Still, Regilme and Parisot highlight “liberal visions” of the future “rested on the primacy of the US-led Liberal Order” and the “underappreciated pillar” of the global forward deployment of the US military.<sup>7</sup> Maintaining primacy, containing challengers, and thereby stability was translated to justify permanent US military superiority, particularly in East Asia.<sup>8</sup> Building on this logic of primacy, the U.S. assumed hegemonic duties that underpinned the liberal order: policing global sea lanes through naval patrols, leading international responses to financial crises, sustaining massive defense expenditures to deter great power war, and extending security guarantees to key allies. In doing so, Washington

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<sup>2</sup>John Christopher Barry, “Empire as a Gated Community: Politics of an American Strategic Metaphor,” *Global Society* 25, no. 3 (2011): 299

<sup>3</sup>G. John Ikenberry, “The End of Liberal International Order?” *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 9; Dana M. D. Sajadi, “A Critical Analysis of the Liberal International Order: From Hegemony to Multipolarity,” *Cihan University-Erbil Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2025): 46

<sup>4</sup>Oliver P. Richmond, “The Evolution of the International Peace Architecture,” *International Affairs* 100, no. 3 (May 2024): 386; Sajadi, “Critical Analysis of the Liberal International Order” 46; G. John Ikenberry, “Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order,” *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 1 (March 2009): 76

<sup>5</sup>Roland Paris, “Saving Liberal Peacebuilding,” *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 2010): 340

<sup>6</sup>Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr. and James Parisot, eds., *American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers: Cooperation or Conflict* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018): 115

<sup>7</sup>Regilme & Parisot, *American Hegemony and Rise of Emerging Powers* 134

<sup>8</sup>Regilme & Parisot, *American Hegemony and Rise of Emerging Powers*, 118

positioned itself as a provider of collective goods, order, and stability that reinforced both its primacy and the durability of the US-led liberal order.<sup>9</sup> In assuming its hegemonic responsibilities, the U.S. held a unique capacity to shape global norms and institutions, endeavoring under a soteriological promise of a “New World Order”<sup>10</sup> rooted in “Western values of liberal democracy, market capitalism, and international co-operation,” backed by American preponderance and force.<sup>11</sup> As “economic and democratic liberalist optimism converged with the promises of liberal institutionalism,” the U.S. championed the globalization of the liberal order,<sup>12</sup> aligning liberal frameworks, institutions, rules, multilateral cooperation, and strategic objectives.<sup>13</sup> This system created an international and multilateral setting for rules and cooperation, through which disputes, crises, and interests could be reconciled.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, with the “end of a pacified bipolar world,” peace and global stability were less threatened by Bolsheviks than by “Balkanization, failed or rogue states, and terrorist networks.”<sup>15</sup> In the post-Cold War era, primary security concerns shifted from interstate to intrastate conflicts, with fragile and failed states posing risks of regional contagion through military “spillovers” that endanger both “neighbors” and “leading states globally” while undermining humanitarian norms of the international order.<sup>16</sup> The concept of “fragility” emerged from multiple facets, including an emphasis on human security and peacebuilding, the emergence of new, often unstable states from the Eastern Bloc, concerns about poor development and state effectiveness, and a belief in the relationship between underdevelopment, insecurity, and conflict.<sup>17</sup> Characteristic states are bereft of their duties, having compromised authority, capacity, and legitimacy, leaving them unable to keep a monopoly on violence, deliver essential services, or maintain broad-based political settlements, and therefore unable to uphold their obligations to their

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Maher, “The Paradox of American Unipolarity: Why the United States May Be Better Off in a Post-Unipolar World,” *Orbis* 55, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 62

<sup>10</sup> S. Jonathon O’Donnell, “Unipolar Dispensations: Exceptionalism, Empire, and the End of One America,” *Political Theology* 20, no. 1 (2019): 73

<sup>11</sup> Robert G. Patman, “Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror,” *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 6 (2006): 968

<sup>12</sup> Regilme and Parisot, American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers, 115

<sup>13</sup> Martha Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn’t All It’s Cracked Up to Be,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): 59.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher J. Fettweis, “Unipolarity, Hegemony, and the New Peace,” *Security Studies* 26, no. 3 (2017): 434

<sup>15</sup> John Christopher Barry, “Empire as a Gated Community: Politics of an American Strategic Metaphor,” *Global Society* 25, no. 3 (2011): 299

<sup>16</sup> David Chandler and Timothy D. Sisk, eds., *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding* (London: Routledge, 2013): 20

<sup>17</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 416

constituents nor meet the demands of the international order.<sup>18</sup> With symptoms including instability, unrest, and recurring conflict, states diagnosed as *failed* or *fragile* jeopardize the health of international trade, stability, and global security. International efforts focused on comprehensive peacebuilding interventions, coalescing around liberal peace frameworks, rooted in Western liberal values. The subsequent peacebuilding consensus, itself the result of a "convergence of interests and norms" as Richmond suggests, prescribed liberal peacebuilding as the universal remedy for all types of maladies and conflict in afflicted states.<sup>19</sup> As a result, liberal peacebuilding became an international effort to contain and curtail conflicts and promote peace in post-conflict settings through market economies and liberal democratic governance and institutions, theoretically placing fragile states in advantageous alignment with the liberal order.

At its heart, liberal peacebuilding frameworks speak to a resounding belief in democratic governance, market-based economics, and the noble protection of human rights as the bedrock of stability, security, and civil society. Liberal peacebuilding, therefore, rests on several core assumptions. MacGinty's characterization of liberalism as "intrinsically peace-promoting" stems from his reframing of the democratic peace thesis, which describes the almost absolute tendency for peace between liberal states.<sup>20</sup> This creed operates on a simple proposition: peace flows from freedom, stability from fair and participatory governance, and prosperity from free markets.<sup>21</sup> In addendum, Ikenberry asserts that, like the liberal international system, economic interdependence reduces the propensity for conflict; that states integrated into global markets are more peaceful.<sup>22</sup> Richmond illustrates how this assumption generates a normative "good governance" agenda that privileges democratization and market liberalization as mutually reinforcing processes to produce the globally-integrated liberal end-state.<sup>23</sup> This leads to another assumption of rationalism and reformability: individuals and institutions are considered capable of progressive improvement, and as MacGinty outlines, given the right incentives, rational actors will prefer order and stability over

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<sup>18</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 22, 34

<sup>19</sup> Oliver P. Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding: Intervention, the State, and the Dynamics of Peace Formation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014): 123; Roland Paris, "Saving Liberal Peacebuilding," *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 2010): 1, 4

<sup>20</sup> Roger Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 27

<sup>21</sup> Cedric de Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding," *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2018): 302; Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 28-30

<sup>22</sup> Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0." 82.

<sup>23</sup> Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 68

conflict.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, the key assumption of universality is critical: liberal norms are understood as universally valid, applicable across diverse contexts, and therefore transferable through standardized institutional templates. Such deterministic assumptions are rooted in the belief that liberal democracy and market economies are the ultimate solutions to conflict, regardless of the specific cultural, political, or social context, and, therefore, advocate the universal applicability of Western democratic governance and market principles.<sup>25</sup> However, MacGinty stresses the tendency of liberal self-righteousness towards interventionism: liberalism's tendency toward coercive intervention has been evident in U.S. foreign policy, where democratic peace theory fuels a "crusader state" mindset intolerant of rival ideologies and inclined to pursue intervention in non-democratic states. Still, liberal states rarely rely on direct violence, often using indirect coercion, including sanctions, financial pressure, and institutional mechanisms, "embedded in international architecture" to a normalizing effect.<sup>26</sup>

Accordingly, liberal peacebuilding manifests in illiberal forms. Reflecting Max Weber's institutional approach, its central maxim, popularized by Roland Paris, is "institutionalization before liberalization": sustainable peace depends first on building strong state institutions capable of regulating political and social competition, before exposing fragile polities to the volatility of rapid liberalization. Once institutional capacity is secured, democratization and marketization are expected to take root in a more stable environment. International actors and institutions serve as catalysts in this process by providing resources, administrative blueprints, and conditional incentives that socialize local elites into adopting rule-bound, rights-respecting governance practices.<sup>27</sup> This mechanism reframes security provision away from the coercive defense of regimes and toward a more accountable and public-oriented system of law enforcement and protection.

The resulting technocratic, "more is better" approach, as Chandler and Sisk write, relies on an implicit belief that the "more intrusive the intervention is, the more successful the outcome would be," viewing peacebuilding as a science or administrative process that can be managed by

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<sup>24</sup> Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 26

<sup>25</sup> Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 26-30; Jütersonke, Oliver, Kazushige Kobayashi, Keith Krause, and Xinyu Yuan. "Norm contestation and normative transformation in global peacebuilding order (s): The cases of China, Japan, and Russia." *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2021): 4.

<sup>26</sup> Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 29

<sup>27</sup> Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 187-207

external experts through institutional design.<sup>28</sup> Peace, as Richmond contends, is not just a political or military outcome but a mode of governing conflict-affected areas and peacebuilding a mechanism of global governance.<sup>29</sup> This leads to a top-down implementation, what MacGinty terms a "chain of delegation" that largely operates downwards from leading states and international organizations to national, municipal, and local elites.<sup>30</sup> In application, "donor-driven" blueprints, as Richmond puts it, intend to build "the shell of the liberal state, into which it was hoped local politics, society, and economics would move wholesale."<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, the policy architecture of liberal peacebuilding reflects these priorities. It typically includes Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), which seek to reorient the state's monopoly of force under democratic civilian control. Viewing security holistically and as a public good, it is subject to the rule of law and human rights standards.<sup>32</sup> Constitutional engineering and elections are employed to institutionalize political competition and encode minority protections.<sup>33</sup> Market governance is advanced through conditional aid, sanctions, and International Financial Institutions (IFI) lending tied to structural reforms, thus binding domestic economic policy to external oversight.<sup>34</sup> In some contexts, international organizations and coalitions assume more quasi-sovereign administrative functions, directly governing territories or supervising political transitions in the interim towards a positive peace—a dynamic that exemplifies Richmond's critique of "peace as governance," where "multiple external actors... take responsibility for governance because local officials, politicians, and other actors cannot be trusted to construct a liberal peace for themselves."<sup>35</sup>

Legitimacy, therefore, remains central to both peacebuilding and statebuilding, as sustainable peace and effective governance depend on consent rather than external imposition. However, peacebuilding presumes legitimacy from universal rights, adherence to international norms and liberal values such as human rights, civil society, and the rule of law. It rests on the assumption that these universal principles inherently justify external support and intervention,

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<sup>28</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 8

<sup>29</sup> Oliver P. Richmond, "The Globalization of Responses to Conflict and the Peacebuilding Consensus," *Cooperation and Conflict* 39, no. 2 (2004): 140-141.

<sup>30</sup> Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 32

<sup>31</sup> Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 108.

<sup>32</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 168-170, 172

<sup>33</sup> Paris, *At Wars End*, 19-21, 23

<sup>34</sup> Paris, *At Wars End*, 19, 29

<sup>35</sup> Richmond, "Globalization of Responses," 143

positioning liberal governance as the primary source of legitimate authority.<sup>36</sup> This framework assumes universal consent to liberal values, sidelining debates over sovereignty and local autonomy. Consequently, peacebuilding seeks to reshape domestic political structures into democratic and rights-based systems aligned with global standards of good governance, with authority grounded in international law and norms that direct states from the top down.<sup>37</sup> Interventions are legitimized through international structures, multilateral organizations, universal norms, and regimes that are, as MacGinty says, “embedded in international political culture they become the widely accepted way of doing things.” This includes the acceptance of international organizations and their mandates as legitimate, along with universal norms such as free markets and constitutional democracy.<sup>38</sup> Interventions, “under the banner of international organizations... give the impression of universal legitimacy,” while the discourse and UN mandate have evolved from a “right to intervene” to a “responsibility to protect,” recasting intervention as a means of strengthening the state’s sovereignty and capacity for “good governance.”<sup>39</sup> In claiming to represent “the peoples” rather than just state interests, Richmond notes, peacebuilding “captures” universal legitimacy.<sup>40</sup> While peacebuilding often derives legitimacy from international liberal norms and institutions, statebuilding requires the integration of both top-down institutional reforms and bottom-up engagement with civil society to ensure local acceptance. When such legitimacy is absent, state institutions remain fragile, peace agreements lose durability, and international interventions risk being perceived as externally imposed and disconnected from local realities.<sup>41</sup>

Peacebuilding, therefore, forms an imperative mission for the U.S. and other donor states, allowing actors to shape systems, institutions, and states as well as garner valuable influence. Liberal peacebuilding has served as a defining feature of U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War.<sup>42</sup> Under this vision, the U.S. has pioneered liberal frameworks, invigorating international efforts and multilateral institutions to universalize democratic governance, human rights, and free markets as the blueprint for global stability and peace.<sup>43</sup> Augmented by unipolar

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<sup>36</sup> Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 179

<sup>37</sup> Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 109

<sup>38</sup> Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 38

<sup>39</sup> Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 34; David Chandler, *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-building* (Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2006): 31, 35.

<sup>40</sup> Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 105

<sup>41</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 391; Chandler, *Empire in Denial*, 124-126.

<sup>42</sup> Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror," 971

<sup>43</sup> Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance* 29

dominance and U.S. leadership of the LIO, liberal frameworks have been institutionalized by promoting liberal norms globally as the international standard, and thereby forming a bulwark for liberal ideals.<sup>44</sup> Such norm-setting rests on and flows through multilateral institutions, where democracy and human rights justify interventions and cooperation legitimizes American actions.<sup>45</sup> Central to the U.S. agenda is an emphasis on “good governance” and “capacity building,” often taking the technocratic approach to promote liberal alignment in governance and economic management.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, with American molding and sponsorship, international organizations facilitate these priorities; IMF and WTO practices of tying aid to liberal governance and market reforms reflect the U.S.’ institutional power and provide platforms to promote and implement its liberal peace agendas in its vision.<sup>47</sup> Thus, in advancing and maintaining its model, the liberal paradigm and U.S. goals can become intertwined and both heavily reliant on unipolar hegemonic power, using the U.S.’ status to promote and legitimize its agenda.<sup>48</sup> By framing its actions as essential for global stability and prosperity and by defining what constitutes a “good” state, the U.S. leverages its normative power to entrench its liberal standards and values.<sup>49</sup> Yet U.S. visions of peace ultimately depend on both material might and soft power: military preponderance enables decisive interventions; economic dominance allows it to wield aid, access, investment, and sanctions;<sup>50</sup> and soft power projects values of “popular democracy, free-market economics, the rule of law, and support for multilateral institutions.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the legitimacy of its visions depends on its own adherence to the universal liberal norms, multilateral organizations, commitments, and subaltern claims it purports to uphold. Essentially, the U.S. is bound by the “moral value and virtue” it proclaims and thereby limited in what Martha Finnemore calls “moralistic justifications for its power and policies.”<sup>52</sup> By institutionalizing its power in “rational-legal authorities,” the U.S. diminished its own “discretion.”<sup>53</sup> Finnemore’s sentiment is that liberal

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<sup>44</sup> Chandler, *Empire in Denial* 29

<sup>45</sup> Regilme and Parisot, *American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers*, 28; Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding*, 58

<sup>46</sup> Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 39; Chandler, *Empire in Denial*, 36, 39

<sup>47</sup> Chandler, *Empire in Denial*, 36; Regilme & Parisot, *American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers*, 28

<sup>48</sup> Christopher J. Fettweis, “Unipolarity, Hegemony, and the New Peace,” *Security Studies* 26, no. 3 (2017): 104

<sup>49</sup> John Christopher Barry, “Empire as a Gated Community: Politics of an American Strategic Metaphor,” *Global Society* 25, no. 3 (2011): 48

<sup>50</sup> Chandler, *Empire in Denial*, 36

<sup>51</sup> Patman, “Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror,” 72

<sup>52</sup> Martha Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn’t All It’s Cracked Up to Be,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): 74

<sup>53</sup> Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity.” 69

peace principles are underwritten, institutionalized, and advanced by U.S. hegemony and Western-dominated institutions, which Sargent echoes, noting U.S. peace operations provide “privileged” access to U.S. markets and the reciprocal.<sup>54</sup> As a result, it frames peace as a burden of the international community, promoting top-down, standardized, and externally imposed liberal templates for peace and governance.<sup>55</sup> Liberal peacebuilding forms the core of the U.S. intervention paradigm, which Baig argues is deeply rooted in doctrines of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny, casting peace operations as a “divine mission to spread liberal values, and most importantly, democracy as the universally accepted political system.”<sup>56</sup> Importantly then, where American actions conflict with U.S.’ “moral virtue,” international norms, or commitments, it risks eroding its own legitimacy, normative authority, and elevated international standing. Moreover, the tension between American rhetoric, international institutions, norms against U.S. actions produces “decreased cooperation and increased resistance internationally,” while contempt and subordination “undercut the legitimacy needed to create a wide range of policy outcomes.”<sup>57</sup>

### ***1.1 Critiques and the Pragmatic Turn***

Liberal peace positioned external intervention as the rational instrument for constructing orderly states and transforming conflict-ridden societies into liberal polities. Yet, despite its optimistic premises, liberal peacebuilding has been subject to sustained and multidimensional critique for its ethnocentric assumptions, technocratic rigidity, economic orthodoxy, and illiberal effects in practice. Across decades of intervention, the liberal peace has been indicted for producing weak, dependent, and illegitimate states rather than emancipatory peace, Liberal peacebuilding has faced sustained criticism for its universalist assumptions, technocratic rigidity, and limited adaptability. Critics contend that it projects Western institutions and values as universally applicable, imposing standardized templates, reflecting Global North experiences, without sufficient regard for context. Richmond argues its universalism and deterministic nature as a result undermine local ownership and fostering resistance.<sup>58</sup> This design reduces

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<sup>54</sup> Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity.” 84; Sargent, “Pax Americana,” 357, 387

<sup>55</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 132

<sup>56</sup> Muhammad Ali Baig, “The Unipolar Torment: Analyzing Grand Strategic Overstretch of the United States,” *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2023): 3

<sup>57</sup> Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity.” 65, 68, 74

<sup>58</sup> Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 12-13, 116, 120

peacebuilding to a technical problem of institution-building rather than a political process, privileging procedure over participation and fostering externally driven, top-down governance.<sup>59</sup> Such orthodoxy breeds rigidity. As a result, interventions often disregard local social orders and produce “conveyor-belt” transitions aimed at reproducing the liberal state model wherever conflict has occurred.<sup>60</sup> Critics argue its disregard for cultural and political contexts of target societies, imposing Western norms, exacerbates local tensions, as seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, where universalist assumptions clashed with local realities.<sup>61</sup>

Economically, liberal peacebuilding’s reliance on neoliberal orthodoxy has been equally contentious. Paris highlights that rapid democratization, neoliberal market reforms and privatization, advanced as engines of prosperity, can destabilize fragile states by deepening inequalities and empowering warlords and nationalist leaders.<sup>62</sup> In El Salvador, rapid liberalization entrenched structural “socio-economic” disparities that had fueled the conflict, while in Bosnia, privatization “reinforced wartime black markets” while quick elections bolstered the power of nationalist networks.<sup>63</sup> Rather than delivering “peace dividends,” neoliberal reforms frequently eroded state legitimacy, replacing social protection with fiscal discipline and creating externally regulated, economically dependent states.<sup>64</sup> Afghanistan followed a parallel trajectory. The early “light footprint” approach quickly expanded into a sprawling apparatus of counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics programs that subordinated peacebuilding to the War on Terror.<sup>65</sup> Aid was instrumentalized to secure donor interests rather than local welfare, producing corruption, elite capture, and the incorporation of warlords into government.<sup>66</sup> The result was not a stable democracy but a hybridized and dependent state, whose legitimacy collapsed alongside the U.S. withdrawal in 2021.<sup>67</sup> For many, including the Chinese Ambassador to the UN in 2021, “Afghanistan proves that ‘democratic transformation’ imposed from the outside will inevitably fail.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Chandler, *Empire in Denial*, 168

<sup>60</sup> Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 39

<sup>61</sup> Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 16-17; Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 27

<sup>62</sup> Paris “Saving Liberal Peacebuilding,” 341-342

<sup>63</sup> Paris “Saving Liberal Peacebuilding,” 341

<sup>64</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 328, 396

<sup>65</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 307-308

<sup>66</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 178, 306

<sup>67</sup> Oliver P. Richmond, “A Prelude to Revisionism? The Stalemated Peace Model and the Emergence of Multipolarity in International Order,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 46, no. 2 (2025): 203

<sup>68</sup> Yuan, “The Chinese approach to peacebuilding contesting liberal peace,” 1808

The liberal peace is also criticized for its ethnocentrism and epistemological bias, rooted in Western rationalist and individualist assumptions.<sup>69</sup> Interventions conceived in Northern policy circles frequently transplant institutional blueprints designed for European contexts into societies with very different political cultures, implementing them with rigidity and fueling resistance.<sup>70</sup> De Coning argues liberal peacebuilding's rigidity often neglects resilience and context-sensitive approaches, both of which are critical for long-term stability.<sup>71</sup> In light of this, Chandler argues the top-down nature of imposed liberal peace marginalizes local agency and concentrates decision-making power with external actors, fostering dependency and "phantom states," thereby weakening prospects for sustainable peace.<sup>72</sup> By privileging external expertise and donor accountability, peacebuilding becomes an exercise in social engineering, producing "neo-trusteeship" arrangements that distrust and marginalize local actors and render government accountable upward.<sup>73</sup> Richmond and Chandler characterize this technocratic depoliticization as the "rule of experts," where state-building is reduced to administrative management instead of reconciliation or negotiation.<sup>74</sup> Richmond critiques the framework for its imperialist underpinnings, arguing that it often serves to entrench Western dominance rather than address local needs.<sup>75</sup> In Iraq, the neoliberal state-building paradigm was applied with extreme rigidity.<sup>76</sup> The 2003 invasion, launched without UN sanction, epitomized U.S. unilateralism and exposed its selective regard for international law, leading to resistance among allies and a "decline" in international law, American diplomacy, credibility, and authority with questions of its legitimacy.<sup>77</sup> Postwar reconstruction fused military occupation with market liberalization, producing what scholars called a "post-conquest" rather than "post-settlement" peace.<sup>78</sup> The U.S. dismantled Iraqi institutions and imposed sweeping economic reforms, transforming the economy into a neoliberal knot.<sup>79</sup> Instead of liberal democracy, Iraq descended into insurgency and sectarian

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<sup>69</sup> Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 30

<sup>70</sup> Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 12-13, 116, 120

<sup>71</sup> De Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding," 303

<sup>72</sup> Chandler, *Empire in Denial*, 46, 121

<sup>73</sup> Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 196-197

<sup>74</sup> Chandler, *Empire in Denial*, 166; Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 1, 196-197

<sup>75</sup> Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 121-122

<sup>76</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 293

<sup>77</sup> Jahn, "Liberal internationalism: historical trajectory," 46, 58; Regilme & Parisot, *American Hegemony and Rise of Emerging Powers*, 211

<sup>78</sup> Paris, "Saving Liberal Peacebuilding," 347-348

<sup>79</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 298-300

fragmentation, its governance structure derided as unstable— all discrediting the morality and efficacy of the intervention.<sup>80</sup>

These structural limitations have led scholars to interpret liberal peacebuilding as a form of neo-imperial governance. Chandler and Sisk similarly note that liberal peacebuilding and its export and imposition of “Western” values appear as a “benevolent form of colonialism,” disconnected from local realities and provoking hybrid forms of peace.<sup>81</sup> The model is described as a “rehabilitation of imperial duty,” echoing what Paris cited as the “mission civilisatrice” that divides the world into a liberal “core” and a tutored “periphery.”<sup>82</sup> Through aid conditionality and governance reform, Western powers exert “metropolitan monitoring, intervention, and regulation unprecedented since the colonial period,” creating externally dependent states whose sovereignty is conditional upon compliance with liberal norms.<sup>83</sup> Chandler argues that such externally imposed frameworks concentrate decision-making power with international agencies, fostering dependency and hollowing out domestic legitimacy. Likewise, Mohammadi interprets the “liberal peacebuilding agenda” as an “American globalist pursuit to consolidate American leadership in the supposed liberal international order.”<sup>84</sup> Liberal peace objectives, particularly “global openness and integration,” form the “main impetus of American imperium,” according to O’Donnell. He posits that rather than territory, “American empire” is built on “commercial access.”<sup>85</sup>

If liberal peacebuilding’s moral claim rests upon consistency and universalism, then the U.S.-led practice has been marked by persistent hypocrisy: proclaiming liberal values while violating them when expedient. The most glaring contradictions lie in selective interventionism, where democracy promotion is pursued in adversarial states but ignored in authoritarian allies. The humanitarian rhetoric of Kosovo, juxtaposed with the indiscriminate nature of cluster bombs, exemplifies this double standard.<sup>86</sup> The invasion of Iraq without UN authorization, the torture and degradation of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, and illicit conduct at Guantanamo Bay further revealed a

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<sup>80</sup> Kamrava, “Accessing the Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East,” 18; Baig, “Unipolar Torment,” 8

<sup>81</sup> Chandler and Sisk, *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding*, 136, 286

<sup>82</sup> Bath & Gamaghelyan, Benefits and Challenges of Institutionalizing Peacebuilding and Activism in a Post-Liberal World, 167; Paris, Saving Liberal Peacebuilding, 344-45, 348

<sup>83</sup> Chandler, *Empire in Denial*, 16

<sup>84</sup> Jamshid Mohammadi, “The Liberal International Order, the Liberal Peace-Building Mission and the Role of American Exceptionalism in It” (Bard College, 2023): 3

<sup>85</sup> S. Jonathon O’Donnell, “Unipolar Dispensations: Exceptionalism, Empire, and the End of One America,” *Political Theology* 20, no. 1 (2019): 74

<sup>86</sup> Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity.” 78-79.

hierarchy of norms in which power superseded principle.<sup>87</sup> Such inconsistencies eroded the credibility of liberal universalism, recasting the U.S. from the custodian of rules into their most visible violator.<sup>88</sup> Finnemore critiques the U.S.' selective application of its values, espousing democracy while supporting authoritarian regimes in strategic regions, for undermining its legitimacy and alienating both allies and adversaries.<sup>89</sup> This hypocrisy, as Barry argues, isolates the U.S. from emerging multipolar dynamics by reinforcing perceptions of inconsistency and self-interest.<sup>90</sup> Finnemore notes that such selective applications of liberal norms contribute to "normative fragmentation," where divergent values between states and regions make coherent global strategies increasingly difficult to achieve.<sup>91</sup> The conflation of moral rhetoric with realist calculation hollows out the framework's authority and breeds cynicism. These inconsistencies, in effect, erode U.S. moral authority and undermine the credibility of the liberal project itself, but transform the liberal peace from a universalist ideal into an instrument of control serving hegemonic interests.

The humiliating failures of peacebuilding interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan cost the U.S. "dearly, in blood and treasure," producing neither peace nor democracy, marking an historic rupture.<sup>92</sup> Confidence in retreat, peacebuilding consensus collapsed, and with it the prospects that democracy could be engineered through external design. These interventions not only discredited the liberal model but the cleavages they sowed revealed the fragility of U.S. hegemony. Indeed, increasing distrust of American hegemony, perceptions of abuses of power, and a peacebuilding legacy of dependency leading to neo-colonial characterizations of U.S.-led interventions have highlighted popular resistance to its peace frameworks.<sup>93</sup> The entanglement of humanitarian rhetoric with militarized occupation exposed the moral bankruptcy of liberal interventionism. The War on Terror deepened the crisis of confidence by explicitly prioritizing U.S. security over ideals and global justice. As peacebuilding became securitized, liberal precedence was displaced by stabilization, counterterrorism, and containment procedures, following the counterterrorism doctrine of the Bush Era *Struggle Against Violent Extremism (SAVE)* and institutionalized under

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<sup>87</sup> Patman, "Globalization, the New US Exceptionalism, and the War on Terror," 978

<sup>88</sup> Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka, *Failed Peacemaking*, 5

<sup>89</sup> Finnemore, "Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity," 65

<sup>90</sup> Barry, "Empire as a Gated Community," 20

<sup>91</sup> Finnemore, "Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity," 68

<sup>92</sup> Regilme & Parisot, *American Hegemony and Rise of Emerging Powers*, 68

<sup>93</sup> Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, 30-31; Fettweis, "Unipolarity, Hegemony, and the New Peace," 449-50

the *Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE)* agenda.<sup>94</sup> The delegitimizing exposés of American-led peacebuilding attempts and further setbacks of liberal peacebuilding to produce sustained peace, coupled with multipolar rejections of American and Western hegemony, have prompted “a turn to the Global South as a source for more legitimate and effective responses to mass organized violence in the world.”<sup>95</sup> The evolving perception was confirmed in the UN resolutions in 2016 redefining peacebuilding towards “sustaining peace” and refocusing peacebuilding as “a political activity that must avoid templates, formulas and one-size-fits-all solutions.”<sup>96</sup> These trends and rising multipolarity have empowered new actors and donor states to advance “their own political and technical approaches to peacebuilding.”<sup>97</sup> New actors and alternative approaches to peacebuilding, as well as growing rejection of Western liberal peacebuilding, threaten the monopoly liberal states have on global peacebuilding efforts and their ability to influence or dictate coordinated agendas and outcomes.

International peacebuilding reflects a growingly multipolar world order, driven by the increasing involvement of rising powers guided by disparate interests and perceptions, most prominently China and Russia, as well as regional actors, including Turkey, Iran, Brazil, and India, amongst others. In many cases, this shift represents a departure from the liberal peacebuilding frameworks dominated by Western states since the end of the Cold War. These new actors bring divergent goals, approaches, and challenges, reshaping the norms and practices of global peacebuilding. Therefore, the rise of multipolarity and alternative peacebuilding beset American status on two fronts: on a normative, ideological level, contesting liberal norms, and on a hegemonic level, challenging the U.S.’ hegemonic ability to advance or implement its agendas, effecting its outcomes. Without mincing, McCurdy and Brown report, “the United States now faces a transition to a multipolar world marked by increased contestation with rival states.”<sup>98</sup>

While their approaches vary and views on “substance” differ, among these new actors is concert rejecting interventionism and conditionality in favor of sovereignty, local ownership, development, and non-interference, reflecting their own historical experiences, interests, and

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<sup>94</sup> Karlsrud, “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism,” 4

<sup>95</sup> Cedric de Coning and Charles Call, “Why Examine Rising Powers’ Role in Peacebuilding?” in *Rising Powers and Peacebuilding: Breaking the Mold?*, ed. Charles T. Call and Cedric de Coning (Cham: Springer, 2017), 2.

<sup>96</sup> De Coning, “Adaptive peacebuilding,” 304

<sup>97</sup> De Coning, “Why Examine Rising Powers’ Role in Peacebuilding?” 3

<sup>98</sup> McCurdy and Brown, “Stabilization Assistance Amid Geopolitical Competition,” 1

external pressures.<sup>99</sup> Many advocate for a more context-sensitive and sovereignty-respecting framework, contrasting with the liberal paradigm's reliance on universal norms of governance and liberalization. Alternative peacebuilding approaches inherently contradict the "deterministic"<sup>100</sup> and universalist assumptions of liberal peacebuilding, as well as its "template-driven"<sup>101</sup> application. The fragmentation of global peacebuilding efforts, driven by competing visions from different powers, has complicated the coordination of international interventions.

Among this freshman class, however, are more turbulent, revisionist and revanchist interests, seeking to reshape geopolitical structures and power. As new donor states cultivate alternative approaches, the rise of alternative multilateral institutions introduces financing outside Western-dominated structures, emphasizing sovereignty and non-interference, diminishing the ability of liberal institutions to enforce liberal peace and the American ability to leverage them.<sup>102</sup> These multipolar endeavors challenge liberal hegemony by disputing its foundational principles and its hegemonic leverage to implement them.

Early on, the asymmetry between American consumption and Chinese production produced security externalities that fueled China's rise as a strategic competitor, threatening the material base of American hegemony. Regilme and Parisot argue these "economic benefits expanded Beijing's power and enhanced the efficacy with which Chinese economic power was transformed into military power," threatening the interests of the U.S., its regional allies, and security of the region. The 2006 National Security Strategy was explicit in this anxiety: urging the prevention of "the re-emergence of the great power rivalries." Once out of Iraq, Washington's hawkish attentions diverted to the surpassing foreign direct investments (FDI) and ballooning trade deficits with China, which channeled these surpluses into a massive upscaling of the People's Liberation Army.<sup>103</sup> Resultingly, the U.S. thus turned from interventionary overreach to strategic consolidation. Under Obama, grand strategy pivoted toward East Asia, rebalancing resources to contain China's rivalling rise while reducing exposure to prolonged wars in the Middle East.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Richmond and Tellidis, "Emerging Actors in International Peacebuilding and Statebuilding: Status Quo or Critical States?" *Global Governance* (2014): 563, 565

<sup>100</sup> De Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding," 304

<sup>101</sup> Richmond, *Failed Statebuilding*, 62

<sup>102</sup> Jütersonke et al., "Norm Contestation and Normative Transformation in Global Peacebuilding Order(s)," 3; Peter Cai, *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, March 2017), 3

<sup>103</sup> Regilme & Parisot, *American Hegemony and Rise of Emerging Powers*, 50-52

<sup>104</sup> Regilme & Parisot, *American Hegemony and Rise of Emerging Powers*, 51-52

This pivot reflected both economic realism and hegemonic fatigue: Washington would preserve influence through selective engagement, proxy partnerships, and regional balancing rather than direct occupation. Stabilization has been used to counter influence in contested regions of strategic interest, including Syria and East Asia.<sup>105</sup> The United States faces competition from “nation-state adversaries in the gray zone” between “statecraft and open warfare,” where adversaries exploit instability in fragile states to expand their influence. In response, the U.S. National Security Strategy commits to using all instruments of national power, not just military strength, to counter these challenges. McCurdy and Brown advise “the United States already has one such tool to advance this objective: civilian stabilization assistance.”<sup>106</sup> As development assistance is increasingly viewed through a security lens, donors flood the coffers of PCVE programs and OECD overseas development assistance funding is directed towards “security-related activities aimed at supporting governments with training and equipment, including governments that often have poor governance and human rights records.”<sup>107</sup> In this way, peacebuilding, once a showcase of U.S. global stewardship, is regraded as a tool of risk management and power competition.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and War on Terror, therefore, did not signal the end of Western interventionism, but rather its transformation. Fatigue from the fiscal and political costs of liberal projects and the financial crisis of 2008 reduced ambitions and inspired “stabilization thinking.”<sup>108</sup> Western states, led by the U.S., redefined their engagement through *stabilization* as a strategic and more *locally driven* framework of liberal peace: pragmatic, security-oriented, and economically lean. This shift was primarily structural, gilded in liberal rhetoric. Western governments reoriented peacebuilding around immediate security imperatives and “good-enough” governance, recalibrating peace from the pursuit of transformation to the management of disorder.<sup>109</sup> The shift moved from ambitious, population-centric goals to more limited, enemy-centric warfare focused on killing or capturing targets.<sup>110</sup> The U.S. defines stabilization as “an inherently political endeavor involving an integrated civilian–military process to create conditions

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<sup>105</sup> McCurdy and Brown, “Stabilization Assistance Amid Geopolitical Competition,” 1-3; Regilme & Parisot, *American Hegemony and Rise of Emerging Powers*, 52-53

<sup>106</sup> McCurdy and Brown, “Stabilization Assistance Amid Geopolitical Competition,” 1

<sup>107</sup> Karlsrud, “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism,” 5

<sup>108</sup> Richmond, “Prelude to Revisionism,” 204

<sup>109</sup> Karlsrud, “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism,” 16

<sup>110</sup> Karlsrud, “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism,” 5

where locally legitimate authorities can manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence.”<sup>111</sup> In practice, it fuses limited reconstruction with military control, creating peace through containment. Stabilization combines civilian and military efforts with a primary focus on re-establishing or strengthening state authority and by design, short-term.<sup>112</sup> The primary objective is to kill or capture enemy targets, often so-called “high-value targets,” rather than addressing the root causes of conflict such as legitimacy, poor governance, or marginalization. It integrates diplomacy, development, and defense under unified command, favoring small-footprint deployments that work with local partners and proxies to minimize Western exposure and cost. Militarily, it collapses into counterterrorism through the F3EAD cycle of “Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, Disseminate.” Drone strikes, special operations, and proxy warfare substitute for long-term institution-building. This reflects a desire to limit US engagement and risks while maintaining a military presence in key regions. Its goals are deliberately limited: to freeze conflicts, prevent escalation, and maintain a “permissive environment” for governance. Civilian programs sustain control rather than transformation.<sup>113</sup> The U.S., UK, France, among other liberal states, have “uploaded” this model into the UN system, whose stabilization mandates now authorize “robust” stabilization missions to protect governments against insurgents.<sup>114</sup> The UN thus became a burden-sharing mechanism, “manning the outer perimeter” of global security, eliminating the UN’s impartiality in conflicts, while internalizing Western stabilization logic.<sup>115</sup>

The current trend toward stabilization, however, produces negative peace dynamics in the “stalemate peace,” effectively freezing the violence without resolving the social or political issues at the source of conflict.<sup>116</sup> Rather than being a platform for future progress, these stalemates allow revanchist states and elites to consolidate power and develop strategies to overturn peace processes, undermining the declining legitimacy of the LIO.<sup>117</sup> These stalemates, often seen as acceptable outcomes by international actors focused on stability, subsequently become breeding grounds for spoilers and counter-peace practices.<sup>118</sup> The stalemate pattern and rise of alternative

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<sup>111</sup> Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-affected Areas (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2018) 4

<sup>112</sup> Hunt & Curran, “Stabilization at the expense of Peacebuilding” 6; Stabilization Assistance Review, 7

<sup>113</sup> Karlsrud, “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism,” 5-6

<sup>114</sup> Karlsrud, “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism,” 10

<sup>115</sup> Hunt & Curran, “Stabilization at the expense of Peacebuilding” 12; Karlsrud, “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism,” 7-8

<sup>116</sup> Richmond, “A prelude to revisionism,” 217

<sup>117</sup> Richmond, “A prelude to revisionism,” 203

<sup>118</sup> Richmond, “A prelude to revisionism,” 202

peace processes helps to contextualize Richmond's concept of counter-peace, describing the deliberate obstruction, manipulation, or reversal of peace processes through strategies designed to preserve existing hierarchies, inequalities, and power structures.<sup>119</sup> Rather than open warfare, it manifests through tactics that empty or capture peace initiatives, achieving stability through pacification rather than transformation. Counter-peace operates across scales, linking local "spoilers" with regional and international allies who exploit the contradictions and weaknesses of liberal peacebuilding processes and actors.<sup>120</sup> Their tactics range from sovereignty claims that block reform and civil society participation, to co-opting peace agreements, spreading disinformation, and forming alternative alliances or institutions that challenge and bypass liberal norms and international structures.<sup>121</sup> Characterized by mimicry, parasitism, and the defense of elite privilege, counter-peace fundamentally rejects the emancipatory goals of peace, namely justice, equality, and reconciliation, by prioritizing control and order.<sup>122</sup> The actors engaged in counter-peace include domestic elites, revisionist and regional actors such as Russia, China, Turkey, or Serbia, as well as liberal actors, including the U.S., and others who, through hypocrisy and stabilization-focused policies, inadvertently create conditions ripe for counter-peace exploitation.<sup>123</sup>

The rise of multipolarity in peacebuilding signifies a geopolitical shift from the unipolar liberal order dominated by the U.S. and the West to a more contested and pluralistic field. As multipolarity dawns, global consensus has strained. Although general accord on the priority of "domestic and international stability" holds,<sup>124</sup> growing cleavages "on the centrality of the sovereign state, the international community, and peacebuilding, statebuilding, and development"<sup>125</sup> have elicited new actors advancing "their own political and technical approaches to peacebuilding."<sup>126</sup> Emerging global and regional powers engage with liberal frameworks in distinct ways, enforcing, reforming, challenging, or dismantling liberal structures.

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<sup>119</sup> Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka, *Failed Peacemaking*. 14, 59

<sup>120</sup> Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka, *Failed Peacemaking*. 14-16

<sup>121</sup> Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka, *Failed Peacemaking*. 43-49

<sup>122</sup> Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka, *Failed Peacemaking*. 22-23

<sup>123</sup> Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka, *Failed Peacemaking*. 10, 41

<sup>124</sup> Richmond and Tellidis, "Emerging Actors in International Peacebuilding and Statebuilding," 565

<sup>125</sup> Richmond and Tellidis, "Emerging Actors in International Peacebuilding and Statebuilding," 563

<sup>126</sup> De Coning, "Why Examine Rising Powers' Role in Peacebuilding?" 3

“Critical states” tread a divergent path, challenging liberal models by pushing reforms or alternatives, still acting within existing architecture to advance their interests.<sup>127</sup> India positions itself as a critical state by advancing a peacebuilding approach rooted in sovereignty, non-intervention, and South-South cooperation, emphasizing locally-led solutions and economic development over externally imposed political reforms.<sup>128</sup> Taking a different critical approach, Turkey engages within the existing international system while actively challenging and reshaping its frameworks under a more hybrid approach to advance its regional ambitions, notably capitalizing on strategic partnerships to bypass Western structures.<sup>129</sup>

Additionally, U.S. disengagement in regions has provided a vacuum that others fill, such as Iran, Russia, and China, often exploiting “a growing, widespread disillusionment towards the United States.”<sup>130</sup> The lack of a dominant external organizing power gives regional actors, including U.S. adversaries and allies such as Iran or Turkey, space to challenge dominant global hierarchies.<sup>131</sup> Taking advantage of the normative contradictions of U.S. actions, emerging regional blocs, such as BRICS and ASEAN, which, Rapanyane notes, have challenged the U.S.-led liberal order and fostered alternative governance frameworks.<sup>132</sup> BRICS, for example, has positioned itself as a counterweight to Western economic dominance by emphasizing multipolar financial institutions, bypassing liberal conditionality and oversight of Western-dominated multilateral institutions.<sup>133</sup> Baig observes that these models incite liberal failures, offering more pragmatic solutions in regions where U.S. interventions have faltered.<sup>134</sup> In this way, Richmond identifies both China and Russia as counter-peace actors, forming “parallel systems of global order” as well as “systematic frameworks that co-opt and hollow out peace processes.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Richmond and Tellidis, “Emerging Actors in International Peacebuilding and Statebuilding,” 564-565

<sup>128</sup> Paczyńska, “New” State Actors and Conflict-Affected States,” 2

<sup>129</sup> Daria Isachenko, *Turkey–Russia Partnership in the War over Nagorno-Karabakh: Militarized Peacebuilding with Implications for Conflict Transformation* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2020) 2

<sup>130</sup> Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau, “Extra-Regional Actors in Latin America: The United States Is Not the Only Game in Town,” *PRISM* 8, no. 1 (2019):1

<sup>131</sup> Mehran Kamrava, “Accessing the Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East,” *Orbis* 62, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 1-2

<sup>132</sup> Makhura Benjamin Rapanyane, “The New World [Dis] Order in the Complexity of Multi-Polarity: United States of America’s Hegemonic Decline and the Configuration of New Power Patterns,” *Journal of Public Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2021): 3

<sup>133</sup> Rapanyane, “The New World [Dis]Order,” 4

<sup>134</sup> Baig, “Unipolar Torment,” 6

<sup>135</sup> Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka, *Failed Peacemaking*, 48

Critical states can be encompassing, simultaneously employing status quo and revisionist policies that both contest and support liberal peace. Embodying this duality, China engages with established rules and norms through its participation in multilateral peace efforts yet critiques the interventionist tendencies and sovereignty challenges of liberal peacebuilding by advancing a pragmatic "peace through development" approach under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which prioritizes economic growth and infrastructure over liberal reforms.<sup>136</sup> It challenges the liberal peace model by advocating for sovereignty-focused, state-led approaches to conflict resolution, emphasizing development over democratization.<sup>137</sup> Diplomatically, it stifles Western initiatives, using its UNSC veto to advantage.<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, Chinese state-to-state financing is crucial in sustaining "poor governance" environments and non-democratic regimes that actively oppose the U.S. This finance removes the necessity for these regimes to seek stabilization loans from traditional sources that demand policy reforms.<sup>139</sup> In this way, China challenges liberal norms by other means, contesting the American/liberal hegemony at the heart of the LIO: through the BRI, China offers finance and investment for infrastructure which developing countries accept, often because it lacks the political conditions and stringent environmental or social safeguards associated with Western-dominated multilateral development banks or organizations. This has allowed China to foster partnerships with countries where its relations have been less "friendly," including India, Indonesia, and Vietnam, where the U.S. maintains strategic security interests.<sup>140</sup> This dual strategy balances adherence to established norms with efforts to create alternatives that bypass Western and international institutions, undermining Western donors' leverage and practices.<sup>141</sup> This allows China to create alliances and leverage which counter the West and particularly, the U.S., giving China greater sway in global governance. Ratner's research suggests China's BRI is likely to lead to the development of an "illiberal regional security order," where the new set of norms subordinates democracy and individual rights to economic growth and social stability.<sup>142</sup> Its rise

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<sup>136</sup> Richmond and Tellidis, "Emerging Actors in International Peacebuilding and Statebuilding," 573-575; Xinyu Yuan, "The Chinese Approach to Peacebuilding: Contesting Liberal Peace?" *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 7 (2022): 1799

<sup>137</sup> Cai, "Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative," 2

<sup>138</sup> Aglaya Snetkov and Marc Lanteigne, "'The Loud Dissenter and Its Cautious Partner': Russia, China, Global Governance, and Humanitarian Intervention," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 1 (2015): 134-135

<sup>139</sup> David Dollar, *China's Investment in Latin America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, January 2017)

<sup>140</sup> Dollar, *China's Investment in Latin America*.

<sup>141</sup> Richmond and Tellidis, *Emerging Actors in International Peacebuilding and Statebuilding*, 573-575

<sup>142</sup> Ely Ratner, *Geostrategic and Military Drivers and Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, January 25, 2018): 4-5

as a global power erodes American hegemony, diminishing its leverage and shifting the global balance of power.

Fully revisionist states reject the foundational premises of the liberal order, challenging its norms outright.<sup>143</sup> Russia and Iran advance agendas driven largely by resistance to American and Western hegemony, viewing American interventions and liberal frameworks as an imperial enterprise. Both states advance agendas that actively undermine the liberal framework and American hegemony by prioritizing state sovereignty, state-centric stability, and military power over democratization.<sup>144</sup> <sup>145</sup> Iran employs a dual strategy of regional alliances and ideological positioning to counter American hegemony.<sup>146</sup> Similarly, Russia has sought to sideline Western actors from mediation efforts,<sup>147</sup> framing liberal peacebuilding as destabilizing, it positions itself as a defender of sovereignty while seeking to dismantle broader aspects of the liberal international order.<sup>148</sup> Guided by the Primakov Doctrine, Russia aims to reestablish itself as a global power player and competitor to U.S. influence, working aggressively to displace U.S. dominance. Russia's foreign policy is often a direct reaction against U.S. attempts to reestablish new orders. Russia's use of "hybrid warfare" and low-cost intervention is designed to maximize impact while weakening U.S. influence.<sup>149</sup> Russia, often working with partners, mercenaries, and other affiliates, employs "coercive mediation" or seeks "power peace," which interlinks negotiations with coercive military actions, prioritizing geopolitical interests and immediate political order over democratic transformation.<sup>150</sup> Russia explicitly argues that achieving social transformation or democratization is not the goal; rather, the aim is a minimum of political order aligned with Russian interests, arguing "that a strong state is the only solution."<sup>151</sup> Like China, Russia uses its permanent seat on the UNSC to protect allies from sanctions imposed by the U.S. and EU, thereby

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<sup>143</sup> Richmond and Tellidis, "Emerging Actors in International Peacebuilding and Statebuilding," 564

<sup>144</sup> Elham Rasooli Saniabadi, "The Requirements of Iran's Foreign Policy in Types of International Order," *Iranian Journal of Public Policy* 10, no. 1 (2024): 193

<sup>145</sup> Kausch, "Competitive Multipolarity in the Middle East," 3

<sup>146</sup> Kausch, "Competitive Multipolarity in the Middle East," 4

<sup>147</sup> Isachenko, *Turkey–Russia Partnership in the War over Nagorno-Karabakh*, 2

<sup>148</sup> Ahmed Aboudouh, "China and Russia Are Proposing a New Authoritarian Playbook. MENA Leaders Are Watching Closely," *Atlantic Council* (February 23, 2022), 3

<sup>149</sup> Philip J. McCormick, *Russian Influence in Venezuela: A Potential Spoiler for USSOUTHCOM* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2021): 10-11, 13

<sup>150</sup> Juline Beaujouan, "Power Peace: The Resolution of the Syrian Conflict in a Post-Liberal Era of Peacemaking," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (2024); David Lewis, "Contesting Liberal Peace: Russia's Emerging Model of Conflict Management," *International Affairs* 98, no. 2 (2022)

<sup>151</sup> Lewis, "Contesting Liberal Peace: Russia's Emerging Model of Conflict Management,"

undermining U.S. diplomatic leverage and coercion.<sup>152</sup> Iranian and Russian revanchism highlights the broader implications of multipolarity in eroding the LIO, as their revisionist strategies not only counter Western dominance but also challenge and erode international norms and institutions, fostering a competitive and polarized international environment.

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<sup>152</sup>Babineau, "Extra-Regional Actors in Latin America: The United States Is Not the Only Game in Town," *PRISM* 8, no. 1 (2019)

## 2. Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative, comparative case study approach to examine how multipolarity and multipolar peacebuilding affect the U.S.' capacity to shape peace operations and outcomes abroad and to consider the strategic, normative, and operational implications of those effects for U.S. power and policy. A qualitative design allows for an in-depth interrogation of the interplay between shifting power structures, normative frameworks, and operational practice, privileging context and process over quantification. Comparative analysis is used to identify both convergent and divergent dynamics across cases, enabling conclusions with broader geographic and political applicability.

The two case studies, Syria and Venezuela, were selected for their illustrative value, demonstrating peacebuilding with a multiplicity of actors and approaches and the constraints of U.S. agendas within these environments. Both represent arenas in which the U.S. has engaged in sustained peace and stabilization efforts alongside significant involvement from alternative power centers. The Syrian conflict, saturated with global and regional rivalries, reveals how competing models, institutional deadlock, and proxy intervention embroil American influence in a highly securitized theater. Venezuela, by contrast, highlights the economic, diplomatic, and normative dimensions of multipolar contestation in a non-kinetic, yet profoundly destabilized, setting. Because these cases differ in regional context, conflict typology, and geopolitical configuration, Syria and Venezuela will be used in cross-case comparison of how multipolarity manifests in disparate theaters. Meanwhile, both cases exhibit pronounced contestation between the liberal paradigms and sovereignty-oriented and development-centric paradigms, among others, providing insight for evaluating changes in U.S. operational capacity, normative authority, and strategic leverage concerning peace.

Primary sources will include official U.S. government documents, speeches, and policy statements; multilateral resolutions and records; official aid and sanctions records, and policy documents from multilateral institutions; and statements from other relevant state and institutional actors. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed scholarship, policy analyses from think tanks, and reports from intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Media reports from political and geographical perspectives will be used to capture competing narratives. Additional

document-based discourse analysis will consider how peacebuilding is articulated, justified, and contested, helping to evaluate how multipolarity affects U.S. objectives and normative authority or alters the leverage of U.S. institutional and material power in terms of peace processes.

Finally, process tracing will be utilized to reconstruct key sequences of events, policy decisions, and interventions, investigating causal linkages between multipolar dynamics and shifts in capacity of U.S. peace operations. The analysis will assess operational reach and efficacy, how competition has shaped access, resources, multilateral coordination, and control over implementation, alongside shifts in normative authority, including legitimacy, credibility, moral standing, adoption or resistance to U.S.-promoted norms, and the pull of rival narratives. It will also consider changes in strategic leverage: the ability to shape settlements; set political terms; and secure outcomes aligned with U.S. interests amid competing models. Findings will be interpreted through the theoretical framework to enable structured comparison, identifying patterns, context-specific variations, and cross-case themes on how multipolarity modulates U.S. capacity as a peacebuilder, while shedding light on broader implications for U.S. strategic autonomy, legitimacy, and leadership in an increasingly plural and contested international order.

### 3. Venezuela

Venezuela stands as a critical case for tracing the erosion of U.S. liberal hegemony and the emergence of rival peacebuilding models within a multipolar order. Once emblematic of hemispheric stewardship under the Monroe Doctrine, Venezuela's descent revealed the limits of American coercive diplomacy and the diffusion of normative authority that once seemed universal. The confrontation between Washington and Caracas became a crucible for systemic change: a contest not over discrete policies but over the legitimacy and efficacy of external intervention itself. In this case, liberal peace's universalist claims collided with alternative repertoires, counter-peace and developmental peace, deployed by a coalition of state and non-state actors who re-centered sovereignty and regime endurance as the superior public goods. The case thus illuminates the reconfiguration of capacity, authority, and leverage when liberal consensus fractures and rivals provide material and normative substitutes.

#### ***3.1 Historical and Political Background***

Although Venezuela's crisis did not begin with Hugo Chávez, it consolidated under his Bolivarian Revolution. The twentieth-century rentier oil economy had long tethered state and society to the price of crude, substituting petroleum rents for productive diversification. By the late 1970s, revenue surges overwhelmed a hollow productive base, fueling capital flight, stagnation, and a corrosive cycle of expectations and disappointment.<sup>153</sup> The party system, which had guaranteed Venezuela's remarkable political stability for decades, was discredited after 1989 through corruption, coups, and mismanagement. Chávez's 1998 landslide election therefore appeared as a popular rupture, an insurgent plebiscite on elite failure and neoliberal fatigue.<sup>154</sup>

Buoyed by the oil boom of the 2000s, Chávez reconfigured the political economy around redistributive social "missions" financed by oil rents.<sup>155</sup> The 1999 constitution concentrated presidential power with nominal "principles of checks and balances," and enabled reelection.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Benedicte Bull and Antulio Rosales, "The Crisis in Venezuela," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 109 (2020): 6-7; Mark P. Sullivan, "Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations," *Current Politics and Economics of South and Central America* 8, no. 2 (2015): 250

<sup>154</sup> Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 250

<sup>155</sup> Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 251-252, 270.

<sup>156</sup> Bull & Rosales, The Crisis in Venezuela, 4; Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 251, 286

Quickly, the state “renegotiated contracts” with foreign investors, taking controlling shares in oil companies while nationalizing firms across key sectors including oil, electricity, telecommunications, food, gold, and steel.<sup>157</sup> Initially, redistribution shored up legitimacy through electoral success,<sup>158</sup> yet policy design hollowed the productive apparatus: subsidies and controls decimated private initiative and by 2012, imports hovered around half of GDP.<sup>159</sup> The state’s capacity became hostage to exogenous price cycles.<sup>160</sup> Democratic institutions simultaneously eroded: following the failed 2002 coup attempt, the Supreme Court was “purged” and “packed;” the opposition’s elections boycott gave the National Assembly to Chávez’s supporters.<sup>161</sup> Silencing dissent, judicial independence and “autonomy of institutions” waned as institutions acted against political opponents and media space narrowed, “to build a personalistic form of rule.”<sup>162</sup> Institutional degradation weakened domestic legitimacy while allowing liberal criticism to be framed as foreign interference.<sup>163</sup>

Internationally, Chávez’s project positioned Venezuela in adversarial relief against U.S. hemispheric primacy.<sup>164</sup> Anti-American rhetoric, nationalizations, and the cultivation of ties with Cuba, Russia, China, and Iran reflected a diversification strategy, beyond ideological flourish, that diluted U.S. leverage and signaled a new alignment. Russia entrenched itself through arms transfers, oil trade, diplomatic cover, and financial aid.<sup>165</sup> China, acting as “Venezuela’s principle banker,” underwrites the economy through loans-for-oil and technological infrastructure.<sup>166</sup> Cuba has provided security apparatuses and shaped regional alignments while Iran and Turkey have

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<sup>157</sup> Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 252-253, 269-270

<sup>158</sup> Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 251-252, 270

<sup>159</sup> Emmanuel Abuelafia and Jose Luis Saboin, *A Look to the Future for Venezuela* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank, 2020): 2-3, 7

<sup>160</sup> Emma Miriam Yin-Hang To and Rodrigo Acuña, “China and Venezuela: South–South Cooperation or Rearticulated Dependency?,” *Latin American Perspectives* 45, no. 5 (2018): 11

<sup>161</sup> Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 251

<sup>162</sup> Bull & Rosales, *The Crisis in Venezuela*, 4

<sup>163</sup> Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 252, 273; Philip J. McCormick, *Russian Influence in Venezuela: A Potential Spoiler for USSOUTHCOM* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2021):18-19

<sup>164</sup> McCormick, “Russian Influence in Venezuela” 18-19

<sup>165</sup> Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau, “Extra-Regional Actors in Latin America: The United States Is Not the Only Game in Town,” *PRISM* 8, no. 1 (2019):100-102

<sup>166</sup> R. Evan Ellis, *The Influence of Extra-Hemispheric Actors on the Crisis in Venezuela* (testimony before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Foreign Affairs Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, September 13, 2017): 2; Farah and Babineau, “Extra-regional actors in Latin America,” 106; To & Acuña, “South-South Cooperation or Dependency in Venezuela?” 4-5

sustained critical fuel and retail circuits.<sup>167</sup> U.S. policy under George W. Bush channeled millions of dollars through NED/USAID to opposition parties, media, and civil society. It gave swift recognition of the short-lived 2002 Carmona government during Chávez' three-day "ouster," and in 2006 an arms embargo, reinforcing the regime's anti-imperial and anti-American narrative.<sup>168</sup>

Chávez's death in 2013 left Nicolás Maduro a brittle inheritance. His narrow, contested victory immediately cast doubt on legitimacy, with the Venezuelan Electoral Observatory (OVE) reporting "concern over the incumbent president's advantages in the use of public funds and resources" in the campaign and the opposition challenging Maduro's victory "alleging irregularities in the elections."<sup>169</sup> By 2014 the economy was contracting, marked by overvalued currency, high inflation, dwindling reserves, and falling oil production despite vast reserves.<sup>170</sup> Within a year, oil prices collapsed, exposing the unsustainability of the rentier model.<sup>171</sup> Protests, initially led by students, over the surging rate of violent crime in Venezuela at the same time expanded to the broader population concerned by the violence and spiraling economic situation.<sup>172</sup> The violent suppression of protests through pro-government civilian militant groups, security forces opening fire on unarmed demonstrators, arrests, and persecution of opposition leaders resulted in international condemnation of the regime by human rights groups, reporting "physical abuse" and killings of detainees and "unarmed protestors" by security forces, while U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry called on Maduro to "end this terror campaign against his own people."<sup>173</sup> Responding with a counter-narrative, Maduro accused U.S. officials of fomenting and funding the students, leading to the expulsion of three U.S. diplomats from Venezuela. U.S. Congressional resolutions followed, "deploring" the regime's abuses and empowered the Obama Administration to levy targeted sanctions.<sup>174</sup>

Confronted by an opposition that won the National Assembly in 2015, Maduro escalated authoritarian consolidation. After a recall referendum by the opposition was blocked in 2016, the

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<sup>167</sup> Susanne Gratius, "The West Against the Rest? Democracy Versus Autocracy Promotion in Venezuela," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 41, no. 1 (2022):152; Antulio Rosales and Maryhen Jiménez, "Venezuela: Autocratic Consolidation and Splintered Economic Liberalization," *Revista de Ciencia Política* 41, no. 2 (2021): 434, 437-438

<sup>168</sup> Gratius, "The West against the rest?" 145, 150, 155; Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 250-251, 273-275

<sup>169</sup> Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 258-259

<sup>170</sup> Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 260-261

<sup>171</sup> Abuelafia and Saboin, "A Look to the Future for Venezuela," 6

<sup>172</sup> Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 261

<sup>173</sup> Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 261-263, 280

<sup>174</sup> Sullivan, Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations, 280-282

courts “sidelined or nullified” legislative powers of the National Assembly, convening the “supra-constitutional” National Constituent Assembly (ANC) to circumvent the opposition-controlled legislature.<sup>175</sup> In an election marred by the exclusion of opposition candidates, state interference, voter intimidation, and manipulation, Maduro’s contested 2018 re-election culminated in the 2019 presidential crisis. The opposition-controlled National Assembly rejected the 2018 results as fraudulent and named its Speaker, Juan Guaidó, interim president of Venezuela. The pro-Maduro Supreme Court retaliated by declaring the National Assembly itself “unconstitutional,” stripping it of authority and legitimacy.<sup>176</sup> Widespread repression followed, intensified through security forces, colectivos, and juridical instruments, exemplifying “autocratic legalism” in the weaponization of law to enforce and “legitimize” illiberal rule.<sup>177</sup>

Unrest and polarization continued.<sup>178</sup> Bereft of revenue, the government turned to monetary financing: hyperinflation soared, reaching 9,598 percent by 2019; shortages of food, medicine, and other goods multiplied; and emigration surged.<sup>179</sup> By 2020, GDP had contracted by more than 80 percent relative to 2013, production at the state oil giant, PDVSA, fell by over 82 percent, poverty reached staggering levels, and more than five million Venezuelans “fled.”<sup>180</sup> The humanitarian calamity demobilized public capacity as daily survival displaced politics, paradoxically reducing pressure on the regime.<sup>181</sup>

### ***3.2 External Engagement and U.S. Peacebuilding Tools***

From 2015 onward, Venezuela’s domestic crisis became an arena for renewed U.S. activism. The Obama administration declared Venezuela an “extraordinary threat to national security,” imposed targeted sanctions on human-rights abusers and corrupt officials, and attempted

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<sup>175</sup> Bull & Rosales, *The Crisis in Venezuela*, 5

<sup>176</sup> Celestine Uchechukwu Udeogu, Chukwuemeka Obasi Igwe, and Chukwuemeka Azubuike Ugwuogo, “Political Economy of U.S.-Russian Hegemonic Struggle for Sphere of Influence in Latin America: How the U.S. Lost Venezuela,” *University of Nigeria Journal of Political Economy* 13, no. 1 (2023): 77-78

<sup>177</sup> Víctor M. Mijares, “Legitimacy Crisis and Venezuela’s Long Road to Democratic Transition,” *GIGA Focus Latin America* 2024, no. 4 (August 2024): 2, 6.

<sup>178</sup> Sullivan, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*, 304

<sup>179</sup> Rafael D. Ramírez, *The Venezuelan Oil Industry Collapse: Economic, Social and Political Implications*, IAI Commentaries 21, no. 52 (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, November 2021): 3; Kleszczyńska, “The humanitarian crisis of Venezuela and international response to its regional migration implications,” 36, 38.

<sup>180</sup> Ramírez, “The Venezuelan Oil Industry Collapse,” 1, 3; Rosales and Jiménez, “Venezuela: Autocratic consolidation and splintered economic liberalization,” 433

<sup>181</sup> Rosales and Jiménez, “Venezuela: Autocratic consolidation and splintered economic liberalization,” 439; Udeogu et al., “Political Economy of U.S.-Russian Hegemonic Struggle,” 89-90.

to mobilize the Organization of American States (OAS) to censure Caracas.<sup>182</sup> Despite efforts, Obama's sanctions proved controversial in Latin America, generating "strong negative reaction."<sup>183</sup> Vatican-facilitated dialogues were explored but instrumentalized by the regime to "buy time."<sup>184</sup> Shifting focus away from its own failures, Maduro's regime re-framed itself as the target of a U.S.-led imperial conspiracy, using this counter-narrative to rally domestic support and court international sympathy.<sup>185</sup> This trajectory reveals that early, targeted, multilateral pressure campaigns, by intensifying U.S. democracy-promotion efforts through coercive measures and collective censure, ultimately reinforced the regime's imperial-intrusion narrative, supplying ideological cover for repression and consolidating sovereignty and non-interference frames of legitimacy in a region acutely sensitive to perceptions of U.S. interference.

More evocatively, the transition to the Trump Administration embarked on a radical escalation to "maximum pressure," a doctrine that fused economic warfare with isolation to precipitate regime collapse or transition.<sup>186</sup> In August 2017, financial sanctions restricted PDVSA and sovereign access to U.S. capital markets.<sup>187</sup> In January 2019, sweeping oil sanctions effectively imposed a de facto embargo on Venezuela's chief revenue source.<sup>188</sup> Secondary sanctions threatened non-U.S. firms and banks, extending the reach of coercion extraterritorially.<sup>189</sup> Washington paired this with a multilateral strategy recognizing Guaidó as interim president alongside a coalition of nearly sixty states.<sup>190</sup>

Yet recognition proved symbolically potent but operationally thin. The regime's coercive core, military, intelligence, and colectivos, remained loyal, not least because exit costs were raised by U.S. narco-terrorism indictments unsealed in March 2020 against Maduro and his senior circle. Rather than facilitating negotiated transition, indictments closed pathways for defection, binding

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<sup>182</sup> Michael Camilleri, "Evolution or Revolution? US Policy on Venezuela from Obama to Trump," *Pensamiento Propio* 47 (2018): 191, 193.

<sup>183</sup> Camilleri, "Evolution or revolution?" 193

<sup>184</sup> Camilleri, "Evolution or revolution?" 194

<sup>185</sup> Camilleri, "Evolution or revolution?" 193

<sup>186</sup> Timothy M. Gill and Joseph Marshall Brown, "Two Decades of Imperial Failure: Theorizing U.S. Regime Change Efforts in Venezuela from Bush II to Trump," *Class, Race and Corporate Power* 8, no. 2 (2020): 5-7

<sup>187</sup> Camilleri, "Evolution or revolution?" 191-192

<sup>188</sup> Gratius, Susanne. "The West against the rest?" 145; Geoff Ramsey and David Smilde, *Recalibrating U.S. Policy in Venezuela: Learning from Failure and Seizing Opportunities* (Washington, DC: Washington Office on Latin America, December 2020), 13-15

<sup>189</sup> Gratius, "The West against the rest?" 146

<sup>190</sup> Ramsey and Smilde, "Recalibrating US policy in Venezuela," 3; Gratius, "The West against the rest?" 142.

insiders more tightly to the regime.<sup>191</sup> High-profile opposition gambits underscored capacity asymmetries: the February 2019 humanitarian-aid convoys were blocked by the military and confusion.<sup>192</sup> April 2019's anticipated uprising collapsed when back-channel negotiations unraveled.<sup>193</sup> Likewise, the May 2020 "Operation Gideon" mercenary raid to overthrow Maduro and install Guaidó as president ended in "fiasco," with 31 mercenaries arrested, including two former U.S. soldiers, as well as eight dead.<sup>194</sup> These tactics as well as Maduro's strengthening grip contributed to the splintering and "internal weakening" of the opposition.<sup>195</sup> Guaidó's approval ratings fell precipitously as credibility ebbed.<sup>196</sup> International recognition, therefore, could not conjure domestic power where control over the coercive apparatus was absent.

Sanctions, for their part, devastated the macroeconomy as intended but produced perverse political effects.<sup>197</sup> Having greater effect on the general population than elites, economic collapse demobilized the populace and elevated survival over mobilization.<sup>198</sup> Figures from 2019 show 78 percent of the population living in extreme poverty and 96 percent living below the poverty line in 2021.<sup>199</sup> Food insecurity is severe, leading to a rise in malnutrition, with much of the population deprived of basic necessities and services including electricity, water, and medicine.<sup>200</sup> Consequently, Trump's rhetoric and sanctions have produced a "rally around the flag effect," bolstering Maduro's narrative of an American "conspiracy against the Bolivarian Revolution."<sup>201</sup> Moreover, Maduro used U.S. sanctions to consolidate his rule, "justifying" the passage of an "anti-blockade law" allowing the transfer of state assets to private groups and individuals loyal to him.<sup>202</sup> Sanctions, as a result, centralized rents into the hands of military officials and regime loyalists, who were rewarded with control over oil, mining, food distribution, and illicit economies.<sup>203</sup> The regime combined "arbitrary deregulation", informal dollarization, "stealth privatizations," and

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<sup>191</sup> Ramsey and Smilde, "Recalibrating US policy in Venezuela," 12-13

<sup>192</sup> Gill and Brown, "Two Decades of Imperial Failure," 9-10

<sup>193</sup> Ramsey and Smilde, "Recalibrating US policy in Venezuela," 3-4

<sup>194</sup> Udeogu et al., "Political economy of US-Russian hegemonic struggle," 94

<sup>195</sup> Rosales and Jiménez, "Venezuela: Autocratic Consolidation and Splintered Economic Liberalization," 427.

<sup>196</sup> Udeogu et al., "Political economy of US-Russian hegemonic struggle," 89; Ramsey and Smilde, "Recalibrating US policy in Venezuela," 4

<sup>197</sup> Camilleri, "Evolution or Revolution?" 192.

<sup>198</sup> Ramsey and Smilde, *Recalibrating U.S. Policy in Venezuela*, 19-20, 23; Udeogu et al., "Political Economy of U.S.-Russian Hegemonic Struggle," 96

<sup>199</sup> Ramírez, *Venezuelan Oil Industry Collapse*, 3; Abuelafia and Saboin, *A Look to the Future for Venezuela*, 14.

<sup>200</sup> Abuelafia and Saboin, *A Look to the Future for Venezuela*, 17-18, 21.

<sup>201</sup> Gratius, "The West Against the Rest?" 144, 155.

<sup>202</sup> Rosales and Jiménez, "Venezuela: Autocratic Consolidation and Splintered Economic Liberalization," 437.

<sup>203</sup> Bull and Rosales, "The Crisis in Venezuela," 8.

informal economies in attempts to bypass sanctions, which stabilized elite consumption and created alternative rents.<sup>204</sup> In bypassing, sanctions have inadvertently compelled the Maduro government to intensify its political and economic alignment with alternative authoritarian and illiberal actors. Rather than isolating the regime, sanctions undercut Western leverage, leaving a vacuum that China, Russia, Cuba, and other illiberal actors have effectively filled by consolidating their partnerships with Caracas.<sup>205</sup>

### ***3.3 Multipolar Contestation and Counter-Peace***

As Washington's coercive leverage faltered, rival powers consolidated a lifeline through "authoritarian linkages" that underwrote regime endurance and constrained U.S. options.<sup>206</sup> Russia assumed the most overtly strategic role: through Rosneft, it became the principal trader of Venezuelan crude, handling a dominant share of exports and diverting sales to Asian markets to evade sanctions.<sup>207</sup> When Rosneft was sanctioned in 2020, assets were transferred to Roszarubezhneft, illustrating adaptive evasion.<sup>208</sup> Moscow has extended billions in loans and more than \$11 billion in arms sales, embedding advisors and private military contractors to service key defense systems.<sup>209</sup> As regimes propagating anti-U.S. ideologies, Russia and Venezuela converge interest in "countervailing, challenging, and undermining U.S. power."<sup>210</sup> Russia's approach has been guided by the Gerasimov Doctrine, envisioning a state of permanent hybrid warfare in which Russia blurs the line between war and peace, mobilizing military, political, economic, and non-state actors to wage multidimensional conflict.<sup>211</sup> Perhaps fearing regime change himself, for Putin, supporting Maduro serves as a strategic buffer against the spread of Western-backed regime change, coded as democracy promotion. This stance reflects Russia's broader foreign policy goal of defending state sovereignty and pushing back against U.S. and EU democracy promotion efforts, while advancing a "new multipolar, anti-US Western order."<sup>212</sup> With Iran, Cuba, and a few other states sharing anti-U.S. ideologies, Russia is a member of Venezuela's Bolivarian Alliance,

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<sup>204</sup> Rosales and Jiménez, "Venezuela: Autocratic Consolidation and Splintered Economic Liberalization," 434-438

<sup>205</sup> Gratius, "The West Against the Rest?" 143-145

<sup>206</sup> Gratius, "The West Against the Rest?" 149

<sup>207</sup> Gratius, "The West Against the Rest?" 148-149; Udeogu et al., "Political Economy of U.S.-Russian Hegemonic Struggle," 91

<sup>208</sup> Gill and Brown, "Two Decades of Imperial Failure," 7

<sup>209</sup> Ellis, *The Influence of Extra-Hemispheric Actors*, 9; Ulf Thoene et al., "Russia in Latin America: Why Support Venezuela in a Crisis?," *International Social Science Journal* 73, no. 248 (June 2023): 634

<sup>210</sup> Thoene et al., "Russia in Latin America," 633.

<sup>211</sup> Farah and Babineau, "Extra-Regional Actors in Latin America," 100-101

<sup>212</sup> Gratius, "The West Against the Rest?" 150

offering a counterweight to the U.S. “on every front including economic aid, military training, equipping and doctrine, large-scale investment, and geopolitical orientation.”<sup>213</sup> Twice, in 2008 and 2018, Russia deployed nuclear-capable bombers to Venezuela, a declaratory posture that signaled willingness to contest U.S. hemispheric presumptions.<sup>214</sup>

China’s engagement has been more technocratic but structural. China’s approach in the region reflects a calculated pragmatism that sidesteps overt ideological battles and explicitly anti-U.S. agendas. By framing its engagement around economic cooperation and non-interference, it has deepened its presence without provoking major resistance.<sup>215</sup> This transactional posture reflects a limited concern for governance, rights, or environmental standards, enabling Beijing to extend substantial financial support to Maduro’s government and build “hemispheric leverage.”<sup>216</sup> Since 2005 it has provided over \$65 billion in developmental projects and oil-backed loans despite Venezuelan oil shipments lagging and debt growing, while government contracts privilege Chinese firms, effectively “repatriating profits” back to Chinese markets.<sup>217</sup> Venezuela joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017, entrenching ties in Beijing’s global logistics.<sup>218</sup> Chinese technology transfers to Venezuela are extensive, from telecommunications to riot control gear and tanks, enabling more efficient social control for the regime and expanding the Chinese defense industry into the U.S.’ hemisphere.<sup>219</sup> The partnership with Maduro’s autocratic Venezuela thereby allows China indirect resistance to liberal and American influence that could threaten its regional interests.<sup>220</sup> This pattern expresses China’s developmental peace model: sovereignty and order prioritized over political reform; access to finance and infrastructure over conditional democratization, extending alternatives to liberal frameworks as a contest.

Cuba, Iran, and Turkey complemented this architecture. As a co-conspirator, Cuban intelligence and security advisors were embedded in the infancy of the “Bolivarian Revolution,” enhancing repression’s efficiency and making the coercive apparatus more cohesive. In the symbiosis of authoritarian interdependence, Maduro has returned the favor, fueling Castro’s

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<sup>213</sup> Farah and Babineau, “Extra-Regional Actors in Latin America,” 97-98

<sup>214</sup> McCormick, *Russian Influence in Venezuela*, 15.

<sup>215</sup> Farah and Babineau, “Extra-Regional Actors in Latin America,” 99

<sup>216</sup> Farah and Babineau, “Extra-Regional Actors in Latin America,” 106

<sup>217</sup> Emma Miriam Yin-Hang To and Rodrigo Acuña, “China and Venezuela: South–South Cooperation or Rearticulated Dependency?,” *Latin American Perspectives* 45, no. 5 (2018): 3-5; Farah and Babineau, “Extra-Regional Actors in Latin America,” 106

<sup>218</sup> Gratius, “The West Against the Rest?” 151

<sup>219</sup> Ellis, *The Influence of Extra-Hemispheric Actors*, 6-7

<sup>220</sup> Gratius, “The West Against the Rest?” 151

regime in Cuba with essential shipments of 30,000 barrels of oil daily.<sup>221</sup> Iran has supplied gasoline to alleviate acute shortages, ramping up since 2020, made “profitable” through transactions paid in gold amid sanctions constraints. Such “off-the-radar” transactions as employed in these gold for oil trades reflect the development of evasion tactics for authoritarian support.<sup>222</sup> Representative of a secondary class of actors, Turkey, like the Gulf States and other secondary authoritarian partners with low linkage and limited strategic commitments, has acted as a “passive autocracy promoter” and conduit for sanction-circumventing commerce and investment, reflecting its opportunistic role within the broader autocratic network.<sup>223</sup> Together these relationships build an ecosystem of counter-peace: a regime-survival architecture that privileges order, sovereignty, and pacification for mutual survival and advantage.

### ***3.4 Legitimacy, Norm Contestation, and Counter-Narratives***

Multilaterally, institutional fractures have mirrored material realignments. Within the UN, Russia and China have consistently “coordinated” their politics, using their Security Council seats to veto punitive resolutions against Maduro’s regime, forcing inaction.<sup>224</sup> Within the OAS, U.S.-led censure efforts repeatedly faltered, Caribbean Petrocaribe beneficiaries resisted.<sup>225</sup> Trump’s rhetoric of coups and military options fractured the coalition built by the Obama Administration, prompting his exclusion from the Lima Group, formed out of the Obama coalition of 15 liberal states, rejecting threats of intervention, preferring pressure without force.<sup>226</sup> The 2019 Oslo Process reportedly negotiated an agreement with Maduro to hold elections in return for a prior lifting of sanctions. Left out of negotiations, the Trump Administration’s reply, “The U.S. doesn’t want that,” collapsed the deal.<sup>227</sup> Similarly, the EU pursued an International Contact Group (ICG) that emphasized dialogue and electoral guarantees.<sup>228</sup> Despite the ICG’s success in negotiating the pardon of some dissidents and pressuring the regime further towards democratic

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<sup>221</sup> Gratius, “The West Against the Rest?” 152

<sup>222</sup> Rosales and Jiménez, “Venezuela: Autocratic Consolidation and Splintered Economic Liberalization,” 438.

<sup>223</sup> Gratius, “The West Against the Rest?” 142; Rosales and Jiménez, “Venezuela: Autocratic Consolidation and Splintered Economic Liberalization,” 434, 436, 438

<sup>224</sup> André Gerrits, “Russia in the Changing Global Order: Multipolarity, Multilateralism, and Sovereignty,” in *The Changing Global Order: Challenges and Prospects* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 100; Thoene et al., “Russia in Latin America,” 632.

<sup>225</sup> Iga Kleszczyńska, “The Humanitarian Crisis of Venezuela and International Response to Its Regional Migration Implications,” *Studia z Polityki Publicznej* 4, no. 28 (2020): 41-42

<sup>226</sup> Camilleri, “Evolution or Revolution?” 194-195

<sup>227</sup> Ramsey and Smilde, *Recalibrating U.S. Policy in Venezuela*, 16-17

<sup>228</sup> Kleszczyńska, “The Humanitarian Crisis of Venezuela.” 42

concessions in 2020, the Trump Administration dismissed the approach as “Cowboy diplomacy” and proactively worked to “undermine” the talks.<sup>229</sup> Significantly, these incidents represent a major departure in U.S. tactics where the Trump Administration has deliberately hijacked or corrupted effective processes and deliberately engages in obstructive or illiberal counter-peace activities, behaving as a spoiler, no better than its adversaries. Polarized by opposing interests of autocracy promotion and democracy promotion, as well as the fracturing of the liberal bloc, external engagement in Venezuela is preoccupied by geopolitics, power balancing, and self-fashioning and therefore unable to “mediate” a solution to the crisis.<sup>230</sup> The result is pluralized legitimacy where no single forum can monopolize the definition of appropriate intervention or responsible stabilization and in the absence of consensus, stalemate persists and counter-peace flourishes.

The revival of the 19th century Monroe Doctrine, claiming American primacy over the western hemisphere, during the Venezuelan crisis served as both a rhetorical anchor for U.S. policy and a catalyst for wider legitimacy erosion. Its reintroduction by the Trump Administration sought to situate Venezuela as a U.S.-led struggle against “poisonous ideologies” and deter extra-regional intrusion, reasserting U.S. hemispheric primacy and stewardship. Against a “troika of tyranny,” in 2019 U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton “reaffirmed” the Monroe Doctrine’s “relevancy,” and entailed concomitant associations with tutelage and intervention, a claim widely rejected in Latin America and among allies.<sup>231</sup> Its deployment shifted policy away from a lower-profile, Latin America-led approach and toward U.S. protagonism, which alienated allies, distanced the EU, and helped catalyze the ICG as an alternative diplomatic center.<sup>232</sup> The rhetoric also resonated with long-running sensitivities to U.S. hierarchy, feeding regional disillusionment which extra-regional actors have leveraged to present themselves as alternatives to U.S. hegemony.<sup>233</sup> Perceptions of empire and interference, however, are impactful, diverging from liberal norms of self-determination and sovereignty in prioritizing outdated imperial claims for geopolitical motivations. Moscow instrumentalized Washington’s “spheres-of-influence framing,” citing the invocation of the Monroe Doctrine to justify reciprocal claims in its “near

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<sup>229</sup> Ramsey and Smilde, *Recalibrating U.S. Policy in Venezuela*, 8-9

<sup>230</sup> Gratius, “The West Against the Rest?” 141, 154

<sup>231</sup> Ramsey and Smilde, *Recalibrating U.S. Policy in Venezuela*, 7-8

<sup>232</sup> Ramsey and Smilde, *Recalibrating U.S. Policy in Venezuela*, 7-9

<sup>233</sup> Camilleri, “Evolution or Revolution?” 194-195; Farah and Babineau, “Extra-regional actors in Latin America,” 97

abroad,” while signaling resolve via deployments to Caracas. Leveraging the largely “symbolic presence,” conversations between Trump and Putin at the time highlighted the geopolitical and transactional nature of the actors in the region: a “withdrawal” of American assistance to Ukraine would be “equally” met with a withdrawal of Russian support for Maduro.<sup>234</sup> Through inverted framing, Russian and Chinese state-owned media in the region provide “added value,” disseminating their non-interference and pro-sovereignty stances in contrast to perceived or implied American imperialism and interventionism.<sup>235</sup> Through counter-narratives presenting the U.S. as the norm violator, the U.S.’ normative authority is diminished by delegitimizing the benevolence of its democracy promotion as a pretext for interference and subordination. This limits the ability of the U.S. to command support and rally coalitions; if authority depends on legitimacy and consent, where they fray, command stiffens and credibility declines.

Humanitarian fallout magnified these normative headwinds. Broad financial and oil sanctions, marketed as tools of democratic restoration, exacerbated shortages of food, medicine, and industrial inputs; accelerated the collapse of public services; and deepened hyperinflation.<sup>236</sup> The regime weaponized suffering to delegitimize external pressure and to justify tighter control.<sup>237</sup> UN reporting and independent fact-finding missions documented systemic abuses by the regime while also noting the compounding effect of sanctions on the humanitarian emergency.<sup>238</sup> Human rights organizations criticized the broad sanctions, which acted as “collective punishment,” further eroding the moral claim that sanctions were about restoring democracy.<sup>239</sup> Thus, even as sanctions imposed real costs on elites, they also punished constituents whom liberal objectives claimed to protect. This contradiction weakens the universality claim of liberal norms and supplies adversaries with a ready counter-narrative of Western hypocrisy.

In response to this impasse, the Biden administration pivoted toward conditional engagement. In October 2023, negotiations in Barbados reached agreement; the U.S. issued a time-limited license easing sanctions on the oil and gas sector in exchange for commitments

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<sup>234</sup> Udeogu et al., “Political Economy of U.S.-Russian Hegemonic Struggle,” 84

<sup>235</sup> Farah and Babineau, “Extra-Regional Actors in Latin America,” 104; Lei Yu, “China’s Strategic Partnership with Latin America: A Fulcrum in China’s Rise,” *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (September 2015): 1066

<sup>236</sup> Gill and Brown, “Two Decades of Imperial Failure,” 7; Clare Ribando Seelke, “Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy,” *Current Politics and Economics of South and Central America* 13, no. 1 (2020): 11

<sup>237</sup> Gratius, “The West Against the Rest?” 144

<sup>238</sup> Rosales and Jiménez, “Venezuela: Autocratic Consolidation and Splintered Economic Liberalization,” 439; Ramsey and Smilde, *Recalibrating U.S. Policy in Venezuela*, 15.

<sup>239</sup> Ramsey and Smilde, *Recalibrating U.S. Policy in Venezuela*, 15; Udeogu et al., “Political Economy of U.S.-Russian Hegemonic Struggle,” 89.

toward competitive elections.<sup>240</sup> This move implicitly acknowledged that maximalist coercion had failed and that leverage now depended on calibrated incentives, multilateral coordination, and verifiable benchmarks. Normatively, the recalibration conceded that durable authority requires some alignment between tools and claimed principles, between the ends of democracy and the means that do not collapse society in the attempt to save it.

The recalibration's success, however, proved contingent on reciprocal compliance. When implementation faltered, the strategy of conditional engagement revealed its fragility. The Barbados accords sought to codify these conditions, tying sanctions relief to verifiable steps toward competitive elections under international observation.<sup>241</sup> The accords arrived after a period in which "the opposition had lost most institutional and electoral resources," even as it still compelled the government to hold "somewhat competitive (though certainly not free or fair) elections" in 2023–2024.<sup>242</sup> Yet when benchmarks slipped and opposition candidates were again barred, Washington reinstated most restrictions in April 2024 while allowing narrow corporate waivers.<sup>243</sup> María Corina Machado, a long-time opposition deputy with a critical record against Maduro's regime, and previously banned from politics, emerged as the clear victor in the opposition primaries but was swiftly disqualified by the regime, while a less polarizing former diplomat, Edmundo González, was nominated as a consensus substitute.<sup>244</sup> The government's reaffirmation of Machado's ban, arrests of campaign workers and the rights advocate Rocío San Miguel, and the forced nomination of González as the unity candidate demonstrated the limits of calibrated pressure.<sup>245</sup> The subsequent presidential election on 28 July 2024 was billed as the first competitive test of the Barbados Accords but unfolded under violations: retaining control over the electoral authority, security forces, and media, Maduro rejected international observation and pursued a campaign of "exclusions, arrests, and harassment of the opposition," ensuring structural asymmetry to the regime's advantage.<sup>246</sup> The July 2024 election confirmed this trajectory: transmissions were halted after roughly one-third of returns, and the CNE declared Maduro's win

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<sup>240</sup> Benedicte Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy? The Pivotal Case of the 2024 Presidential Elections in Venezuela," *Forum for Development Studies* 52, no. 2 (2025): 369.

<sup>241</sup> Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 369

<sup>242</sup> Gamboa, "Plebiscitary Override in Venezuela," 126.

<sup>243</sup> Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 370

<sup>244</sup> Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 369–370

<sup>245</sup> Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 369–370

<sup>246</sup> Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 370

without releasing precinct tallies.<sup>247</sup> The Carter Center and a UN expert panel deemed the process non-compliant with Venezuelan law and international standards, while an opposition reconstruction of tally sheets indicated a clear González victory, winning 67 percent of the vote to Maduro's 30 percent.<sup>248</sup> The evidence, however conclusive, did not break the regime's cohesion. With the CNE and military still behind him, Maduro rejected the defeat; protests that followed were met with more than 1,600 arrests and 30 deaths.<sup>249</sup> Fleeing persecution, opposition leaders went into hiding and exile.<sup>250</sup>

International reactions reflected the opposing normative hardlines, as the July 2024 vote "deepened the regime's legitimacy crisis" at home and abroad.<sup>251</sup> Although most of Latin America, as well as the U.S. and Europe "condemned" the fraud, their responses were disjointed: the U.S. , alongside several Latin American countries including Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay quickly recognized the opposition's results while the EU rejected Maduro's victory, dawdling recognition of González until September.<sup>252</sup> Chilean President Gabriel Boric took a sharper line by publicly criticizing the regime.<sup>253</sup> Within the OAS, twenty-two of thirty-five members called for an "impartial, independent verification;" and among the group, Panama announced intentions to address human-rights violations in Venezuela in the next session.<sup>254</sup> Still, posturing as mediators, some regional governments fractured along pragmatic rather than purely ideological lines. Despite noting the "troubling" nature of Maduro's "authoritarian traits," Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva initially kept channels open in part to preserve Brazil's "geopolitical ambitions," including ties through BRICS. Columbia's Gustavo Petro floated a "power-sharing solution" that neither Maduro nor Machado accepted. Mexico ultimately stepped back, remaining quiet following an August ruling by the pro-Maduro tribunal which confirmed his victory and "improperly" closed the case.<sup>255</sup> In contrast, Russia and Cuba

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<sup>247</sup> Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 370-371

<sup>248</sup> Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 371; Laura Gamboa, "Plebiscitary Override in Venezuela: Erosion of Democracy and Deepening Authoritarianism," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 712, no. 1 (2024): 130.

<sup>249</sup> Gamboa, "Plebiscitary Override in Venezuela," 130; Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 371.

<sup>250</sup> Gamboa, "Plebiscitary Override in Venezuela," 130.

<sup>251</sup> Víctor M. Mijares, "Legitimacy Crisis and Venezuela's Long Road to Democratic Transition," *GIGA Focus Latin America* 2024, no. 4 (August 2024), 1.

<sup>252</sup> Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 371-372.

<sup>253</sup> Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 371-372.

<sup>254</sup> Mijares, "Legitimacy Crisis and Venezuela's Long Road to Democratic Transition," 3.

<sup>255</sup> Mijares, "Legitimacy Crisis and Venezuela's Long Road to Democratic Transition," 3.

congratulated Maduro, invoking principles of non-interference over other countries' concern for "democratic standards."<sup>256</sup> Likewise, China called on the U.S. "for undue interference in Venezuela," defending Maduro as a bulwark against Western coercion.<sup>257</sup>

Migration pressures further complicated these alignments. The displacement of over seven million Venezuelans since 2015 has reshaped regional politics, forcing neighboring states to balance humanitarian obligations with border control and domestic constraints, and to favor stability and coordination over isolation.<sup>258</sup> Sovereignty concerns have reinforced this calculus: "effective migration control" and "population legibility" are treated as conditions for preserving authority, which in turn conditioned foreign-policy choices, managing migration as an exercise of sovereignty.<sup>259</sup> These competing pressures on regional and extra-regional actors underscore how humanitarian, economic, and strategic calculations undercut normative alignment. Persistent cooperation failures among democracy promoters through "policy inconsistency" and limited multilateral commitment help explain why expressed concern has not translated into unified enforcement, instead allowing autocratic quicksales in an illiberal marketplace.<sup>260</sup> As coordination erodes, regimes such as Maduro's can exploit a multipolar plurality of norms, institutions, and actors, turning geopolitics and power rivalries into a buffer against democratic accountability.

### ***3.5 Democracy-by-Coercion, Developmental Peace, and Counter-Peace***

The Venezuelan arena is best understood as a competitive marketplace of external models.<sup>261</sup> The U.S. strategy has relied on promoting democracy through coercion, combining broad sanctions, recognition of parallel executives, and regime isolation to force transition.<sup>262</sup> Its operative assumptions have been that economic collapse would compel regime change and democratic transition; that international recognition would generate domestic legitimacy; and that multilateral consensus could be mobilized to ratify a negotiated exit.<sup>263</sup> However, the results belie

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<sup>256</sup> Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 372-373.

<sup>257</sup> Bull, "Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?" 377.

<sup>258</sup> Mijares, "Legitimacy Crisis and Venezuela's Long Road to Democratic Transition," 4; Manav Johar, "Pitting Sovereignty Against Migration: The Case of the Venezuelan Refugee Crisis," *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities* 14, no. 1 (2024): 5.

<sup>259</sup> Johar, "Pitting Sovereignty Against Migration," 2, 4-6.

<sup>260</sup> Stefano Palestini, Luciano Quispe, and Diego Telias, "Autocracy Promotion in the Americas? Scrutinizing the Effect of China and Russia on Democracy Protection in Venezuela and Nicaragua," *Democratization* 32, no. 7 (2025): 16

<sup>261</sup> Bull & Rosales, "The Crisis in Venezuela," 11.

<sup>262</sup> Gratius, "The West Against the Rest?" 145

<sup>263</sup> Gamboa, "Plebiscitary Override in Venezuela," 128; Ellis, *The Influence of Extra-Hemispheric Actors*, 14-15.

the premises: sanctions devastated the economy but demobilized resistance by turning daily survival into the central preoccupation; recognition energized allies but failed to materialize power where it mattered, demonstrating the relevance of control over coercion.<sup>264</sup> Multilateralism fractured under U.S. presumptions, and with it the performative consensus on which liberal legitimacy relies.<sup>265</sup> Its inability to coerce democratic transition or enforce democratic standards is suggestive of the limitations it faces in both operational capacity and strategic leverage. The failures of coordination and cooperation are particularly illustrative of how operational capacity and strategic leverage compound: in Venezuela, bolshie American unilateralism and the volitional exacerbation of a humanitarian crisis represent ultimately “counterproductive” actions and diminish credibility of liberal intentions, opening space for adversaries to advance or exploit alternatives.<sup>266</sup> On losing credibility, the aforementioned outdated hemispheric primacy rhetoric and counter-peace actions in Venezuela serve as key examples of the U.S. employing illiberal means for strategic ends.

Russia’s approach exemplified counter-peace through active autocracy promotion using arms, advisors, financial lifelines, and information operations to stabilize allied regimes and impose costs on adversaries elsewhere.<sup>267</sup> This comported with its revanchist and Gerasimov-style logic: sustain anti-U.S. nodes to stretch American bandwidth and bargaining power in primary theaters.<sup>268</sup> Based on power-relations, the approach centers conflict management on coercive, interest-driven strategies to create stability through pacification.<sup>269</sup> Cuba supplied embedded intelligence and policing expertise, greatly increasing the regime’s efficiency of coercion.<sup>270</sup> In their countervail-to-survive approach, the aim is neither positive peace nor reconciliation but managed pacification at the core of counter-peace: hollow out negotiations, fragment the opposition, saturate the informational environment, and lock in elite privileges, even as institutions atrophy.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Udeogu et al., “Political Economy of U.S.-Russian Hegemonic Struggle,” 96; Rosales and Jiménez, “Venezuela: Autocratic Consolidation and Splintered Economic Liberalization,” 432.

<sup>265</sup> Ramsey and Smilde, *Recalibrating U.S. Policy in Venezuela*, 8-9

<sup>266</sup> Gratius, “The West Against the Rest?” 144; Palestini et al., “Autocracy Promotion in the Americas?” 13-14

<sup>267</sup> Thoene et al., “Russia in Latin America,” 632-634.

<sup>268</sup> Thoene et al., “Russia in Latin America,” 637

<sup>269</sup> Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka, *Failed Peacemaking*, 57

<sup>270</sup> Gratius, “The West Against the Rest?” 152

<sup>271</sup> Palestini et al., “Autocracy Promotion in the Americas?” 2, 5-6; Gratius, “The West Against the Rest?” 153; Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka, *Failed Peacemaking*, 46-51

China's developmental approach has been passive autocracy promotion through investment and infrastructure. Large oil-backed finance, infrastructure deals, and market access, coupled with normative deference to sovereignty and regime preference help to expand the Chinese theater.<sup>272</sup> Political conditionality was minimal and though repayment has been questionable, in Venezuela, stances of sovereignty trumped reform.<sup>273</sup> Chinese narratives disseminate the self-image of a benevolent hegemon in the region, encroaching on American self-image in Washington's "backyard."<sup>274</sup> Beijing's model is less theatrical than Moscow's, but equally constraining for liberal leverage: it furnishes regimes with alternatives that reduce the marginal utility of Western inducements and penalties. By obviating these leverages and structures, China repositions its model in the cynosure of order.<sup>275</sup>

These repertoires did not simply operate in parallel; they interacted to produce stalemate.<sup>276</sup> U.S. coercion raised the costs of neutrality for domestic elites, but Russian transactions, security guarantees, and Chinese finance raised the benefits of loyalty.<sup>277</sup> As humanitarian suffering mounted, norm entrepreneurship shifted. Sovereignty and non-interference were reframed as humanitarian virtues, while liberalism was cast as punitive. In this setting, hegemony became negotiable and authority pluralized. The cumulative effect was to disperse leverage across actors, transforming decisive power into marginal influence.<sup>278</sup>

### 3.6 Outcomes and Reflections

The outcome in Venezuela is neither peace nor transition but a managed stalemate and stability of scarcity, propped up by rival actors and domesticated by selective liberalization.<sup>279</sup> The regime preserved elite cohesion by distributing control over lucrative sectors and illicit economies, while colectivos and security forces suppressed protest and deterred defection.<sup>280</sup> Judicial

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<sup>272</sup> Gratius, "The West Against the Rest?" 150-151

<sup>273</sup> To and Acuña, "China and Venezuela," 3-5; Farah and Babineau, "Extra-Regional Actors in Latin America," 106

<sup>274</sup> Gonzalo Sebastián Paz, "China, United States and Hegemonic Challenge in Latin America: An Overview and Some Lessons from Previous Instances of Hegemonic Challenge in the Region," *The China Quarterly*, no. 209 (March 2012): 32.

<sup>275</sup> Pogodda, Richmond, and Visoka, *Failed Peacemaking*, 57-58

<sup>276</sup> Gratius, "The West Against the Rest?" 155.

<sup>277</sup> Ramsey and Smilde, *Recalibrating U.S. Policy in Venezuela*, 23; Ellis, *The Influence of Extra-Hemispheric Actors*, 3, 11.

<sup>278</sup> Bull and Rosales, "The Crisis in Venezuela," 9-13.

<sup>279</sup> Bull and Rosales, "The Crisis in Venezuela," 11; Rosales and Jiménez, "Venezuela: Autocratic Consolidation and Splintered Economic Liberalization," 434.

<sup>280</sup> Rosales and Jiménez, "Venezuela: Autocratic Consolidation and Splintered Economic Liberalization," 434, 439.

instruments and emergency decrees supplied a legal coloration to coercion.<sup>281</sup> Internationally, Russian oil-trading channels, Chinese finance, Cuban security assistance, and Iranian fuel have meanwhile kept the state solvent enough to endure.<sup>282</sup> Institutionally, UN paralysis and regional fragmentation deprived liberal actors of a unified stage for enforcement.<sup>283</sup> Normatively, the humanitarian toll of broad sanctions diminished the moral authority of democracy promotion.<sup>284</sup>

Three implications follow. First, capacity in a multipolar order is conditional: formidable toolkits do not translate into decisive outcomes when adversaries can offset effects through diversified patronage networks. Second, authority is contingent on performative coherence: when the means of democracy promotion contradict its stated ends, rivals can recode liberal intervention as hypocrisy and rally the language of sovereignty and non-interference. Third, leverage is now a dispersed resource: access to alternative finance, markets, arms, and diplomatic cover reduces the marginal effect of any single actor's pressure and raises the price of compliance. Venezuela is therefore a structural marker of systemic change. It registers the decline of coercive liberalism and the ascent of multipolar counter-peace and developmental peace, wherein sovereignty and regime security re-enter as legitimate public goods. The U.S. can still impose costs but struggles to forge outcomes; it can still mobilize coalitions but cannot monopolize legitimacy. For comparative purposes, Venezuela's trajectory foreshadows patterns observable in other contested theaters: where liberal consensus is fragmented, rivals can blunt coercion with relatively modest inputs by combining security, finance, and narrative shields. The equilibrium is grim: a humanitarian catastrophe stabilized by rival legitimacies.

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<sup>281</sup> Bull and Rosales, "The Crisis in Venezuela," 14; Mijares, "Legitimacy Crisis and Venezuela's Long Road to Democratic Transition," 6.

<sup>282</sup> Thoene et al., "Russia in Latin America," 633.

<sup>283</sup> Palestini et al., "Autocracy Promotion in the Americas?" 13.

<sup>284</sup> Udeogu et al., "Political Economy of U.S.-Russian Hegemonic Struggle," 89.

## 4. Syria

Syria's trajectory since 2011 illustrates how contested multipolarity and rival counter-peace practices reshaped U.S. approaches to peacebuilding.<sup>285</sup> Peacemaking shifted from liberal transition to geopolitical risk management, as Washington sought to contain threats, protect equities, and police fragmented orders in competition with Russia, Iran, Turkey, and others.<sup>286</sup> The UN-centered liberal toolkit, built for hegemonic alignment, was progressively displaced by regionalized arrangements and coercive conflict management led by rival powers, especially Russia.<sup>287</sup> This produced a stalemated peace defined by stabilization over settlement, transactional "reconciliations," and frozen lines of control, eroding U.S. normative authority and strategic leverage.<sup>288</sup> Conceptually, Syria exemplifies a broader reconfiguration of peacemaking under multipolar misalignment. UN roles narrowed, processes fragmented into regional spheres with thinner toolkits, and counter-peace architectures linked great-power competition with local spoiler networks. This environment incentivized stalemate and partition, privileging coercive "victor's peace" over liberal transformation and pushing Western policy toward order maintenance, stabilization, sanctions, and deterrence rather than settlement.<sup>289</sup>

### 4.1 From Uprising to Civil War

The Syrian conflict began in March 2011 as a wave of protests emerged in the southern city of Daraa following the arrest and torture of local youths for anti-regime graffiti.<sup>290</sup> Demonstrations quickly spread to other cities, including Homs, Hama, and Damascus, mobilizing around demands for political reform, the release of political prisoners, and an end to the pervasive security state.<sup>291</sup> The regime responded with escalating repression: security forces fired on

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<sup>285</sup> Mehran Kamrava, "Accessing the Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East," *Orbis* 62, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 2

<sup>286</sup> Daphne McCurdy and Frances Z. Brown, "Stabilization Assistance amid Geopolitical Competition: A Case Study of Eastern Syria," *CSIS Briefs* (January 2021): 1.

<sup>287</sup> Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Transactional Peacemaking: Warmakers as Peacemakers in the Political Marketplace of Peace Processes," *Contemporary Security Policy* 46, no. 2 (2025): 325

<sup>288</sup> Christopher Phillips, "The International System and the Syrian Civil War," *International Relations* 36, no. 3 (2022): 375; McCurdy and Brown, "Stabilization Assistance amid Geopolitical Competition," 5.

<sup>289</sup> Juline Beaujouan, "Power Peace: The Resolution of the Syrian Conflict in a Post-Liberal Era of Peacemaking," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (2024): 6-10, 12.

<sup>290</sup> Mehran Kamrava, "Accessing the Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East," *Orbis* 62, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 2

<sup>291</sup> Guy Burton, Nicholas Lyall, and Logan Pauley, "China and the Reconstruction of Syria," *The Middle East Journal* 75, no. 1 (2021): 58.

demonstrators, arrested activists, and deployed the military to key urban centers, consolidating the image of a regime willing to use overwhelming force to prevent organized political challenge.<sup>292</sup>

In this early phase, the U.S. and EU framed the crisis through the liberal peacebuilding template that had structured their post-Cold War interventions. Policy statements stressed political transition, human rights, and multilateral pressure through the UN, presuming that a combination of diplomatic isolation and conditional incentives could induce reform or produce regime change without large-scale intervention.<sup>293</sup> The Arab League attempted mediation in Syria which soon fell through, and the U.S. and EU pushed sanctions targeting the Assad regime.<sup>294</sup>

Opposition structures emerged in parallel. Exiled political figures and activists established the Syrian National Council (SNC) in August 2011, aiming to present a unified political front. Inside the country, army defectors and local armed groups coalesced into the Free Syrian Army (FSA), announcing their formation in July 2011.<sup>295</sup> However, the SNC struggled to consolidate authority over armed factions, while the FSA lacked central command. This early bifurcation between political and military opposition would prove decisive later in the conflict.

By 2012, protests had given way to open armed rebellion. Major clashes erupted in Homs, Idlib, and the Damascus suburbs. The Assad regime deployed artillery, armor, and air power, while opposition forces expanded their operations through loosely coordinated local brigades.<sup>296</sup> Regional sponsors, particularly Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, began channeling funds, arms, and logistical support to various opposition factions, often along ideological or strategic lines.<sup>297</sup> This internationalization rapidly multiplied armed actors and reduced the already weak coordination between them.

The U.S. increased diplomatic pressure but avoided direct military involvement. Washington and its European partners imposed additional sanctions and lobbied for UNSC action, expecting that isolation combined with domestic pressure would force political concessions. Early

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<sup>292</sup> Arthit Thongin, "Russia Amidst the Syrian Civil War," *RSU International Journal of College of Government* 4, no. 1 (2017): 47-48.

<sup>293</sup> Juline Beaujouan, "Power Peace: The Resolution of the Syrian Conflict in a Post-Liberal Era of Peacemaking," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (2024): 5.

<sup>294</sup> Christopher Phillips, "The International System and the Syrian Civil War," *International Relations* 36, no. 3 (2022): 375; McCurdy and Brown, "Stabilization Assistance amid Geopolitical Competition," 369; Courtney J. Fung, "Separating Intervention from Regime Change: China's Diplomatic Innovations at the UN Security Council Regarding the Syria Crisis," *The China Quarterly* 235 (2018): 696.

<sup>295</sup> Sara Hellmüller, "Peacemaking in a Shifting World Order: A Macro-Level Analysis of UN Mediation in Syria," *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 3 (2022): 545.

<sup>296</sup> Karim and Islam, "Syrian Crisis: Geopolitics and Implications," 109

<sup>297</sup> Phillips, "The International System and the Syrian Civil War," 370-373.

responses assumed that international consensus and conditional tools could induce regime change or negotiated transition without direct intervention.<sup>298</sup> Washington relied on sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and opposition support to steer the conflict toward transition. Recognizing the SNC and later the Opposition Coalition embodied an assumption that externally supported structures could drive political change.<sup>299</sup> Moscow and Beijing vetoed two resolutions in October 2011 and February 2012 that would have condemned the regime and opened the door to coercive measures.<sup>300</sup> These vetoes signaled the breakdown of international alignment around the liberal toolkit, leaving Western actors with shrinking coercive leverage even in the early phase of the war. This initial period reveals the misalignment between institutional language and material capacity. Western states operated on the assumption that conditional diplomacy could shape the conflict's trajectory, but the rapid militarization of the crisis, the regime's willingness to escalate, and the early externalization of support all undermined those assumptions. Liberal instruments persisted, but their leverage was already beginning to erode.

#### ***4.2 Internationalization and Fragmentation***

Throughout 2012, the conflict escalated into a nationwide civil war. Rebel forces seized territory in Idlib, parts of Aleppo province, and the Damascus countryside. In July, the FSA launched operations, marking the beginning of sustained armed confrontations in the capital.<sup>301</sup> The regime intensified its use of air power, artillery, and siege tactics, aiming to isolate and wear down opposition strongholds.<sup>302</sup>

Diplomatic efforts struggled to keep pace with battlefield realities. The Geneva I Communiqué of June 2012 proposed a transitional governing body with full executive powers.<sup>303</sup> However, the communiqué lacked enforcement mechanisms and reflected divergent interpretations between Western states, which saw it as a pathway to Assad's departure, and Russia and Iran, which viewed it as a negotiated transition without preconditions.

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<sup>298</sup> Beaujouan, "Power Peace," 5.

<sup>299</sup> Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Transactional Peacemaking: Warmakers as Peacemakers in the Political Marketplace of Peace Processes," *Contemporary Security Policy* 46, no. 2 (2025): 550-556

<sup>300</sup> Fung, "Separating Intervention from Regime Change," 696-700.

<sup>301</sup> Karim and Islam, "Syrian Crisis: Geopolitics and Implications," 113.

<sup>302</sup> Thongin, "Russia Amidst the Syrian Civil War," 57.

<sup>303</sup> Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Transactional Peacemaking: Warmakers as Peacemakers in the Political Marketplace of Peace Processes," *Contemporary Security Policy* 46, no. 2 (2025): 323.

This gap hardened after further UNSC vetoes in July 2012, which blocked Chapter VII authorization for sanctions or intervention. Annan's subsequent resignation underscored the collapse of diplomatic momentum.<sup>304</sup> In this vacuum, regional sponsors intensified unilateral support to favored factions. Turkey expanded cross-border logistical hubs, Qatar and Saudi Arabia financed and armed rival Islamist and nationalist groups, and private Gulf networks proliferated supply lines.<sup>305</sup> These streams of support amplified opposition fragmentation, creating an armed landscape in which no actor could aggregate political authority with coercive capability. U.S. policy remained calibrated around containment and conditional engagement. Covert programs supplied select armed groups through neighboring states, but these efforts produced limited operational impact and did not reverse battlefield trends.<sup>306</sup> U.S. regional allies backing rival factions, produced proliferation rather than coherence. The fractures exposed the limits of U.S. influence: material support and diplomatic access failed to translate into operational control. Coordination breakdowns eroded the opposition's negotiating capacity. Early U.S. involvement expanded access without leverage, dispersing influence without authority.<sup>307</sup> By the end of 2012, the conflict was no longer primarily a domestic contest but an externally structured proxy war.<sup>308</sup> The early liberal script of political transition through pressure and coordination was overwhelmed by overlapping networks of sponsorship and armed fragmentation. Normatively, the crisis became a contest over legitimacy and international order. Western governments invoked human rights, accountability, and Responsibility to Protect (R2P), while Russia and Iran promoted a sovereignty-first narrative, casting Western action as destabilizing. At the UNSC, repeated vetoes paralyzed liberal enforcement, exposing how the liberal toolkit depended on a consensus that no longer existed.<sup>309</sup> U.S. economic and diplomatic weight no longer yielded coercive capacity, and appeals to democratic reform carried diminishing authority amid rival, institutionalized claims to legitimacy. This shift narrowed the space in which diplomatic mechanisms could function, setting the stage for the stalemate that would define subsequent years.

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<sup>304</sup> Hellmüller, "Peacemaking in a Shifting World Order," 554-555

<sup>305</sup> Phillips, "The International System and the Syrian Civil War," 370-373.

<sup>306</sup> Hellmüller and Salaymeh, "Transactional Peacemaking," 550-556

<sup>307</sup> Phillips, "The International System and the Syrian Civil War," 370-373.

<sup>308</sup> Muharrem Ekşi, "The Syria Crisis as a Proxy War and the Return of the Realist Great Power Politics," *Uluslararası Kriz ve Siyaset Araştırmaları Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (2017): 109-110

<sup>309</sup> Muharrem Ekşi, "The Syria Crisis as a Proxy War and the Return of the Realist Great Power Politics," *Uluslararası Kriz ve Siyaset Araştırmaları Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (2017): 107-115

### ***4.3 Geneva and the Erosion of Transition***

By early 2013, the conflict was structured less by domestic bargaining than by the architecture of external sponsorship. Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia deepened their support for armed factions, while the opposition's political institutions struggled to assert control. The formation of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) in late 2012 was intended to consolidate political representation, but competition between external patrons prevented the emergence of a unified command structure.<sup>310</sup> No single actor could fuse political legitimacy with operational authority on the ground, and coordination remained fragmentary.

The Geneva I Communiqué of June 2012 became the nominal diplomatic framework for a transition. It envisioned a governing body with full executive powers, constitutional reform, and elections under UN supervision. Yet this framework rested on the assumption of major-power consensus. Repeated Russian and Chinese vetoes in the Security Council in 2012 and 2013 blocked Chapter VII measures, stripping the process of any coercive enforcement capacity. Kofi Annan's resignation as UN envoy in August 2012, followed by Lakhdar Brahimi's assumption of the post, underscored the fragility of the institutional framework.<sup>311</sup> The Geneva II conference in January 2014 convened more than thirty states and international organizations, but negotiations quickly stalled.<sup>312</sup> Western states anchored their position in liberal language, but without credible enforcement mechanisms their leverage remained rhetorical. These developments demonstrate how diplomatic frameworks persist as language even when their ability to shape the conflict erodes. Geneva neither collapsed nor produced outcomes; it became a hollow form through which power relations were merely mirrored. For the U.S., strategic leverage is undercut as its normative authority is challenged in international forums. Fragmentation of normative authority emerged early through the progressive dislocation of institutional vocabulary from the shifting distribution of coercive capacity. Importantly, this clarifies how enforcement can migrate without formal institutional rupture. As a nominal framework, the ability to compel action flows instead through external actors able to deliver outcomes, not through the multilateral bodies mandated by liberal processes.

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<sup>310</sup> Phillips, "The International System and the Syrian Civil War," 370-373.

<sup>311</sup> Hellmüller and Salaymeh, "Transactional Peacemaking," 323.

<sup>312</sup> Hellmüller, "Peacemaking in a Shifting World Order," 556

#### ***4.4 Chemical Weapons and the Counterterrorism Pivot***

In August 2013, Assad launched an attack in Ghouta using sarin weapons, killing over one thousand civilians, forcing the first direct strategic engagement between Washington and Moscow since the start of the conflict. The U.S. prepared limited military strikes, then suspended them after reaching a bilateral agreement with Russia to dismantle Syria's chemical arsenal. The U.S.-Russia Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons, adopted in September 2013 and codified in UNSC Resolution 2118, required Syria to declare its stockpiles and allow inspections and destruction of declared materials.<sup>313</sup> International inspectors and UN personnel assisted and oversaw the destruction of chemical stocks at the behest of the successful UNSC initiative. This sequence achieved immediate security objectives, averting U.S. strikes and dismantling declared arsenals, but it also repositioned Russia as an indispensable intermediary.<sup>314</sup> Enforcement had effectively migrated out of the Geneva process into a transactional U.S.-Russia arrangement, demonstrating how great-power coordination could override multilateral frameworks when liberal enforcement mechanisms faltered.

While Geneva remained formally intact, the war's center of gravity shifted elsewhere. By mid-2013, jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda factions, had consolidated territorial enclaves in Idlib and Aleppo, while ISIS emerged as an autonomous conquering force, declaring a "caliphate." ISIS's rapid territorial expansion in 2014, capturing Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Mosul in Iraq, recast the conflict as a transnational security threat.<sup>315</sup> In September 2014, the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS launched sustained airstrikes in Syria.<sup>316</sup> With counterterrorism the new priority, U.S. strategy revolved around local partnerships, most significantly with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG), which Turkey, a key regional ally and NATO partner, views as a security threat. This move strained U.S.-Turkey relations, pushing Turkey's misalignment towards Russia in the coalition. The ISIS defeat in Kobane in 2015 following intense U.S. air support and Kurdish ground operations solidified U.S. relations with YPG in the northeast, exacerbating tensions with Ankara.<sup>317</sup> This campaign displaced opposition

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<sup>313</sup> Thongin, "Russia Amidst the Syrian Civil War," 48; Hellmüller, "Peacemaking in a Shifting World Order," 556

<sup>314</sup> Juan Cole, "China, and Syria as an 'Ideological Exception'?" in *The Myth of Middle East Exceptionalism: Unfinished Social Movements* (London: Hurst, 2023): 9-10.

<sup>315</sup> Cole, "China, and Syria as an 'Ideological Exception'?", 12-16.

<sup>316</sup> Karim and Islam, "Syrian Crisis: Geopolitics and Implications," 114.

<sup>317</sup> Seçkin Köstem, "Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria: Geopolitical Alignment with Limits," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34, no. 6 (2021): 6.

factions from the international agenda and narrowed external engagement to counterterrorism. This pivot reveals a reconfiguration of leverage. Operational capacity expanded through military intervention, but political influence contracted. Diplomatic frameworks become less structured around transition and more around threat suppression. The same counterterrorism register was subsequently appropriated by Russia and the regime to justify their offensives, further displacing the liberal script.

#### ***4.5 Russian Intervention and the Astana Process***

In September 2015, Russia began direct air operations to stabilize the Assad regime.<sup>318</sup> Russian aircraft targeted opposition positions in Aleppo, coordinating with Iranian-backed militias and Hezbollah fighters. By late 2016, Assad's recapture of Aleppo followed months of siege, encirclement, and aerial bombardment. The fall of Aleppo reversed opposition momentum and signaled a decisive shift in the war's balance.<sup>319</sup> Moscow framed its intervention as counterterrorism, aligning its narrative with the coalition campaign while pursuing an independent coercive strategy.<sup>320</sup> Iran intensified militia deployments and logistical support, embedding itself in the regime's warfighting infrastructure.<sup>321</sup> Ankara, initially aligned with opposition backers, shifted its posture after a failed July 2016 coup attempt and deepened coordination with Moscow.<sup>322</sup> In August 2016, Operation Euphrates Shield seized Jarablus, al-Rai, Dabiq, and al-Bab from ISIS, creating a Turkish buffer zone north of Aleppo.<sup>323</sup>

The Astana Platform, launched in January 2017 by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, translated battlefield gains into diplomatic structures, sidelining the broken-down liberal peace of Geneva.<sup>324</sup> The guarantors established four de-escalation zones: Idlib, Eastern Ghouta, northern Homs, and the south.<sup>325</sup> Each zone was administered in a similar sequence: ceasefire agreements, siege, "reconciliation" deals, and population transfers, with Russian military police overseeing

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<sup>318</sup> Thongin, "Russia Amidst the Syrian Civil War," 57-58.

<sup>319</sup> Thongin, "Russia Amidst the Syrian Civil War," 62; Namig Abbasov and Emil A. Souleimanov, "After Assad: How Russia Is Losing the Middle East," *Middle East Policy* 32, no. 1 (2025): 3-4.

<sup>320</sup> Ekşi, "The Syria Crisis as a Proxy War," 118.

<sup>321</sup> Sinem Adar, et al., "The Fall of the Assad Regime: Regional and International Power Shifts," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* 9 (2025): 3.

<sup>322</sup> Köstem, "Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria," 7.

<sup>323</sup> Köstem, "Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria," 8.

<sup>324</sup> David Lewis, "Contesting Liberal Peace: Russia's Emerging Model of Conflict Management," *International Affairs* 98, no. 2 (2022): 664

<sup>325</sup> Köstem, "Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria," 10

handovers.<sup>326</sup> Turkish deployments expanded in northern Aleppo, counterbalancing Kurdish forces while coordinating indirectly with Russian positions.<sup>327</sup> In parallel, Astana did not replace Geneva; it displaced it through functional dominance. This is a key characteristic of counter peace, mimicking and displacing the formal peace process through parallel institutions to gain legitimacy and eclipse the former. With Astana, counter-peace illustrates a strategy of prominence, elevating Russia, Turkey, and Iran to preeminence among external actors, sidelining the West and any international coalition. The liberal vocabulary of ceasefires, negotiation, and reconciliation survive in Astana, but the coercive center of gravity shifted to a tripartite guarantor structure. In this way, counter-peace becomes institutionalized, embedding coercive power into procedural form. Meanwhile, the co-optation of liberal norms through the bastardization of definitions and practice further corrupts and delegitimizes the concepts in a way reminiscent of disinformation. Moreover, this erodes the Western monopoly on liberal norms expressed through processes as they are corrupted and reappropriated through mimicry.

#### ***4.6 Stabilization, Sanctions, and Competitive Peace Market***

By 2018, active frontlines had contracted into a fragmented order. Regime forces controlled the urban corridor from Damascus to Aleppo; U.S. influence was limited to the northeast, where the SDF held control; Turkish-backed armed groups occupied large parts of the north; and Idlib remained under the sway of al-Qaeda-affiliated Organization for the Liberation of al-Sham.<sup>328</sup> Russia expanded its military police presence and secured long-term base agreements at Hmeimim and Tartus.<sup>329</sup> Iran was entrenched through militia networks, commercial projects, and security coordination with the Assad regime.<sup>330</sup>

Economic pressure intensified through the Caesar Act (2020) and successive U.S. and EU sanctions, which targeted energy, construction, and banking sectors, deterring foreign investment and reconstruction financing.<sup>331</sup> As formal reconstruction stalled, alternative channels emerged through Russian and Iranian companies, regional traders, and war economy networks.<sup>332</sup> Local

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<sup>326</sup> Lewis, "Contesting Liberal Peace," 663

<sup>327</sup> Köstem, "Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria," 5-6.

<sup>328</sup> Burton, et al. "China and the Reconstruction of Syria," 59; Daphne McCurdy and Frances Z. Brown, "Stabilization Assistance amid Geopolitical Competition: A Case Study of Eastern Syria," *CSIS Briefs* (January 2021): 1-3; Köstem, "Russian-Turkish Cooperation in Syria," 5-6.

<sup>329</sup> Abbasov and Souleimanov, "After Assad," 2.

<sup>330</sup> Burton, Lyall, and Pauley, "China and the Reconstruction of Syria," 61-62

<sup>331</sup> Tarik Basbugoglu, "Syria: Understanding Assad's Unexpected Fall," *Political Insight* 16, no. 1 (2025):

<sup>332</sup> Abbasov and Souleimanov, "Russia is Losing the Middle East," 6.

governance became transactional: armed groups and councils negotiated access to resources, taxation rights, and service delivery, “extracting rents” through patronage systems in the “political marketplaces” that formed in “peace,” reflecting the coercive mediation.<sup>333</sup>

Meanwhile, Western engagement narrowed to stabilization assistance in non-regime areas. These programs focused on service provision, humanitarian access, and limited governance support but avoided steps that could imply political recognition. Funding flowed through NGOs and local councils rather than national institutions, producing uneven governance structures.<sup>334</sup> This highlights a crucial development in peace and stabilization operations. In Syria, stabilization aid, once viewed mainly as a humanitarian and technical measure and core component of liberal stabilization paradigms, is now playing a growing role as a strategic instrument in the geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and its competitors.<sup>335</sup> Stabilization in this phase no longer functioned as a bridge to political transition. Instead, it became a competitive marketplace of influence, where actors deployed economic instruments, security guarantees, and service provision to consolidate spheres of control. The liberal framework persisted as technical language without political traction, while rival powers embedded themselves through material presence. In this case, sidelined from peace processes with constrained operational capacity, the U.S. focused on its liberal stabilization, reforming and subsequently implementing it specifically as a weapon against adversarial influence. This illustrates a common theme where geopolitical competition trumps peace and consensus and stratagem masquerades liberal norms and institutions for advantage and dominance.

#### ***4.7 Outcomes and Reflections***

On December 8, 2024, the rebel coalition under Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham led a rapid offensive campaign that captured Damascus and overthrew the Assad regime. Assad’s collapse resulted from a confluence of shifting regional and international power dynamics, particularly Turkey’s active posture, Hezbollah’s contracting under Israeli strikes limiting Iran’s axis, and Russian constraint under their invasion of Ukraine.<sup>336</sup> For external actors, this ended more than a decade of competitive coercive governance. The structures that once allowed coercive actors to convert military control into political legitimacy collapsed under the same interdependence that had

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<sup>333</sup> Burton, Lyall, and Pauley, “China and the Reconstruction of Syria,” 60; Hellmüller and Salaymeh, “Transactional Peacemaking,” 314, 330.

<sup>334</sup> McCurdy and Brown, “Stabilization Assistance amid Geopolitical Competition.” 2

<sup>335</sup> McCurdy and Brown, “Stabilization Assistance amid Geopolitical Competition.” 1-2.

<sup>336</sup> Adar et al., “The Fall of the Assad Regime,” 1.

sustained them. External actors, having replaced settlement with management, discovered that management without reform yields neither durability nor recovery. The regime's demise was therefore not a triumph of containment but the exhaustion of a paradigm that mistook endurance for stability.

The case also reveals the character of legitimacy under multipolar conditions. Authority in Syria had depended on the ability to claim sponsorship from powerful actors rather than consent from citizens. When those actors withdrew or diverted attention, legitimacy dissolved with them. The liberal model in the sidelines, pressuring for reform while withholding recognition, was equally constrained, because its credibility rested on norms it could no longer enforce. Contradictions in the early liberal approach emerged quickly. Opposition fragmentation, jihadist ascendance, and external backing for the regime undermined the plausibility of transition. Although the U.S. retained economic and diplomatic weight, it lacked the means to compel political change. Liberal framings lost persuasive force amid institutionalized alternative claims to legitimacy. This failure marked not only lost momentum in Syria but also a broader contraction of U.S. influence in a fragmented order.<sup>337</sup> The norms and institutions through which the U.S. once translated values into influence and leverage could be co-opted by advantageous rivals, dramatically limiting American normative authority and strategic leverage in the conflict.

Multipolar order could balance interests but not sustain institutions. The combination produced a managed stagnation that unraveled the moment external support faltered. The sudden collapse in 2024 was not an operational success but the final expression of accumulated contradictions within an international order that had replaced transformation with order maintenance through stabilization. While the future of Syria remains precariously uncertain, the sudden fall of Assad's regime confirms that neither coercive control nor conditional assistance can reproduce legitimacy once the material and political scaffolding of order is withdrawn.

The Syrian conflict demonstrates how liberal frameworks falter once multipolar competition fragments authority and divides legitimacy. Across its arc, the U.S. and its allies possessed the resources to intervene, to fund opposition, and to sustain humanitarian and stabilization programs, yet the pattern of engagement reflected the logic of management rather than transformation. By the time the regime collapsed in December 2024, the institutions and

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<sup>337</sup> Phillips, "The International System and the Syrian Civil War," 367, 370-371, 373, 375

norms that had once defined international order no longer operated as a coherent system of authority.

The case demonstrates the geopolitics of multipolarity, where emergent power competition transforms intervention into a zero-sum contest for spheres of influence rather than a collective project of peace. Each actor's pursuit of control narrowed the space for compromise. The liberal process sought legitimacy through procedure and restraint, while its rivals claimed legitimacy through effectiveness and sovereignty. Neither achieved durability. When external sponsorship weakened and resources contracted, the arrangement collapsed, showing that equilibrium under multipolarity is sustained by competing dependencies rather than shared institutions.

For the U.S., Syria exposes the structural limits of engagement in this environment. Operational reach remained unmatched, but the absence of political coherence and authority turned capacity into inertia. Air power and sanctions could influence outcomes, yet the inability to transform short-term advantage into legitimate governance shows power without an organizing framework producing only temporary balance. The instruments of liberal engagement, diplomacy, aid, conditionality, lost leverage once legitimacy became contested among multiple centers of influence. Normative authority eroded as the language of liberal order was replicated by its competitors. Counter-peace blurred the distinction between legality and coercion, appropriating humanitarian and procedural vocabularies to mask exclusion and repression. Over time, the liberal framework's claim to universality became indistinguishable from the selective practices it criticized. The regime's collapse made that erosion visible: the end of one authoritarian system did not restore normative consensus, because the system of peace that replaced it lacked ideological clarity and institutional continuity. Strategic leverage declined for the same reason. Multipolar competition diffused influence across actors whose agendas converged only intermittently. Parallel financing, structures, and peace processes significantly erode strategic leverage, neutralizing coercion through competition. The U.S. could deny rivals full control but could not dictate a settlement. The ability to shape rules was replaced by the need to defend fragments of order against encroachment. Engagement became a defensive exercise in preserving access and credibility within an increasingly contested system.

The collapse of the Syrian regime thus exposes a deeper transformation in the relationship between legitimacy and power. Counter-peace had converted external rivalry into domestic order, but that order depended on endless subsidy. Its fall revealed that neither coercive stabilization nor

liberal containment can sustain authority once their enabling flows falter. The lesson is not that intervention is futile, but that influence now depends on the capacity to reconcile legitimacy with competition; to engage rivals without reducing peace to a calculus of denial.

Syria's experience therefore marks a turning point for U.S. engagement in a multipolar order. The case illustrates that the pursuit of stability through management produces exhaustion rather than resolution, and that the contest for spheres of influence constrains every actor within the limits of its own dependencies. Liberal peace cannot be restored by force or subsidy; it must be adapted to an environment where legitimacy is conditional and authority is plural. The collapse of the Syrian regime revealed that neither dominance nor withdrawal can yield sustainable order. What follows will depend on whether policy can move beyond containment toward a form of engagement that accepts competition yet still anchors peace in principles that outlast it.

## 5. Discussion

### *5.1 Peacebuilding as Competition*

Syria and Venezuela expose the structural transition from a unipolar order of coordination to a multipolar field of contestation. What once operated as a system of universal norms has become a market of rival frameworks, each offering a different conversion rate between legitimacy and control. The liberal project relies on consent manufactured through institutions and norms, yet that authority dissolves when others can supply the same services—security, finance, or recognition—without the liberal conditions attached. Multipolarity transforms peacebuilding into a competitive peace economy in which external actors exchange stabilization, access, and political cover as tradable commodities.

This economy is not governed by complementarity but by substitution. In both cases, the U.S., Russia, and China deploy distinct repertoires of peacebuilding that intersect without integration. Liberal instruments meet rival systems of protection and finance that neutralize their effects. Where coercion aims to compel reform, counter-peace guarantees shield regimes from its consequences; where democratization seeks to widen participation, developmental peace channels rents into loyalty; where human rights conditionality limits engagement, sovereignty discourse converts non-interference into moral superiority. The outcome is not balance but stasis. Rival models absorb the pressure exerted by others, preventing either coercion or reform from reaching decisive effect.

This interaction reflects the fragmentation of normative authority. Each framework defines peace in its own image and measures legitimacy by its own criteria. Liberal peace treats participation as virtue; developmental peace equates order with prosperity; counter-peace locates stability in subordination. These definitions coexist but do not converge. Their coexistence dissolves the possibility of shared benchmarks, and with it, the prospect of coordination. Multipolarity therefore produces not pluralism but cancellation. Competing systems of justification convert peacebuilding into a field of reciprocal vetoes, where influence depends less on the possession of power than on the capacity to nullify another's.

Syria and Venezuela illustrate how this logic materializes. In each, U.S. initiatives were not defeated but absorbed. Sanctions in Venezuela lost traction because alternative credit and oil markets bypassed their reach. Diplomatic isolation failed because rival actors offered legal and institutional recognition. In Syria, opposition support was counterbalanced by Russian airpower

and Iranian auxiliaries, while developmental reconstruction financing offered by China and Gulf states diluted the coercive intent of Western conditionality. These mechanisms did not reverse liberal peacebuilding; they rendered it inert. The capacity of each framework to offset the others produces a system that maintains conflict within tolerable bounds but prevents transformation.

The cumulative effect is structural neutralization. Multipolar peacebuilding does not restore equilibrium among powers; it suspends resolution itself. Each actor sustains enough leverage to obstruct but not enough to decide. Authority becomes episodic, exercised through provisional alignments and tactical exchanges rather than durable consensus. The market functions by inhibition. What appears as restraint is often the consequence of over-crowded influence, where every attempt at dominance encounters an equivalent countermeasure. Peace, in this setting, is no longer the outcome of settlement but the residue of competition.

## ***5.2 Influence and Regionalization***

Multipolarity converts peacebuilding into a geography of containment. Where unipolar liberalism imagined universality, rival actors now territorialize order. Influence is no longer exercised through global institutions but through regional spheres sustained by selective patronage. These zones reproduce the language of peace but redefine its substance. Stability becomes the defense of local hierarchies, not the reconstruction of institutions. The Syrian and Venezuelan cases show that once external actors anchor authority in discrete regions, peacebuilding ceases to be multilateral and becomes jurisdictional.

In both theaters, the liberal architecture fragmented into parallel systems. In Syria, Russian and Iranian intervention institutionalized coercive stabilization under their supervision, while the U.S. consolidated enclaves through the Syrian Democratic Forces and limited reconstruction financing. Each power administered a partial peace calibrated to its reach. Venezuela followed the same logic through economic and diplomatic patronage networks. Russian oil mediation, Chinese developmental finance, and Cuban security assistance entrenched the regime's survival architecture, while U.S. sanctions, recognition, and humanitarian programs constructed a rival circuit of legitimacy. Neither displaced the other. Each created bounded spaces of control that persisted without integration.

This spatial segmentation reflects a deeper reorganization of authority. Peacebuilding loses consensus in universal frameworks, now flowing instead through coalitions defined by geopolitics, regime type, and reciprocal interest. Institutions that once mediated between actors now record

their divergence. The UN Security Council becomes a venue for veto rather than consensus, and regional blocs such as BRICS pursue partial alignments that mirror their material dependencies. Furthermore, their establishment of parallel institutions removes the leverage to comply or coordinate. As coordination collapses, each actor embeds its own version of peace within its sphere, replicating the patterns of dependency and influence that once defined unipolar liberalism but without its integrative ambition.

The cumulative effect is an archipelago of localized orders that coexist under continuous tension. These orders do not merge into a multipolar equilibrium but remain provisional and overlapping. Boundaries are maintained not by shared norms but by deterrence. External actors respect limits only to avoid escalation. Peacebuilding thereby functions as a tool of spatial management rather than institutional reform. It contains instability within bounded zones while preventing any actor from achieving comprehensive settlement. The diffusion of authority produces stability through fragmentation.

This regionalization also transforms the meaning of sovereignty. Under liberal hegemony, sovereignty was conditional upon compliance with international norms. In the multipolar field it becomes a currency exchanged for protection. States align with external actors not to preserve autonomy but to secure survival. The actor's legitimacy substitutes for that of the domestic regime, and sovereignty becomes divisible among sponsors. In both Syria and Venezuela, the regime's endurance depended on this conversion. Each accepted partial loss of autonomy to foreign guarantors in exchange for insulation from Western coercion. The resulting hybrid sovereignty anchors spheres of influence while eroding the very concept of independence that each actor claims to defend.

Peacebuilding thus becomes the administrative language of territorial competition. Interventions no longer seek to produce shared governance but to freeze conflicts within recognizable limits. These limits are enforced by the capacity of rivals to block one another, not by any higher authority. What emerges is a world of regional custodianships where peace is neither negotiated nor imposed but suspended between incompatible claims.

### ***5.3 Zero-Sum Dynamics and the Erosion of Consensus***

Multipolarity recasts peacebuilding as a competitive economy of negation. Where unipolar order once produced shared standards, power dispersion produces offsetting strategies that turn cooperation into arithmetic balance. Each actor's advance triggers a compensatory response that

restores equilibrium by subtraction rather than by synthesis. The outcome is a system that sustains activity without convergence.

The U.S. continues to operate within frameworks premised on universality, while rivals proceed from positional logic. In both Syria and Venezuela, liberal peace instruments met countervailing repertoires that neutralized their coercive and normative force. Sanctions and conditional aid provoked the creation of alternative financing and trade networks; recognition of opposition bodies elicited counter-recognition through parallel institutions and alliances. Multilateral diplomacy, once the medium of consensus, became a stage for reciprocal veto. The UN, designed to embody collective will, now functions as a mechanism through which rival powers block one another's initiatives. Each action invites an equal and opposite reaction until resolution itself becomes structurally impossible.

The erosion of consensus reflects a deeper shift in the meaning of legitimacy. Under liberal hegemony, legitimacy flowed from norms presumed universal and from institutions that translated them into authority. In the multipolar field, legitimacy is manufactured through contest. Competing actors no longer appeal to shared principles, but construct narratives of legality and virtue suited to their strategic purpose. The result is a landscape of overlapping moral claims that cancel one another out. The U.S. presents intervention as the defense of human rights; Russia and China portray it as imperial coercion; regional actors justify their involvement as protection of sovereignty or stability. Each vocabulary is internally coherent and externally void. When legitimacy is pluralized, it ceases to constrain behavior.

The zero-sum dynamic transforms the function of peacebuilding. Its purpose is no longer to resolve conflict but to prevent any actor from resolving it on terms unfavorable to others. Syria's stalemate persists not because peace is unattainable but because its attainment would redistribute advantage. The same logic governs Venezuela, where negotiated transition would eliminate the structural leverage that external actors derive from the regime's survival. In both theaters, the equilibrium rests on endurance, not settlement. Violence recedes where interests intersect, revives where they diverge, and remains confined within limits that preserve the competitive order.

For the U.S., this environment imposes strategic compression. Power once translated directly into influence through institutions that magnified its reach. Multipolarity breaks that chain. Material superiority no longer yields operational control when adversaries can offset its effects through selective engagement. Even allies adopt hedging behavior, cooperating in some domains

while aligning with rivals in others. The liberal claim to leadership erodes as states learn to arbitrate among competing actors. Consensus becomes transactional, and cooperation depends on temporary coincidence rather than shared conviction.

The structural consequence is stagnation disguised as stability. Each actor maintains the capacity to prevent defeat but not to impose order. Collective outcomes are constrained by the lowest common denominator of tolerance among rivals. The liberal peace collapses into procedural maintenance, while alternative models entrench their influence by exploiting the absence of a unifying principle. The system endures because no one can alter it without risking wider conflict. Peacebuilding in this setting is self-limiting: its success lies in its failure to transform.

#### ***5.4 Implications for the U.S.***

The diffusion of power has not eliminated American influence but has stripped it of decisiveness. The U.S. retains vast material resources, global reach, and institutional presence, yet these no longer guarantee control over outcomes. Multipolarity confines that power within a competitive system that converts strength into counterweight. Each exercise of leverage activates mechanisms of resistance that dilute its effect. Sanctions invite alternative financing. Interventions provoke rival patronage. Diplomatic pressure produces institutional gridlock. The tools remain formidable but no longer cumulative.

The erosion of operational capacity is structural, not circumstantial. The liberal peace relied on vertical integration between military, economic, and normative instruments. That alignment allowed the U.S. to translate resources into influence through multilateral coordination and normative appeal. As competitors fragment that integration, each component operates in isolation. Military deterrence no longer supports diplomacy when rivals can veto enforcement at the UN. Economic power loses reach when alternative markets and credit systems absorb pressure. Normative authority declines when liberal values are reframed as self-serving ideology. The coherence that once magnified American action has been replaced by friction that absorbs it.

Normative authority has suffered the most visible decline. The liberal order's legitimacy rested on the presumption that its rules applied universally. That presumption collapses once compliance is contested and alternatives exist. The exposure of hypocrisy in Iraq and Afghanistan, the uneven application of human rights norms, and the strategic use of sanctions have reduced moral credibility. Multipolarity magnifies these weaknesses by giving rivals the means to formalize dissent. Sovereignty and non-interference, once marginal principles, have become the

idioms through which resistance acquires legitimacy. The U.S. continues to speak the language of universalism, but its audience now hears conditionality. Authority derived from example has become authority by assertion, and assertion without consensus carries little weight.

Strategic leverage has likewise contracted. The U.S. can still shape costs and incentives but not final outcomes. Its power operates as a constraint on adversaries, not as a determinant of settlements. The ability to impose penalties exceeds the capacity to secure compliance. In both Syria and Venezuela, coercive instruments produced disruption without transformation. The regimes endured because rival actors absorbed the external pressure and recoded it as proof of sovereignty. The liberal toolkit thus generates diminishing returns. Each new sanction or diplomatic initiative reproduces the pattern of partial effect and compensatory reaction. Influence circulates but does not accumulate.

The broader implication is that peacebuilding has ceased to serve as an instrument of liberal expansion and now functions as a domain of strategic containment. For the U.S., participation in peace processes is no longer a means of consolidating order but of managing exposure. Engagement sustains presence and visibility, yet its principal achievement is to prevent exclusion. In this sense, the U.S. remains central to global governance but no longer commands it. Leadership persists as inertia rather than as initiative.

This transformation also redefines the meaning of success. In a competitive peace economy, stability achieved through fragmentation is preferable to transformation that empowers rivals. The U.S. thus calibrates its objectives to avoid defeat rather than to secure renewal. The pursuit of comprehensive settlement has given way to the management of partial outcomes that preserve residual influence. The liberal project endures as an administrative habit supported by institutions that can no longer deliver consensus. What remains is a framework that reproduces American engagement without reaffirming American primacy.

## **Conclusion**

The reconfiguration of the international order has transformed peacebuilding from a universal project into a competitive system of governance. The U.S., once the organizing power of global reconstruction, now operates within a dispersed field where influence is contingent and authority is plural. Multipolarity has not abolished liberal norms but has deprived them of

monopoly. What remains is a landscape in which multiple actors advance incompatible definitions of peace, each sustained by its own networks of legitimacy, finance, and coercion.

The Syria and Venezuela cases reveal the structural mechanics of this transition. In both, U.S. engagement collided with rival repertoires that displaced liberal frameworks without replacing them. Russia and Iran subordinated political reform to coercive stabilization. China transformed development into strategic patronage. Regional partners recast sovereignty as moral defense. These interactions produced not alternative orders but enduring stalemates that preserved influence while foreclosing resolution. The liberal model, designed to integrate, now competes on equal terms with models that divide. Its outcomes are diluted by the very plurality that once promised inclusion.

This condition marks the exhaustion of unipolar peacebuilding as a system of authority. The institutions built to universalize liberal norms now serve as arenas of contestation. Consensus, once manufactured through coordination, must now be negotiated among powers that recognize no higher arbiter. The UN remains central but paralyzed. The EU maintains technical leadership but lacks coercive reach. The U.S. continues to frame interventions in moral terms but cannot compel assent. The resulting order functions through mutual containment rather than shared conviction.

Multipolarity also exposes the fragility of the liberal peace's theoretical assumptions. Its claim to universality rested on the coincidence of hegemony and legitimacy. Once hegemony fractures, legitimacy becomes conditional. The belief that liberal governance and global stability are mutually reinforcing gives way to a recognition that they may be incompatible. Peacebuilding in this environment can no longer presume consensus around democracy, markets, or rights. It must operate within a marketplace of norms where sovereignty, stability, and development carry equal, and often opposing, weight.

For the U.S., adaptation will require a redefinition of purpose. The management of competition cannot be mistaken for its resolution. Sustaining credibility will depend less on asserting universality than on demonstrating restraint and consistency. Legitimacy must be rebuilt through conduct that narrows the gap between principle and practice. In a system where rivals can mirror and counter every move, moral authority becomes the only form of power that cannot be offset. The preservation of influence will depend on credibility rather than coercion.

The multipolar order will not restore balance in the classical sense but will institutionalize competition as its organizing condition. Peacebuilding will remain necessary yet perpetually incomplete. The U.S. can no longer define peace as the universalization of its own institutions. It must instead learn to navigate a field where coexistence substitutes for consensus. The alabaster promise of liberal order endures only as an inheritance of memory. What follows is a peace that reflects the distribution of power rather than the triumph of ideals, a peace sustained by limits rather than conviction.

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