Can humanitarian interventions help create global peace? Common practices, normative change and the end of nationalism

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Humanitarian interventions are an established practice in international relations, even though their proximate effects remain disputed. Some evidence suggests that they save lives and shorten hostilities, whereas other works in the literature call this into question. Instead of discussing these proximate effects, however, this essay focuses on their effects on long-term peacekeeping. Arguing that repeated practice changes norms and values in international politics, and that these affect how international relations are conducted, I outline how humanitarian interventions can promote values that are conducive to global peace. The practice of humanitarian intervention can foster ideas of global solidarity and weaken the support for national sovereignty. Both of these developments may help us overcome the current system of independent nation-states, which, as I will show, currently allows and even promotes wars. However, humanitarian interventions are currently carried out in the wrong way and do not fulfil their potential. This essay shows how they can be improved and become an important step towards achieving global peace.

Introduction

In 1915, during the First World War, Bertrand Russell wrote that "[t]he question whether war is ever justified, and if so under what circumstances, is one which has been forcing itself upon the attention of all thoughtful men" (Russell 1915: 127). The question certainly occupied him. Russell spent decades arguing that to avoid international conflict, humanity needed a world state with control over all means of warfare (Russell 1916: 65-67, 79). About a hundred years later, Jürgen Habermas argued that a sustainable peace would not be created through a world state, but through international law. Habermas thought that international law had to be 'constitutionalised' or made enforceable by a global organisation if we want lasting peace on earth (Habermas 2014). A global reform that would put an end to the system of sovereign nation-states remains a popular idea for achieving sustainable peace. The underlying belief is that independent nations will inevitably wage war sooner or later, and thus for peace to emerge, we must overcome nationalism. In this Russell (see Greenspan 1996) and Habermas (2014) agree. Today, pacifist literature identifies nationalism and national sovereignty as two key causes of warfare (Ryan 2013; 2023).

The purpose of this essay is to examine a path towards sustainable global peace, and it does so by seeking ways to overcome nationalism. My chosen method will be the practice of humanitarian intervention. In humanitarian interventions, states deploy armed forces to stop atrocities committed in other nations, to end civil wars, to create safe environments for humanitarian aid, and to rebuild infrastructure after a conflict. However, these are proximate effects of humanitarian interventions. By contrast, my essay examines their ultimate effects – more precisely, it analyses how humanitarian interventions can foster a sustainable global peace in the long term.

I claim that humanitarian interventions can be an important tool to end nationalism. That is because they do two things: they strengthen a norm of global solidarity and weaken the idea of inalienable national sovereignty. However, they do not achieve this automatically. In fact, humanitarian interventions may currently do the opposite. To fulfil their potential, the practice of humanitarian intervention must change.

I choose humanitarian interventions because they have already revealed their potential to change international relations. States have repeatedly used humanitarian interventions to protect foreign civilians, and every time this occurs the norm that such interventions are legitimate is strengthened. This means that humanitarian interventions have the benefit of being an established practice in international politics. Since it is likely that states will use them again in the future, those interested in creating a sustainable peace should try to use them to promote this goal.

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This essay is thus not a comprehensive account of global peace, but an examination of the potential that humanitarian interventions, as an already existing practice, can have. Such an examination is not the answer to all questions about war and peace. But it illuminates one possible step toward a peaceful world.

The next section will outline why global solidarity and the end of sovereignty are important. Following that, I examine how humanitarian interventions can facilitate these normative changes. Lastly, I show why humanitarian interventions currently fall short of changing norms, and what can be done to change that.

What is sustainable global peace?

Before delving into how humanitarian interventions may foster a 'sustainable global peace', I should outline how I am defining this term. It seems obvious that a sustainable global peace should fulfil some goals beyond an absence of armed hostilities between states. Firstly, it should not only mean an absence of inter-state war, but also of intra-state violence, such as civil wars, insurgencies, or government-orchestrated genocide. Thus, for instance, refusing to back Ukraine in its current struggle against Russia is not automatically a peaceful position, if we have reason to suspect that the Ukrainian population would suffer under the Russian regime or that the population may continue an insurgency against their oppressors.

Secondly, sustainable peace should not be crafted through the threat of violence alone. For example, we should not aim for a situation whereby a powerful dictatorship suppresses conflicts worldwide. While such a situation might be preferable to anarchy and constant warfare, it should not be the ultimate vision. Similarly, a balance of power between nations could theoretically be peaceful, but remain fragile, since a shift in this balance could lead to war. A sustainable peace would abolish the causes of peace – not just suppress or temporarily disarm them.

Thirdly, peace should reduce all potential threats to life as much as possible. This especially includes the nuclear stalemate. While one might argue that nuclear weapons have made the world more peaceful, they have also made it more dangerous.[1] Sustainable peace should reduce these kinds of risks, for example, by improving inter-state relations such that nuclear threats between nations become obsolete.

One might summarise the above conditions by suggesting that a global peace would be considered sustainable if all (or at least most) parties are satisfied with the current order. 'Sustainable global peace' describes a world in which there would be no reasons for states to go to war; not because they are prevented by external forces, but because they truly see no sense in it. In addition, we would want a peace that is built upon liberal ideas, not enforced by an iron fist.

An illustrative example may be the peace between the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) during the Cold War, contrasted with the current peace between Germany and France. In the former example, there were no direct hostilities between the two superpowers – and they suppressed conflicts among their allies – but one could hardly call this a sustainable peace. While the US and the USSR did not wage a direct war against each other, they funded local conflicts, intervened to have foreign governments replaced, and reached dangerous levels of nuclear brinkmanship – such as during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

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In the case of Germany and France, neither country must be coerced to abstain from war with each other, nor is there bellicose rhetoric between them. While war remained a constant prospect between the superpowers during the Cold War, it seems difficult to even imagine conflict between Germany and France today. Peace between them has been internalised to a great degree. Germany and France coexist peacefully because their identities changed from being enemies to close allies.

This is a far more desirable goal. After all, today's safest societies are not safe because the police constantly arrest criminals. They are safe because norms and material conditions have changed significantly, so that most people do not commit crimes – and do not seriously consider committing one. In a similar vein, sustainable peace would mean that the thought of warfare would arise only rarely, if at all.

The reduction of inter-state war after the Second World War was a clear sign of progress. And so would be replacing all imperialist autocratic leaders with more restrained dictators. But such a development would be insufficient. We can acknowledge that the world has made progress towards peace while arguing that it is inadequate long term.

There are multiple possible paths towards the sustainable peace described above. One would be a democratic peace – based upon the assumption that democracies do not fight wars against each other (Doyle 2005) – another would be a world government. The first approach implies that if all nations were democratic, none would fight wars against each other. The second approach outlines a global reform in which nations either join a global government or where international law is 'constitutionalised' and thus enforceable – the ideas of Russell and Habermas respectively. My essay will deal with this second approach, albeit in a broad sense. I do not argue for a centralised world state or stronger international law specifically – both have their advantages and drawbacks. I only claim that for sustainable peace, we must transcend the system of sovereign nations.

States already cooperate and join supranational institutions to solve many of the world's issues, such as climate change, economic globalisation or international terrorism (Cabrera 2010). But norms of nationalism and sovereignty continue to prevail. Today, states join international institutions, but are far away from transcending the system of independent states. While some institutions, such as the EU, lower the sovereignty of their individual members, member-states can always leave.

Nation-states joining supranational agreements is certainly desirable, but truly overcoming nationalism goes beyond this. It might, for example, entail the creation of a supranational political community, in which people extend the moral concern they feel for co-nationals to everyone. As we have seen, some pacifist writers argue that world peace can only emerge once nationalism is overcome (Ryan 2013; 2023). But even many non-pacifist scholars of international relations argue that the world must replace the system of nation-states if we wish to avoid recurrent war, as the nation state fosters moral tribalism (Scheuerman 2011: 49). This tribalism can turn into indifference to the suffering of others or even a desire to harm them (Linklater 2002; Nash 2003).

> Global peace may require the creation of a cosmopolitan community – although not necessarily a world government. For my purposes, I agree with the notion that nationalism makes moral distinctions between members of the nation and foreigners. This does not necessarily lead to outright hostility, but does create a feeling that one's own co-nationals are deserving of greater moral concern than foreigners.

By contrast, there is evidence that communal feelings between different groups can foster peaceful relations (Fry 2012). The promotion of inclusive identities would inspire people to recognise the rights and equality of all humans, not just members of their in-group (Fry / Miklikowska 2012: 239). Evidence suggests that there is a correlation between people who see themselves as global citizens and those who readily endorse pacifist values (Reysen / Katzarska-Miller 2017), and scholars note that a key variable in sustainable peace is re-configuring identities to be more inclusive (Hagg / Kagwanja 2007).

Put simply, critics of nationalism highlight that the nation inhibits people from extending full moral concern to others. Global peace may then require the creation of a cosmopolitan community – although not necessarily a world government. For my purposes, I agree with the notion that nationalism makes moral distinctions between members of the nation and foreigners. This does not necessarily lead to outright hostility, but does create a feeling that one's own co-nationals are deserving of greater moral concern than foreigners.

To achieve a sustainable global peace, I propose that we must strengthen global solidarity and weaken national sovereignty. By global solidarity, I mean that that citizens no longer prioritise the interests of their co-nationals over the interests of others. By weakening national sovereignty, I mean that the world must weaken the normative importance of non-interference. Those two norms are central building blocks of nationalism and changing them could be a vital step in transcending the system of independent nations.

As is often the case in international relations theory, my argument relies on deductive reasoning, but also on induction. To build the premises of my argument, I must rely on observations from the social sphere – where one cannot guarantee that past insights carry into the present or the future. Conditions which could foster a sustainable peace may be so complex that stable insights about them remain impossible (Boulding 1963). I cannot form a definitive, universal law about peace, nor can I create an unambiguous path towards it. What a theorist of international politics must do is to build certain assumptions based on observations and then deductively follow them to their logical conclusion (Blagden 2016). For example, one explanation of the democratic peace argues that democracies do not fight wars against each other because wars against democracies are highly unpopular. This is partially dependent on observations – such as experiments suggesting that people perceive democracies as less threatening and are more reluctant to endorse offensive actions against them (Tomz / Weeks 2013). Deduction then connects this insight with democratic peace – namely, that since democratic politicians care about public opinion, they will avoid unpopular wars against other democracies.

This method may not be foolproof. In fact, an issue with international relations theory – and other social sciences – is that they are unable to create closed systems of causality. In other words, it is difficult to isolate causal factors. Rather, social sciences examine open systems, where many effects work at the same time and may counteract each other (Wight 2006: 51-52). Events thus remain open to a wide array of explanations. This affects, again, the democratic peace. While evidence suggests democracies do not fight other democracies, the causality remains disputed. For instance, it may be the case that democracies do not fight because most of them are allied with each other, such as through NATO or the EU (Rosato 2003).[2]

Any outline for a sustainable global peace relying on the methods of international relations theory is open to the same problems. However, there is hardly an alternative. The methods of international relations theory can still create important explanations. There are plausible reasons for why humanitarian interventions can foster global peace, supported both by inductive insights and deductive reasoning – which I will present shortly.

Put simply, I will rely primarily on qualitative methods of observation and deduction to outline a path towards sustainable peace. The exact contents of my theoretical assumptions will be explored in the next section, in which I will argue that humanitarian interventions can change our ideas about global solidarity and national sovereignty.

Humanitarian interventions: what they are and what they can(not) achieve

Humanitarian interventions are a popular topic in the literature on international relations. The concept is not clearly defined, and different thinkers and practitioners use the term in varying ways.

However, the term usually refers to military operations by a country (or multiple countries) in the territory of another state, with the aim of protecting civilians, creating favourable conditions for humanitarian aid, removing governments, or state-building. This happens without the consent of the state where the intervention is occurring. The interventions are based on moral principles, rather than national interests – at least, the governments which carry them out argue that they are. Be that as it may, an underlying principle is that human beings have equal moral value and a right to protection – while in turn, states that violate human rights can have their sovereignty violated (Archibugi 2004; Pape 2012).

In the last decades, the UN Security Council has endorsed various resolutions for interventions, such as in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Iraq, and Haiti (Lillich 1997). But even without UN authorisation, states have undertaken humanitarian interventions, such as in Kosovo or Libya (Pape 2012). After NATO intervened without UN approval in Kosovo in 1999 – because the Security Council was divided – supranational authorisation became less important in justifying interventions. This was further emphasised when the Security Council did not act during the Rwandan genocide – and no state had an interest to intervene – leading to nearly a million deaths (Heinze 2006). In response to a Security Council that regularly became gridlocked, humanitarian interventions undertaken without legal backing became more accepted (Sterio 2014).

Discussions about humanitarian interventions often focus on their proximate effects. In these, opponents and supporters of humanitarian intervention are divided about two key questions: do humanitarian interventions achieve what they set out to do, and is their moral foundation – the 'responsibility to protect' – a permissible stance?

Regarding the first question, there is an active discussion about whether humanitarian interventions protect civilians or shorten conflicts. Some literature asserts that interventions can do a lot of good, especially under UN-auspices (Walter / Howard / Fortna 2021) and when tied to mediation (Clayton / Dorussen 2022). Specific instances, like the NATO-led intervention in Libya, are cited as successful examples of humanitarian intervention, because the no-fly zone established as well as the airstrikes conducted by intervening states successfully protected civilians and helped rebels overthrow the country's de facto leader. A verdict by two military commanders reads that NATO's intervention

"saved tens of thousands of lives from almost certain destruction. It conducted an air campaign of unparalleled precision, which, although not perfect, greatly minimized collateral damage. It enabled the Libyan opposition to overthrow one of the world's longest-ruling dictators. And it accomplished all of this without a single allied casualty and at a cost – $1.1 billion for the United States and several billion dollars overall – that was a fraction of that spent on previous interventions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq" (Daalder / Stavridis 2012: 3).

By contrast, critical assessments of the Libya intervention point out that NATO prolonged the conflict – leading to more civilian deaths – and damaged regional stability. This conclusion may also be applied to other interventions, such as the Syrian civil war. An argument behind this verdict is that intervening nations tend to demonise the regimes they attack, to the extent that they later face domestic pressures to avoid negotiation with them. Thus, intervening nations call for regime change, which causes the sitting regime to fight for its survival (Kuperman 2013).

A second debate regards a norm which governs humanitarian interventions. That is, a "norm that calls on the international community to intervene when governments fail to safeguard their own civilians" (Daalder / Stavridis 2012: 3). This norm arose in the early 1990s, with interventions in Iraq, Bosnia, and Somalia, and even more prominently in 1999 after NATO's Kosovo intervention. That this intervention was not legitimised by the UN inspired a debate about the moral and legal justifications of humanitarian interventions. As a result, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty was formed by the Canadian government and the UN, and tasked with establishing rules for further interventions. In 2001, it declared the existence of a 'responsibility to protect'. In 2005 the UN General Assembly emphasised the responsibility of nations to protect their own citizens, and the duty of the international community to assist those efforts. Crucially, however, this duty required UN authorisation to be carried out (Heinze 2006; Kuperman 2013). In 2009, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon outlined that this responsibility required nations to protect their own populations, and that the international community had a duty to assist them in doing so. This referred mostly to non-violent assistance; however, he also acknowledged the option of armed intervention as a last resort (Paris 2014).

> Pacifists argue that in focusing on armed intervention in the case of humanitarian emergencies, one fails to interrogate whether atrocities could have been prevented in the first place. Conflict scenarios requiring intervention, however, do not arise out of nowhere, but from complex historical forces and values. Pacifists suggest that we should try to change these forces and values in a way that makes interventions unnecessary.

In contrast to those who seek to legitimise humanitarian interventions, pacifists worry that such measures not only make war permissible, but also make it morally necessary. In addition, they argue that in focusing on armed intervention in the case of humanitarian emergencies, one fails to interrogate whether atrocities could have been prevented in the first place. Humanitarian interventions deal with adequate responses to emergencies, but not with ways to avoid them (Dexter 2019). Conflict scenarios requiring intervention, however, do not arise out of nowhere, but from complex historical forces and values. Pacifists suggest that we should try to change these forces and values in a way that makes interventions unnecessary (Fiala / Kling 2023: 17).

Furthermore, humanitarian interventions may not have humanitarian motives. For example, India's intervention into East Pakistan during the Bangladesh war of 1971 helped put an end to Pakistan's oppression of Bengalis, but India's justification was to prevent refugees from reaching India. Their normative causes may even be a guise for other motives. For instance, after not finding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the former President Bush's government used humanitarian justifications to defend its invasion. Before that, the US used humanitarian concerns to legitimise their use of military force in Central America during the Cold War (Heinze 2006). More recently, the Russian government framed the occupation of Crimea, the support of separatists in the Donbas, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine through a humanitarian lens, in an attempt to legitimise their actions (Sauer 2023). States can perform such rhetorical tricks because the norms behind humanitarian interventions are vague (Heinze 2006). Supporters of the responsibility to protect are thus confronted with potential misuse of the concept – but also with the critique that humanitarian intervention is a modern form of imperialism through which Western states influence former colonies (Crossley 2018).

That humanitarian interventions can be misused – and in fact, currently are – will be an important point in the next section. However, since I focus on ultimate effects, my concern will not be that the norm of humanitarian intervention may justify a specific invasion, but that their current practice solidifies norms that are detrimental to long-term peace. Thus, even if they are carried out for explicitly humanitarian reasons, interventions right now are not doing enough to change norms of global solidarity and national sovereignty.

To some extent, this approach tackles the pacifist criticism of humanitarian interventions. Instead of pondering if nations should intervene or not in a specific instance, I analyse how to create a world in which interventions are no longer necessary. In which, perhaps, armed action would become entirely unnecessary. After all, the goal of sustainable global peace should not be to solve individual crises with violence, but to ensure that these crises do not emerge (Fiala 2016).

My analysis of international politics – and my proposal that humanitarian interventions can improve it – is underlined by certain theoretical presuppositions. To examine if humanitarian interventions can change political affairs, I employ a 'Constructivist' analysis of international relations.[3] 'Constructivism' argues that, as the name suggests, international politics is constructed through norms, values, ideas, or common practices. While other IR theories such as 'Realism' assume that there is a rigid national interest, Constructivists argue that the interests of states are shaped by norms and values. As Wendt (1992) put it: "Anarchy is what states make of it".

Constructivists argue that how two states see each other, how they see themselves, and how they interpret their own international reputation affects their behaviour. All of this is subject to change. States can also have multiple identities at once, such as when the United States sees itself as a 'great power', a liberal democracy, and member of the West simultaneously (Hopf 1998). The norms derived from such identities create standards of behaviour and define rights and obligations, as well as the goals and purposes of states (Björkdahl 2002). For instance, having the identity of a 'great power' creates different obligations for the United States in different contexts. For Estonia, it would mean that the United States has a special duty to defend Estonia as a fellow liberal democracy. By contrast, for Russia or China it could mean that a liberal great power should exercise restraint and not impose its values onto others. Importantly, this must not mean that Constructivism makes prescriptive statements. While it is concerned with norms and values, it examines them from an empirical point of view – asking how norms and values affect the reality of international relations, not how they should (Barkin 2010: 79).

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Constructivists note that norms or identities must not be the direct cause of state action, but that they constrain or enable choices (Brunnée / Toope 2012: 124). It may be too much to say that the United States' identity as a liberal power directly causes its relationship with Estonia. However, its identity constraints how it can behave with regards to Estonia. Likewise, the Soviet Union was constrained by its identity as a Marxist-Leninist country, and this identity made it difficult for former President Gorbachev to enact liberal economic policies (Frost 1996: 61-63). Norms, values and identities thus affect the chances of war or peace between nations. For example, an often-cited cause of war is the 'security dilemma'. It describes how states cannot be sure of their counterparts' intentions and thus, if a state acquires weapons for defensive reasons, another state could interpret this as preparation of an attack and might consider a preventive strike. However, this situation is socially constructed. It relies on an "intersubjective understandings in which states are so distrustful that they make worst-case assumptions about each others' intentions, and as a result define their interests in self-help terms". By contrast, states could also live in a "security community", which is "composed of shared knowledge in which states trust one another to resolve disputes without war" (Wendt 1995: 73). In the latter case, the risk of war is much lower.

Constructivists thus recognise that ideas and material factors both matter. Material power determines which nations can be called a great power, but ideas and common practices determine how we perceive great powers and which expectations we have for them (Hopf 1998). It appears uncontroversial that ideas and norms construct international politics to some degree, and various scholars take the study of norms seriously (Björkdahl 2002). Even 'Realists' in international relations theory, arguing that states are primarily motived by power, would agree that state-behaviour must take norms and values into account. For instance, states should be aware of the norm prohibiting the use nuclear weapons and that a use of these weapons would get them internationally shunned (Barkin 2010: 56).

Its focus on norms, values. and identities makes Constructivism a useful lens for studying transformations in international politics, especially in the constitution of actors, institutions, and social structures (Brunnée / Toope 2012: 121; Burai / Hoffmann 2020: 169). In the case of the Cold War, for example, Constructivists can point out that the conflict ended because identities changed. For decades, the Soviet Union based its identity on the Leninist theory of imperialism, arguing that relations between capitalist and socialist states are defined by inevitable conflict. However, in the 1980s, this identity stated to crumble, paving the way for better relations with the West (Wendt 1992).

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Another presupposition here is that these norms and values can be changed or solidified if they demonstrably affect how states behave – a concept which is broadly accepted by Constructivist scholars (Björkdahl 2002; Brunnèe / Toope 2012: 123-124; Burai

/ Hoffmann 2020: 174). In regularly behaving in a certain way, states can change how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves. This process is also acknowledged in pacifist literature (Hutchings 2018; Thaler 2019). For example, by consistently honouring their alliances, even if this carries negative consequences, states form their own identity as a trusted ally. And if many states repeatedly honour their alliances, the norm that they ought to honour them grows stronger.

Having established this perspective, we can now understand the contribution that humanitarian interventions could make towards world peace. Put simply, humanitarian interventions can support beneficial norms and weaken detrimental ones. As identified in the last section, a key step towards sustainable peace may be transcending nationalism – by strengthening global solidarity and weakening national sovereignty. A Constructivist analysis, focused on practice, can demonstrate whether, and in what ways, humanitarian interventions might promote this goal.

I argue that humanitarian interventions can facilitate normative change through two processes. Firstly, humanitarian interventions strengthen the idea of global solidarity because they are explicitly justified by the notion that all people deserve the same protection from atrocities. States must ensure this protection, even if it incurs costs for them or risks the lives of their armed forces. Thus, simply carrying out a humanitarian intervention perpetuates the idea of global solidarity. Secondly, humanitarian interventions weaken national sovereignty, because they defend foreign populations, even if the state they live in forbids any incursion into its internal affairs. In other words, they elevate the right of equal protection above the norm of non-interference. Through these paths, humanitarian interventions can lay the foundation for overcoming the system of independent nation-states – and thereby help create a more peaceful world.

However, interventions are currently not doing enough to change norms of global solidarity and national sovereignty. In the next section, we will see why that is the case and how this might be improved.

Changing global norms

It seems plausible that humanitarian interventions can change international conduct. By using a Constructivist lens, we see that international politics relies on socially constructed norms, identities, and behaviours. The question is: How can humanitarian interventions bring about norms that will overcome nationalism in the long run?

I argue that they can do that by emphasising certain norms over others, through the way the practice of humanitarian intervention is carried out. For instance, every time two national leaders meet to discuss issues instead of declaring war, they support the norm of peaceful conflict-resolution. They do that solely by behaving in this specific way, not another. In a similar vein, every humanitarian intervention, successful for not, fosters the norm that every human being deserves protection from war or repressive governments – even if said government disagrees.

As a result, humanitarian interventions can promote global solidarity and weaken the idea of national sovereignty. They prioritise individual human rights over sovereignty and territorial integrity (Fiala / Kling 2023: 94). This must not necessarily go so far as to abolish nations, but it should foster a norm that every human deserves moral consideration, and that this consideration trumps national sovereignty.

Unfortunately, the way that humanitarian interventions are carried out today has the opposite effect, weakening global solidarity

and strengthening national sovereignty. The reason for this comes down to smaller practices during interventions.

Let us look at global solidarity first. If we examine past interventions, we see that despite rhetorical commitments to universal rights, Western governments placed different values on their own soldiers' lives compared to people that they set out to protect. This can be seen in the methods they employed: intervening governments regularly used air strikes, which protect soldiers to the detriment of civilians. Intervening states recognised that they had a responsibility to protect, but employed methods they would never have used to defend their own populations – one can hardly imagine a Western country air striking its own territory (Archibugi 2004; Heinze 2006). NATO's Libya intervention was praised for low material costs and no casualties on the side of the invading forces. These are not bad things, but states would not discuss material costs in this way if their own population were involved, nor would they necessarily protect armed personnel while accepting civilian casualties.

In short, there are different standards when it comes to protecting foreigners and a nation's own citizens. When firefighters died to save American citizens during the 9/11 attack, their sacrifice was honoured, but it was also considered an unquestionable success if a few firefighters died, and in doing so saved more civilians. By contrast, in a humanitarian intervention, a dead soldier on the intervening side might be seen as a greater tragedy than their failure to protect hundreds of foreign civilians.

This is not to say that more dead soldiers on the side of the intervening states would be a good outcome – that would be an absurd conclusion. And an intervention predominantly using air strikes may have proximate benefits. It may even perpetuate good norms – such as that states have *some* obligations to protect foreigners. However, this practice perpetuates the norm that intervening nations have weaker obligations towards foreign civilians than to their own populations and military services. This undercuts the idea of true global solidarity.

Secondly, humanitarian interventions should erode the idea of national sovereignty. However, they currently do this to an insufficient degree. In fact, as they are currently conducted, humanitarian interventions perpetuate a harmful contradiction. They weaken the sovereignty of states facing interventions but reinforce it for those that carrying them out. Western nations show that they can disrespect the sovereignty of others but would forbid even softer interference in their own affairs (Archibugi 2004). For example, the United States has a history of foreign intervention but is itself not a member of the International Criminal Court and reserves itself the right to military action should one of its citizens be tried in The Hague.

States thus uphold two norms that are mutually inconsistent: universal human rights and non-intervention in internal affairs (Krasner 2001). Intervening nations seem to be flexible about which norm trumps the other. Under the banner of humanitarian intervention, Western states weaken the sovereignty of others, but not their own. It then comes as no surprise that nations facing intervention highlight contradictions in the practice (Archibugi 2004). Some western thinkers spot the same problem. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has noted that in the interventions in Kosovo and Iraq, the US and UK established their own right to intervene in other nations whenever they wanted – a kind of liberal nationalism (Habermas 2002).

In this sense, humanitarian interventions currently weaken ideas of sovereignty in one part of the globe, but strengthen it in others. For this contradiction to be resolved, we need a universal standard for all states. It should not be common practice that some states can decide to violate the sovereignty of others, whilst allowing no interference in their own affairs. Unfortunately, failures by the Security Council have shown that there is a trade-off between gathering international support for an intervention and acting before atrocities are carried out. As the world grows more multipolar, reaching consensus may become even more difficult. Thus, an attempt to weaken sovereignty for all and rely on more consensus-building might come to the detriment of citizens that interventions seek to protect.

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Fortunately, Western governments can do other things to remedy the contradiction. They could, for example, submit more to international authorities – such as the United States joining the International Criminal Court. This would signal an acceptance of supranational oversight – at least to a greater degree than now. If Western politicians were to be tried in The Hague, it would promote the idea that their nation's sovereignty is just as conditional on good behaviour as that of other states. It does not seem to be too strict a condition, that a nation which reserves itself the right to invade other nations should accept the relatively mild constraint of the International Criminal Court. Through such gradual steps, the world's most powerful nations can weaken the norm of sovereignty – for everyone, including themselves.

However, this should not go too far. Multilateral consensus might also mean communication and collaboration with nations that have shown no concern for universal human rights. This affects the practice of humanitarian intervention itself. For example, China has been trying to soften the emphasis on human rights in UN peacekeeping missions (Karlsrud 2023). Gathering broad consensus for an intervention could thus require weakening the commitment to universal human rights. It may erode the idea of sovereignty, but also negatively affect the idea of global solidarity, which should include a notion of universal human rights.

Liberal-democratic states thus face a trade-off. They should resolve the contradiction regarding their own national sovereignty versus that of others, but must also be cautious when reaching agreements with illiberal states. Western nations allowing more interference into their affairs could pave the way for autocratic influence – which cannot be the goal. One can criticise the United States for interfering in other nations while allowing no interference into their own affairs, but this would not be improved by states like Russia, China or Iran suddenly intervening into the affairs of the US – for example through binding decisions in international bodies.

Western nations are the main proponents of foreign intervention on explicitly humanitarian grounds, but this does not mean they are infallible or that they necessarily always act out of good motives. The reasonable position would be to criticise the practice of liberal-democratic nations whenever applicable, while barring autocratic influences through the guise of multilateralism.

To sum up, intervening states must change their practices if interventions are to be used to help the world overcome the system of

independent nation states. They must be willing to afford foreign civilians the same protection as their citizens – even if that means danger for their own soldiers. Moreover, they must be willing to weaken their own sovereignty to a greater extent than they currently do – while avoiding submission to illiberal influences. These changes alone might not create a sustainable peace order, but they can be part of a broader transformation towards global solidarity.

> Liberal-democratic states face a trade-off. They should resolve the contradiction regarding their own national sovereignty versus that of others, but must also be cautious when reaching agreements with illiberal states. Western nations allowing more interference into their affairs could pave the way for autocratic influence – which cannot be the goal.

Nonetheless, we might find that this whole project is misguided. Perhaps an end of nationalism would not achieve global peace. Perhaps it would only lead to different kinds of wars. Or perhaps nothing would change at all. However, this should not stop one from trying. After all, since humanitarian interventions are already a part of international conduct, it seems reasonable to try and leverage them for the creation of a more sustainable peace. This is an important goal – especially in a world where technology has made war increasingly destructive.

Conclusion

Securing peace is a difficult task – maybe the most difficult of all. For such a complex objective, there will not be one single solution. Wars emerge from a complicated network of institutions, norms, and actions, and it will take multiple approaches and a lot of time to resolve it. Maybe nothing can fully abolish wars. Nonetheless, the most reasonable course is to try it, even if we fail repeatedly.

This essay has examined a small portion of the debate on global peace. I analysed how humanitarian interventions may be conducive to peace by fostering the norm of global solidarity and weakening the norm of national sovereignty. Since humanitarian interventions are already an accepted practice – although regularly misused – it seems logical that we use them to improve international politics as best as we can. Continued practice of humanitarian intervention, done in a way that emphasises the notion that all people deserve the same moral consideration, and that national sovereignty is trumped by this right, might lead the world towards a more peaceful order. If repeated often enough, humanitarian interventions could foster a world order that is less marked by nationalism, and where humans treat members of other communities as moral equals. It might not be the complete solution to the problem of war. But it represents an important step.

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1 During the Cold War, the world came much closer to a nuclear exchange than we might like. These incidents include the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, but also various instances where technical errors could have triggered a launch of nuclear arms (Craig 2003: 167-168.). For example, in 1983, the Soviet Lieutnant Colonel Stanislav Petrov received warning about incoming nuclear missiles from the United States, but luckily judged it to be a false alarm and did not inform his superiors about the alleged nuclear strike (Chan 2017).

2 For responses to Rosato see Doyle (2005) and Kinsella (2005). Another important question is if we can generalise current findings about democratic peace towards all nations, such as to the relations between Iran and Israel (Carson 1988).

3 I capitalise the theories of international relations ('Realism', 'Constructivism') in order to avoid confusion with other meanings of the terms. Importantly, then, 'Realism' refers specifically to the international relations theory of Realism, not to more common understandings of being a 'realist'. Put simply, a 'Realist' is someone who believes in the theoretical framework of Realism in international relations, while a 'realist' may be someone who tries to stay as close as possible to factual information in their reasoning and avoids having idealistic wishes cloud their judgment. Those may overlap, but do not have to. A 'Constructivist' can be much more of a 'realist' than a 'Realist'.

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