

**BEYOND POWER POLITICS: LIBERAL AND
CONSTRUCTIVIST CRITIQUES OF REALISM AND THEIR
CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE**

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ABSTRACT: Realism has provided a concise explanation of state behaviour based on anarchy, power struggle, and self-help since it became the leading grand theory of international relations. However, by the end of the 20th century, constructivism and liberalism had launched serious objections that changed the direction of academic research. This study uses a qualitative interpretive approach and draws on a broad literature review of classic works. It systematically contrasts constructivism's assumption that ideas, identities, and shared beliefs fundamentally determine state interests with liberalism's emphasis on institutions, economic interdependence, and democratic norms, as well as realism's materialist perspective. The analysis shows that the fundamental contributions of liberalism have greatly broadened the toolset for understanding cooperation in anarchy. Constructivism emphasises both the strength of normative dissemination and the flexibility of state identities. However, there are issues with both schools: constructivist explanations can downplay the enduring role of material incentives, while liberal optimism is tested by non-democratic conflict players. The resurgence of great-power rivalry has reinvigorated realist scholarship while simultaneously exposing the limits of purely ideational or institutionalist explanations. This study concludes that the dynamic interaction of institutions, ideas, and power in modern international affairs cannot be adequately captured by a single grand theory. A more integrative research strategy is advised, one that systematically evaluates normative and material variables against comparative empirical evidence across diverse regional contexts.

Keywords: Constructivism, Democratic Peace, Realism, Liberalism, Power Politics, Liberal International Order, Norm Contestation

INTRODUCTION

Scholars of international relations have attempted to explain the dynamics and behaviour of states in the international system using a set of ideas, otherwise referred to as grand theories. These theories, which include realism, liberalism, and constructivism, have not only shaped the way state actions are interpreted in the international system, but they also provide distinct lenses for analysing international politics. However, liberalism and constructivism have offered substantial criticisms of realism to provide alternative perspectives and fresh insights into state behaviour and the international system. As a result, this study examines the basic arguments of realism, drawing insights from the works of scholars in the field and interpreting them along Morgenthau's principles. It also examines the alternative philosophical overview of the international system

presented by liberalism and constructivism through their critique of realism, beginning with an exploration of the waves of grand debate. The study evaluates the insights and research questions that liberalism and constructivism bring to the field of International Relations with a critical analysis of the useful research agenda that these theories offer. In the final analysis, the study assesses the present reality with liberal IR and constructivism in terms of their relevance, particularly against the backdrop of democratic backsliding, resurgent nationalism, and great-power revisionism that define the post-2022 international landscape. While a tripartite realism-liberalism-constructivist debate has been well established in the literature, previous studies have not been able to reconcile all three perspectives under the conditions of the post-2022 revisionism theme, which is characterised by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, growing Sino-American rivalry and the paralysis of multilateral institutions. In view of this, this study aims to question if and how much the critique of realism by liberals and constructivists can still explain in such a context of renewed great power competition.

Grand theories offer different viewpoints on analysing the international system. Realism emphasises the dominance of anarchy in the world and the conflict being an integral and indispensable attribute of the global system. This is connected with power struggles that propel states to seek means to subdue one another. Realism underscores the conflictual and competitive nature of the international system. It hinges on the race by states to undermine each other in the inherent quest for material power and security (Blagden & Porter, 2021). Meanwhile, the absence of an overarching authority to regulate and control power relations among states makes the theme of power acquisition and retention a dominant feature of realism (Ikenberry, 2009). To this end, global governance is characterised by states' self-help, resulting in competition, conflict of interests, and insecurity. Unlike Morgenthau (1948), Waltz (1979) did not believe that the essence of human nature itself was the root of interstate conflict, but rather that the anarchic structure of the international system itself was. This distinction, which highlighted the differences between human nature and the anarchic international system, was a constant feature of theoretical debates in the decades that followed.

Liberal international relations challenge the realist's political worldview, deriding its pessimistic notion and emphasising the role of institutional cooperation, economic interdependence, and democracy in promoting state relations. Liberalism, which draws inspiration from the works of Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, advocates for a global system guided by democratic norms and international law to counter the prevailing anarchic tendencies envisioned by realism (Ikenberry, 2009). Moravcsik's (1997) systematic reformulation laid the foundations of liberal theory in terms of domestic state-society relations, in which the configuration of societal preferences (rather than the distribution of material capabilities) plays the most basic role in understanding state behaviour in world politics.

Constructivism, on the other hand, emerged as a counter-perspective to the realist and liberal principles. It holds that international politics is influenced by norms, ideas, and identities, rather than material factors such as power and resources. As Wendt (1992) puts it, 'anarchy is what states make of it', (p. 395), emphasising the notion that social interactions and norms influence state behaviour. Constructivism acknowledges and puts emphasis on the fluidity of state interests and identities, which emerge as a result of persistent interaction and socialisation (Palan, 2000). This

challenges the realist idea of a static understanding of state interests and its simplistic view of anarchy as a source of conflict. Since the early 1990s, the constructivist agenda has grown significantly and has been used to account for the spread of common conceptions of 'appropriate behaviour' within the international system and how these standards influence identities over time. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) developed the notion of the life cycle of norms - emergence, cascade, and internalisation - which has proved useful for explaining how common standards of 'appropriate behaviour' spread within the international system and influence state identity over time.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative interpretive design rather than testing a hypothesis with one data set to compare with several grand theories. The relevant literature was assembled purposively in two layers. The first layer consists of statements considered the backbone of each tradition: Morgenthau (1948) and Waltz (1979) for realism; Moravcsik (1997) and Keohane (1984, 1988) for liberalism; and Wendt (1992, 1999) and Katzenstein (1996) for constructivism. The second layer includes more recent scholarship from 2019 to 2024, which addresses Great Power Revisionism, the Liberal International Order, and norm contestation, identified through purposeful searches of International Security, International Organisation, and International Studies Quarterly. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs and edited volumes that explicitly theorise the assumptions, causal mechanisms, or normative claims of at least one of the three traditions were included; sources that provided descriptive commentary on current events but whose authors did not go so far as to theorise the assumptions, causal mechanisms, or normative claims of at least one of the traditions were excluded. The comparative interpretation itself works by triangulating each of the core ontological assumptions, how each tradition posits a source of state interest, and how each tradition uses it to predict against three live empirical situations that are introduced later in the analysis: the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the wars in Gaza and Sudan, and the inability of the UN Security Council to act. The study's claims concerning the comparative relevance of the three traditions are made through an analytic method of juxtaposing a structured, theory-by-theory and case-by-case analysis of the traditions, rather than statistical inference.

Basic Arguments of Realism

Described as the oldest and most dominant theory of international politics (Walt, 2017), realism emphasises the notion of state security. It presupposes that states are motivated by the need to maintain security. However, in the absence of a regulatory agency or actor to ensure this security, states resort to self-help to survive in the international system. Meanwhile, the need for security is driven by the state's conflict of interest, the desire for power, and states' asymmetric possession of resources, which increases the chances of anarchy (Walt, 2017). Realism focuses on securing peace, security, and civil rights in international politics. It moves away from the moral prescriptions of Kant and Rousseau and offers a more practical and realistic approach to politics (North, 2010). Waltz (1979) modified this model into structural realism, which highlights that the anarchic ordering principle of the international system, not the nature of human beings nor the characteristics of individuals, explains the recurring international system patterns of competition and balancing.

According to Cristol (2009), realism may be viewed as an amoral or potentially immoral theory due to its penchant for promoting states' pursuit of national interest without recourse for morals in foreign policy decision-making. However, Galston (2010) opines that politics is not amoral or immoral, 'rather, appropriate standards of valuation arise from within politics rather than from an external moral standpoint' (p. 387). Galston (2010) puts it more crudely when he asserts that 'realists see political conflict as ubiquitous, perennial, ineradicable, and they regard political moralists as being far too sanguine about the possibility of achieving either normative or practical consensus' (p. 396).

In Morgenthau's view of realism, power trumps morality. This is properly espoused in his principles of realism, which emphasise objectivity, rationality, and the centrality of power. Morgenthau opines that actors behave rationally and make decisions by considering rational alternatives. While this may lead us to conclude that Morgenthau favours rationality, his criticism of rationalism points otherwise. He argued that rational decision-making is flawed and that rational processes could be driven by irrational impulses. This contradistinction between his critique of rationalism and his advocacy for rationality reveals a lingering paradox. It therefore calls for the careful application of objectivity and rationality in politics. Morgenthau further highlights the centrality of power in international relations and conceives of interest in terms of power, describing power as the currency of diplomacy. That is, power in international politics is both a means to achieve a specific interest and an end for guaranteeing state survival. Meanwhile, Morgenthau does not advocate for a completely power-driven approach, suggesting that morality plays a crucial role in politics. He cautions against the universal application of moral principles to state actions to avoid an imminent threat to state existence. There was a tension in Morgenthau's thinking: between the descriptive aspect that power rules state action and the normative aspect that statesmanship must be moral in some way (Galston, 2010), a tension that was later the target of more thorough-going critiques of the more structural determinism of neorealism.

Rejecting The Old: Liberal and Constructivist Critique of Realism

Liberalism and Constructivism, by critiquing realism, offer alternative philosophical explanations of the nature of the international system. While realism focuses on power, anarchy, and order, liberalism emphasises interdependence and progressive change. These standpoints have collectively shaped history and historical events over time. These opposing views, referred to as a 'grand debate' by Ikenberry (2009) underscore the various phases of the arguments which began with realism and idealism in 1930. Realism was challenged by scientific methods in 1960 and by transnational liberalism in 1970. By 1980, the debate was between neo-realism and neo-liberalism, and by 1990, the debate was between rationalists and constructivists. Ikenberry (2009) observes that in 1990, the field of international relations was dominated by the idea of democratic peace, with liberals preoccupied with explaining the reasons why democracies seldom go to war with one another and how democracy promotes restraint, commitments, and long-term cooperation.

The field was shaped by the contributions of scholars such as Andrew Moravcsik, who introduced the idea of 'structural liberalism', which linked state behaviour to domestic societal preferences, as against 'structural realism', emphasising power dynamics in an anarchic system. However, liberalism was not defined as an idealistic approach, as realists had long claimed; instead,

Moravcsik (1997) described it in terms of three variants of the liberal theory: ideational, commercial, and republican. This tripartite distinction, which replaced the idealistic view of liberalism with a more rigorous and positivist one, provided the field with a more sophisticated and empirically 'coequal' alternative to realism and institutionalism, and marked the emergence of liberalism as the paradigm that Moravcsik termed 'empirically coequal'. Moreover, another approach engendered a 'liberal order' categorised by economic interdependence, rule-based relations, and cooperative security agreements. To this end, the pillars of a liberal theory emerged: democratic peace, economic interdependence, and international institutions. Thus, while realism emphasises the rise and fall of states, liberalism highlights the opportunities for democracies to cooperate and advance a rule-based international order (Ikenberry, 2009; Rousseau & Walker, 2009).

Liberalism focuses on the contributions of individual rights, progress, and human reason to peaceful relations between states. To this end, it offers key postulations. First, it offers the idea of a democratic peace theory, which contends that democratic states are less likely to engage in conflict with one another. Second, the idea of economic interdependence among states fosters peace as states engage more in international trade and investment. Third, democracies are poised to resolve disputes through international institutions (Rousseau & Walker, 2009). Russett and Oneal (2001) empirically integrated these three elements in their triangulating peace framework, which showed in large-N statistical analysis that both democracy and trade and IGOs are independently and jointly correlated with a decrease in militarised conflict, which they labelled the 'Kantian tripod' of liberal peace.

The institutionalist strand of this tradition is most clearly expressed in Keohane (1984), who finds that as the number of states decreases and one of the most powerful states wanes, international regimes remain able to provide the stability of expectations, reduce transaction costs and provide information necessary for states to cooperate. It is important because it provides a materialist and rationalist explanation for the persistence of institutions which is not based on the internalisation of norms or shared identity, unlike the liberal institutionalist explanation of cooperation discussed below.

While the origin of constructivism can be traced to three different epochs: Deutsch and Jervis; post-positivist ideas; and international relations theory (Balzacq, 2009), it was Robert Keohane in his presidential speech at the International Studies Association in 1988 who mentioned that 'the intellectual predominance of the rationalistic approach has been challenged by a 'reflective' approach, which stresses the impact of human subjectivity and the embeddedness of contemporary international institutions in pre-existing practices' (Keohane, 1988, p. 379). Keohane's submission is rooted in the works of interpretive scholars such as Alker, Ashley, Kratochwil, and Ruggie, who have adopted a sociological approach to studying the role of institutional norms, cultural practices, social forces, and values in influencing state behaviour. Jung (2019) attributes the rise of constructivism to three factors: the response of neorealists and neoliberals to critical theory critiques, the inability of rationalists to explain the international change occasioned by the Cold War and the emergence of insights from third debate theories. As a result, the 1990s became dominated by the debate between the rationalists and constructivists, leading to the rise of constructivism, categorised under the third wave of the great debate identified by Ikenberry.

As a broad movement, constructivism comprises various schools of thought such as variants of Marxism, Symbolic Interactionism, Weberian interpretative sociology, post-structuralism, Veblenian institutionalism, and hermeneutics. The field has benefited from the contributions of scholars such as Koslowski, Kratochwil, and Onuf (Palan, 2000). Constructivism focuses on human actions and interactions that shape the material world based on evolving norms and interpretations. Here, attention is drawn to nonmaterial factors such as culture, ideas, and norms, emphasising how interests and identities in the international system are shaped by shared beliefs (Jung, 2019). The core assumptions of constructivism, according to Finnemore and Sikkink (2001, p. 393) are: (a) human interaction is shaped primarily by ideational factors, not simply material ones; (b) the most important ideational factors are widely shared or 'intersubjective' beliefs, which are not reducible to individuals; and (c) these shared beliefs construct the interests and identities of a purposive actor. Wendt's (1999) Social Theory of International Politics carried these assumptions into a structural idealism, in which the Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian 'cultures of anarchy' were seen as intersubjective understandings that could influence system outcomes in different ways at their respective systemic levels.

In his edited volume (1996), Katzenstein takes this structural idealism to the empirical level of the study of security policy and argues, based on case studies of Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union, that states define what a security interest is in their security policy, first based on norms and collective identities, rather than material threat assessments. This volume not only offers comparative empirical material to support the constructivist critique of realism, but also goes beyond the metatheoretical assertion, underlining the idea that state interests are constituted and not given. One of the bases for constructivists' rejection of realism is realism's focus on structure rather than history. Moreover, realism is considered the opposite of constructivism due to its inability to explain the incidence of change in global politics, whereas constructivism focuses on change (Sterling-Folker, 2002). Constructivism has become a relevant framework for interpreting state behaviour in international politics. While it has been criticised as having a broad boundary that accommodates realism and liberalism, it is distinct.

From the foregoing, both liberal and constructivist theorists have opposing views against realism. Liberal theorists maintain that realists' focus on power and conflict undermines the potential of economic interdependence and the role of institutions in fostering peace (Harrison, 2002). They altogether reject realism's deterministic view of anarchy, suggesting that cooperation can mitigate the challenges posed in an anarchic international system (Ikenberry, 2009). Meanwhile, constructivists contend that the materialist assumptions of realism do not consider the role of norms, ideas, and beliefs in shaping state behaviour. Wendt (1999) and Copeland (2006) critique realism's reductionist approach to anarchy and its assumption that state interests are fixed.

Liberalism and constructivism may differ in their core argument and assumptions, yet both challenge realism's deterministic view of international politics. The two theories argue against realism's narrow view of state behaviour being driven by power and conflict; rather, they espouse social factors such as cooperation, institutions, and norms. Liberalism's emphasis on institutions and economic interdependence is given a wider focus by constructivism's notion of norms, identities, and ideas as shaping state behaviour. This viewpoint is supported by Adler and Barnett (1998), who submit that constructivism expands the liberalist idea by examining how norms shape

state identities and interests, further increasing the boundary of analysis of international cooperation. Importantly, however, the connection between them is not additive; rather, constructivists have internally challenged the liberal assumptions (whether the democratic peace thesis is based on social-constructive mechanisms (shared norms, mutual trust, socialised identities) or on incentives embedded in structures and institutions is something that neorealists could in principle accept) (Risse, 2000).

What Insights?

The above explores liberalism and constructivism's criticism of realism, highlighting the major flaws in the realist perspective. It is therefore imperative to provide an account of the insights they provide and the fundamental questions resulting therefrom. Liberalism advances the democratic peace theory, which emphasises the need for cooperation and peace. Liberals' argument that democracies are less likely to engage in war with one another due to economic interdependence offers useful insights into the role of democracy as a system for promoting peace. In addition to increasing the popularity of democracy among states, it critiques authoritarianism. Meanwhile, the US as a liberal democratic state has significantly shaped the theory and by extension, the field of IR (Ikenberry, 2009). By lending its voice to the theory, the US has emerged as a bastion of democracy and exported its ideals of IR.

Furthermore, the theory highlights the importance of international organisations in providing alternatives to the absence of a regulatory body and the need for self-help prescribed by realism. Such institutions increase the chances of economic and social cooperation among states. It is against this backdrop that institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the World Trade Organization have emerged to promote stability and reduce the chances of conflict around the world. These institutions promote economic interdependence among states by breaking down barriers to trade and commerce. However, a fundamental question to ask here is: given liberalism's rejection of power politics and its emphasis on democratic peace, economic interdependence, and international institutions, does it truly promote peace? One may assert that the answer lies in the growing relevance of international institutions in the post-Cold War era and the reduction in power relations and conflict. However, when one considers the ongoing global conflicts such as the Russian-Ukraine war, the Israel-Hamas conflict, and the imbroglio in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the authority of the relevant institutions is questioned. On this note, Mearsheimer (2019) makes the argument that the liberal international order was bound to fail, in his own phrase, because it rested on the hubristic assumption that US unipolarity could sustain an extensive array of liberal norms and institutions across regions of deeply entrenched nationalist and great-power resistance. From a realist perspective, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia is akin to a confrontation between a revisionist nation's security agenda and Western liberal expansionism, as Mearsheimer (2019) argues.

Meanwhile, the counterargument to this lies in the 'democratic' supposition of the liberal theory. A cursory overview of these conflicts will reveal that the states involved are not democratic. Thus, the assumption that conflict is less likely to take place between democratic states holds. Draper and Haggard (2023) also highlight the challenges that the rise of authoritarian great powers since the 2010s presents for liberal IR theory: it is no longer just a theory facing non-democratic 'spoiler

states' on the fringes of the liberal international order, but one confronting powerful revisionist states that can challenge the normative basis of this international order.

Constructivism, on the other hand, rejects the notion of viewing state interests as fixed and a result of material factors, arguing that state interests are socially constructed through interactions and shared understandings. Concerning security, constructivism holds that states with shared norms and identities often cooperate to achieve collective security. This is against the realist submission of states' individualistic quest for power and control. That is, global civil society organisations may act as international organisations with shared norms and identities to promote specific norms related to human rights and conflict resolution.

The emphasis placed on history and shared identities shapes state behaviour and reduces the chances of conflict as states with mutual affinities are poised to ally, thus reducing the chances of conflict among them. Put differently, when states are driven by a shared norm, idea, identity, or history, there is the likelihood of cooperation, improved relations, and economic interdependence among them, reducing the chances of conflict. This offers a substantial contribution to the field of IR by shifting emphasis from the realist emphasis on power and conflict to the place of norms, history, beliefs, ideas, and identities in influencing state foreign policy decision-making. The term 'norm cascade' (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) has been especially fruitful for developing an understanding of the spread of human rights norms, anti-landmine mobilisations, and more recently, climate governance pledges around the world, which are not sufficiently explained by power- or interest-based approaches. However, a resulting question is: how well has the constructivist emphasis on norms, ideas, and identities reduced the chances of conflict among states? The answer lies in a close examination of territorial disputes and military conflict in many states. For instance, sharing a common history and identity did not prevent the Russia-Ukraine war. Moreover, the theory fails to account for the recurring power struggles and material interests that continue to shape global politics. Studies on norm contestation challenge earlier linear explanations of norm transmission. For example, Wiener (2018) and Taggart and Abraham (2024) show that norm contestation is not merely a passive socialisation process but one that is actively contested, reinterpreted, and selectively applied by states with divergent strategic interests, necessitating a balance between the constructivist focus on socialisation and the persistent politics of norm resistance.

Any Useful Research Agenda?

Based on the literature, it is clear that the realist assumption of a constant nature of the international system is challenged, even though anarchy persists (Tang, 2010). While the debates among the grand theories may not have been resolved, it is evident that liberal and constructivist theories offer useful insights and research agendas to promote the understanding of state behaviour and the international system. Granted that these competing theories offer varying perspectives to understanding the international system, it may amount to grandstanding to claim that one grand theory is better than the other. As Tang (2010) argues, a grand theory is better suited to a particular epoch. Thus, a state opts for a specific theory by first determining the world it is living in.

Realism, which focuses on international security (Ikenberry, 2009), has been criticised for acknowledging the balance of power but not providing means for improvement (Buzan, 2014). If anything, recent events prove the inaccuracy of realism in predicting state behaviour (Harrison, 2002). However, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the growing Sino-American competition between powers have led to a resurgence of realist analysis, and both offensive and defensive realist logics are now being examined to explain the nature of great power revisionism (Blagden & Porter, 2021; Mearsheimer, 2019). The ‘doctrine of the harmony of interests’ (Carr, 2001, p. 75) originates in E. H. Carr’s classical critique of liberal idealism rather than being a measure that Owen (2019) proposes; Owen instead engages critically with Carr’s challenge in an essay that is considerably more cautious about liberal theory’s prospects given China’s rise than an endorsement of the doctrine would imply. It emphasises cooperation, collaboration, and interdependence among states, though Carr’s original critique treated the harmony of interests as a liberal illusion rather than an empirically workable measure, a caution that Owen (2019) revives in his sceptical reading of Ikenberry’s optimism about liberal order surviving China’s rise.

From a liberalist perspective, the international system has evolved to a stage where competition is replaced by socialisation, thus increasing the possibility of peace (Snyder, 2013). As experienced in the modern world, economic gain through trade confers more political power compared to conflict or conquest. After all, superior military capabilities do not necessarily confer a state with a superior status, acceptance, or respect (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). The liberal response to realist predictions is the ‘capitalist peace’ argument, which states that interdependence in markets alone reduces the risk of conflict. This has also gained increasing empirical attention but has been criticised for its inability to account for instances where one party to an interdependent dyad is a nationalist authoritarian state with the means to absorb the economic costs of coercive action (Draper & Haggard, 2023).

The international system is dominated by liberal democratic states, while states with opposing values are described as illiberal regimes. This underscores the unwritten agreement on the adoption of liberal democratic values. This liberal Western Order characterises a system based on democratic principles, a free market, and universal norms (Snyder, 2013). More so, the submission that states with a cultural affinity are more likely to develop a shared identity is not so in the case of non-Western, illiberal powers such as China, where an entrenched political culture and institutional structure serve as an antithesis to the values promoted by liberal Western powers (Snyder, 2013). Since 2019, academic debates on the Liberal International Order (LIO) have coalesced around three theses: the first is the decline thesis which holds that changes in the structure of power and the emergence of revisionist states have led to a decline of the LIO (Lake et al., 2021; Mearsheimer, 2019); the second is the resilience thesis, which maintains that the deep-rootedness of institutions has made the LIO resilient enough to withstand revisionist pressures (Ikenberry, 2018); and the third is the myth thesis, which doubts that the postwar order possessed any real universal liberal features or that it was a fundamentally Western order (Johnston, 2019). Such a research agenda would produce more sophisticated cross-regional comparisons of institutional frameworks in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America with respect to or against the Western liberal template.

Where Are We?

In this final part of the study, we ascertain the relevance of liberal IR in modern times. The principles of human rights, peaceful relations, and democratic peace have become more important in present times. The theory emphasises the need for peace in a fast-changing world. In the area of interdependence, it is undeniable that the world is becoming more integrated as states engage more in international trade and investment and pursue free trade zones. Moreover, international institutions continue to play important roles in dispute resolution and mediation among conflicting states. For instance, the United Nations has mediated the wars in Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan. In all three, however, the UN Security Council has been structurally paralysed by the great-power veto, undercutting liberal normative aspirations and substantiating the Decline Thesis of Mearsheimer (2019) and Lake et al. (2021).

Arising from the above, it is important to also acknowledge that while President Trump is pushing for peace in warring zones, a ceasefire leading to a prisoner swap was recorded in the Israel-Hamas conflict, while there are speculations that Ukraine may be forced to the negotiation table with Russia following the suspension of United States' aid. Moreover, considering the recent spate of military coups in Africa, concerns about democratic backsliding, de-democratisation and populist regimes, as well as the criticisms such developments have generated from world leaders, one would reckon that the democratic peace theory is still being actively pursued.

Meanwhile, in seeking to answer whether constructivism's notion of perception and social status is still valid in the contemporary world, we are forced to revisit Jervis (2002), who emphasised constructivism's ideal of non-violence and the place of interaction between democracies to promote peace. A cursory overview of the present world reveals a planet where state actions are driven by interest without recourse to shared beliefs. States resort to violence in pursuing their interests and asserting their dominance. This has made the world more chaotic than socialised. While we cannot overlook the role of identity and perception, we also cannot ignore the eroding culture and norms of states occasioned by globalisation and a contested normative shift that critics, rather than the present study, characterise as cultural erosion, and that norm-contestation scholarship treats as one interpretation among several rather than settled fact. A critical constructivist reading, however, would reject such a negative conclusion that norm erosion is unstoppable. However, as Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) showed, the normative processes of compliance are not linear, and thus, it is possible that what appears to be a collapse is, in fact, a contestation. This period of democratic regression and authoritarian reinvigoration should therefore not be taken as a signal that norms are epiphenomenal, but rather as an invitation to examine how counter-norms - sovereignty absolutism, anti-liberal nationalism, civilisational identitarianism - are being produced and circulated via their own socialisation processes (Taggart & Abraham, 2024; Wiener, 2018).

Conclusion

This study underscores that while realism has long provided a powerful lens for understanding state behaviour under anarchy, its emphasis on material capabilities and the inexorable logic of power competition leaves important dynamics unexplored. Liberal critiques have persuasively shown how institutions, economic interdependence, and democratic norms can mitigate security dilemmas and

foster cooperation, extending the analytical boundaries beyond zero-sum calculations. Constructivist interventions reveal that state interests and identities are neither fixed nor self-evident but are continually fashioned through shared ideas, social interaction, and normative diffusion. However, important tensions remain. Liberalism's optimism about institutional constraints is tested by the persistence of non-democratic and transnational threats that exploit normative gaps, and constructivism's focus on ideational malleability sometimes underplays the enduring distributions of power that shape state choices. Realism continues to have explanatory value in situations where threat perception and coercive leverage are prevalent. The three-way debate on the Liberal International Order - the Decline, Resilience, and Myth theses - highlights the direct correlation between theoretical stance and empirical evaluation of the same international events, emphasising the importance of more robust comparative and longitudinal research designs capable of resolving competing explanations.

Rather than seeking a single grand narrative, the field would benefit from integrative frameworks that can flexibly account for how power structures, institutional arrangements, and shared beliefs co-evolve. Such an approach promises richer insights into phenomena such as democratic backsliding, norm contestation in emerging domains (e.g., cyberspace and climate governance), and the strategic use of identity politics in international forums. By way of recommendation, a robust research agenda should prioritise hybrid explanatory models that are tested against diverse empirical cases, such as examining how rule-based regimes interact with evolving norms to shape state behaviour in regional security complexes or how identity-driven movements influence the durability of international accords on human rights and environmental protection. In doing so, the discipline will be better equipped to explain and predict the complex dynamics of cooperation, conflict, and change in an increasingly multipolar and normatively contested international order.

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