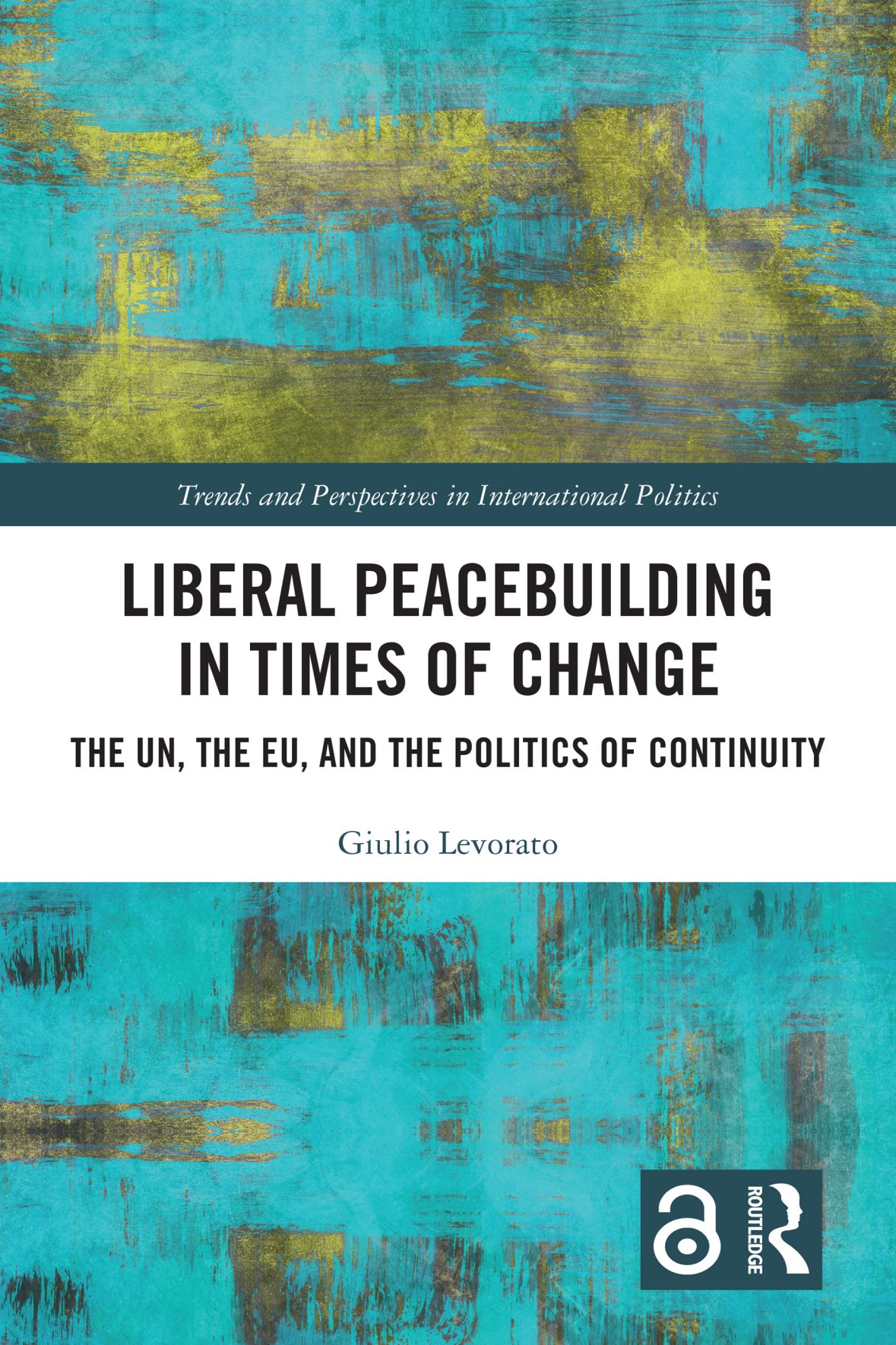




*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics*

# **LIBERAL PEACEBUILDING IN TIMES OF CHANGE**

**THE UN, THE EU, AND THE POLITICS OF CONTINUITY**

Giulio Levorato



*“Liberal Peacebuilding in Times of Change* is a timely and important contribution to the study of international organizations and the changing landscape of peacebuilding. At a moment when new approaches to conflict management are gaining momentum, this book offers a compelling analysis of why and how institutions such as the UN and the EU have never ceased to frame their peace efforts according to the liberal peace paradigm. By introducing the pioneering concept of “strategic inertia,” the author provides a novel framework for understanding organizational behavior, demonstrating how bureaucratic rules, procedures, and even pathologies can be mobilized to sustain normative commitments in the face of rising contestation. Combining public policy theories and peace research, and with rich empirical insights from the UN’s and EU’s involvement in the Sahel, the book shows that continuity is not a sign of stagnation, but a deliberate and strategic response to illiberal challenges. This makes it an essential reading for scholars and students of international relations, peace and conflict studies, and global governance, as well as for policymakers and practitioners seeking to understand the resilience of liberal institutions in turbulent times.”

— **Sara Hellmüller**, *Research Professor in the International Relations and Political Science Department at the Geneva Graduate Institute*

“In an increasingly contested peacebuilding environment, marked by the growing involvement of authoritarian powers in conflict management and resolution, international organizations continue to rely on the liberal peace framework despite its shortcomings. Why? And in what ways? This study – grounded in extensive empirical research — addresses these pressing questions through the lens of “strategic inertia.” By combining insights from International Relations, Security Studies, and Public Policy, the book provides a rigorous and comprehensive analysis through the crucial cases of the United Nations and the European Union in the Sahel. It is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the evolution of peacebuilding in the context of the crisis of the Liberal International Order.”

— **Fabrizio Coticchia**, *Full Professor of Political Science at the University of Genoa*

“This is a highly original and timely contribution to debates on the future of the Liberal International Order and the evolving dynamics of peacebuilding. Drawing on insights from public policy and international organization theory, the book offers a compelling account of how institutions such as the UN and the EU respond to the rise of illiberal models of peace. Through in-depth case studies of their engagement in the Sahel, it develops a sophisticated conceptual framework around “strategic inertia,” showing that policy continuity is not a symptom of bureaucratic paralysis, but a deliberate effort to defend and recalibrate the

liberal peace paradigm in a contested global environment. By reframing inertia as a purposeful, even performative, strategy of resistance to authoritarian alternatives, the author makes a powerful case for understanding IOs as active guardians of the liberal peace—seeking to preserve its normative core while adapting to mounting pressures for change. It offers a much-needed nuance to often simplified debates on fragmentation in peacemaking. Richly theorized and empirically grounded, this book is essential reading for scholars and practitioners concerned with peace and conflict studies, international organizations, and the shifting architecture of global order.”

— **Tom Buitelaar**, *Assistant Professor in the War, Peace & Justice program of the Institute of Security and Global Affairs at Leiden University*

# Liberal Peacebuilding in Times of Change

This book explores why and how, in an era in which conflicts are turning into arenas of strategic competition, international organizations have become the ultimate guardians of liberal peace.

International organizations display policy continuity at a time when authoritarian models of conflict resolution are gaining traction thanks to streamlined objectives, fast-paced solutions, and reduced normative commitments. Confronting the challenges posed by illiberal actors, the United Nations and the European Union have entrenched their survival with that of the liberal international order and of liberal peace in particular. In a novel reading of organizational behaviours amid crises, policy continuity is interpreted as the result of “strategic inertia”. This book demonstrates how bureaucratic rules and procedures, including organizational pathologies, are strategically employed to reproduce problem schema and counter illiberal contestation.

Combining public policy theories to peace research, this text explores the use of strategic inertia through the crucial case of the United Nations and the European Union in the Sahel. It offers an innovative perspective on the inner mechanisms through which international organizations are adapting to preserve their role and mission within an ever more competitive international environment.

**Giulio Levorato** is a post-doc researcher at the University of Naples L’Orientale. His research focuses on conflict management and resolution strategies adopted by various actors, such as nation states, international organizations, local minorities, and armed groups. Recently, his work has been dedicated to studying the impact of international competition on peace dynamics. He has been teaching and/or researching, among else, at the University of Genoa (Italy), the University EAN of Bogota (Colombia), the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (Switzerland), and the University Ramon Llull (Spain). He is the author of several research articles appeared in top-tier international journals.

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The UN, the EU, and the Politics of Continuity

*Giulio Levorato*

# **Liberal Peacebuilding in Times of Change**

The UN, the EU, and the Politics of Continuity

**Giulio Levorato**

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# Abbreviations

|          |                                                                                      |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AAD      | Ansar Dine                                                                           |
| ACM      | authoritarian conflict management                                                    |
| AES      | Alliance des États du Sahel                                                          |
| AFISMA   | African-led International Support Mission                                            |
| AIO      | Authoritarian International Order                                                    |
| AHC      | Ad Hoc Coalitions                                                                    |
| AMISOM   | AU Mission to Somalia                                                                |
| AQIM     | Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb                                                      |
| AU       | African Union                                                                        |
| AUSSOM   | AU Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia                                      |
| BRICS    | Formal group primarily referring to Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa       |
| CAR      | Central African Republic                                                             |
| CCC      | Civilian CSDP Compact                                                                |
| CFSP     | EU Common Foreign and Security Policy                                                |
| CSDP     | EU Common Security and Defence Policy                                                |
| CSO      | Civil Society Organization                                                           |
| DDR      | Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration                                       |
| DG ECHO  | EU Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations |
| DG INTPA | EU Directorate-General for International Partnerships                                |
| DG NEAR  | EU Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations       |
| DPO      | UN Department for Peace Operations                                                   |
| DPPA     | UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs                                 |
| DRC      | Democratic Republic of the Congo                                                     |
| EC       | European Commission                                                                  |
| ECCAS    | Economic Community of Central African States                                         |
| ECOWAS   | Economic Community of West African States                                            |
| EEAS     | European External Action Service                                                     |
| EPF      | European Peace Facility                                                              |
| EPLO     | European Peacebuilding Liaison Office                                                |
| EU       | European Union                                                                       |

|             |                                                                                      |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| EUCAP Mali  | EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali                                                 |
| EUCAP Niger | EU Capacity Building Mission in Niger                                                |
| EUMPM Niger | EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger                                             |
| EUMS        | EU Military Staff                                                                    |
| EU SDI GoG  | EU Security and Defence Initiative for the Gulf of Guinea                            |
| EUSR        | EU Special Representative for the Sahel                                              |
| EUTM Mali   | EU Military Training Mission in Mali                                                 |
| FARC-EP     | Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army                                 |
| FMLN        | Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front                                            |
| FNLA        | National Liberation Front of Angola                                                  |
| FOCAC       | Forum on China-Africa Cooperation                                                    |
| GCI         | China’s Global Civilization Initiative                                               |
| GSPC        | Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat                                              |
| G5 Sahel    | Group of Five for the Sahel                                                          |
| G7          | Group of the seven most developed countries                                          |
| HR          | High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs                        |
| IBK         | Former Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta                                       |
| IBSA        | Trilateral forum between India, Brazil and South Africa                              |
| IFAD        | International Fund for Agricultural Development                                      |
| IO          | International Organization                                                           |
| ISAF        | NATO military mission in Afghanistan                                                 |
| ISGS        | Islamic State in the Greater Sahara                                                  |
| JNIM        | Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin                                                   |
| JPO         | UN Junior Professional Officers                                                      |
| LIO         | Liberal International Order                                                          |
| LTTE        | Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam                                                 |
| M&E         | Monitoring and evaluation                                                            |
| MD-PSD      | EEAS Directorate-General for Peace, Security and Defence                             |
| MGIM        | Moscow State Institute of International Relations                                    |
| MINUSCA     | UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic |
| MINUSMA     | UN Stabilization Mission in Mali                                                     |
| MONUSCO     | UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo                     |
| MNJTF       | Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram                                    |
| MNLA        | Mouvement National de Liberation de l’Azawad                                         |
| MPCC        | EU Military Operations Headquarters                                                  |
| MPLA        | People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola                                       |
| MS          | Member States                                                                        |
| MUJAO       | Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa                                        |
| NATO        | North Atlantic Treaty Organization                                                   |
| OECD        | Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development                               |
| PBC         | UN Peacebuilding Commission                                                          |
| PBSO        | UN Peacebuilding Support Office                                                      |
| PMC         | Private Military Company                                                             |

|         |                                                                                   |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| P2      | Russia and China within the UNSC                                                  |
| P3      | France, UK, US within the UNSC                                                    |
| RCI-LRA | Regional Cooperation Initiative for the elimination of the Lord's Resistance Army |
| RWP     | Responsibility while protecting                                                   |
| R2P     | Responsibility to protect                                                         |
| SADC    | Southern African Development Community                                            |
| SG      | United Nations Secretary General                                                  |
| SNE     | EU Seconded national expert                                                       |
| SPMs    | UN Special Political Missions                                                     |
| SRAP    | EU Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020                                           |
| SRSG    | UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General                                |
| SSR     | Security sector reform                                                            |
| UAE     | United Arab Emirates                                                              |
| UN      | United Nations                                                                    |
| UNCT    | UN Country Team                                                                   |
| UNDP    | United Nations Development Programme                                              |
| UNESCO  | UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization                              |
| UNFPA   | UN Population Fund                                                                |
| UNISS   | United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel                                  |
| UNITA   | National Union for the Total Independence of Angola                               |
| UNMISS  | UN Mission in South Sudan                                                         |
| UNOCI   | UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire                                                     |
| UNOWAS  | UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel                                           |
| UNRWA   | UN Agency for Palestine Refugees                                                  |
| UNSC    | UN Security Council                                                               |
| UNTAET  | United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor                          |
| US      | United States of America                                                          |



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# Introduction

## About the Subject of the Book

On 26 April 2025, during the funeral of Pope Francis in Rome, world leaders gathered to pay tribute to the Argentine Jesuit who, during his pontificate, spearheaded the global Catholic movement for peace. Preaching the power of reconciliation and the importance of dialogue, he embodied the commitment to an idea of peacebuilding that addresses the root causes of violence and destruction. He envisaged a continuing important role for multilateral institutions, having addressed the United Nations (UN) General Assembly several times during his 12 years of pontificate. The Pope dedicated a section to the UN in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, a first since John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* (1963), emphasizing the need to prevent it from being delegitimized.

Oddly enough, Pope Francis's funeral has been the stage for a very different conflict resolution strategy from the one he used to advocate. In a corner of St Peter's Basilica, US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met face to face, with no press, delegations, or international mediators present. The encounter between the two leaders took place two months after a prior meeting in the White House, where President Trump and Vice President JD Vance berated Zelenskyy for being 'gambling with World War III' in an unprecedented public confrontation between an American president and a foreign head of state. The US administration engaged in a form of muscular mediation consisting of forcing Ukraine to retreat from its core objectives through persuasion and coercion (e.g., suspension of military aid), while opening direct negotiation channels with Russia that excluded European leaders and the UN and the Ukrainian people themselves. Washington's goal was not the overall resolution of the conflict, but rather the achievement of a mutual ceasefire agreement. Behind this is a short-term approach to peacebuilding oriented towards immediate gains, like the interruption of hostilities rather than long stable peace, and a narrow interpretation of conflict dynamics centred on material interests. A few days after Pope Francis' funeral, the US and Ukraine signed a controversial deal that conditioned the partial restoration of US military aid to Kyiv's concession of mining rights for the extraction of rare earths. Following this, Russia and Ukraine held direct talks in Istanbul for the first time since early 2022 around a US peace proposal that included formal recognition

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of Crimea as part of Russia, unspecified security guarantees for Ukraine without Washington's involvement, and the outsourcing of Zaporizhia nuclear power plant operations to the US. Trump's conflict management strategy sparked outrage among Western allies for its shameless transactional logic, the exclusion of all major stakeholders, and the disdain for the multilateral order. Amid growing tensions and the ideological rupture between the European Union (EU) and the Trump administration following JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 where the American Vice President openly supported the cause of European far-right groups, the president of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, sentenced: "the West as we knew it no longer exists".

For many observers, this is symptomatic of a general crisis of the Liberal International Order (LIO) and the simultaneous surge of an Authoritarian International Order (AIO), which had prospered during the numerous stalemates and regressions of liberal internationalism. This order, which is dominated by autocratic and authoritarian states, propagates opposing views to the LIO and tends to reject or disrupt multilateral cooperation. In terms of the norms and practices for promoting international stability, while the LIO created a liberal peace model rooted in the principles of democracy, human rights, free market, and the rule of law aimed at addressing the root causes of conflicts, the AIO seeks peace through the use of force and economic growth without caring for political reforms and social participation, rather looking for negative or victor's peace. Elements of this 'authoritarian conflict management' model are present in the peacebuilding approaches of countries such as Russia or China and also, albeit with varying degrees of opposition to liberal peace and the West, Turkey, the Gulf States, Brazil, India, and South Africa. Notwithstanding the growing relevance of illiberal peace approaches and alternative venues for mediation outside multilateral ones, liberal peace solutions are still part of the international policy toolkit. Recipient states are exploiting the interstices left by major powers clashing to extend their influence to deploy extraversion strategies. Instead of choosing one side, local elites are more eager to maintain a precarious balance between rivals in order to obtain the highest variety of peace and security provisions. This dynamic has transformed conflicts from shared global problems into arenas of strategic competition to the detriment of the primary interest of local people. Thus, peacebuilding assumed the semblance of a market-like field where peace interventions ceased to be 'only' about solving or managing conflict and became part of a complex system geared toward the preservation, the contestation, or the spreading, of international order(s). The driving force of this conflict resolution market is 'competition', being also the main feature characterizing the relations among states in the multipolar era.

This book critically examines the challenges posed by illiberal competition to the LIO and its established mode of peace, laying the groundwork for understanding a pivotal moment in global conflict management and resolution. In particular, it investigates whether and how international organizations (IOs), as both the most prominent expression of the LIO and the shapers of the institutionalization of liberal peace as a policy paradigm, are responding to both internal and external pressures to make peacebuilding less liberal. Its underlying puzzle is that the

liberal peace model, however criticized and challenged, in its core format has never ceased to frame the peace efforts of IOs such as the UN and the EU, even in the face of failure. The Kuhnian notion of ‘policy paradigm’ is the most apt to describe this *gestalt*-like model, which is more than a framework of ideas and norms that specifies policy goals and instruments, rather inspiring the way we look at policy problems themselves. The entrance of non-Western powers in conflict resolution, from Russian engagement in Syria, to Saudi intervention in Yemen, to Turkey’s activism in the Horn of Africa, shifted scholars’ attention from the study of the shortcomings of liberal peace to defining the characteristics of the authoritarian model.

However, this has been done without first reflecting on the role of the liberal paradigm’s vestiges on international actors’ behaviour. In particular, the identity of IOs remains closely linked to a liberal conception of peace, making it necessary to reflect on their role in the preservation of such a model facing the surge of illiberal alternatives. The many turns that peacebuilding underwent (e.g., local, spatial, pragmatic) had varying effects on the composition and calibration of peacebuilding policy instruments. In particular, the ‘stabilization’ approach, which has been seen in Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and Mali, focused on institution strengthening and the delivery of security to local populations instead of democratization and political reforms. However, while reflecting a general intervention fatigue and a strategic response to a changed geopolitical context, it consisted of a reordering of priorities rather than the replacement of liberal norms with something new. More in general, the substantive changes forwarded at the strategic level, like the UN’s ‘sustaining peace agenda’ and the EU’s ‘principled pragmatism’, have not been reflected in mission mandates, as most of them still display maximalist tasks aimed at positive peace. Hence, as long as peacebuilders continue to be deployed to address the root causes of conflict, peace operations will embody some normative assumptions about which modes of social, political, and economic systems are conducive to peace.

In the case of the UN and the EU, such assumptions have historically been embedded in liberalism, and in liberal peace more specifically. Recent analyses have highlighted how ‘crisis talks’ regarding the LIO had conservative effects on IOs, which are striving to stabilize liberal norms and practices in the face of a shared perception of the threat posed by illiberal approaches, rather than interrogating themselves on the conditions that triggered the crisis in the first place. Thus, amidst a contested global order and a world increasingly divided and polarized due to tectonic changes, the liberal peace paradigm is far from dead. On the contrary, it saw a resurgence following illiberal contestation and watershed events like the war in Ukraine. Proof of this is the continuous support for the democratic peace theory contained in the *New Agenda for Peace* (2023) or the promotion of multilateralism, democracy, and rule of law in the EU’s latest security and defence strategy (2022). The liberal peace issue also returned at the centre of the academic debate through the revival of narratives depicting a clash between democracies and autocracies, and the search for ways to save it ahead of post-conflict reconstruction in Ukraine.

Stemming from these considerations, this book addresses a twofold question, namely, *why* IOs continue to rely on the liberal peace framework despite its failures

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and *how* they do so in an increasingly contested peacebuilding milieu. Drawing on public policy theories, it is contended that IOs like the UN and the EU are guided by a logic of appropriateness in dealing with crises, consisting of the adherence by peacebuilding bureaucracies to those liberal norms that have historically shaped their identity. Such adherence is translated into inertial mechanisms designed to reassert the liberal paradigm by reinforcing internal cohesion, preventing possible deviations from both inside and outside, and responding strategically to those perturbations that could undermine policy continuity. Although it is by no means new to assert the inertia of organizations, what this book proposes is a novel framing of it as a deliberate institutional response to a rapidly evolving peacebuilding field. Through the concept of *strategic inertia*, policy continuity is portrayed not as a passive oversight or failure to adapt but as the result of a tactical behaviour aimed at strengthening organizational (self-)legitimacy and liberal identity. Accordingly, inertia does not (necessarily) mean immobility or inaction but can entail a proactive role and imaginative capacity by IOs, which eventually become guardians of liberal peace. Internal structures, administrative rules, bureaucratic procedures, and organizational politics are leveraged to selectively ignore, deflect, or undermine demands for transformations that contradict an embedded liberal vision. Thus, for example, through recruitment strategies IOs can select pre-socialized individuals who align with organizational values and goals. Behavioural rules can be imposed on IOs' staff involving disciplinary measures to control dissent or limiting institutional spaces for criticism. IOs may also minimize the possibility of the emergence of alternative constituencies or adverse political reactions by strategically managing their engagement with external actors, for example, through the imposition of rigid criteria for funding which privilege like-minded civil society. IOs can also exploit bureaucratic pathologies to hinder change. Through analogical reasoning established problem schema are applied to new cases regardless of their effectiveness, thus reinforcing existing liberal practices.

Amid international competition in the peacebuilding field, inertia acquires a strategic value in that the retention of certain practices and goals implies the attachment to a given (liberal) policy option at the expense of existing (illiberal) alternatives. Underlying the concept is both a complex view of competition involving different dynamics and actors beyond a linear understanding that considers only the role played by major state powers and a specific interpretation of policy continuity, according to which following a set of norms and practices is the result of a collective rational choice rather than something solely linked to habit or identity.

#### **About the Method**

This book examines strategic inertia through the crucial case of the UN and the EU in the Sahel region. The two organizations exhibit notable divergences in terms of structure, composition, and mandate. The UN is a universal institution in charge of maintaining peace and security worldwide whose members represent the totality of the internationally recognized states, while the EU is a regional institution composed of 27 countries primarily focused on securing European peace and prosperity.

However, they also share a common commitment to democracy, human rights, and global justice; they are the biggest international peace operators in terms of number and scope of peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions; and the largest multilateral donors in the field of development aid. Moreover, given their centrality in terms of prestige and resources, they have been accused of imposing a liberal peace. The focus on both organizations allows for a cross-case analysis and a moderate degree of generalization, although more research is needed to consider strategic inertia as a systematic tactic to deal with competition and illiberal contestation.

The choice of the Sahel, an African region spanning from Guinea-Conakry to the coast of Sudan, as a case study is linked to the need to provide a significant test-bed for the existence and functioning of strategic inertia, as well as to place it within a specific temporal and spatial context. The Sahelian security crisis erupted in Mali in 2012 when the return of armed fighters following the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 reignited the Tuareg rebellion and led to the declaration of an independent state of Azawad in the northern part of the country. The uprising was soon overtaken by Islamist groups, such as *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) and the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara* (ISGS), spreading violence to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger, which eventually prompted the intervention of an unprecedented variety of international actors. The relevance of the Sahel lies in that the region represents the intersection of crucial strategic interests for Western countries, sees the presence of non-Western actors offering alternatives to the liberal model, and displays extreme political fragility, as evidenced by the wave of coups that brought military juntas to power in Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Chad (2021), Sudan (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Niger (2023), and Gabon (2023). In other words, it constitutes a least-likely case for liberal policy continuity.

Yet, although Western interventions have been marked by a strong securitarian focus during the first decade of engagement (2012–2021), the overall conflict resolution efforts in the region still responded to a liberal governing initiative, whereby security was associated with the construction of efficient Western-like states to counter fragility. Both UN and EU missions' mandates for the region retained important features of a liberal approach, with an emphasis on human rights, strengthening the rule of law, and the importance of stable institutions. Such emphasis has increased over time rather than diminished, especially following the post-2021 period that marked a strategic shift in regional alliances towards authoritarian states, particularly Russia. The most recent European strategy for the Sahel (2021) placed a stronger emphasis on governance, including upholding human rights, fighting corruption, and fostering social inclusion; similarly, MINUSMA's last term, before its withdrawal, made the handover of power to democratically elected civil authorities one of its core priorities. More in general, Western efforts in the region never ceased to be norm-oriented, with monitoring and promoting respect for human rights and the rule of law at the centre of the agenda, as demonstrated by the UN accusation of Malian troops committing mass human rights violations in the town of Moura (2022) and by the strong condemnation of the military coups by European institutions. For many observers, the West's normative

attachment to liberal values and goals, particularly on the part of the UN and the EU, has been a major factor in triggering the misalignment with the new Sahelian regimes, which eventually led to a setback with the withdrawal of the MINUSMA, and the closure of the EU Training Mission in Mali and the Capacity Building Mission in Niger. Within this, the role played by strategic inertia has been crucial in both preventing the military-securitarian component within the two organizations from assuming full control and radically deviating from the liberal policy-path, and in facilitating a return to the foundations of liberal peace following 2021.

In the analysis of the case study, the research was guided by two interlinked analytical objectives: to demonstrate the *relatedness* of organizational behaviour to liberal policy continuity and to prove the *intentionality* behind that, namely, the deliberate use of inertia to maintain adherence to the liberal policy paradigm. As for the former aspect, methodologically, the study draws on what has been described as ‘minimalist process tracing’ to explore evidence linking strategic inertia to liberal policy continuity.<sup>1</sup> The mechanisms underpinning institutional inertia have been isolated and unpacked into three distinct but interconnected bureaucratic processes named *Grouphink*, *Backlash Prevention*, and *Pathological Behaviours*, spanning the entire policy cycle from adoption to policy implementation. Inertia is seen as both an anticipatory process, characterizing IOs’ day-to-day work, and a reactive process, which is activated when a crisis arises. According to the process tracing method, inertia is also seen as a causal process linking bureaucratic behaviours to policy continuity. Hence, the analytical work aimed to unveil the existence and functioning of this causal connection through a case-based reconstruction of the three above-mentioned bureaucratic processes. Empirical observation was gathered through 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with UN and EU officials and experts from both the headquarters and the field conducted, remotely and in person, between Geneva, Barcelona, and Genoa in 2023, with the informed consent of all participants (Table 0.1). A more recent round of interviews with international officials was conducted in 2024 as part of a distinct but related research project (PRIN 2022 n.2022K8L99X). Therefore, although not an integral part of the study on which this book is based, the information gathered through these interviews was considered during the writing process. Additional evidence was also drawn from the critical analysis of official documents, such as organizational guidelines, regional strategies, and mission mandates, and secondary sources, such as policy reports from universities and think tanks, and academic literature.

Regarding *intentionality*, to prove that policy continuity stems from collective action rather than the routinary repetition of actions detached from people’s support, inertial processes were detailed and traced back by situating them within a specific time and space. While under liberal unipolarity, the continuation of the status quo was self-explanatory, as the only policy expectation was associated with liberal peace, amidst the current multipolar order, bureaucratic inertia acquires a strategic value, facing the presence of illiberal alternatives. Hence, the recollection and analysis of evidence was conducted using this context-specific lens, whereby sources were interrogated about the temporal and spatial values of inertial processes, and empirically based consideration was made over the degree of awareness and perception of threat exhibited by officials and IOs’ strategic documents

Table 0.1 List of interviews

| <i>Interviewee</i>      | <i>Date</i> | <i>Place</i>                                        |
|-------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>UN Officials</b>     |             |                                                     |
| UN 1                    | 08-03-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva – Abuja)             |
| UN 2                    | 24-03-2023  | Online via Microsoft Teams (Domodossola – New York) |
| UN 3                    | 31-03-2023  | Online via Microsoft Teams (Geneva – New York)      |
| UN 4                    | 13-04-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Genoa – Niamey)             |
| UN 5                    | 13-04-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Genoa – New York)           |
| UN 6                    | 18-04-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva-Dakar)               |
| UN 7                    | 19-04-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva -Dakar)              |
| UN 8                    | 21-04-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva -Bamako)             |
| UN 9                    | 25-04-2023  | Online via Microsoft Teams (Geneva -New York)       |
| UN 10                   | 05-05-2023  | Online via Microsoft Teams (Geneva – Bamako)        |
| UN 11                   | 19-05-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Genoa – Lomé)               |
| <b>EU Officials</b>     |             |                                                     |
| EU 1                    | 22-02-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Barcelona-Brussels)         |
| EU 2                    | 27-02-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Genoa- Brussels)            |
| EU 3                    | 08-03-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva - Brussels)          |
| EU 4                    | 09-03-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva -Bamako)             |
| EU 5                    | 13-03-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva -Niamey)             |
| EU 6                    | 13-03-2023  | Online via Webex (Geneva -Bruxelles)                |
| EU 7                    | 14-03-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva - Brussels)          |
| EU 8                    | 15-03-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva - Brussels)          |
| EU 9                    | 20-03-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva - Brussels)          |
| EU 10                   | 24-03-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Domodossola- Brussels)      |
| EU 11                   | 03-04-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva - Brussels)          |
| EU 12                   | 14-04-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Genoa-Niamey)               |
| EU 13                   | 14-04-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Genoa- Brussels)            |
| EU 14                   | 14-04-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Genoa- Brussels)            |
| EU 15                   | 18-04-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva - Brussels)          |
| <b>Experts</b>          |             |                                                     |
| Conflict Advisor        | 11-04-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Genoa- Geneva)              |
| Former UN SRSG          | 27-04-2023  | Geneva                                              |
| EU Diplomat             | 02-05-2023  | Geneva                                              |
| Expert of Civil Society | 08-05-2023  | Online via Google Meet (Geneva-Brussels)            |

concerning the challenges posed by authoritarian actors and illiberal alternatives in the Sahel and beyond (Table 0.1).

### About the Structure of the Book

This book consists of two parts and is structured into seven thematic chapters, in addition to an introduction and the conclusions. *Part I* (Chapters 1–4) outlines the main concepts explored in this book, presents the research puzzle, lays out the core

argument around the idea of strategic inertia, and contextualizes the issue within the most recent academic debate. *Chapter 1* traces the evolution of peacebuilding from its institutionalization as ‘liberal peace’ by the UN to some of its most emblematic failures (e.g., Libya, Afghanistan). Despite mounting criticism and competition from authoritarian powers, the chapter argues for a resurgence of liberal peace in recent years, especially following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. *Chapter 2* details the entry and growing influence of non-Western powers in the field of conflict management and resolution. It delineates the features of an illiberal peace model, emphasizing the focus on state control and stability over democracy and political reforms, and discusses how it contributed to the transformation of conflicts into arenas of strategic competition. *Chapter 3* situates the recent challenges to liberal peacebuilding within the broader crisis of the LIO. By referring to policy change theories, it problematizes notions of ‘shocks’ as a trigger for paradigmatic shifts. It describes how recent upheavals have not led to liberal peace’s demise but to a conservative attitude by IOs. *Chapter 4* introduces ‘strategic inertia’ as the book’s core theoretical contribution, defining it as a deliberate strategy by IOs to achieve policy continuity in a contested peacebuilding milieu. It unpacks this into three mechanisms: Groupthink, Backlash Prevention, and Pathological Behaviours, explaining how enable IOs to resist illiberal demands and preserve policy continuity.

*Part II* (Chapters 5–7) contains the empirical sections. It expounds on the characteristics and dynamics of the Sahelian conflict and reports the results of the analysis on the processes underlying strategic inertia, which allowed the UN and EU to maintain policy continuity in the region. *Chapter 5* presents the Sahel as a crucial case study due to the intersection of Western interventions and the presence of rival actors. It details the Malian crisis and subsequent strategic realignment towards authoritarian powers, arguing that, despite a securitarian shift during a decade of predominantly Western activism (2012–2021), the UN and EU’s liberal normative framework was never fully abandoned. *Chapter 6* provides an in-depth analysis of the UN’s strategic use of inertia in the Sahel to maintain its liberal policy continuity. It demonstrates how Groupthink, Backlash Prevention, and Pathological Behaviours were employed by the UN’s civilian-liberal component to resist securitarian drifts and defend liberal values, even at the cost of operational presence. *Chapter 7* analyses the EU’s strategic use of inertia, focusing on how the European bureaucracy resisted pressures for a purely securitarian approach. It shows the way in which inertial mechanisms were deployed to safeguard liberal policy continuity and institutional identity. The *Conclusions* acknowledge the role of IOs as the ultimate guardians of liberal peace and highlight the strategic value of a sustained engagement with liberal peacebuilding, arguing against validating authoritarian models to avoid credibility loss and to preserve a political counterbalance to illiberal proposals.

## Note

- 1 In its maximalist interpretation, process tracing is aimed at sequencing the causal chain linking a specific triggering event to a given outcome.

## **Part I**

# **Strategic Inertia and the Transformation of the International Peacebuilding Order**



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# 1 Evolution, Crisis, and Resurgence of Liberal Peacebuilding

## Evolution

The concept of *peacebuilding* is hard to define, not because of a lack of definitions but precisely for their abundance. Depending on which constituency is consulted, whether civilian practitioners, national policymakers, supranational officials, or peace scholars, significant divergences can emerge regarding its aims and scope, from that of a comprehensive reform of the economic, societal, and political order to a narrower focus on micro-initiatives geared towards local empowerment and social relief. Past and current inconsistencies in the understanding of peacebuilding can be traced back to the origin of the term, found in academia, and its mutation in the process of integration into politics.

It was the putative father of peace research, the Norwegian researcher Johan Galtung, who first coined, in 1976, the term ‘peacebuilding’ in his pioneering work “Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, and Peacebuilding”. The Galtunian idea of peacebuilding involves the elimination of the deepest causes of conflicts, which he found in social injustice. This was strictly linked to the notion of ‘positive peace’ (Galtung, 1969), reflecting an extended conception of violence, which goes beyond personal harm to include systemic violations of human dignity. Other scholars built on his work to theorize means of transforming conflicts from disruptive phenomena into forms of collective progress through transversal participation and revolutionary changes. John Paul Lederach (1997), in particular, transferred academic notions on peacebuilding into real-life situations, through a first-hand commitment in conflict-affected places like Colombia, the Philippines, and Nepal. He promoted the idea of moving beyond traditional forms of peacemaking, still rooted in track-one diplomacy, to move towards more holistic approaches. He stressed the need to link the grassroots level with top-level initiatives, especially through the work of middle-range leadership, like ethnic and religious leaders, academics, and nongovernmental organizations, and the creation of peace infrastructures to empower resources within a society and maximize contributions from outside.

The transposition of the peacebuilding concept into an actionable policy principle came with the publication of the report *An Agenda for Peace* in 1992, by the

United Nations (UN) Secretary-General (SG) Boutros-Ghali. Here, ‘post-conflict peacebuilding’ appeared as the last phase of a conflict-tackling pathway that begins with preventive diplomacy and extends beyond peacemaking and peacekeeping. It was defined as “an action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict” (p. 11). The report further described peacebuilding as a practice of political (re)ordering geared towards the promotion of democracy as the main precondition to attain peace. Accordingly, the concept suddenly acquired a specific political value and a shared meaning among international policymakers. A liberal model of peace emerged as a banalized version of the Kantian idea that liberally constituted societies tend to be more peaceful, both in their domestic affairs and in their international relations, than illiberal ones (Cavalcante, 2019). The conversion of the liberal-democratic peace theory (Doyle, 1983; Panebianco, 1997) from a theoretical construct to a policy guideline was largely contingent on the transformations unfolding within the international system after the end of the Cold War. Throughout the 1990s, new forms of asymmetric and hybrid warfare emerged, which changed the ontology of armed conflicts. The consequent broadening of the notion of security beyond nation-states to include other threats to life, such as poverty, environmental pollution, population displacement, and infectious diseases (‘human security’, UNDP, 1994), expanded the domain of conflict management and resolution to the promotion of human rights and the combat against poverty. Parallel to this, the interpretation of the end of the bipolar era as a victory of the West and liberalism spread consensus over the legitimacy and viability of liberal democracy as a tool against violence. The level of peace within a society began to be measured along a spectrum where the negative pole was represented by failed states, namely, those that did not meet the Weberian standard of Western liberal statehood (Baldaro and Costantini, 2021). Hence, ‘liberal peace’ comes to coincide with “the promotion of democracy, market-based economic reforms and a range of other institutions associated with ‘modern’ states” (Newman et al., 2009, p. 3). Through the rhetorical use of its ideational components in the day-to-day practices and activities of international organizations and the adaptation of their bureaucratic structures (e.g., with the creation of the UN peacebuilding architecture in 2005),<sup>1</sup> liberal peace became such an entrenched policy paradigm that it was for a long time synonymous with ‘peacebuilding’ itself.

Like a *Gestalt*, it constituted a framework of ideas and standards conditioning the definition of goals and the policy instruments deemed acceptable to attain them. Hence, the ideational component of the liberal peace paradigm rests in the principles of political liberalism (Doyle, 1983), first and foremost, the peace-democracy nexus. In this view, liberalism “is the ideology upon which life, culture, society, prosperity and politics are assumed to rest” (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2007, p. 493). According to its advocates, the fact that liberalism has its roots in Europe should not undermine its inherent universal value, since political freedom and the idea that the legitimacy of a government must be based on popular consensus cannot be attractive only to Europeans (Wallis, 2018). According to Autesserre (2017), there are at least three implicit assumptions of liberal peace upon which

policymakers and practitioners rely in the performance of their duties: that ‘good things’ lead to good things; that peacebuilding efforts are necessary; and that local people in conflict-affected places lack the ability to solve their own problems. ‘Good things’ refer to the measures contained in the liberal agenda, which emphasizes the organization of elections, the creation of a market economy, the promotion of the rule of law, and the advancement of human rights and civil society. The second assumption concerns the ineluctability of peace operations under the guidance of the international community (a generic term still used to identify Western states and Western-based international organizations). As if to say that there are no other possible and viable solutions to resolve violent conflicts, apart from the intervention of a selected group of people who possess unique resources and expertise. The latest assumption recalls a widespread ‘romanticization’ of local actors frequently portrayed as victims or listed among the causes of their own problems. For Zambakari (2016), other assumptions of the liberal peace paradigm are that conflict-related problems are always internally generated, while their solution must be external, and the conflation of democracy and elections, which tends to favour formal democracies over substantive ones.

On the side of practice, liberal peace has shown notable flexibility. The principles and values attributed to a policy option are finally those determining its ‘liberal’ character more than the nature of the policy itself, together with the ideational belonging and geopolitical affiliation of the actors implementing it. Having said that, in its maximalist declination, namely, the one geared towards the transformation of violent societies into democratic/peaceful ones, liberal practices are typically related to a list of tasks in the areas of security (e.g., human rights, rule of law, security sector reform – SSR), humanitarian relief (e.g., refugee return, fight against poverty), governance (e.g., institution building), economic stabilization (e.g., free trade), democratization (e.g., creation of political parties, independent media, organization of elections), and development (e.g., economic growth). Attached to this is a specific interpretation of peacebuilding as ‘problem-solving’ (Cox, 1981) to indicate a way of understanding intervention as a technical and ‘non-political’ exercise (Richmond, 2011), whose strength is the ability to reduce a problem to a limited number of variables.

In the early 1990s, a series of UN-led peace negotiations in Central America, Cambodia, Namibia, and Angola and subsequent successful operations to monitor peace agreements, organize elections, and restore civilian governments, sanctioned faith in the liberal paradigm. On the other hand, the 1993 genocide in Rwanda and the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica-Bosnia were interpreted as failures by the international community to provide UN peace missions with strong-enough mandates to pursue their agenda. The institutional response came shortly after, with the unanimous adoption of the *Responsibility to Protect* (R2P) doctrine by heads of state and government gathered at the 2005 UN World Summit, which provided legal recognition to the practice of ‘humanitarian intervention’ already employed in Kosovo by NATO (1999). This provided the international community, under UN guidance, with unprecedented powers. The principle of ‘sovereignty as responsibility’, upon which the doctrine was built, cemented the connection with the liberal agenda. In

order to uphold their duties towards the population, states must implement policies aimed at protecting human rights, ensuring equal access to justice, and establishing laws against hate speech. Failure or unwillingness to do so may result in a breach of a state's obligation to protect its population from mass crimes and trigger collective action by the international community. Framed by this vision, the first decade of the 2000s was characterized by an interventionist ethos and aggressive state-building initiatives. Between 1999 and 2002, for example, the UN assumed the role of de facto government in Timor-Leste through the mission UNTAET (UN Transitional Administration in East Timor), even taking on foreign policy tasks such as interaction with regional governments. Similarly, the European Union (EU), with the launch of its first mission under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in 2003, replaced the UN in Bosnia by taking over executive functions such as law enforcement and adjudication of criminal cases (Belloni, 2019).

Western interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq marked a turning point in the conflation of peacebuilding with counter-terrorism strategies. The 2004 Commission for Weak States and US National Security (Weinstein, 2004) linked the capacities of governments in the development world with potential threats to global stability. The resulting state-building endeavour was marked by a top-down exclusionary approach, whereby forced democratization followed a foreign-imposed regime change (Mako and Edgar, 2021). Amid growing criticism against Western interventionism (Carty, 2011), in 2011, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1973 in the framework of R2P, authorizing the use of all necessary measures, including coercive military action, to halt the perpetration of crimes against humanity and war crimes in Libya. The subsequent military operation (imposition of a 'no fly zone', and launch of airstrikes against Libya's air force, tanks, and artillery), enforced by a NATO-led coalition, soon went from being primarily aimed at protecting the populations at risk, to overthrowing the Qaddafi regime, with several states admitting to breaking the UN-imposed arms embargo and supplying Libyan rebels with weapons (Richmond and Visoka, 2022). After the fall of Qaddafi in October 2011, the lack of a post-conflict reconstruction plan left the country submerged in tribal and regional rivalries, further exposing Western opportunism and instrumental use of the liberal peace framework to pursue national interests. The resulting loss of legitimacy, especially among Southern states and emerging powers (BRICS), compounded the failures of ongoing state-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan and led to a substantial crisis in the international peacebuilding sector. This became especially evident in the impasse of UN mediation efforts during the Syrian conflict and the West's inability to secure a peace agreement in Yemen.

In Syria, a series of vetoed UN resolutions (four only in 2011) prevented any type of intervention under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, allowing armed forces under the command of former President Bashar al-Assad to commit massive human rights violations against civilians, including the use of chemical weapons. The following attempts by the UN and Western countries to mediate between the parties under the format of the Geneva Process achieved poor results, having been sidelined in 2016 by the military intervention of Russia in support of the Syrian regime and the launch of the Astana Process (Beaujouan, 2024). Yemen also saw

a military intervention in favour of the official government, initiated without the authorization of the Security Council. In 2015, the Shia Houthi rebels, supported by Tehran, took over the capital Sanaa. In response, Saudi Arabia began a military intervention to restore the legitimate government and reverse the territorial gains of the Houthis. Between 2015 and 2019 several rounds of talks led by the UN and the EU did not produce any tangible results as they failed to recognize the reality on the ground, with the exclusion of the Houthis and the separatists of the Southern Movement from intra-elite negotiations, and due to the double role played by Saudi Arabia as a part in the conflict and a committed mediator. As with the case of Russia in Syria, Riyadh sidelined the UN, with the support of the US under the first Trump presidency, first through the Stockholm Agreement of 2019, officially hosted by the UN but negotiated between the Saudis, Washington, and Tehran, and later through direct bilateral talks (Palik and Rustad, 2019).

The ‘evolution’ of liberal peace from a framework that sought to connect global subalterns’ demands with liberal democracy, to a hegemonic instrument of the West, sanctioned the end of an era of aggressive liberal interventionism against the pressure imposed by local resistance, international contestation, and a general decline of legitimacy.

## **Crisis**

In the decade spanning from the military intervention in Libya to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the leading international organizations in the field of peacebuilding underwent a process of critical self-reflection that led to a succession of major reform attempts. In 2014, UN Former SG Ban Ki-Moon, announcing the establishment of a *High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations*, stated that “peace operations must change [...] if they are to remain an indispensable and effective tool in promoting international peace and security”. The report and subsequent strategic documents draw from extensive research on the limitations of liberal peacebuilding.

During the two decades of liberal interventionism, studies on peace missions flourished. While certain convergence can be found in deeming Western conflict resolution fundamentally unsuccessful with regard to its stated goal of reducing the risk of relapsing into conflict,<sup>2</sup> the reasons for explaining this poor performance differ in the literature. David Chandler (2010) presented a useful categorization of the most relevant approaches adopted by scholars in their criticism of liberal peace, using the focus and scope of the analysis as a qualifier. He distinguished between an idea- and a power-based approach. A dualism that closely reflects theories of policy change and normative contestation. Bhatia and Coleman (2003), for example, separated between augmentative discourses, which defend existing paradigms calling for limited changes in the settings of instruments, and transformative discourses, which conversely push for comprehensive changes by questioning the tenure of the paradigm in power on the base of alternative frames. Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014) distinguish between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ contestation. The former challenges international practices within the established metric of a field, the

latter calls for alternative metrics. Similarly, Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2020) fostered the divide between applicatory and validity contestation. The former concerns the appropriateness of a norm and related actions for a given situation; the latter contrasts its very core, that is, the overall soundness of a norm.

Hence, the ‘idea-based’ approach critiques the universalizing assumptions of liberal political discourses. It calls for less liberal frameworks, with less emphasis on the reconstruction of sovereign states, democracy, and free markets. While defending its values, this body of research argues that the liberal model is unsuitable for many post-conflict societies. Roland Paris (2004) advocated a policy of ‘institutionalization before liberalization’ in order to establish the necessary regulatory frameworks to ensure a gradual move towards liberal models of market democracy. Cedric de Coning (2018), referring to the high complexity and fundamental intractability of many conflicts, called for a more adaptable approach to peacebuilding. The ‘adaptive peace’ model he proposed opts for continuous experimentation and learning-by-doing with the primary aim of stimulating intra-national processes of resilience building. This literature is characterized by pragmatic thinking, namely, by a focus on processes rather than end-states, prioritizing a step-by-step logic of progressive reforms and a strengthening of the ability to act under the pressure imposed by the uncertainty reigning in (post)conflict scenarios (Ansell and Geyer, 2016). Through the eyes of its proponents, this adaptive (or pragmatic) form of peacebuilding is not (and should not be) value-free. The flexible and improvised style of decision-making underpinning it, in fact, is necessarily based on broad participation and the existence of a pluralist system as preconditions for enabling intra-crisis learning (Paris, 2024). Thus, this group of critics is not anti-liberal; they simply argue that liberalism must take into account the implications of international interventions in non-liberal contexts.

In the ‘power-based’ approach, on the contrary, liberal peace is criticized precisely on the merit of its core values and normative content. The unbalance of power between interveners and interveners is put at the centre of the analyses, and peacebuilding efforts are confronted with their (more or less intentional) impact on conflict dynamics and, more broadly, on world politics. The liberal approach to conflict resolution is thus regarded by these critics as a governing technology used by a (formerly) hegemonic West in the pursuit of its geostrategic interests (Jabri, 2006). Three main strands of research are included in this approach. The first is the neo-Marxist, which suggests that Western interventions reinforced existing power hierarchies due to the structural constraints of neoliberal market relations. In serving the interests of dominant Western powers and international financial institutions, liberal peace exacerbated the root causes of conflicts. For Pugh (2005), the imposition of Western models on reluctant post-conflict societies pushed their economies towards market liberalization, resulting in local impoverishment and increased national vulnerability.

The second strand of literature has its roots in post-structuralism, especially in the work of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. Here, the policies promoted by liberal peacebuilding are portrayed as serving a neoliberal *telos* aimed at protecting the economic and administrative (infra)structures essential to the functioning of the

global economy and at exerting a biopolitical control over local populations (Chandler, 2013). For Mark Duffield (2011), the blurring boundaries between development and security sectors in the scenario of the war on terror were proof of the weaponization of foreign aid and the turning of peacebuilding into a foreign policy instrument from a global approach to solving violent conflicts (Levorato and Donelli, 2023).

The third body of research is that of hybridity or ‘hybrid peace’. This group of scholars, headed by Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver Richmond, criticized liberal peace for having ignored the role of local structures in the unfolding of peacebuilding processes. In particular, the failure to recognize local agency, coupled with the serious lack of knowledge of local customs and traditions by international actors (Autesserre, 2017), inevitably undermined not only the effectiveness of international peace operations but also their legitimacy. This led to the emergence of hybrid forms of governance, neither completely liberal nor fully illiberal, where local and international actors embraced opportunities and constraints derived from the interaction of different, even contraposing, visions of peace. Thus, hybrid peace became both a label to describe real-life situations and an aspiration, an ideal outcome of a possible collaboration between distant worlds, which does not repudiate liberal goals altogether but reinterprets them through the involvement of native actors beyond Western understandings of ‘civil society’ (Belloni, 2012; Mac Ginty, 2010; Richmond, 2011; 2013). Although particularly successful in terms of dissemination and academic recognition, hybrid peace theories were not exempt from criticism, including (but not limited to) the over-reliance on problematic dualisms (e.g., locals-internationals), the acritical embracement of power dynamics (Chandler, 2010), the overestimation of the liberalness of liberal peace (Joshi et al., 2014), and the assumption of the generative effects of local-international encounters. Some of these criticisms have been embraced by hybrid peace theorists themselves. Richmond et al. (2024), for example, stated that local actors can openly oppose liberal interventions when this entails losing their privileges. Hence, by building on conservative elite networks, they forge counter-peace dynamics aimed at obstructing, derailing, and reversing peace and reform processes through “proto-systemic processes that connect spoilers across all scales (local, regional, national, transnational), while also exploiting structural blockages to peace and unintended consequences of peace interventions” (2024, p. 127).

A last and more recent strand of literature that escaped Chandler’s categorization could be labelled as ‘post-modern’ or ‘utopian’. This stems from the acknowledgement that much of the extant research work on peacebuilding has been focused on demonstrating the shortcomings of liberal peace while failing to provide theoretical conceptualizations of positive alternatives (Visoka, 2019). This body of research has thus been focused on proposing radical, sometimes avowedly utopian, conceptions of peace moving beyond traditional notions of statism, actorhood, or territoriality. Ignasi Torrent (2021), for example, advanced the idea of peace as an entanglement of human and non-human entities, actions, and co-constitutive relations, “whose genealogy is co-emergent with other processes, unveiling [...] the vulnerability of the human in the face of [...] the Anthropocene” (2021, p. 74). Through a more radical interpretation of ‘complexity’ than the one offered by De Coning, Torrent

suggested that peacebuilding is a necessary but unpredictable exercise that needs to make up with the fact that changes can at best be induced but not over-determined. Miriam Anderson et al. (2025, p. 2) assumed a feminist perspective by coining the idea of peace as a continuum of efforts that should not be confined “to formal processes or ‘post-conflict’ environments [and] that can emerge and persist even without formal war or peace negotiations”. They highlighted the central role played by women in leading non-militarized, inclusive, and locally grounded peace initiatives in places like Colombia, Afghanistan, and Myanmar, despite the collapse of formal peace processes. Their concept reflects the idea of ‘continuum of violence’, which appeared in the work of Cynthia Cockburn (2004), to indicate systemic or symbolic forms of gender-based violence transcending war/peace boundaries. The idea of continuity and non-linearity of peacebuilding is also shared by Thania Paffenholz (2021, p. 368), scholar and peace practitioner, who preached the adoption of a ‘perpetual peacebuilding’ paradigm, which entails the “continuous negotiations, and re-negotiations, of the social and political contract of a society and polity”. Paffenholz proposed a radical rethinking of both peacebuilding categories, through the abandonment of concepts such as those of ‘tracks’ and ‘peace agreements’, and the role of international actors within it, who should refrain from providing solutions and rather focus on “facilitating the envisaging of the society which people want to build and helping them adapt their approaches accordingly” (2021, p. 379). Roger Mac Ginty (2021) focused on the hyper-local level and theorized the term ‘everyday peace’ to refer to those micro-practices of peace by ordinary people that occur in mundane places, like the church, the market, or the grocery store, and that could trigger virtuous circles of ‘scaling out’ (horizontally) and ‘scaling up’ (vertically) capable of disrupting violence. Hence, Mac Ginty abandoned the level of macro-dynamics and (inter)national policymaking, to outline the potential of human actions towards reconciliation involving notions of sociality, reciprocity, and solidarity. Dahlia Simangan’s (2024) conceptualization of ‘post-growth peacebuilding’ draws from the environmental discourse to question the often-assumed positive linkage between peace and economic growth. According to the author, notwithstanding the latest attention posed by the UN to the environmental impact of peace operations, economic growth is still uncritically regarded as a virtue of international peacebuilding, even though it can contribute not only to environmental degradation but also to an unequal distribution of resources in conflict-affected societies. Hence, post-growth peacebuilding rests upon pluralistic approaches to development which prioritize human needs and local production. For Simangan it is “more than being climate-sensitive; it is about restructuring the political economies of growth” (2024, p. 885). Finally, Jonas Rusche (2022) recently proposed a radical theoretical reorientation of the peacebuilding ideological substratum from liberalism to anarchism. For Rusche, since anarchism has always been about the attainment of a utopian future, it had to formulate credible ways to ‘get there’. Through an economy of commons, the ending of the nation-state and borders, free association, mutual aid and prefigurative, anti-authoritarian, collaborative action, anarchism would pave the way to self-emancipation away from any form

of domination, while also escaping the accusation of imposing another hegemonic blueprint approach on local actors.

International Organizations proved to be not insensitive to these criticisms and above all to the new international landscape. The post-Lybia scenario configured a new reality where ‘the West’ lost its monopoly in the field of peacebuilding and became aware of its diminishing capacity to influence local and international peace dynamics. In particular, they had to face the fact that the problems to be solved (war and violence) no longer match (if ever did) the measures designed to solve them (Öjendal et al., 2021). The subsequent wave of reforms was more responsive to a logic of progressist adaptation rather than a radical rethinking of all peacebuilding normative and institutional structures, hence being more in line with the propositions put forward by the idea-based critique, oriented towards a recalibration of policy instruments rather than a thorough shift of goals and normative commitments.

At the UN level, as mentioned, in 2014, former SG Ban Ki-Moon authorized the establishment of an Independent Panel on Peace Operations in charge of reviewing the relevance and effectiveness of UN peace operations. In its recommendation, the Panel made a call for four essential shifts to be embraced in the future design and delivery of UN peace operations in order to realize their potential for better results in the field. Firstly, that politics must drive the design and implementation of peace operations; secondly, that the full spectrum of UN peace operations must be used more flexibly to respond to changing needs on the ground; thirdly, to strengthen the global and regional partnership for peace and security; fourthly, that the UN Secretariat must become more field-focused and UN peace operations must be more people-centred. Alongside this, two other independent studies were commissioned to review the peacebuilding architecture and the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace, and security. On the one hand, the *Advisory Group of Experts on the Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture* pointed to fragmentation of efforts across the UN system that undermines its ability to support member states in their efforts to build peace and coined the idea of ‘sustaining peace’ as the new imperative of UN action. This entailed taking “proactive measures aimed at building on peace where it already exists by reinforcing the structures, attitudes, and institutions that underpin it” (Mahmoud and Makoond, 2017, p. 2). On the other hand, the *global study on the implementation of resolution 1325* reviewed the challenges and lessons learned across regions in implementing the women, peace, and security agenda 15 years after its adoption and reiterated how women’s equal and meaningful participation in peace and security efforts is vital to sustainable peace. The SG put forward an agenda based on the recommendations by the groups of experts, through the publication of the report *The Future of United Nations peace operations* in 2015 and of the report *Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace* in 2018. The former sanctioned pursuit of political settlements, protection of civilians, tailored and appropriate responses, accountability, strengthening of organizational partnership, prevention, and mediation as the main priorities for UN peace operations. The latter further declined the term sustaining peace as “a goal

and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population were taken into account” (p. 1) and sought to foster operational and policy coherence across the UN peacebuilding architecture.

For its part, between 2003 and 2016, the EU became the second most engaged international actor in conflict resolution globally after the UN, having deployed peace missions in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Guinea-Bissau, Palestine, Central African Republic (CAR), and Indonesia and having played a leading role in peacebuilding efforts in the Western Balkans. In 2003, the first European security strategy (*Secure Europe in a Better World*) stated the role of the EU as a global player committed to international peace and security. It identified terrorism and state failure as major security threats and posited the fostering of democracy as the most effective way of dealing with them. This self-confidence and liberal optimism faded in 2016 with the publication of its second strategy (*Global Strategy*). Following a financial crisis (2008–2012) and a so-called refugee crisis (2014–2015), it combined a “realistic assessment of the strategic environment” with an “idealistic aspiration to advance a better world” (p. 16). In particular, the Global Strategy advanced the idea of ‘principled pragmatism’ as a solution to tone down ideological aspirations linked to democratization while putting European security priorities in first. More related to the field of peacebuilding, in 2018, the *Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises* was released. Building on the conclusions of the 2012 Comprehensive Approach, it was inspired by the same pragmatic ethos that guided the 2016s security strategy, and promoted an integrated approach aimed towards multifaceted and multi-phased coordination in order to contribute to sustainable peace.

In an attempt to make an order on the general characteristics of the peacebuilding sector reforms of the mid-2010s, many scholars relied on the concept of ‘policy turn’ to interpret the changes in conflict resolution approaches by international organizations with respect to the liberal interventionism that had characterized the period 1991–2011. In particular, the ‘local turn’ (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013) and the ‘pragmatic turn’ (Moe and Stepputat, 2018) had the greatest success.

On the former, Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver Richmond (2013) coined the term to describe the surge of interest in ‘the local’ in the study and practice of peacebuilding, resulting in an increased number of references to ‘civil society’ or ‘local ownership’ in the description and articulation of the programmes, projects, and policies of international peacebuilding organizations. The UN incorporated this approach by assuming an understanding of peacebuilding that it is about sustaining local peace endeavours, while the EU adopted a similar perspective by stating its willingness to “engage the world manifesting responsibility towards others and sensitivity to contingency”<sup>3</sup> and emphasizing “the need to build back better and promotes solutions that focus on building sustainable and resilient systems”.<sup>4</sup> According to Charles T. Hunt (2023), there were at least three drivers behind this shift towards localism. First, a need to respond to a growing antipathy against liberal interventionism stemming from the failure of externally imposed top-down and technocratic national and state-centric solutions to promote lasting peace (exemplified by the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq). Second, a recognition,

grounded in empirical reality, of the relative ability of locally grown initiatives to build order amid conflict, and of the better placement of local actors for a deeper understanding of the context and needs in their communities. Third, the push from an increasingly audible Global South, both within and outside the ranks of international bureaucracies, for more grounded and tailor-made approaches to peacebuilding. However, for many scholars and analysts, the actual scope of this localist reorientation has been rather limited and confined to the discursive dimension, as the translation of the policies contained in the strategic documents into practice never materialized. For Séverine Autesserre (2019) international organizations only paid lip service to the ideas proposed in the reform documents, while Filip Ejdus (2018, p. 38) sustained that the efforts made by the decision-makers towards centring the peacebuilding process on the locals have not led to a substantive change, as international actors still “decide when, how, and to what end they intervene”. Elisa Randazzo (2021) and Charles Hunt (2023) sustained that the local turn may have even reinforced liberal peacebuilding, having encouraged “more local buy-in to the same top-down externally designed intervention” (Hunt, 2023, p. 338). Through a quantitative analysis of UN and EU peacebuilding mandates spanning two decades (2001–2021), Mattia Sguazzini and I (2024) demonstrated not only a detachment between policy orientations vis à vis goals and instruments already at the mandate-level but also an instrumental use of the local turn as an exit strategy from highly complex scenarios. Thus, using a minimalist interpretation of the idea of ‘local ownership’ as the appropriation by local authorities of external goals and principles, the international organizations were able to both disengage from intractable conflict situations threatening the integrity and legitimacy of their vision of peace and maintain direct influence over the intervened countries. By delegating implementation to local actors, they decreased the costs and risks of missions, while through a range of techniques such as training, counselling, mentoring, monitoring, capacity-building, and evaluations, they developed forms of governance from a distance (Joseph, 2013).

Stemming from these, and other similar, considerations Louise W. Moe and Finn Stepputat (2018) contested that the changes brought about by the 2010s reforms of the peacebuilding sector were more in line with a ‘pragmatic turn’ rather than a local one. For the authors, a renewed focus on bottom-up approaches was not the only element in peacebuilding’s adaptation to criticism and pushback. There was also a growing engagement with realpolitik thinking and an apparent retreat from liberal idealism. Robert Muggah (2014), Roberto Belloni and Irene Costantini (2019), Simone Tholens (2021), and John Karlsrud (2019) noticed a shift towards more robust peacekeeping mandates in terms of the use of force and rules of engagement, with a focus on pacification instead of democratization, after the deployment of the Force Intervention Brigade in MONUSCO, the transition to MINUSMA in Mali, and the launch of MINUSCA in the CAR, between 2013 and 2015. All three missions had the word ‘stabilization’ in their name, and all three had stabilization tasks in their mandates. The term also appeared in the European Global Strategy, where it has been defined as a way to “enable legitimate institutions to rapidly deliver basic services and security to local populations, reducing

the risk of relapse into violence and allowing displaced persons to return”.<sup>5</sup> For Cedric de Coning (2019), the stabilization approach marked the abandonment of a conflict resolution framework and the adoption of a conflict management one, whose main goal is limited to the interruption and containment of violence. Thus, for many, the pragmatic turn came to coincide with the demise of liberal peace (Moe and Stepputat, 2018), as stabilization practices would be in open contradiction with important liberal tenets in the extensive use of violence, the exclusion of non-state armed actors from peace processes, and indirect support for authoritarian states (Rosas Duarte and Souza, 2024).

This apparent moving away from traditional liberal peace has been attributed not only to intervention fatigue but also to a changed geopolitical landscape (Belloni and Costantini, 2019). Resounding obituaries concerning the death of liberal peace (“The Liberal Peace Is Gone and Is Not Coming Back”; Mac Ginty, 2024) have been flourishing in coincidence with the affirmation of non-Western approaches to peacebuilding, which, as we will see in the next chapter, have fostered opposing views to those of the liberal model concerning how to achieve peace and the meaning of peace itself. Thus, away from the critical analyses of peacebuilding discourses and practices, the decay of liberal peace has been increasingly interpreted as the inevitable consequence of structural upheavals. Since the end of the 2010s, a sense of the ‘end of history’ has increasingly permeated the debate on the future of peace operations (Paris, 2024), seen as living vestiges of a fading international order. For Hylke Dijkstra (2024), the post-Cold War era, as an extraordinarily peaceful and prosperous period marked by international cooperation and diplomacy, is over, and with it also the liberal international order that underpinned it. While historians will tell us when exactly it came to an end, whether it was with the first BRIC(S) summit (2009), Xi Jinping’s presidency (2013), the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum (2016), or the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea (2014), and its full invasion of Ukraine (2022), for many realist thinkers the causes of it must be sought within the international liberal order itself. John Mearsheimer (2019) especially referred to liberal peacebuilding as a deeply flawed policy, because of which the international liberal order was bound to collapse. According to the well-known thinker “spreading democracy around the globe, which is of paramount importance for building such an order, not only is extremely difficult but often poisons relations with other countries and sometimes leads to disastrous wars” (2019, p. 8). The apparent inadequacy of peacebuilding to deal with the consequences of incoming multipolarity, like the use of rough force and the spread of a transactional logic, seems reflected in the scant success of the stabilization approach of the mid-2010s. In CAR, ten years after the deployment of MINUSCA, large parts of the country are still controlled by rebel forces, and both MINUSMA and MONUSCO have been asked to withdraw behind accusations of ineffectiveness.

Thus, while the aggressive liberal interventionism of the 1990s–2000s was abandoned during the 2010s, the reform processes that followed did not create a new peacebuilding consensus. Most of the literature refers to this period as one characterized by mere incremental adjustments that did not configure a complete

rethinking of the liberal model, not even in the adoption of the stabilization approach, which remained informed by a liberal ethos. This attachment to Western principles, according to some, sentenced peacebuilding to irrelevance in the face of a changed international landscape and the advance of conflict management approaches by non-Western powers (“The widely criticized liberal peace [...] is vanishing under conditions of counter-peace and multipolarity”; Richmond and Pogodda, 2025).

## **Resurgence**

Since 2014, no new multidimensional peace operations have been established, the number of UN personnel in uniform has decreased by 20,000,<sup>6</sup> major peacekeeping missions have been closed worldwide, Western officials have been expelled from former colonies, and a surge in authoritarianism has led to strategic shifts in alliances. In correspondence to the retreat from a focus on root causes of conflicts and long-term engagement, the number of peace agreements signed each year is continuing to decline (Farquhar et al., 2024), while 2023 marked the highest number of active conflicts since the end of WWII (Rustad, 2024). This portrays a hardly optimistic picture of the state of peacebuilding; however, we should be cautious about giving it up for dead too quickly. Over the years, liberal peace policies have proved remarkably resilient to structural changes. There is a body of evidence that proves that liberal principles and practices would not have disappeared but at most lost their primacy.

Aside from the downsizing of peace interventions under the UN system umbrella, regional organizations are taking the lead in peacebuilding efforts. The EU has 24 ongoing CSDP missions and operations deployed in three continents and continues to remain present, although sometimes in different forms, in all the countries of previous commitment, with the notable exception of Niger. Beyond this, it has also deployed seven new missions between 2022 and 2024, in Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine, Mozambique, the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden, and the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>7</sup> In Africa, African-led peace operations became a vital tool for managing security challenges. The continent has witnessed an increased regionalization in conflict resolution efforts, with a leading role played by the regional economic communities, such as ECOWAS, ECCAS, and the SADC, in dealing with the crises in places like the DRC, the CAR, and Mozambique (Allen, 2024). These organizations are the product of a major wave of institutionalization that took place in the second half of the last century. As such, they retain the imprints of their founding context, imbued with ideals of democracy and human rights, and continue to be geared towards the promotion of a liberal vision of peace. A role also recognized in the UN SG report *New Agenda for Peace* (2023), which attributed regional and subregional organizations a central relevance in the achievement of more effective action for peace (“The challenges that we face can be addressed only through stronger international cooperation”, p. 1), and with the approbation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2719 (2023) to establish a more predictable and sustainable financing system for African Union peace operations.

Beyond peace practices, also discourses and policy orientations seem to account for a perdurance, if not a resurgence, of liberal peace. Far from embracing an illiberal turn, the reforms of the peace tools that followed the failure of the stabilization interventions seemed instead to recover past notions of locality and peacebuilding as a political undertaking. In 2018 SG Antonio Guterres launched the *Action for Peacekeeping* (A4P) programme<sup>8</sup> asking for a step back from peace enforcement for the advancement of political solutions to conflicts and the alignment of peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts, formalized with the restructuration of the former Department of Peacekeeping Operations into the Department of Peace Operations, which is more closely integrated with the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs through shared regional divisions. The *New Agenda for Peace* is in itself an attempt to retrieve the ideas that inspired the Agenda for Peace of 1992, standing at the basis of liberal interventionism (“The peace that we envisage can be pursued only alongside sustainable development and human rights”, p. 3). Authors like Sara Hellmüller and colleagues (2024) and Tom Buitelaar (2024) looked at missions’ mandates to address the impact of structural changes on UN legal frameworks and found that although responsive to macro-level alterations, the Organization adapted only partially as almost half of mandates still display maximalist tasks aimed at a positive peace in the emerging multipolar era. On the EU side, if it is true that the publication of the new foreign and defence strategy, the *Strategic Compass* (2022), marked a ‘geopolitical awakening’ for the continental organization under both external and internal pressure, this was mostly inspired by the desire, as we will see in later chapters, to uphold the values and principles underpinning European democracies and to promote the norms of multilateralism, democracy, and the rule of law as the only tool for global stability and security.

Finally, the liberal peace issue continues to inform the academic debate through the revival of narratives depicting a clash between democracies and autocracies (Ikenberry, 2024) and the search for ways to save liberal peace ahead of post-conflict reconstruction in Ukraine. On the former aspect, authors like Caroline Dunton and colleagues (2023) and Roland Paris (2024) affirmed that no matter how ‘pragmatic’ they declare themselves to be, peacebuilding efforts will continue to embody normative assumptions about which modes of social, political, and economic organization are conducive to peace. The Russian invasion of Ukraine not only boosted international competition, but as Russia’s actions and identity stem in critical opposition to the Western world, it made the liberal-illiberal fulcrum the core of this competition, contributing to a resurgence of identitarian talks around the inner value of liberalism as opposed to an authoritarian obscurantism that sometimes precipitated into civilizationism (“Europe is a garden [...] It is the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion that the humankind has been able to build [...] The rest of the world is a jungle”).<sup>9</sup> Thus, the critical juncture of the Russian-Ukrainian war has revived interest in liberal peace even among long-term critics (Richmond et al., 2024) and prompted reflection on its relevance for the new challenges ahead of us (Karlsrud et al., 2024; Morin-Kovács, 2023). The election of Donald J. Trump in 2024 marked the return of US foreign policy to the fundamental principles of balance of power and the (re)alignment of peacebuilding instruments,

such as development cooperation (e.g., USAID), with national interests. However, while not benefiting liberal peace overall, the new American course is not in direct contrast to it, considering it irrelevant at most.

In conclusion, although recent developments have strained (liberal) peacebuilding, they have not led to its abandonment, having rather triggered continuous adaptation. Moreover, although structural changes and the emergence of alternative models may have eroded its hegemony, they do not endanger its overall relevance. In the next chapter, I will delve deeper into the emergence and characteristics of so-called authoritarian conflict management, or ‘illiberal peace’, representing the main contender of international peacebuilding.

## Notes

- 1 A/RES/60/180; S/RES/1645.
- 2 Significant evidence of this is that between 1989 and 2018, approximately half of the conflict incidents were ‘repeated’, namely, related to the same issues and grievances that triggered the conflict in the first place (PRIO Conflict Recurrence Database; Jarland et al., 2020).
- 3 EU Global Strategy, p.16.
- 4 Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on Strengthening the EU’s Contribution to Rules-Based Multilateralism (2021), p. 4.
- 5 EU Global Strategy, p. 30.
- 6 United Nations. (2020). Troop and police contributors. Retrieved from: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>
- 7 EEAS Missions and Operations. Retrieved from: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations_en).
- 8 From 2021 ‘A4P Plus’.
- 9 European Diplomatic Academy: Opening remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the inauguration of the pilot programme. Bruges, 13.02.2022.

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## 2 The Rise of Authoritarian Conflict Management

### Challenging Liberal Peace

Contrary to a diffuse perception, the involvement of non-Western countries in external conflict dynamics is not new. During the Cold War, in the shadow of great powers' competition, counter-hegemonic forms of cooperation amid violence emerged between Third World states, fostering alternative forms of conflict resolution compared to those envisaged by traditional powers. These efforts were inspired by subaltern solidarity and rooted in revolutionary thinking. They took the form of economic or military assistance to ideologically related factions, often defiant of the established authority, to change the balance of power on the battlefield and achieve a resolution of the conflict through victory. As reported by Tobias Berger and Markus-Michael Müller (2025), probably the best-known example is the Cuban intervention in the Angolan civil war, between 1975 and 1991, in support of the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). Cuban aid, which included resources and combat support, was decisive in the MPLA's victory over the US-sponsored National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA). Another example emerged from recent reports testifying to the North Vietnamese support, through the provision of weapons and ammunition, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in its war against the pro-American government of El Salvador (Pribbenow, 2011). The mutual diplomatic support of Allende's Chile for Algerian independence and that of Algeria for the leftist opposition in post-coup Chile, constitutes another relevant instance (Palieraki, 2021). Hence, Oliver Richmond (2021) spoke of early challenges to the emerging liberal peacebuilding consensus in what he referred to as 'stage three' in the evolution of the 'international peace architecture'. After the growth of international law, the emergence of new forms of diplomacy, and growing multilateralism cemented the development of an American-driven liberal international order following the end of WWII, the 1960s and 1970s displayed a defiant attitude against imperialism, capitalism, and liberalism. In particular, newly decolonized states demanded recognition for their role within the international community and fairer treatment beyond the economic sphere. This period ended with the co-option of

recalcitrant states through the expansion of the liberal peace framework with the inclusion of self-determination and collective rights, such as the right to development, in the dominant normative scheme.

Subsequently, dissent against liberal peace, especially in its interventionist derivation, did not disappear but remained latent and expressed itself within the system, especially in the chambers and corridors of organizations' headquarters. While a balance of power still overwhelmingly in favour of the US and its network of allies did not provide room for open contestation, unsatisfied actors resorted to more subtle strategies, charging lower reputational costs, like 'competitive socialization' or 'interpretative contestation'. With the former, subaltern actors internalized dominant norms to seek greater international status and challenge Western primacy. Kazushige Kobayashi et al. (2022), who coined the term, affirmed that competitive socialization played an important role in the way in which many non-Western nations, like China or Turkey, related to the liberal peace framework, through symbolic adherence rather than honest commitment. The latter refers to a favourable interpretation of dominant norms through discourses and practices that privilege certain components over others, exploiting their inherent ambiguity to water down the overall scope of norms. This was, for example, the case of non-Western contestation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. The international dispute over the interpretation of the norm saw the emergence of a fissure within the UN between a Western-led interventionist group and a 'sovereignty bloc' led by the BRICS (Stuenkel, 2014). After the adoption of R2P as part of the 2005 World Summit, countries like China and Brazil remained sceptical and later claimed that they did not accept the whole idea but merely committed themselves to continuing the debate on it. When the governments of Brazil, China, India, and Russia met for the first time in Yekaterinburg on 16 June 2009, they loudly expressed their desire to promote a more inclusive international order. They therefore perceived the reinterpretation of the sovereignty principle underlying R2P as a potential threat. As an earlier strategy against the diffusion of the norm, they decided not to reject it entirely, as consensus around it was still very high. Instead, they limited their commitment to pillars I and II,<sup>1</sup> while voicing concerns over pillar III regarding the use of force.

In this scenario, Libya constituted a game-changer, as it undermined not only the legitimacy of R2P but that of the entire liberal peace framework, allowing for more open contestation by emerging powers. Strongly influenced by the negative experience with the intervention in Libya, the governments of Russia and China vetoed a series of UN resolutions condemning the regime of Damascus for human rights violations and menacing the adoption of a list of measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. For Michael Ignatieff (2012), the Syrian conflict triggered something more fundamental than a difference of opinion over intervention, as it meant the definitive rupture of the world into two blocks, one composed of a loose alliance of struggling capitalist democracies and the other built around a group of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states shaking the foundations of the international order. The world following the fall of al-Qaddafi was indeed very different

from the one that allowed the emergence of the R2P norm. After a short parenthesis lasting four years, between 2008 and 2012, during which he served as the prime minister, Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency centralizing power and fostering a much more assertive foreign policy behaviour with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In 2013, the election of Xi Jinping as Chinese president represented one of the most significant upheavals in global politics. Henceforth, the new Chinese course has been marked by a more confrontational stance vis-à-vis its systemic rivals, portraying the 21st century as China's century, and an ambitious international agenda, as exemplified by the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, which sealed its role as a global power. Other significant changes were the election of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as president of Turkey and that of Narendra Modi as prime minister of India, both in 2014, which marked an increasing role for the two countries in the international arena. Thus, the influence exerted by (semi)authoritarian powers was much more pronounced than in the post-Cold War era of the 1990s and early 2000s, as many authors started speaking of the emergence of a multipolar (or multiplex) world order (Acharya, 2017; Flockhart, 2016). For Oliver Richmond (2024), the increased relevance of these 'new' powers marked a move away from merely contesting the liberal order to actively proposing an alternative to it. This entails a return to 19th-century principles of state sovereignty and non-interference and the support for a plurality of development and governance models, opposing the universalization of liberal democracy.

In such a fragmented scenario, conflicts passed from being seen as transnational problems to be solved collectively to arenas of strategic competition. Hence, if post-Cold War unipolarity saw an alignment around liberal peace, with multipolarity, there has been a misalignment following the emergence of an authoritarian model of conflict management, reflective of a conservative counter-hegemonic world order, and centred on an 'illiberal' understanding of peace (Richmond and Pogodda, 2025).

### **The Internationalization of Authoritarian Conflict Management**

The concept of 'authoritarian conflict management' (ACM) made its appearance at the beginning of the 2010s to refer to internal processes of "post-war reconstruction managed by local elites in defiance of liberal peace precepts" (De Oliveira, 2011, p. 288). Hence, at first, ACM coincided with the notion of 'victor's peace' as the post-conflict order established following a military victory, where the winning side imposes its own vision without engaging in inclusive reconciliation or power-sharing (Piccolino, 2018). A frequently mentioned case is that of Sri Lanka. Here, after a failed Norwegian-mediated peace process (2002–2006) centred on addressing the grievances of the Tamil minority, the government of Mahinda Rajapaksa decided to restart the conflict against the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE), imposing his view on donors and diplomatic partners and finally obtaining a full victory in 2009. Subsequently, Colombo implemented stabilization measures in the northern Tamil provinces, previously under insurgent control, such as militarization of the territory and cultural assimilation, which, although

preventing an upsurge of violence, left fundamental issues related to political participation and underdevelopment unresolved. Similarly, in Colombia, the country witnessed a comprehensive peace process, under the auspices of the UN, which ended in 2016 with the signing of a peace agreement between the FARC-EP and the Colombian authorities, including a series of radical political and economic reforms. However, in 2018, the election of the conservative candidate Ivan Duque meant a reinterpretation of the previously agreed provisions, as the new president focused on extending state authority in the former rebel territories through military presence, to the detriment of development and reconciliation measures. This, together with the high levels of political violence against former guerrillas and in the absence of state protection, caused many signatories to the agreement to return to arms. Other examples are the authoritarian ordering practices that followed the victory of the MPLA in Angola (2002) or the rule of Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya as a result of the Second Chechen War (1999–2003).

That of ACM remained an inward-looking concept until 2018, when an article by David Lewis, John Heathershaw, and Nick Megoran brought it to the fore as an international strategy. In this seminal work, ACM has been detached from the concept of victor's peace and depicted as a form of wartime and post-conflict order in its own right. Further conceptual development has been made in the categorization of its repertoires beyond the use of violence, into discursive practices (i.e., state propaganda, information control, and knowledge production); spatial politics (i.e., both military and civilian modes of controlling and shaping spaces); and political economy (i.e., the hierarchical distribution of resources to produce particular political outcomes). In addition, ACM has been more clearly linked to the crisis of liberal peace and traced back to China and Russia's growing influence in the international system. ACM considers conflicts to be unavoidable and fundamentally irresolvable. Drawing from Collier's feasibility theory (2009), efforts are placed on limiting the opportunities and economic incentives for rebellion, rather than trying to pursue transformative ambitions. Hence, ACM is focused on the management of conflicts, namely, the interruption or mitigation of direct violence. Such a mode of conflict management is uninterested in notions of political participation and inclusivity and disregards local grievances, in favour of repressive policies of illiberal governance geared towards the control of territory, the strengthening of borders, and the centralization of state power (Figure 2.1).

While embracing the concept, Harold Cheung (2019) highlighted how Lewis' formulation conflated domestic peace enforcement with international peacebuilding, relying on examples such as the repression of the Uyghurs by the Chinese government in Xinjiang or post-genocide Rwanda. On the other hand, it failed to acknowledge that not all authoritarian states possess sufficient capacity to pursue conflict management policies, delinking ACM from state power. Subsequent research contributed to the further refining of the concept, also thanks to greater available evidence, as non-Western states became increasingly involved in conflicts worldwide (Costantini and Hanau Santini, 2021). Charles Call and Cedric de Coning (2018), for example, affirmed that, contrary to traditional peacebuilding, which is more focused on social and economic inequalities, ACM subordinates political



*Figure 2.1* Diagram illustrating the three domains through which authoritarian regimes manage conflict according to Lewis et al. (2018). Author's image.

openness to development and institutional stability. Inspired by their own internal experiences, many non-Western actors consider the level of political competition that a national system can manage to be closely linked to its level of development and institutional solidity. According to this view, peacebuilding must be directed towards economic growth and the strengthening of the security and governmental apparatus rather than on organizing elections and fostering the participation of civil society, which could lead to social fragmentation and instability. For Mateja Peter and Haley Rice (2022), in addition to this, authoritarian approaches denote a detachment from multilateral institutions in favour of unilateral engagements or ad hoc mini-lateral solutions. However, suspicion towards multilateral mechanisms, seen as guided by Western normative logics and orientations, has not meant a complete disengagement, as even the most revisionist powers, such as China and Russia, have much to defend in the current global order (Gerrits, 2020).

Hence, on the side of unilateral initiatives, these countries have actively promoted their competing peace visions within the multilateral institutions. For Kobayashi and colleagues (2022), they have successfully altered the hierarchy of legitimate beliefs within the international peacebuilding system, infusing notions of an authoritarian order in the erosion of the prominence of the norm of conditional sovereignty and the increasing focus on economic and social rights associated with developmentalism, evident in key policy texts (e.g., resolutions and

deliberations at the UN Security Council and UN Peacebuilding Commission). The exact mechanisms through which alternative peacebuilders have reshaped the global peacebuilding order are not yet clear, as the debate on the issue is still very much open. The above-mentioned authors referred generically to ‘top-top’ dynamics of contestation, especially ‘rearticulation’, namely, “norm change and modification either via national understandings of new peacebuilding actors feeding back into the global normative order, or through endogenous evolution at the global level” (2022, p. 947). For Gregorio Bettiza and David Lewis (2020), peacebuilding reshaping by authoritarian powers took the form of ‘civilizational essentialization’ and ‘counter-norm entrepreneurship’. The former involves a two-stage process: the crafting of a specific vision of world order, and its presentation as ‘other’ than the liberal one, in order to counter its validity. In a recent leak from Russia’s top diplomatic academy, the *Moscow State Institute of International Relations* (MGIMO), Inna Bondarenko (2025) offers an insider’s perspective on the education and mindset of Russian peace mediators. Young diplomats are instilled with the belief that Russia is a *derzhava* – a great power destined to challenge Western influence. This perspective is reinforced by the Primakov Doctrine, which advocates for a strategic alliance between Russia, China, and India to counterbalance US hegemony. Infused with realpolitik thinking and the study of offensive realism, they are pushed to forge a worldview that emphasizes power dynamics over cooperative diplomacy, whereby liberal theories, let alone constructivism, postcolonialism, or feminism, are either mocked or ignored. Hence, Russian mediators are prepared to engage in muscular diplomacy, speaking of peace while justifying or engaging in conflict. Linked to this, ‘normative entrepreneurship’ involves the advancement of alternative policies to actively contest liberal solutions based on existing practical surrogates. In 2023, China proposed the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) as part of a broader effort to remake the (liberal) world order. The GCI promotes a state-centric approach that allows countries to pursue their own peace path without external interferences, rejecting the imposition of universal values, such as democracy and human rights. China provided a concrete alternative to liberal approaches with the establishment of the United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund (UNPDF), which fosters self-driven development instead of political reforms in conflict-affected countries.

As for the motivations guiding non-Western powers’ engagement with peacebuilding, moving away from the general category of ‘national interest’, Peter and Rice (2022) divided between material-based and value-based interests. The notion of security threat as a perceived menace to state sovereignty is a fundamental motive for engaging in peace efforts abroad, whereby the stabilization of a foreign state or region is seen as a way to maximize national security. The idea of ‘security threat’ is commonly linked to geographical proximity (“adjacency is potent for security because many threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones”; Walt, 1987:276). In particular, ‘emerging’ middle powers display a regionalized vision of security. This was apparent, for example, in the military role played by Turkey in Northern Syria, where Ankara’s involvement has been mainly driven

by the goal of impeding the formation of a Kurdish state near its borders as part of its internal war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Similarly, India's engagement in peacebuilding in Nepal was also driven by security concerns over the impact of political instability in cross-border regions. Economic/commercial interests are another relevant pulling factor for non-Western engagement. Conflict management programmes can, in fact, pave the way for broader partnerships in areas other than the military. The strong entanglement between military cooperation and economic partnership is well illustrated by the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, China's oldest, largest, and most regularized regional forum. The latest FOCAC Action Plan (2025–2027) represents a mechanism to strengthen China's global influence, through programmes that cover the expansion of Chinese free trade zones together with issues regarding police and military cooperation (Nantulya, 2025). On the other side, a well-known transactional logic underlies Russian participation in conflict management, whereby Moscow's no-strings policy is limited to a spirit of non-interference in the internal political affairs of host countries, and does not entail cost-free commitments. The Malian authorities underwent an operation of internal economic reordering with the approval of an amendment to the national Mining Law in August 2023 in order to secure the necessary funding to pay for the services of the (former) Wagner Group. In addition, through a progressive wave of nationalization that mainly affected Chinese and Canadian companies, the Malian authorities granted the Russians rights in the exploitation of mines of lithium and uranium in exchange for continued support in the fight against Islamist insurgencies (Nantulya, 2025).

Sometimes, non-Western commitment to peacebuilding is coupled with a petition for political support within multilateral arenas in order to increase or decrease the relevance or legitimacy of a political instance. In 2017, many of China's African partners in the UN Human Rights Commission endorsed a resolution proposing an alternative interpretation of human rights centred on non-interference, while many continental leaders also reiterated their commitment to the position that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China (Nantulya, 2022). Similarly, the involvement of Ankara and the Gulf monarchies in Libya and the Horn of Africa has been prompted by colliding interpretations of political Islam, whereby foreign aid and investment to the different military factions was conditional on them 'choosing sides'. A final material-based interest concerns the use of conflict management as a strategy of distraction from domestic troubles and internal scandals. The visit of Erdogan to conflict-ridden Mogadishu in 2011, and subsequent Turkish engagement with humanitarian relief and development cooperation in Somalia, was seen with great enthusiasm not only by Somali citizens but also by the domestic audiences in what has been judged as a particularly successful attempt at public diplomacy.

Regarding value-based interests, conflict management and resolution practices have clear reputational benefits, particularly for small powers that, due to resource constraints, must rely on alternative tactics to advance their position within the international system. A clear example is the rise of Qatar as a leader in peace-making, thanks to its role as a mediator between the US administration and the Taliban and its contribution to the signing of peace agreements for Lebanon,

Yemen, Darfur, and Gaza, which elevated its international status and contributed to mounting pressure to break the diplomatic isolation prompted by the Saudis. Peacebuilding is also increasingly viewed as a world-ordering practice; hence, it is often used as a means to propagate values and normative assumptions about which modes of social, political, and economic organization are conducive to peace. Many non-Western countries leverage their position as ‘outcast’ in the liberal international order to empathize with fragile and conflict-affected states and present themselves as something else than the Western – often former colonial – powers, of which they publicly disapprove conduct and guiding norms, labelled as elitist and hypocritical. They promote instead alternative sets of principles inspired by a pluralist vision of the world and geared towards a diffuse distribution of power.

Although, as illustrated, it is possible to find common elements and shared trends, especially in opposition to a Western-led homogenization of solutions around a rigidly liberal interpretation of peace, non-Western countries present differences among themselves in how they conceptualize and practise peacebuilding. They diverge, for instance, in the extent to which they equate peacebuilding with development, or the degree to which their cooperation is provided bilaterally versus multilaterally, or even in their level of engagement with the West. It is therefore useful to indulge briefly in presenting some of the specificities related to the approaches of some of the most committed states in the field.

### **Shades of Illiberal Peace**

Conflict management and resolution approaches are shaped by countries’ own identities and historical experiences. For this reason, it is often misleading to talk about a non-Western consensus around a specific model of peacebuilding. Although ACM is often presented as a unified model, it mostly serves as an analytical category that, however useful, tends to overlook the specific characteristics of a rather heterogeneous group of actors, identified under the generic label of ‘non-Western’ or ‘rising powers’, with different goals and interests and an oscillating degree of compliance with liberal peace.

The Russian model of conflict management, or *Pax Rossica*, is probably the approach most at odds with traditional peacebuilding. It has a regime-centric security focus and interlinks negotiations and coercive military actions. The *Pax Rossica* emerged following Moscow’s intervention in favour of the Assad regime in Syria, constituting “the most important case for Russia’s counter-norm entrepreneurship in conflict” (Lewis, 2022, p. 662). This has sanctioned a departure from liberal notions of peace by trading off emancipation, rights, and democracy “in exchange for a modicum of security” (Richmond et al. 2021, p. 251). From Russia’s perspective, liberal interventions and their promoters are part of the problem, as they contributed to chaos and disorder in contexts from the Sahel to Afghanistan and through the Middle East, as they pushed for social fragmentation through inclusive policies and power-sharing provisions. According to David Lewis (2022), Russia indeed promotes order as a moral priority over justice and pursues it through partisan military interventions and activities involving

the supply of lethal equipment and the deployment of troops on the ground, either army or paramilitary, to carry out short-term operations aimed at stabilization, counter-terrorism, and the suppression or elimination of armed groups that challenge the authority of the host state. Peace talks are conducted from a position of strength with powerful actors who can impose solutions, without the involvement of international organizations or civil society (Zhou et al., 2024). Upon request, Russian private military companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group (reorganized as Africa Corps) also offer authoritarian leaders bulletproofing their regimes. The ‘regime survival package’, adopted, for example, by Burkinabe junta leader Ibrahim Traore and Central African President Faustin-Archange Touadera, includes “expertise and experience as well as actual support in defending against possible uprisings by the civilian population” (Ehl, 2024).

With the election of Xi Jinping as President in 2013, China became an increasingly important actor in the field of peacebuilding. As for Russia, China’s role in post-conflict societies is seen as a growing challenge to the West, at the same time, Chinese opposition to the liberal international order is less systematic than the Russian, having rather maintained a pragmatic stance (Strasheim and Bogati, 2021), being the second-largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget<sup>2</sup> and among the top ten personnel contributors to UN peace operations.<sup>3</sup> Chinese selective engagement with the liberal multilateral framework is coherent with its long-standing respect for the principle of non-interference and light security footprint in conflict-affected settings. Thus, the Chinese approach, also labelled as *developmental peace*, is infrastructure- and commerce-oriented (Escriche and Burguete, 2023; Zhou et al., 2024) and is rooted in the assumption that “with political and social stability as a prerequisite [modelled on its domestic experience], development can lead to sustainable peace” (He 2021, p. 47). With this in mind, China offers to its client nations the dream of economic development, poverty alleviation, and infrastructure restoration by means of loan concessions, direct investments, developments aid, and strengthening of the economic ties with little or no political conditionality on issues such as human rights and good governance (Jung and Shyrokykh, 2024).

Turkey’s recent turn towards authoritarianism prompted a more direct contestation of the liberal order (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016). The Erdogan-led executive aimed to upgrade Turkey’s status as a regional power with a global projection through a more interventionist role, especially in the African continent (Levorato and Donelli, 2024a). The Turkish approach, named by Federico Donelli as the *Ankara consensus* (2018), places a unique emphasis on religious, ethnic, and cultural ties with recipient states’ societies. Humanitarian assistance and development aid activities have a strong identitarian connotation, thus privileging religious-cultural initiatives carried out by a network of non-state actors linked to the government (Aras and Akpınar 2015). Turkey follows a multitrack approach, meaning that it is active in different areas, including security. In particular, it recently emerged as an important exporter of military technology, especially drones, which are significantly cheaper than those offered by Western producers, and whose trade is subject to fewer controls, making it an affordable product even for impoverished armies in places like Ethiopia, Mali, and Libya (Martins et al., 2023).

The involvement of small states like the Gulf monarchies in addressing violent conflicts evidences the fragmentation of the peacebuilding field. Both the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar face the limits imposed by their ‘smallness’ and have adopted a niche approach towards conflict resolution, by offering tailor-made services in specific sub-field areas (Mazzucco and Alexander, 2025). As mentioned, Qatar is a champion of mediation, having forged its foreign policy on the principles of neutrality and political pragmatism. Its services are particularly in demand when peace talks involve dissident groups (e.g., the Taliban, Hamas), providing a basis to facilitate communication with counterparts (Miller and Verhoeven, 2019). On the other hand, the UAE leveraged their maritime-commercial prowess to project political influence over the Red Sea and the Western Indian Ocean. Although they usually engage more in the development sector through the construction of strategic infrastructure (e.g. ports) and in bilateral aid through budget support, they also occasionally provide military aid (e.g., RSF in Sudan) and direct partisan engagement (e.g., Yemen).

Other active players are India, South Africa, and Brazil, gathered around the IBSA forum as the three largest democracies and major economies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Table 2.1). Given their geopolitical affiliation and ideological substratum, they represent a more reformist stance towards the liberal peace framework. These states are not directly competing with Western-supported liberal peacebuilding; however, they have contributed to introducing alternative norms and forms of international engagement. India is not a part of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and has sometimes viewed the peacebuilding agenda of the DAC countries with suspicion. Similar to China, it promotes a development-first type of engagement with a greater relevance attributed to interventions in neighbouring countries, like Myanmar and Afghanistan (Adhikari, 2022). Brazilian presence has been rather significant in the Lusophone area, especially in Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, with technical advice and development packages. The Brazilian approach is oriented towards an emancipatory version of the liberal peace framework, voided of its hegemonic aspirations. It highlights the value of ‘cooperation’ over top-down aid programmes and is based upon principles of South-South solidarity, non-conditionality, and non-interference. It forwarded a nuanced interpretation of the R2P norm, advocating for Responsibility While Protecting (RWP). This calls for the exhaustion of all peaceful means and ensuring that the use of force is proportionate and responsible, as well as for prioritizing prevention and engagement over coercion (Call and Abdenur, 2017). South Africa carved out a role as a regional mediator committed to continental peace and security, both bilaterally, like in Côte d’Ivoire and Burundi, and through a prominent role within the African Union and the Southern African Development Community, as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Mozambique. South African strategy is not to contrast liberal peace but rather to project an image of a liberal champion while shedding light on the contradiction and lack of commitment of Western states to their own principles. Its legitimacy in Africa and abroad as a nation devoted to international law and justice is strictly linked to its history, as a nation that fought against apartheid and poverty (Nyuykonge and Zondi, 2017).

Table 2.1 Non-Western approaches to peacebuilding

| <i>Actor</i>         | <i>Approach/Model</i>      | <i>Main Focus &amp; Tools</i>                                                      | <i>Commitment to Liberal Peace Framework</i> |
|----------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Russia               | Pax Rossica                | Regime security, coercion, manipulative negotiation, military intervention, PMCs   | Low/Oppositional                             |
| China                | Developmental peace        | Development, infrastructure, commerce, economic aid, UN peacekeeping involvement   | Selective/Pragmatic                          |
| Turkey               | Ankara consensus           | Religious-cultural ties, humanitarian aid, drone diplomacy, multi-track engagement | Moderate/Contesting                          |
| Qatar                | Mediation-centric          | Neutral facilitation, communication channels for dissident groups, niche diplomacy | Low to Moderate                              |
| United Arab Emirates | Strategic developmental    | Infrastructure projects, bilateral aid, selective military engagement              | Low to Moderate                              |
| India                | Development-first          | Infrastructure projects, regional focus                                            | Moderate/Reformist                           |
| Brazil               | Emancipatory peacebuilding | Technical assistance, South-South cooperation, RWP advocacy                        | Moderate/Transformative                      |
| South Africa         | Liberal performance        | Regional diplomacy, multilateralism (AU/SADC), international law advocacy          | High/Critical Liberal                        |

There is no question that modern competitive dynamics in peacebuilding revolve around a liberal-illiberal fulcrum. However, we should be careful about indulging in analytical shortcuts and problematic binaries that uncritically associate the Western and non-Western worlds with the opposite ends of the liberal/illiberal spectrum. As just evidenced, there is notable variation among non-Western powers on their commitment to liberal institutions. In addition, it is worth highlighting how the liberalness of Western countries is frequently exaggerated, leading to the conflating of peacebuilding approaches with geostrategic affiliation and declared ideological identity.

### **The Liberal-Illiberal Peace Dichotomy**

For Mandy Turner and Florian P. Kühn (2019), the continued exaltation of the West as being driven by the pursuit of freedom and stability, and the blaming of non-Western forms of intervention for upsetting the international order, is not only reductive but also does not reflect reality. On the one hand, Western actors are

not averse to using unilateral solutions or indulging in forms of ‘compromised peacebuilding’; on the other, most non-Western ones are only modestly dissatisfied with the liberal peace architecture and usually prefer to reform it or complement it rather than replace it altogether. The stabilization approach, in particular, has been equated with illiberal models as a heavy-handed and militarized form of Western conflict management, by Geraldine Rosas Duarte and Matheus Souza (2024), who stated that the diffuse use of violence and the exclusion of non-state armed actors from peace processes by UN stabilization operations contradict liberal principles of impartiality, neutrality, and inclusion. Similarly, Sarah von Billerbeck and colleagues (2025) proved that the last decade of Western-led peace missions enabled host state authoritarianism in places like the DRC, Haiti, and Liberia through the capacity-building of (often repressive) institutions and the condoning of host governments’ illiberal behaviours. In my work with Federico Donelli (2024a; 2024b), we demonstrated how ideological declarations and long-term ambitions are often misaligned with actual peacebuilding practices, which are necessarily bound by contingencies. These can affect different actors in similar ways, hence flattening differences. By confronting Italian and Turkish peacebuilding initiatives in Somalia, for example, we noticed that, net of the liberal/illiberal rhetoric, motivations and on-the-ground activities showed little (if any) difference. Hence, in their action in favour of stability in the Horn of Africa, Italy and Turkey employed similar repertoires, based on a mix of security-led and development-led instruments.

Oliver Jütersonke and his colleagues (2021) decoupled the attributes of ‘Western/non-Western’ from the adoption of ‘pluralist’ or ‘statist’ forms of peacebuilding. They affirmed that, while showing a predilection for statism, which prioritizes the construction of a strong state with hierarchical/centralized governance, most rising powers do not offer a “clear alternative [approach], ideology, or model of the state or peace” (2021, p. 945). For Turner and Kühn (2019), the distinction between ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’ does not hold when subjected to critical scrutiny. Not only because the difference in interventionist terms is often not huge as one may think but also due to the continuous reconfiguration of the borders between Western and non-Western worlds, in terms of ontological connotations. The conflict resolution strategy of the second Trump administration, for instance, is more akin to the Russian approach, based on the use of force and manipulative mediation, rather than a liberal one, as evidenced in the case of the negotiations over Ukraine and Gaza. At the same time, non-Western states like South Africa, Chile, and Malaysia, united in The Hague Group, are championing the defence of liberal multilateralism and respect for international law, in opposition to the attitudes of a certain part of ‘the West’ (e.g., Israel, Trumpist US; Huber, 2024).

Hence, the present work departs from an acritical notion of liberal-illiberal peace that reduces peacebuilding to monolithic models and instead acknowledges the many nuances that peace practice can take along the liberal-illiberal spectrum. Similarly, it eschews automatisms in the conflation of Western and non-Western with (il)liberalness, especially in an age of ontologies in flux. Given these caveats, the book embraces this specific characterization of peacebuilding. The (il)liberal peace concept, in fact, represents an effective and largely necessary tool for

describing the competitive dynamics revolving around a broader understanding of peacebuilding as a political (re)ordering practice by a variety of states with different visions of peace.

### **The Marketization of Peacebuilding**

Until the 2000s, the concept of peacebuilding was synonymous with liberal peace. Provisions for democracy and human rights were so deeply rooted in international practice that any other understanding of it was either illegitimate or unthinkable. Such liberal consensus faced multi-layered challenges with the apparent decline of the unipolar system and the emergence of alternative actors. The notion of peacebuilding became increasingly contested for its long-standing association with liberal peace; thus, recent debates preferred to drop it in favour of the concepts of ‘conflict management’ and ‘conflict resolution’ to better differentiate between styles of intervention. Fanny Badache et al. (2022) provided the first systematic mapping of states’ conceptions of (UN) peacebuilding by coding member states’ peace-related speeches at the Security Council from 1991 to 2020. Their findings confirm that the P3 (France, the UK, the US) favour a conflict resolution approach aimed at resolving the root causes of conflicts and comprise tasks such as democratization, good governance, dialogue and reconciliation, security sector reforms, and economic restructuring. While the P2 (Russia, China) prefer a conflict management approach that respects sovereignty and fosters national ownership. This would be aimed at containing violence and attaining a negative peace and includes tasks such as stabilization, demining, observation, and monitoring.

In an attempt to recover the concept from scratches and detaching it from the pursuit of a liberal end-state, Kazushige Kobayashi and colleagues (2025) have recently tried to reconceptualize it by interrogating scholars and practitioners based in New York, Geneva, Beijing, Tokyo, and Moscow, on how they define and operationalize it. They agree on an interpretation of peacebuilding as a process of political (re)ordering, namely, one that “organize[s] and sustain[s] formal and informal social institutions, rules, norms, and practices [shaping] and constrain[ing] social actors in conflict-affected and fragile states” (2025, p. 228). It stems from relevant considerations concerning the impact of global systemic factors on the practice of peacebuilding. In particular, international competitive dynamics are altering our understanding of how peace is pursued. Therefore, peacebuilding can neither be limited to liberal-oriented policies nor be conflated with any programme implemented in conflict-affected states. This updated version of the concept involves practices that reshape the field of forces among social actors. Hence, political orders can be the product of coercive power against domestic challengers or entail a more profound (re)organization of specific areas of political and social life around well-defined boundaries, common rules and practices, and shared causal and normative understandings. The idea of peacebuilding as a process of political (re)ordering emphasizes its function as a tool of foreign policy (Levorato and Donelli, 2024a), a governing initiative (Zanotti, 2006), a world ordering practice (Schmidt and Williams, 2023), and an ideological enterprise (Paris, 2024).

As an order-making instrument, peacebuilding cannot be completely agnostic to the characteristics of that order in the making and will necessarily embody some normative assumptions (Dunton et al., 2023). The connivance of these different understandings of the type of order suitable for peace amid an international landscape marked by power competition triggered the transformation of peacebuilding into a ‘political marketplace’. For Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh (2025), the main logic underpinning it is transactionalism, whereby interventions are increasingly deployed following cost-benefit calculations in view of trading political allegiances. The marketization of peacebuilding came with at least three implications. First, the conflation of warmaking and peacemaking. Until a few years ago, neutrality and impartiality were seen as the most desirable characteristics for any actor with the ambition to be involved in conflict resolution efforts. The absence of bias and direct interests in the conflict was deemed a precondition for legitimate external engagement and the only viable solution to the prisoner’s dilemma. However, the military involvement of Russia in Syria and Saudi Arabia in Yemen and their subsequent role as mediators have cast doubt on the universal validity of this assumption, paving the way for a reconsideration of the role of political and military leverage over neutrality. Second, the growth of political cynicism, intended as the eagerness to trade values for the maintenance or enhancement of (geo)political relevance. In light of the retreat of Western countries from many conflict scenarios in places like the Sahel, the DRC, and Libya, many European states decided to downgrade their commitment to traditional liberal values to maintain outposts abroad in places considered key to national interests or keep their eyes closed on the repressive policies of authoritarian governments to forge, or preserve, utilitarian alliances. The Italian case is eloquent of this trend. Even before the election of Giorgia Meloni, previous governments had maintained funding to the Libyan coast guard to stop migratory flows despite indications of massive human rights violations (Amnesty International, 2024). Meloni’s right-wing government made Italy the last Western country to maintain a presence in Niger after the coup in 2023. Finally, only a few months before the fall of Assad in Syria, Italy, was the first G7 country to appoint an ambassador in Damascus, intending to normalize relations with the regime. This move was followed by the rapid establishment of ties with the new rulers of Syria after the end of the Alawite regime. Third, the rise of a peacebuilding marketplace has altered the rules of the game between providers and beneficiaries. These used to be in favour of the former as they were rooted in patron-client dynamics. Today, the multiplication of offers by competing actors provides unique alternatives for beneficiaries, which display sensitivity to political costs and strategic opportunities by constantly redefining the types of provisions they deem appropriate. Governments in Mali and the DRC are relevant examples of this growing assertiveness. Local elites engage in ‘extraversion strategies’, referring to a particular mode of relationship whereby “the external environment (is) turned into a major resource in the process of political centralization and economic accumulation, and in the conduct of the social struggles of subaltern actors” (Bayart, 2000, p. 218). After the coup, the Malian junta, aware of Russia’s willingness to take over, increased demands on Western allies for providing

security hard devices and aligning with national priorities, causing great unease among European capitals. Similarly, in the DRC, since his election in 2019, Felix Tshisekedi has embarked on forum shopping to promote his agenda. As the conflict in the east escalated, he exploited the population's malaise to obstruct UN initiatives, demanding the departure of MONUSCO and favouring the involvement of other actors, like Uganda and Burundi.

The process of marketization of peacebuilding reflected the loss of monopoly by the West on conflict resolution and has undoubtedly generated fertile ground for the spread of ACM. Although this has caused a retreat towards less liberal peacebuilding by many Western governments facing the advance of systemic rivals, it has also triggered the hardening of liberal positions by those actors who still benefit from a liberal peacebuilding system and whose existence is closely linked to the persistence of such a policy paradigm. I will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

## Notes

- 1 They respectively refer to the primary responsibility of each state to protect its own populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity (I), and the responsibility of the international community to assist states in meeting their obligations to protect (II).
- 2 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/how-we-are-funded>
- 3 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

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### 3 Political Shocks and Liberal Decline

#### A Defensive Turn in a Changing Global Order

##### The Iron Cage

International organizations (IOs) are largely composed of massive administrative bodies. In particular, International Public Administrations – the bureaucratic organs of IOs – have been identified as the “institutional backbones of [global] governance” (Bayerlein et al., 2020, p. 5). Their characteristics – in terms of structures and processes – are not dissimilar from those of national bureaucracies (Steinebach and Knill, 2022). As such, they have frequently been associated with rigidity and homogeneity.

The emergence of bureaucratic organizations was attributed by Max Weber (1968) to the complexifications brought about by the intense and multilayered competition characterizing modern capitalist societies, which increased the need for rules and order. Bureaucracies are the organizational manifestation of this need. For Weber, through a technology of repetition, extreme simplification, and standardization, bureaucracy became so efficient and powerful in controlling men and women that, once established, it became irreversible. Constituted in organizational fields (e.g., peacebuilding), bureaucratic organizations tended toward homogeneity as the result of isomorphic processes “forc[ing] one [organizational] unit [...] to resemble other units (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 149)”. Regional IOs like the African Union (AU), for example, have developed internal structures and procedures that closely resemble those of the UN, such as establishing a Peace and Security Council modelled after the UNSC, thus aligning with the dominant organizational type in the peace and security field. Beyond the truism that reliability and accountability require organizational structures to be highly reproducible, IOs can be forced by external pressure to join in collusion in the implementation of a specific mandate around which internal structures and procedures are built. In addition, facing the ambiguity of mandates and the uncertainty of the environment in which they operate (e.g., conflict settings), organizations may model themselves on other organizations. Isomorphism can also stem from professionalization. The production of staff with similar profiles, sharing life and work experiences and educational backgrounds, and the creation of labour pools from which IOs can recruit

(e.g., New York, Geneva) contributes to overriding variations in rules and procedures that might otherwise shape organizational behaviours (Dairon and Badache, 2022).

Some of the factors involved in organizational homogeneity also contribute to generate structural inertia. For Michael T. Hannan and John Freeman (1984, p. 149), “organizations are subject to strong inertial forces, [as] they seldom succeed in making radical changes in strategy and structure in the face of environmental threats”. According to this, organizations do not change for both internal and external reasons. On the one hand, costs in plant, equipment, and personnel and the dynamics of political coalitions are powerful disincentives to undertake substantial shifts. On the other hand, there are legal and economic barriers to entry and exit from a specific activity’s domain. Finally, and above all, attempting radical structural changes threatens legitimacy, which is the fundamental source of authority for IOs.

IOs, in fact, receive public legitimation and social support for the accomplishment of a specific and limited set of goals, the pursuit of which justified the creation of the organization in the first place. Such a dynamic is well described in the organizational imprinting hypothesis. In a seminal study on the foundation of the Paris Opera under Louis XIV, Victoria Johnson (2007) emphasized the importance of the foundational moment in the life of organizations. These are necessarily created out of specific technological, economic, political, and cultural resources, which make particular structures and practices possible and desirable. According to the imprinting hypothesis, the characteristics stemming from the founding context reproduce themselves throughout the organization’s history, making it reliant on a mission that reflects a particular vision of the policy problem and the types of solution deemed acceptable to solve it. Hence, the post-World War II IOs, which were established to promote peace and prosperity throughout the world and within specific regions, reflect a specific historical context, characterized by the belief in the healing power of democracy on violence and poverty and an aversion to autocratic systems of power. For organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), therefore, liberal peace is not just a policy approach but a guiding paradigm deeply rooted in their founding myths. Such a historical outlook for explaining policy continuity is also reflected in the notorious concept of ‘path dependency’ (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). At the basis of historical institutionalism, it refers to the idea that past choices and events exert significant influence on the future trajectories of organizational development, even if those past choices are no longer optimal or rational. This suggests that institutions tend to evolve and adjust along the paths established early on, making significant policy changes unlikely.

The association between bureaucracies and policy continuity has developed so strongly that it has been at the centre of recent research interest on the tenure of formal institutions. According to Hylke Dijkstra and colleagues (2025), while

literature has extensively discussed the causes of IOs' existential challenges, scant attention has been paid to the organizations themselves. The authors developed a theory to explain their survival and longevity. Accordingly, all things being equal, IOs with stronger internal institutions survive longer and can better withstand geopolitical pressures. In particular, IOs with a larger bureaucratic apparatus and a solid administrative structure are less frequently terminated. Think about NATO surviving the Cold War, after which its mandate was essentially fulfilled. NATO persisted because key member states were unwilling to abandon such an extensive institution and because its staff fought hard for its adaptation from an anti-Soviet institution to a provider of collective security (Debre and Dijkstra, 2020).

In the peacebuilding field bureaucratization has been a defining logic. Since its outset, discourses, understandings, expectations, and practices of peacebuilding have been framed by ideas of neutrality and efficiency, thus falling into the realm of technocracy (Williams and Mengistu, 2015). As the institutional response to complex situations, peacebuilding prioritized bureaucratic rationality over adaptive and contextualized policy-making. At the core of a bureaucratic approach is the misbelief that conflicts can be solved or fixed "via arbitration mechanisms [...] able to reach judgments based on evidence" (Mac Ginty, 2012, p. 291). Bureaucratization took the form of a professionalization of the peace sector, standardization of interventions, and extensive use of activities describable as 'technocratic', such as Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration – DDR, Security Sector Reform – SSR, and good governance programmes. The end goal envisaged by liberal peace for post-conflict societies was nothing less than a bureaucratic Weberian state, with international state-building long focused on state capacity and institutions strengthening. Thus, peacebuilding bureaucracy is extensive and liberal norms are thoroughly entrenched within it (Dunton et al., 2023). Here, the rivalry between experts/bureaucrats and politicians resolved in favour of the former, stemming from a process of depoliticization consisting of "socially meaningful patterns of action which deny or conceal contingency, choice and deliberation" (Louis and Maerten, 2021, p. 13).

If it is true that bureaucratic behaviours and structures favour inertia, it is also true that this does not necessarily mean a total absence of change. On the contrary, for Hannan and Freeman (1984), inertia is more linked to organizational responsiveness, thus the speed of change in relation to the mutation of the external environment and the scope of change. Thus, inertia emerges when the speed of reorganization is lower than the rate at which environmental conditions change and when policy change remain at the level of (re)setting and (re)calibration of instruments.

Given all this, are major changes still possible? According to policy change theories, yes. Literature typically considers 'exogenous shocks' as the main driver (Thompson and Volgy, 2023). The underlying rationale is that "IOs must remain responsive to a constantly evolving political landscape" (Knapp, 2024). Therefore, substantive changes, or paradigm shifts, may occur when IOs face watershed events, say also 'critical junctures' (Collier and Collier, 1991) or 'focal points' (O'Neill, 2005), which punctuate an otherwise unresponsive policy system. Haas

(1990) refers to them more generally as a ‘crisis’, namely, a sudden concatenation of circumstances that threatens the values of most members of an organization, like a war, a pandemic, an economic depression, or a major shift in the global distribution of power. Such shocks would lead to a sequence of events, which passes through the accumulation of failed experiments and results in a shift of the locus of authority from the old epistemic community to a new one, carrying an alternative policy paradigm.

### **A Shock Wave: The Crisis of LIO**

If we assume the realist claim that IOs are a reflection of the distribution of power in the world (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 7), then the crisis of the LIO – intended as the erosion of the post-Cold War global system characterized by liberal principles, international institutions, open markets, and cooperative security, largely led by the US – is undoubtedly one of the major shocks that the multilateral system has faced in decades. For someone, this is reflective of the rapid receding of the Anglo-American era, which might be leading to some sort of post-American and post-Western order (Kagan, 2012). For others, it means the end of a ‘liberal modernity’ spanning from the Enlightenment until the rise of the West through the industrial age (Mishra, 2017). Regardless of how the crisis of the LIO is framed, a broad debate outlined its causes in both external and internal factors.

Explanations attributing the crisis of the LIO to exogenous factors are mainly centred on the growing sharing in the global distribution of power (Lake et al., 2021). In this sense, the new world order would be less characterized by the decadence of the US, Europe, and Japan and more by the rise of everyone else. In such, this is not best seen as a transition from an American to a Chinese hegemonic order or a return to multipolarity but rather as ‘multiplexity’. The term coined by Amitav Acharya et al. (2023) describes a post-hegemonic world order characterized by a decentralized distribution of power and influence, a proliferation of diverse globalisms and governance layers, and interconnectedness across various domains. The surge of non-Western countries, like China and Russia, to global relevance poses a direct threat to the LIO. China, in particular, through its three global initiatives (Global Development, Global Security, Global Civilization), is actively promoting an alternative order based on the retrieval of Westphalian values of sovereignty and non-interference and a pluralist vision of international society which entails the coexistence of different governmental models and institutional types. China neglects core concepts of the LIO, such as democracy, a free press, and other human rights at the domestic level, which are traded in exchange for the promise of rapid economic growth and social development. This vision has been promulgated through the establishment of alternative counter-hegemonic IOs, like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. At the same time, while Russia is not promoting any alternative world order beyond the idea of ‘spheres of influence’, it is imposing itself as a power to be reckoned with, after the (self-)perception of a weakened and defeated empire had spread in the two decades following the end of the Cold War. Russia’s contestation

of the LIO is mostly carried out through the use of force and sabotage, as demonstrated by the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the war of aggression against Ukraine (2022-ongoing), and the long series of hybrid operations conducted on European soil. In addition, other states, like Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf monarchies, are increasingly seen as regional challengers, projecting their vision and influence across Africa and the Middle East, leveraging cultural/religious ties and economic prowess, to the detriment of Western players.

Other explanations pointed towards endogenous factors. The degeneration of liberalism into mercantilist neoliberalism exacerbated the effects of economic globalization, increasing inequalities even within wealthy Western societies, and became a major source of populism. In this regard, the very political openness of liberalism created avenues for its subversion, allowing autocratic forces to challenge the political foundations of democratic states through misinformation campaigns and social resentment (Farrell and Newman, 2021). Max Lesch et al. (2024) outlined the internal contradictions of the LIO reflected in negative distributional effects and widespread hypocrisy in the implementation of its principles. Tom Buitelaar and Gisela Hirschmann (2020), in their work on ‘conflicting norms’, highlighted the tension between liberal principles in the peacebuilding field, for example, between ensuring stability and promoting long-term peace and reconciliation (i.e., amnesties). David Lake and colleagues (2021, p. 237) brought the example of the insulation of opposition groups and native citizens in the pursuit of free trade agreements, claiming that “for liberalism to construct itself it had to be in some ways illiberal”. Finally, liberalism in both its economic and political forms challenged notions of national identity, eventually triggering a backlash against cultural globalization and progressive norms. This took various forms, including the spread of Islamic extremism, which invokes the rejection of Western values and a return to traditional religious rule, and democratic backsliding in places like Hungary, Turkey, and Brazil. The rise of nationalist-populist opposition from within core Western states also challenged our very perception of ‘the West’ as a homogeneous ontological entity. The election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 transformed the government of the guarantor of the LIO into its strongest challenger, a role he resumed after his re-election in 2024. The US administration has forged a novel peace doctrine far away from traditional liberal peacebuilding and closer resembling illiberal models. In the aftermaths of the 12 days war between Iran and Israel in June 2025, which concluded with an imposed ceasefire, US Vice President JD Vance resumed the elements of this doctrine in “1) clearly define an American interest; 2) negotiate aggressively to achieve that interest; 3) use overwhelming force if necessary [...] No mission creep. No protracted, ill-defined nation-building” (*The Guardian*, 2025). In the merging of conflict management with national foreign policy priorities, the US approach fully embraced a transactional logic which prioritizes bilateral engagement and assumes the use of force as an acceptable instrument to reach narrow peace deals.

Internal and external threats come together in a major challenge to liberal principles and to core multilateral institutions of the LIO. While it is not something new to see IOs targeted by national governments, think of Nixon’s abrupt termination

of the Bretton Woods monetary regime in 1971, today's threats to multilateralism seem unprecedented. The 2016 Brexit marked a major setback following two decades of uninterrupted European integration. On the other hand, the Trump administration terminated its engagement with the UN Human Rights Council, ceased funding for the Palestinian relief agency UNRWA, and ordered a review of UNESCO, while proposing the complete elimination of US contributions to UN peacekeeping, which would pass from \$1.2 billion to 0 in less than a year (Goldberg, 2025). Washington, however, has not been left alone in cutting peace funds. Global peacebuilding and peacekeeping accounted for just 0.52% of military expenditure in 2024, a staggering 26% decline since 2008 (Bojang, 2025), highlighting a shift in priorities from assuring peace towards preparing for war, driven by a widespread perception of international insecurity and volatility. The diminished influence of multilateral institutions prompted the multiplication of actors involved in peace-making and a consequent fragmentation of efforts. Alternative solutions promote a short-term orientation aimed at managing the consequences of violence instead of resolving the root causes of war. Counterinsurgency operations aimed at maintaining territorial stability and border control have replaced multidimensional peace missions, as no UN peacekeeping operation has been launched in over a decade. Multilateral institutions with their decision-making style based on consensus and their value-based approach are increasingly seen as an obstacle for the fast termination of conflicts by both intervening and intervened countries. As the former are now more focused on containing spill-over effects and reestablish 'normalcy' away from positive peace considerations, and the latter are guided by elites' interests of consolidating regime control against separatist/opposition groups, IOs are frequently circumvented in favour of bilateral provisions or the creation of various forms of 'Ad Hoc Coalitions' (AHCs).

Actors such as Qatar are becoming specialized in offering mediation services geared towards reaching 'deals' instead of 'agreements'. As rightly stated by John Gledhill (2025), the idea of a peace deal "is built on a narrow view of conflict dynamics [...] in which disputes over material interests drive war, and bargaining over those interests can bring an end to war". On top of this, peace deals are necessarily limited in scope and time as they "are about parties coming to arrangements that best meet their material interests at a particular point in time". According to the PA-X Peace Agreements database, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of internationally brokered comprehensive peace agreements in recent years. These are intended as broad, negotiated settlements designed to formally end a civil war and establish a lasting peace by addressing the root causes of conflict. This trend downwards has been matched by an increase in the percentage of bilateral 'peace deals' focusing on ceasefires and implementation rather than full-scale conflict resolution (Badanjak, 2022).

On the other hand, state actors are increasingly promoting the use of AHCs as a faster way to solve specific conflict situations. They are defined by Malte Brosig and John Karlsrud (2024, p. 771) as "autonomous arrangements, which are set up outside established institutions on short notice and with a task-specific mandate". AHCs are considered a much more flexible and adaptable instrument

than classic peacekeeping/peacebuilding as they more easily align with national interests, enable states to deploy troops to their own and neighbouring territories without the need to undergo tedious bureaucratic procedures, and can be fielded with a lighter human rights accountability framework. Significant examples are the Regional Cooperation Initiative for the elimination of the Lord's Resistance Army (RCI-LRA), the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) dealing with the Boko Haram threat, and the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) Joint Force. The use of AHCs or mini-lateral solutions has also become frequent among EU member states as a way of freeing themselves from the constraints imposed by the unanimity rule in European foreign policy, with a view of adapting their responses to the security needs arising from Russian expansion on the eastern flank and American disengagement in the region. In February 2025, for example, France, Germany, and Poland formed the 'Weimar Group', later expanded to include Italy, Spain, and the UK, as a geopolitical alliance to coordinate efforts in support of Ukraine in response to changes in US policy and to overcome obstacles towards more assertive action by some EU member states such as Hungary and Slovakia. For Brosig and Karlsrud (2024, p. 773), the use of these informal or semi-formal solutions is triggering processes of de-institutionalization in peacebuilding, as AHCs "bypass standard procedures for decision-making processes, whittle down established institutional scripts and shift resource allocations".

Not dissimilar from the use of AHCs is the recourse to extra-informal methods, like the hiring of private military companies (PMCs) or the sponsorship of local militias. Countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Madagascar, Haiti, and Ecuador have in recent years signed contracts with PMCs from Russia, South Africa, the US, and Romania to deal with international security problems. Once used primarily to defend private business interests in violent territories, PMCs are now deployed by state governments to the side of national armies with broader conflict management tasks. Although solely focused on security aspects, the use of PMCs bears clear advantages for those who contract them. Unlike traditional military forces, they do not have legal constraints and accountability mechanisms, so they can be tasked with 'dirty work' in counterinsurgency operations, such as targeting civilians suspected of hiding or collaborating with armed groups, leaving the hands of the commissioners relatively clean. Their private nature allows national governments to maintain a semblance of sovereignty, thus avoiding the accusation of being complacent with external powers and keeping the line of command within national structures. Finally, the employment of PMCs serves to treat internal conflicts as domestic affairs, thus avoiding both bad publicity and the interference of the international community.

Aside from PMCs, locally created armed militias are increasingly used tactically by states. This is nothing new per se, as they were already present in 81% of all country-years affected by civil war between 1981 and 2007 (Carey et al., 2013). However, recently, there has been an increase in their use as a complementary tool adopted by weakened states alongside other kinds of security initiatives. Examples include the Wazalendo militias in the DRC, acting as a proxy force of Kinshasa in

Kivu – a conflict-affected region that also saw the presence of a UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO, 1999-ongoing) and a SADC peace operation (SAMIDRC, 2023–2025) – or the Macawisley clan militias in central Somalia, where a joint UN and AU mission (AUSSOM) has been present since 2007. In a recently published article on Cambridge Review of International Affairs about the fluidity of African security governance, Federico Donelli and I (2025) demonstrated how ‘creating informal alternatives’ is one of the strategies employed by African states to navigate institutional complexity. Brosig and Karlsrud (2024, p. 773) affirmed that “a lack of problem-solving capacity, slow adaptation to external changes and the implicit path dependency” of IOs is what provides opportunities for the creation of these informal solutions.

In a nutshell, both external and internal factors caused the diminished relevance of IOs as a fundamental component of the LIO. This had a direct impact on the way we think and act about peace, privileging conflict management over conflict resolution, bilateralism over multilateralism, and informal solutions over formal ones. Net of global power shifting and internal inconsistencies, however, the crisis of the liberal peacebuilding order is also the result of a long list of failures, some of which, Iraq and Afghanistan, became too blatant to be ignored, thus putting into question the entire scope of the liberal peacebuilding framework. Illiberal alternatives are born not only as the expression of new powers claiming their place in a multiplex world but also as a response to the need perceived by many for alternative solutions to conflicts.

### **Everything Changes Nothing Changes**

As a global development that marked the collapse of the unipolar era and the end of the liberal peace consensus, the LIO crisis reflects the definition of ‘shock’ and opened a window of opportunity for substantial changes in the peacebuilding field (and beyond). However, recent literature problematized both the concept of shock, which remained notably ambiguous, and its effect in overcoming inertia. William Thompson and Thomas Volgy (2023) affirmed that shocks are neither necessary nor sufficient to bring about change. While it is true that they may create opportunities for change by encouraging actors to rethink their failing strategies, they can also have the opposite effect, namely, inducing conservative behaviours. The widespread interpretation of shocks as the main driver for policy change has so far relied on a number of automatisms related to *learning*, the *role of feedback*, and *epistemic communities*, which require further problematization.

Until the 1990s, the dominant position in the policy change literature was that learning produces change. However, Levy (1994) showed that learning by definition is not the same as policy change, that it does not always lead to change, and that it is generally neither necessary nor sufficient to explain it. More recently, Dunlop (2017) stated that learning may not always be a good thing, as it can be detrimental to the system and backfire. On the role of feedbacks, while positive ones are usually associated with self-reinforcing policy trajectories, negative feedbacks are linked with policy change, as they erode public support, alter incentives, and create

conditions that make policy continuity difficult. Carsten Daugbjerg and Adrian Kay (2020), however, demonstrated how also negative feedbacks can have a reinforcing effect, as policies may need to slightly change in response to shifts in the external environment in order to maintain their tenure. Finally, epistemic communities are defined by Holzner and Marx (1979, p. 107) as those “knowledge-oriented work communities in which cultural standards and social arrangements interpenetrate around a primary commitment to epistemic criteria in knowable production and application”. According to Haas (1990), for an alternative epistemic community to replace an existing one, there must be at least two conditions: the claim for truth that it makes must be more persuasive to decision-makers than the existing one and a successful alliance with the dominant political coalition must be in place.

In summary, no matter how big a shock is, as long as psycho-social processes within IOs challenging a unified perception of a crisis, this would only trigger minor changes towards policy adaptation rather than substantial alterations targeting core goals and values. ‘What a crisis is’ depends on the lens through which it is viewed. Thus, an external shock could even reinforce the old paradigm if policy failures are attributed to the lack of a correct implementation (i.e., liberal peace is not ‘enough’ liberal). For this reason, authors like Benjamin Cashore and Michael Howlett (2009) and Mark Blyth (2013) supported the adoption of a more endogenous perspective in addressing atypical changes, like paradigm shifts.

For Pol Bargués and colleagues (2023), the crisis of the LIO pushed peacebuilding IOs to adopt a defensive approach. The authors argue that ‘crisis talk’ had a conservative effect on institutions such as the UN and the EU, which are now seeking to stabilize themselves, their practice, and visions rather than interrogate the historical conditions which allowed the crisis to occur in the first place. They refer in particular to how resilience thinking, a dominant approach in the mid-2010s, has turned into a defensive strategy to manage the destabilizing effects of an increasingly volatile international arena. When, during the launch of the *New Agenda for Peace* (2023), the UN Secretary-General called for an adaptation of the World Organisation “to the geopolitical realities of today and the threats of tomorrow”, he was hoping for a resumption of the momentum that had inspired the values of the first Agenda for Peace (1992). Similarly, the 2024 *Summit for the Future* was more an attempt to revive multilateralism in the face of accusations of inadequacy than a concrete commitment to organizational reforms. At the EU level, the Von der Leyen Commission (2019) favoured a defensive turn, adopting a more security-oriented and inward-looking narrative. The *Security Union Strategy* 2020 made the protection of the EU and the LIO the main driver for action. This became even clearer in the *Strategic Compass* (2022), the EU’s latest security and defence strategy. Here, Brussels sanctioned the need for ‘a quantum leap’ to strengthen internal resilience in order to protect the core liberal values of human rights, human security, and democracy, which were portrayed as under attack both at home and at abroad.

Policy change is framed by collective ideas and “is underpinned by processes of institutionalisation and strategies of entrenchment” (Coticchia and Di Giulio, 2024). This is connected to the assumed linearity of policy dynamics and elite

substitution when a paradigm shift (eventually) happens. Such a linear understanding would imply that the growing popularity of illiberal models in peacebuilding is necessarily causing the demise of liberal peace. Recent scholarly assertions about the introduction of illiberal features into Western peacebuilding (Rosas Duarte and Souza, 2024) have been accompanied by resounding obituaries (“The liberal peace is gone and is not coming back”). This is not only reductive but also misleading. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, both the UN and the EU, as well as the AU and African regional organizations (RECs), are still a significant presence in almost all conflict scenarios around the world and continue to be framed by liberal values. Although no multidimensional UN peacekeeping operation has been authorized since 2014, special political missions in Colombia, Libya, and Iraq have been extended, and a new one in Somalia (UNTMIS) was launched in 2024. Furthermore, in 2023, the UN authorized the Multinational Security Support (MSS) Mission in Haiti, a new type of peace mission that delegated police enforcement and capacity building to a coalition of countries led by Kenya.<sup>1</sup> For its part, the EU has deployed new missions in Mozambique, the Gulf of Guinea, Armenia, and Moldova, while the AU has renewed its efforts in Somalia through AUSSOM, and African regional organizations like the SADC have recently been involved with field operations in Mozambique and the DRC. Mediation and diplomatic efforts also continue to see a prominent role for the liberal IOs. The UN provided unique support for the signing of the ‘grain deal’, which, despite having collapsed, still represents the biggest diplomatic achievement in the Russia-Ukraine war. Similarly, the EU was crucial in calming tensions in Bosnia and Kosovo with the Serbian communities, while the AU was the main architect behind the resolution of the conflict in Tigray (2022). This suggests that liberal peace, with its set of principles, practices, and institutions, lost its hegemony in the conflict resolution arena but still retains a dominant position. The difference between hegemonic paradigm and dominant paradigm has been effectively resumed by Fabrizio Cotichia and Marco di Giulio (2025), whereby the former indicates a policy approach that is not contested by any significant actors outside the policy elite, while the latter refers to a situation where the policy elites are continuously challenged by actors with opposite views.

Underlying this is the possible coexistence of multiple sets of policy ideas and practices over relatively long periods (Wilder and Howlett, 2014). Looking at modern peacebuilding as an assemblage of different actors and approaches, Stephanie Hofmann (2024, p. 10) stated that as long as one specific vision of peace does not become globally hegemonic, “liberal ordering aspirations and properties will continue to coexist and interact with others, both in terms of ideational content and procedural rules”. Stacie Goddard and colleagues (2024) pointed out that the incredible capacity of the liberal peacebuilding order to absorb shocks is the result of a low liberal embeddedness and weak institutionalization. On the one hand, the highly aspirational goals that characterize liberal peacebuilding bring together various potentially contradictory ideas, such as peace and justice, development and environmental protection, or democratic elections and stability, causing confusion and competition even within IOs themselves, for instance, between organizational actors in charge of development and those in charge of peace and security. On

the other hand, doctrines such as the responsibility to protect or the protection of civilians have been marked by a high degree of legal ambiguity that has fostered different, even conflicting, interpretations, especially regarding the use of force. However, according to Goddard et al. (2024), it is precisely weak institutionalization and low liberal embeddedness that make liberal peacebuilding so flexible and able to absorb contestation. For its characteristics, it is more prone to reform instead of going through counter-institutionalization (the rejection of peacebuilding institutions altogether) or illiberal reordering (a fully order-challenging contestation).

In conclusion, despite the LIO becoming less solid, IOs emerge as forces of continuity. They absorb shocks and adapt functionally to counter crises that may threaten their liberal foundations. The limited success of liberal peacebuilding is seen as a result of obstacles posed by (autocratic) counter-peace processes, triggering a defensive reaction. Thus, the ontological value of liberal peace has not been eroded by the LIO crisis. On the contrary, it has consolidated as a defining feature of IOs promoting a democratic, economically interdependent, and human rights-based order as the only path to lasting peace.

## Note

- 1 On 30 September 2025, the Security Council authorized a new multinational Gang Suppression Force (GSF) in Haiti to replace MSS.

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## 4 Strategic Inertia

### The Bureaucratic Pathway for Liberal Policy Continuity

#### From Institutional Inertia to Strategic Inertia

The idea that policies can change abruptly and in a short period as a consequence of some major upheaval questioned a belief that has been dominant in the field of public policy, namely, that policies evolve incrementally, adapting to their surroundings through small and gradual adjustments, thus relegating the possibility of major changes to a marginal and almost uninteresting phenomenon (Lindblom, 1959). The ‘punctuated equilibrium theory’ rejected the implicit assumption of incrementalism, namely, the evolutionary capacity of policy systems, by instead embracing the opposite premise: policies change seldom as they possess a remarkable tendency towards *inertia*. For Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones (1993), inertia refers to the powerful tendency of political systems to maintain the status quo. Therefore, policy change is seen as occurring following long periods of stability, occasionally punctuated by short bursts of major changes ignited by the impact of a crisis or a combination of multiple exogenous shocks (*polycrisis*). From this moment onwards, inertia has been typically framed as a spontaneous process, produced by a natural predisposition of bureaucratic organizations to rigidity stemming from loose institutional arrangements that slow decision-making, and/or bounded rationality that limits the amount of information bureaucrats can process, providing them with only a partial understanding of complex policy problems.

As seen in the previous chapter, institutional inertia characterized the contemporary definitions of international public administrations, as international organizations (IOs) literature often drew uncritically from public policy theories (Fleischer and Reiners, 2021). This is also due to a specific vision of IOs widespread in certain policy circles. Particularly among (neo)realists and (neo)liberals, IOs are seen as arenas for power struggles or cooperation among states, constituted of neutral and impartial bureaucratic organs without policy preferences (Keohane, 1988; Moravcsik, 1993; 1995). In the last two decades, however, scholars dealing with IOs have amassed an impressive body of evidence supporting the importance of international bureaucracies in a variety of policy areas. Inspired by the work of Barnett and Finnemore (1999), they framed IOs as normative actors capable of setting premises, defining norms, and imposing policy models to a large variety of audiences

(Bauer et al., 2016; Christensen and Yesilkagit, 2019; Fleischer and Reiners, 2021). Especially in sensitive areas such as peacebuilding, international bureaucrats are equipped with a well-defined set of ideas and policy preferences. Therefore, they cannot be treated solely as fora for the realization of national interests, but they must also be regarded as autonomous actors pursuing a specific policy vision that is not necessarily aligned with that of member states (Fleischer and Reiners, 2021).

In light of this, research works have demonstrated that IOs employ several strategies to respond against member states' contestation and blaming and thus to impose their own will over national constituencies. This had the merit of moving away from the image of bureaucrats as faceless grey men blindly following orders from their masters. For Gisela Hirschmann (2021), international bureaucracies use at least two types of strategies to counter the challenges posed to multilateralism: 'adaptation' and 'resilience-building'. The former involves the introduction of institutional arrangements that embrace the demands of their detractors in form rather than substance. For example, the pressures towards an increasingly pragmatic peacebuilding (see Chapter 1) have been incorporated by means of rhetorical concepts such as 'integrated approach' or 'pragmatic idealism', which, while altering existing peace practices little or nothing, helped mitigate unfavourable judgements. The latter consists of insulating organizations from the influence of contesting states. In 2017, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) dealt with budget cuts to reproductive health programmes imposed by the first Trump administration through a cosmetic readjustment that emphasized the humanitarian component of such programmes, which had not been targeted. In January 2025, the International Criminal Court supported the creation of a coalition of states in defence of international law, called the 'Hague Group', which condemned the attacks by the US and Israel against the Court over arrest warrants issued against Israeli government officials for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Gaza. A further means to build resilience is diminishing the legitimacy of detractors through 'shaming'. Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner General of UNRWA, shamed the Israeli authorities for banning the UN agency from the Gaza Strip (2023). He did so through an intense media campaign condemning the irresponsibility of Tel Aviv and showcasing the impact of UNRWA's ban on the human rights of thousands of Palestinian civilians, contributing to a surge in donations from the non-profit sector (AP News, 2025).

Katharina P. Coleman and colleagues (2021) reached similar conclusions, talking about the creation of 'empty institutions' to deal with intractable problems to deflect attention from a lack of progress in a specific policy area. Since its inception in 2005, for example, the UN Peacebuilding Commission has been swamped with novel functions despite the evident difficulties in fulfilling those already assigned in an attempt to address the overall criticisms around the lack of effectiveness and coordination of UN peacebuilding (Gaston, 2024). Furthermore, Kseniya Oksamytna (2023) recently highlighted how international bureaucrats can actively shape governmental outputs through advocacy strategies. Subjected to specific scope conditions (strategy-specific characteristics of advocates, targets, issues, and context), IOs' officials can rely on their unique position within the policy cycle

and their reputation as experts to persuade or even force, through manipulation of social rewards and punishments, governmental coalitions to adopt a policy option, as in the case of ‘quick impact projects’ or ‘strategic communication’ in peace-keeping missions. Thus, Oksamytna (2023, p. 63) empirically showed that change in IOs does not ‘simply happen’ but is always actor-driven: “[W]hat appears as a natural response to new challenges [...] required successful advocacy”.

It is interesting to notice how contemporary IOs theories overwhelmingly focus on bureaucratic positive actions oriented towards (different degrees of) change. Being so, the absence of change is often regarded as a lack of political will by IOs’ member states or as the natural consequence of an institutional rigidity that exists by design. According to this view, bureaucrats need to resort to their imaginative power to stimulate change or to maintain the political course against the will of the state. This is done through affirmative actions, namely, concrete, observable behaviours influencing policies as a result of group decisions. Positive actions are in themselves an expression of a decision-making power, similar to that of states, but stemming from the ‘delegation principle’, through which bureaucrats are empowered by their unique thematic and technical knowledge. Inertia, on the contrary, would require no effort, being by definition an inherent characteristic of bureaucracies, the expression of a routinary repetition of actions detached from people’s support. In the above-mentioned studies, inertia became synonymous with ‘inaction’. Gisela Hirschmann (2021, p. 1966) defines it as “an instance and/or pattern of non-intervention”. Katharina Coleman (2021, p. 458) considers “cease working on [a political] issue” a viable option for IOs facing complex problems. This view is reductive because it removes the strategic potential of inertia, seeing it simply as the absence of any active engagement with a political issue.

The idea of ‘strategic inertia’ was first conceptualized in the field of economics, in relation to the behaviour of business managers in situations of high competition, and stems as the negative pole for ‘strategic renewal’. While this literature had the merit of highlighting the aspect of intentionality behind inertia, it still links its choice to the result of organizational constraints and managerial cognitive bias. For Hodgkinson and Wright (2002), it is a means of coping with high levels of decisional distress, arising from the need to confront a variety of alternatives, each with the potential of threatening the survival of the organization. For Luis Perini and colleagues (2024), strategic inertia and strategic renewal emerge as opposite managerial decisions based on the same starting conditions: declining performance and industry transformation, felt pride in past success, and the need to navigate internal politics and turnover. The reasons for the orientation towards one or the other option lie in the timing of recognition of market changes, in the way past successes are interpreted vis-a-vis policy change, and in the style of corporate decision-making (closed or participative) and individual managerial skills. Thus, in the economic sphere inertia constitutes a failed strategy of adaptation facing market shifts in the presence of better alternatives to deal with changed conditions. In the peacebuilding realm, it stems as a low-effort and high-return response to a complex competitive scenario where the constraints on positive action outweigh opportunities. While the field of peacebuilding has recently been compared to a market-like field, this would be, at the very least,

an exceptionally complex one, where considerations of national interests, ontological factors, and the constraints given by an entangled and multilayered structure must be taken into account along with market's rules. Moreover, while increasingly popular, especially among authoritarian leaders, illiberal solutions have so far showed limited success, as exemplified by the recent Syrian turmoil, so there is still no 'better alternative' to the liberal one.

What I propose here is a novel vision through the notion of 'strategic inertia' applied to the peacebuilding arena, one that aims to provide strategic dignity to inertial processes as an expression of the 'non-decision-making power' of IOs. Steven Lukes (2005), taking from Bachrach and Baratz's idea of two-faced power (1962), affirmed that overemphasizing the importance of positive actions entails a one-dimensional view of power and denies the fact that power can be, and often is, exercised through 'non-decisions'. Readapting Lukes' definition, which still considers non-decisions as a sub-category of positive actions that do not derive from initiating, deciding, and vetoing processes, I regard non-decisions here as those (in)actions that draw on the institutional resources typically associated with structural inertia employed to suffocate demands for change contrary to bureaucratic preferences; or to keep them hidden; or to kill them before they have access to the relevant decision-making arena; or, in case all these things fail, to maim or destroy them in the policy implementation phase (Lukes, 2005). Inaction is thus not to be confused with mere passivity, as it does not imply acquiescence to the demands of opponents and the pushes for a paradigm shift by alternative constituencies (Isernia and Longo, 2017). Similarly, inertia is not immobility; on the contrary, it can emerge as the result of deliberate action by international bureaucracies, which can be extraordinarily imaginative in manipulating available knowledge and, hence, the surrounding environment to achieve their conservative ends (Bauer et al., 2016). With this, I am not suggesting that inertia is *always* strategic. What makes it 'strategic' is its use as part of a resistance effort. Goddard et al. (2024) claimed that "when faced with [...] contestation, an order's supporters can either undertake reform of the institution's norms, decision rules, and membership, or [...] resist meaningful change". The 'resistance path' can be pursued using various methods, like rhetoric (e.g., stigmatization/shaming) or creating coalitions but can also entail the use of more internal bureaucratic resources, like institutional arrangements or rules of procedure, to purposefully render the organization highly resistant to demands for change that would deviate from its locked-in path.

The strategic connotation of inertia is, therefore, highly contingent and linked to temporality and spatiality. In the peacebuilding milieu, policy continuity was self-explanatory under the liberal hegemonic order, as the only policy expectation was associated with liberal peace; however, amidst the current multipolar order, bureaucratic inertia acquires a strategic value, in that the retention of certain practices by peacebuilding IOs implies the attachment to a given policy option (the liberal one) at the expense of existing (illiberal) alternatives. Michael L.R. Smith (2024), for instance, investigating the reasons for the continuing failures of Western-led military interventions over the past 25 years, realized that not only must the explanations for this be located within bureaucratic institutions, but also

that their ‘failures’, as systematic and due to the same reasons, must involve some sort of strategic behaviour and deliberate action. On top of this, many IOs are fully aware of the challenges that authoritarian actors and illiberal approaches pose to the LIO and to liberal peacebuilding. On 31 October 2014, on the occasion of the appointment of the *High-Level Panel on Peacekeeping Operations*, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, acknowledged: “We are [...] at an inflection point. The post-Cold War period is over. A transition is underway to a new global order”.<sup>1</sup> The *Peace and Security Outlook* (Bilquin et al., 2023), produced by the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), stated that democratic structures are under attack by illiberal forces and external authoritarian powers and that the EU needs to strengthen its tools to support democracy all over the world. In a wide-ranging interview with the *Zeit* newspaper (2025), Ursula von der Leyen said, “The West as we knew it no longer exists [but] Europe is still a peace project”.

Thus, for inertia to be considered strategic, it is not sufficient to say that it is causally linked to the lack of change in a given policy area, whereby inertial behaviour is the main factor associated with policy continuity (*relatedness*). Inertia must also be *intentional*, that is, the result of a set of deliberate actions aimed at maintaining the status quo in the face of destabilizing factors.

In conclusion, while structural inertia stems from systemic constraints – such as organizational complexity, procedural rigidity, or limited cognitive capacities – strategic inertia is an expression of agency. It involves the deliberate decision to leverage organizational rigidity to preserve the liberal order, by selectively ignoring, deflecting, or undermining illiberal or alter-liberal demands for transformation. This form of inertia is not passive but performative; it is a calibrated response to political contestation, based on risk assessment, legitimacy-seeking, and long-term institutional positioning within the current world order. Strategic inertia is thus a reflection of bureaucratic non-decisional power, exercised through silence, delay, obfuscation, and procedural isolation, all enacted to protect the liberal peace paradigm from erosion. Recognizing the strategic use of inertia and the purposeful character of (in)action, anchored in specific temporal and spatial configurations, implies a better understanding of how IOs resist against illiberal contestation.

### **Guardians of (liberal) Peace**

Facing the question of inertia also means understanding why bureaucrats seek to maintain policy continuity amid growing contestation and existing alternative approaches, which amounts to asking what bureaucrats (really) want. Jorn Ege (2020) offered a comprehensive review of the literature on this subject. What emerged is a consensus in attributing the main source of bureaucratic action to a ‘logic of appropriateness’. Such behavioural logic stems from following the specific rules and identities associated with a particular situation (March and Olsen, 1998). This is opposed to a ‘logic of expected consequences’, as one in which bureaucratic actors choose among alternatives by evaluating their likely effectiveness in the pursuit of the mandate’s goals. In his categorization of bureaucratic motivations, Ege further distinguishes between ‘self-centred orientation’ and

‘collective orientation’. The first sees bureaucrats as utility-maximizing and rent-seeking individuals, mainly driven by power and prestige. The second depicts them as political proponents guided by a sense of mission and driven by legitimacy. Collective orientation better depicts peacebuilding bureaucracies as a peculiar type of administration operating in a highly principled field. Their sense of mission is stronger than in other bureaucratic venues and is linked to moral considerations about their role in maintaining peace and security. Peacebuilding bureaucrats depict themselves as special individuals tasked with a unique responsibility. They feel they belong to an enlightened elite that has been endowed with unique tools, knowledge, and influence to make an impact on the world, and they feel obliged to do so. Indeed, self-interest and collective interests are actually not mutually exclusive, as for peacebuilding bureaucrats, even concrete career aspirations are linked to liberal mandates and goals. Experts in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), Security Sector Reform (SSR), the rule of law, election observation, and human rights protection can reasonably only have a function in a liberal political framework. Authoritarian conflict management does not need them, as it would rather require military personnel, training specialists, and operational planners. Peacebuilding bureaucracies are thus thoroughly entrenched within liberal norms (Dunton et al., 2023), not the least because they played a central role in the institutionalization of the principles and practices of liberal peace (Chapter 1).

Bureaucratic motivation is also linked to contrasting notions of organizational sources of influence. While traditional institutionalism found them in material factors, like economic resources and effective internal organization, (neo)institutionalists and constructivists attribute more centrality to ideational factors. In particular, normative appropriateness would generate *legitimacy*, which is an essential source of influence for IOs (Minatti, 2024). According to Sarah von Billerbeck (2023:965), as IOs lack coercive means to exercise authority, “they rely disproportionately on perceptions of legitimacy [...] to operate effectively”. The ‘audiences’ are those who grant or withdraw legitimacy. They encompass member states (in the case of a global organization, like the UN, powerful resource-contributing states are considered more relevant than others), non-state actors working closely with the IO’s machinery, like civil society organizations, think tanks, universities, and parts of the IOs’ bureaucracy themselves.

Simply put, IOs are driven by the maintenance of their legitimacy rather than policy effectiveness. In this way, strategic inertia is translated into the reaffirmation of organizational identity, beliefs, and practices against the pressures to make peacebuilding less liberal, thus conforming a new function for IOs as spearheads of the LIO in an increasingly litigious global arena.

### **The Resistance Path**

In the reaffirmation of liberal norms and practices, IOs leverage their bureaucratic component to engage in inertial behaviours. But then, *how* is strategic inertia articulated? *How* do inertial processes unfold? *How* are they causally related to policy continuity? To answer these questions, I broke down strategic inertia into three

inertial mechanisms, each corresponding to a specific set of organizational processes, and I called them *groupthink* (M1); *backlash prevention* (M2); and *pathological behaviours* (M3).

M1 and M2 relate to the policy adoption phase and act in a preventive way, thus characterizing IOs' day-to-day action (*anticipatory inertia*). M3 refers to the policy implementation phase and acts reactively; therefore, it is detectable whenever a crisis arises (*reactive inertia*). Anticipatory inertia resembles the characteristics of structural inertia, but complemented, as previously said, by contextual intentionality. It may not be directed against a particular outcome, yet it contributes to policy continuity as a whole. In their work on blame avoidance by public administration, Markus Hinterleitner and Fritz Sager (2019) outlined how the need to avoid blame from state officials or the public does not only arise after a crisis has occurred. The same case can be made for illiberal contestation, as IOs do not have to wait for a specific challenge if the illiberal alternative is already present in a given time and space. Hence, peacebuilding officials can anticipate contestation and prepare for it. As for Hinterleitner and Sager, anticipatory inertia could be considered comparatively more important than reactive inertia, as bureaucracies, unlike governments, possess only limited resources at the high decision-making level, and countering crises that have already happened is more complex and costly than preventing them. However, bureaucrats do have some instruments, stemming from the quasi-monopoly over certain functions in field operations and their position along the information chain, which enable them to avoid policy deviations after the onset of a crisis. Reactive inertia works on the foundations provided by anticipatory inertia and is specifically employed to counter policy change vis-a-vis specific situations. It exploits the interstices that arise from the ambiguity of mandates and strategically uses regular bureaucratic procedures, such as reporting or monitoring and evaluation, to maintain the policy course, even in situations of liberal retreat.

### ***Groupthink***

Concerning the first mechanism, *Groupthink* (M1), as bureaucrats live with a constant overload of information, they need collective ideas to act coherently. Such ideas refer to concepts or beliefs held by groups of individuals that are incorporated through 'socialization', i.e., "the process of inducting individuals into the norms and rules of a given community" (Hooghe, 2005, p. 865). These range from individual cost-benefit calculations to more complex psychological mechanisms. International officials, for example, may be driven to adopt a specific set of ideas and beliefs for reasons of social conformity, a tendency to come to conclusions in line with pre-existing beliefs and interests or to avoid isolation.

The result is the spread of a supranational behaviour or 'actor-level supranationalism'. This implies "that staff is loyal to the mission and vision of the IO, [and thus that] civil servants are expected to become system defenders" (Trondal and Vegge-land, 2014, p. 56). The impact of M1 on liberal policy continuity is that "the extent to which a civil service forms a caste matters because an internally united body has a greater capacity to shape decision-making" (Hooghe, 2012, p. 88). This, in line

with the original meaning given to ‘groupthink’ by Irving Janis (1982), results in the pursuit of a single political option by bureaucrats to the exclusion of potential (illiberal) alternatives.

A supranational behaviour can be either induced or forced. In the first case, a prominent role is played by ‘recruitment strategies’ (M1.1). Here, it is no secret that peacebuilding IOs tend to recruit individuals from specific countries and/or educational centres who share similar life and work experiences and who identify themselves with liberal values and beliefs (Eckhard and Steinebach, 2021). Small, rich democracies like the Nordic countries, which are also traditional investors in democracy, diplomacy, and foreign aid, are frequently over-represented in senior positions related to peacebuilding (Novosad and Werker, 2019). Although the assignment of senior positions (e.g., UN SRSG – UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General) often eschews written rules, being rather the result of bargaining between major powers and conflicting interests, they still see the arbitrary power of key supranational institutions, such as the UN Secretariat. Moreover, peace missions and operations witness a distribution of labour that imposes a division of tasks along geographical, cultural, and even racial lines, relegating potentially contesting actors to implementation tasks and keeping the most important ones in the hands of like-minded actors (Oksamytna and von Billerbeck, 2024).

Where staff filtering alone is unable to instil homogeneity of thought, unity is imposed through ‘disciplinary measures’ (M1.2). As the degree to which liberal norms are internalized can vary, bureaucratic leadership maintains groupthink through a series of internal incentives and disincentives (Christian, 2022). These may include limiting institutional spaces for criticism, instilling a culture of silence, imposing punishments – including dismissal – for officials who express dissent and career advancement for the most obedient and extreme turnover of personnel.

### ***Backlash Prevention***

The second mechanism, *backlash prevention* (M2), relates even more strongly to the power of IOs to preserve and defend the dominant policy paradigm against external threats. Its main objective is to minimize the possibility of the emergence of alternative constituencies and adverse political reactions (Patashnik, 2019). The impact of M2 on policy continuity consists in that its use fosters defensive and closed attitudes within the organizations, rendering them resistant to change. In particular, IOs adopt specific strategies in their engagement with both external (M2.1) and internal actors (M2.2), concerning the peacebuilding decision-making process.

The involvement of civil society organization (CSO) not only provides the organisation with both legitimacy and scope of action but also exposes it to potential policy deviations, which could be instilled by illiberal groups. Thus, bureaucracies rely on strict but broadly interpretable guidelines for the conferring of funds and for allowing CSOs to participate in the peacebuilding work. These

implicitly favour Western nongovernmental conglomerates, which ultimately constitute an extension of the IOs themselves, or force smaller entities to be supported by larger ones, which act as capacity-builders, socializing little NGOs or CBOs to IOs' institutional jargon and routines (Johnson, 2016). Behind technical requirements, there is a specific intention to make the organizations immune to the influx of non-aligned CSO and to shape their external environment in such a way as to force 'politicized organizations', a label often used by bureaucrats to designate a type of entity they are not allowed to work with, to become 'technical', in line with a purported idea of neutrality that is in itself the bearer of a liberal approach.

Different but geared towards the same goal are the strategies used to condition governmental decision-making and, more generally, to limit the involvement of member states. These may be driven by their interests rather than by a genuine desire to transform conflict-affected states into (liberal) peaceful societies. Therefore, member states are prone to impose a political direction that is in line with the national interest by shaping peacebuilding mandates, by electing national personnel to key positions, or by retaining effective control over their deployed staff.

Although the power of IOs to circumscribe national governments' influence is limited, they can still resort to a number of possible solutions. Bureaucracies can modify the agenda setting and shape the content of policy proposals in order to make them more compatible with organizational policy preferences (Hartlapp et al., 2013; Princen and Rhinard, 2006). For instance, in the early stages of the policy cycle, bureaucrats frame information by selectively presenting problems and their possible solutions. In the negotiation and policy formulation phases, officials choose the most convenient policy venue by collaborating with receptive stakeholders so as to shape the decision-making process outcome (Ege et al., 2021). Moreover, as most seconded staff members are deployed in the field, given nation states' interest to exert control on peace missions, bureaucrats exercise intense supervision over their activities and minimize margins of autonomy.

### ***Pathological Behaviours***

The last mechanism, *pathological behaviours* (M3), is inspired by the seminal work of Barnett and Finnemore (1999). The two authors attributed them to the institutionalization of dysfunctional behaviours that arise when simplification and routinization are brought to excess and provide a summarization of them as 'irrationality of rationalization', 'universalism', 'normalization of deviance', 'organizational insulation', and 'cultural contestation'. These directly respond to the IOs' need to maintain their legitimacy, which entails adherence to specific functions and procedures (logic of appropriateness).

Again, what I contend here is the automatism and unintentionality underlying Barnett and Finnemore's view of such behaviours as part of the bureaucratic culture. I assume instead that bureaucrats are fully aware of the existence and functioning of such dysfunctions, and although they cannot make and unmake

them *ad hoc*, they can exploit their inertial power to hinder the transformative impact of a crisis (or illiberal contestation) on peacebuilding policies. The impact of M3 on policy continuity is that through these behaviours, IOs' action is purposefully oriented towards the maintenance of appropriateness criteria in policy implementation rather than towards the effective realization of a specific policy outcome. Thus, organizational pathologies are the bureaucratic response to the uncertainty and unpredictability triggered by crises, and they work reactively.

Among the set of disfunctions enlisted by Barnett and Finnemore, there are two that can impede the shock wave caused by a policy failure to hit too hard on policy tenure and avoid paving the way for illiberal, or alter-liberal, constituencies. One is 'bureaucratic universalism' (M3.1), the other is 'feedback manipulation' (M3.2). The former mainly involves the utilization of analogy-based policy instruments, which correspond to the linking of the use of a specific (set of) policy instrument(s) to past decisions. For Thomas Dörfler and Thomas Gehring (2021), the use of analogy-based logic in the selection of policy instruments strengthens organizational resilience, as the application of an established problem schema to cases perceived as similar reinforces existing rules and makes decisions more robust. Analogy can also be used in cases perceived as dissimilar. Here, it is possible to adapt the problem schema while still using the past experience as a reference case, thereby promoting within-path changes.

Feedback manipulation instead refers to overstating the efficacy of liberal solutions and/or conceal errors and pitfalls of peacebuilding programmes (Davies, 2017). The monitoring and evaluation phase of peacebuilding is almost exclusively internal to IOs, and most of the time, there is no control over the information provided, so that mission personnel found themselves in a strategic position to control the narrative around peacebuilding performance. Depending on the objective to be achieved, whether it is to keep the mission open, to receive more funding, to close it, to move it, or to transform it (e.g., from a peacekeeping operation to a special political mission), bureaucrats can edulcorate or worsen the outcomes of peacebuilding policies in their periodic reports.

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In sum, the categorization of strategic inertia into anticipatory and reactive forms – articulated through the mechanisms of groupthink (M1), backlash prevention (M2), and pathological behaviours (M3) – offers a comprehensive and coherent framework for understanding how IOs sustain policy continuity across the entire policy cycle. This typology captures both the proactive measures embedded in routine bureaucratic operations before and during policy adoption, and the more tactical responses deployed during implementation and monitoring in the face of crises or contestation. By doing so, peacebuilding bureaucracies, far from being passive or bound by automatism, strategically exploit internal procedures, norms, and information asymmetries to guard against illiberal incursions and preserve a liberal peace framework (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Conceptualization and operationalization of inertial mechanisms

|                                                | <i>Inertial Mechanism</i>   | <i>Parts of the Inertial Mechanism</i>      | <i>Conceptualization</i>                                                                         | <i>Predicted Evidence</i>                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Anticipatory inertia (policy adoption phase)   | M1. Groupthink              | <i>M1.1 Staff filtering</i>                 | IOs adopt recruitment strategies that favour pre- socialized individuals                         | Officials are socialized around liberal values and goals                                          |
|                                                |                             | <i>M1.2 Rule following</i>                  | IOs punish officials who are not aligned with liberal vision and reward those who are more loyal | Internal criticism is either discouraged or punished                                              |
|                                                | M2. Backlash prevention     | <i>M2.1 Engagement with external actors</i> | IOs only collaborate with aligned CSO                                                            | Bureaucracies impose barriers to ensure access only to like-minded CSO                            |
|                                                |                             | <i>M2.2 Engagement with internal actors</i> | Officials exploit their strategic position to gain support for liberal policies                  | Officials use formal and informal tactics to raise awareness and garner support for their issues  |
| Reactive inertia (policy implementation phase) | M3. Pathological behaviours | <i>M3.1 Bureaucratic universalism</i>       | When faced with crisis IOs resort to analogy-based solutions                                     | Extensive use of analogical thinking in employing policy instruments that provide political gains |
|                                                |                             | <i>M3.2 Feedback manipulation</i>           | Feedback from the field is opportunistically retained and manipulated                            | The flow of information from the field is severely undermined by gatekeeping activities           |

## Note

- 1 United Nations, “Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 9 - A New Agenda for Peace”, 2023, New York: United Nations, p. 3.

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## **Part II**

# **Castles in the Desert**

Strategic Inertia in the Sahel



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## 5 The Sahel Conflict

### Clashing Interests and Diverging Strategies

#### A Region in the Making

The Sahel region is a vast area in the African continent connecting sub-Saharan Africa with the Maghreb and the Atlantic Ocean with the Red Sea and the wider Middle East. For centuries, due to its strategic position, it has been a crossing point for international trade. Cities like Timbuktu, Gao, Djenné, and Kano were turned into thriving urban centres thanks to the commerce of goods like gold, salt, cotton, leather, and ostrich feathers transported in large caravans up to the Moroccan port of Essaouira. Its centrality gradually vanished with the arrival of European colonialism, which prompted the movement of goods towards the coast, instead of through the Sahara, contributing to its progressive impoverishment. The region's historical characteristic as a melting pot of people and cultures, and as a bridge between spaces, contributed to the fluidity of its boundaries. Although I focus here on the *Liptako-Gourma* region, bordering Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which has witnessed the highest level of violence and the greatest involvement of foreign actors, there are conflicting spatial definitions of where the Sahel begins and where it ends (Figure 5.1).

For Edoardo Baldaro (2021), the Sahel found itself at the crossroads of region-building initiatives prompted by groups of actors with different political ordering visions. Western interventions were guided by a state-building approach embedded in the strategic and cognitive framework created by the 'war on terror', which saw 'fragile states' as the main causes of global insecurity. Thus, Western discursive and spatial imaginaries drew the frontiers of the Sahel around the bulk of countries considered to be the epicentre of the terrorist threat, equating the region with their area of intervention.

This view coincides with what is expressed by Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen (2020), according to whom the variety of definitions around the Sahel underline the political nature of defining regions as an appropriate space for action. Following their intervention in Afghanistan, the US launched the first regional security initiative in the Sahel, persuaded that it would become the next 'terrorist heaven'. The *Pan-Sahel Initiative* (2002–2004) was a counter-terrorist programme run by the US Department of State together with the local security forces of Chad, Niger, Mauritania, and Mali. This paved the way to the deployment of further similar

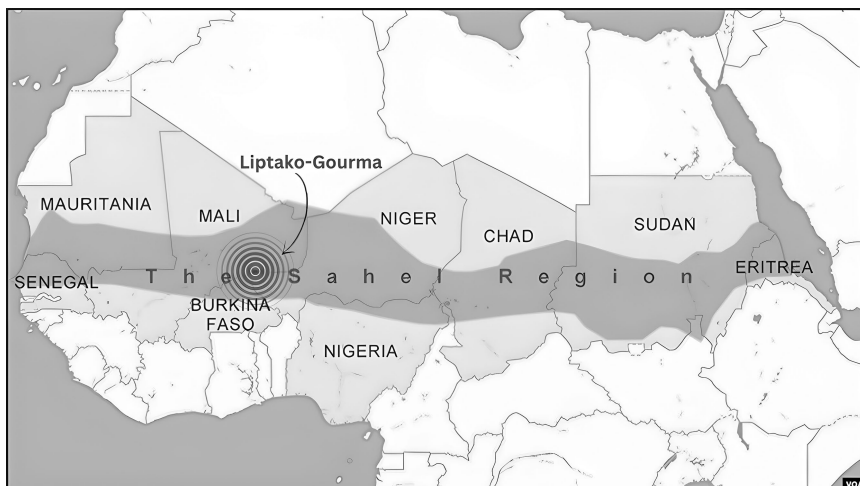


Figure 5.1 The Sahel region. Adapted image from Voice of America-VOA (Bryant, 2022).

interventions. In 2005, the US launched the *Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative* (later ‘partnership’), extending the geographical focus to other countries (i.e., Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Cameroon), following a perceived ‘enlargement’ of the terrorist threat. In the aftermath of the Malian crisis (2012), the former colonial power, France, intervened in the country with *Operation Serval* (2013–2014), later converted into *Operation Barkhane* (2014–2022) as it assumed a ‘regional focus’, widening the scope of its action to Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger.

With the ‘Europeanizing’ of French initiatives, the EU maintained the emphasis on these countries in its *Regional Action Plan* (2015), while concentrating security efforts in Mali and Niger. After changing political dynamics forced the EU to a partial withdrawal, its range of action has extended towards the Gulf of Guinea with the launch of the *Security and Defence Initiative* (EU SDI GoG) in 2023, involving Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin. The UN have traditionally considered the Sahel as part of West Africa, with the *Office for West Africa and the Sahel* (UNOWAS)<sup>1</sup> covering 16 countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. It was not until 2013 that the region gained a separate relevance for the global organization with the launch of the *United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel* (UNISS), encompassing countries in West, Central and North Africa, but with an emphasis on the five central Sahelian states of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Subsequently, other UN agencies, such as UNDP, and funds, such as IFAD, maintained the same geographical focus of intervention.

The jihadist groups, which constitute another relevant actor shaping the spatial and discursive imaginaries of the Sahel, have essentially mirrored Western region-

building, equating the region with their area of operation. In their zones of influence, jihadist groups proposed alternative forms of governance to those put forward by the West with the aim to replace clientelist states with an African Islamic caliphate. The *Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat* (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* – GSPC) – a splinter cell of the *Armed Islamic Group* active in Algeria during the civil war (1992–2002) – was first active in Northern Mali, Eastern Mauritania, and Western Niger. The affiliation of GSPC to Al-Qaeda, which followed its rebranding as *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb* (AQIM), signified its commitment to the doctrine of the ‘global jihad’ and improved its regional scope. The subsequent multiplication of jihadist groups, including a branch of the Islamic State, has led to a process of ‘Sahelization’ of jihadist activities that further developed across the region (Cristiani and Fabiani, 2011). Hence, through the years, jihadist action became entrenched in specific regions, such as the Liptako-Gourma and the Lake Chad basin. More recently, Islamic insurgents have moved further south to the coastal region of the Gulf of Guinea, which has been coupled by an increase in security activities by international actors, leading to the formation of a new ‘regional security complex’.

At the level of the local governments, the Sahel rose to institutional relevance with the creation in 2014 of the *Group of Five for the Sahel* (G5 Sahel), a security and development initiative jointly created by the presidents of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, and strongly supported by the West. It was no coincidence that the G5 mirrored the same geographical scope of Barkhane and shared its interpretation of the causes of conflict (i.e., state fragility). On the other hand, the creation of the G5 also allowed national authorities in the region to increase their relevance vis-à-vis their partners and attract more aid and support.

Local communities and populations have their ways of living and experiencing space. Smugglers, Fulani pastoralists, and Tuareg nomads see frontiers not as separations but as places of contact and interchange, to the point that “crossing borders becomes a profitable activity because of the price and political differentials characterizing the different national territories” (Baldaro, 2021, p. 276). Francesco Strazari and Luca Raineri (2022) highlighted how, in places like the Liptako-Gourma, illegal activities are not necessarily a source of disorder. In fact, ‘merchants’ interact with both state representatives and local communities, building an order based on specific rules of coexistence and thus also contributing to the emergence of forms of trans-boundary governance.

Non-Western powers have also developed their own imaginaries for the region. Russian Sahel mirrored Moscow’s ambition to create a zone of influence extending from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea and from Central Africa to the Mediterranean. For China, the region represents a strategic corridor for achieving East-West connectivity by linking relevant maritime facades – Mediterranean coastline, Gulf of Guinea, Atlantic, Gulf of Aden – through crucial inland control.

With all this in mind, the regional configuration of the Sahel as a security complex, resulting from the interaction of the different actors involved in shaping conflict dynamics, is still ongoing. On the one hand, the dissolution of institutional

arrangements such as the G5 Sahel and the creation of alternative fora, like the *Alliance des États du Sahel* (AES), has led to a fragmentation of regional identities between a Central Sahel composed of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, ruled by authoritarian leaders partnering with illiberal actors; a Western Sahel composed of coastal countries, such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo, which belong institutionally to ECOWAS and which are becoming witnesses to the expansion of jihadist activities from the north (Wilén, 2024a); and a Central-Eastern Sahel comprising the countries around the Lake Chad basin (e.g., Chad, Nigeria) and war-torn Sudan, which have been caught in the middle of the regional strategic realignment and power competition (Baldaro and Lopez Lucia, 2024).

### **A Crucial Case for Policy Continuity**

Since gaining independence from France in the 1960s, the Sahelian countries faced a wide range of challenges, mainly related to state weakness and corruption, also fuelled by interests linked to the management of illegal trafficking, and natural disasters (droughts, famines) linked to the effects of climate change. Despite chronic poverty, weak statehood, corruption, and frequent clashes between communities with differing preferences for land use (e.g., farmers vs. herders), the region had been excluded from jihadist violence until very recently. The end of the civil war in Algeria and the fall of the al-Qaddafi regime in Libya were two major drivers for the rise of jihadism in the Sahel, whereby the flux of combatants and radicalized individuals from the north intertwined with preexisting social grievances in the Sahelian peripheries. In this regard, Luca Raineri (2022) pointed out that the upsurge of jihadism in the region was not so much the result of poor governance in areas of limited state reach – an idea that inspired the ‘ungoverned space’ concept – but rather the perception by the local population of the abuses perpetrated by state authorities.

The expansion of Islamic extremism and the subsequent affiliation of Sahelian armed groups to international jihadist cartels caused great concern in Western capitals, which were still dealing with the negative effects of the Arab Springs. In particular, as the civil war in Libya left the continent with little guarantee that migration flows could be controlled directly from African shores, attention was turned further south. Here, the control by armed groups of important migratory hubs, e.g. around the city of Agadez, along with the possibility of terrorists arriving in Europe hidden among asylum seekers, placed the Sahel at the centre of the European foreign policy agenda. Notoriously, the West's involvement in the Sahel began with an intervention by France (the aforementioned Op. Serval). Following this, the EU and European member states deployed an impressive effort, in the form of counter-terrorism activities, security force assistance (SFA), and border management, turning the Sahel into a hotspot for Western conflict management.

European security initiatives, however, did not develop in a vacuum. The region had already hosted an African-led International Support Mission (AFISMA; 2012–2013), which was authorized by the UN Security Council and implemented by ECOWAS. It was later incorporated into the *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali* (MINUSMA; 2013–2023). International

efforts unfold alongside regional initiatives, like the *Joint Operational General Staff Committee* (CEMOC) – comprising Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – and the *G5 Sahel Joint Force*.

The already stratified security environment became even more complex with the growing involvement of non-Western powers. 2013 marked a turning point for Chinese engagement in the Sahel when, for the first time, Beijing sent an infantry company to MINUSMA. Russia, which had already signed military cooperation agreements with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso between 2017 and 2019, assumed the role of main security provider for these countries after 2021. At the same time, Turkey and the Gulf States also provide military training, capacity-building programmes, and arms sales (Ndiaye and Dieye, 2022).

For many actors, the Sahel became a ‘laboratory for experimentation’ for conflict management (Lopez Lucia, 2017). Like nowhere else in the world, it has seen an assemblage of national and international actors competing for their political visions. Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen (2020) described this scenario as a ‘security traffic jam’, to indicate not merely a crowded arena and lack of coordination, but also, and more importantly, an emblematic case of conflicts seen as an arena for competition. The concept of ‘political marketplace’ is also particularly consistent in the case of the Sahel, as it highlights the role of local national actors in the shaping of conflict responses by international actors. The Sahelian military and political elites did not merely navigate competition but actively prompted it to obtain the maximum level of benefits from their external partners. This exacerbated friction between rivals, emphasizing differences.

Thus, the Sahel case is a crucial one for exploring the different manifestations of contemporary conflict management and resolution by rival actors with competing agendas. It lies at the intersection of the strategic interests of Western countries and the growing presence of non-Western ones offering political alternatives to traditional peace models. At the same time, it also constitutes a least-likely case for liberal policy continuity. The high political stakes represented by the region for many Western powers, in fact, prompted a securitarian response focused on stabilization, institution-building, and strengthening of the military apparatus. This came with the accusation that the West, in particular the UN and the EU, were trading liberal peace for ‘military peace’ (Navarro Millán, 2022) or fully embracing illiberal peacebuilding in their stabilization approaches (Rosas Duarte and Souza, 2024). However, as I will show below, the adoption of a ‘security first’ approach did not mean the abandonment of long-term liberal goals, with many actors continuing to qualify Western conflict management in the region as a ‘liberal governing initiative’ (Baldaro, 2021). On top of this, as a major shift in alliances took place in the Sahel after 2021, IOs’ responses have been characterized more by the recovery of liberal peace features than by their abandonment.

### **The Sahelian Conundrum**

In 2012, the Malian state collapsed in the face of a military coup against the then-President Amadou Toumani Touré and a rebellion by a Tuareg-based armed movement (*Mouvement National de Liberation de l’Azawad*, MNLA), in the north

of the country. The Tuareg have long desired their own independent state, and there had already been uprisings in 1962, 1990, and 2007. Heavily armed militants who had worked as mercenaries in Muammar al-Qaddafi's Libya returned to Mali in 2012, sparking the rebellion. After the military takeover in the southern capital Bamako, the MNLA joined forces with various jihadist groups active in the north: AQIM, the *Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa* (MUJAO), and the largely Tuareg *Ansar Dine* (AAD). By late 2012, they had conquered the cities of Kidal, Timbuktu, and Gao (Pye, 2021). The occupation of northern Mali lasted about six months. Operation Serval put an end to jihadist rule and drove the fighters out of urban areas, dispersing them in the countryside, with the Liptako-Gourma region becoming a vital retreat (Nsaibia, 2022) (Figure 5.2).

The French intervention, later joined by other international actors, brought minimum stability conditions for the holding of elections in Mali, which were won by Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK). In 2015, the MNLA and the government of Bamako signed the *Algiers Accords*, under the auspices of the EU, the UN, the US, France, and Algeria. The peace agreement, however, left out key actors involved in the conflict, like Islamists, civil society, women, and youth groups, and remained exclusively focused on the 'Tuareg question'.

This was soon replaced by a 'Fulani question' in central Mali and bordering Burkina Faso and Niger. Showing the impact of climate change as a threat multiplier, the desertification of the Sahel made arable land increasingly scarce, prompting sedentary groups such as the Dogon in Mali, the Mossi in Burkina Faso, and the Daoussahak in Niger, to compete with Fulani nomads for access to resources, creating a backdrop of tensions. In Mali, jihadist groups targeted leaders of the Dogon ethnic group, accused of supporting the Malian forces. The Dogon, in turn, formed militias to defend themselves, often targeting Fulani civilians. At the height



Figure 5.2 The Azawad region (Mali). Public image from Istituto Analisi Relazioni Internazionali (IARI; Perronace, 2024).

of violence in March 2019, a Dogon militia massacred over 160 Fulani, including women and children, in the Malian central region of Mopti (Pye, 2021).

By exploiting their knowledge of the territory and their linkages with ethnic communities and traditional leaders, jihadist groups survived the counteroffensive of state and international forces and expanded beyond Mali's borders, converting the conflict from a north-south cleavage within a single country into a much more complex scenario of cross-border tribalized armed violence (Baldaro and Dially, 2020). In 2017, amid the dispute with the Sahelian armed forces and international troops, various jihadist groups, including Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, Al-Mourabitoun, and AQIM, formed a coalition called *Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM), headed by Iyad Ag Ghali (Tuareg) and his deputy Amadou Koufa (Fulani), which soon became the most influential and powerful armed actor in the region. JNIM's dominance was challenged by the expansion of the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara* (ISGS). The ISGS was born in 2015 in Niger's Tillabéri region from a coalition of splinter cells from Al-Mourabitoun and Katiba Macina that gathered around the charismatic figure of Abu Walid al-Saharawi. Between 2019 and 2020, the coexistence of the two jihadist networks in the central Sahel, competing for the support of the same constituencies, led to open warfare. Jihadist infighting saw JNIM prevail over the ISGS, which was expelled from central Mali and central and eastern Burkina Faso. The death of al-Saharawi in August 2021, killed in a French counter-terrorist operation, further weakened the organization. However, the ISGS was able to reorganize itself to the point that in 2023 another conflict escalated with JNIM for supremacy in the Liptako-Gourma. After several deadly attacks, JNIM mobilized hundreds of fighters from different regions for a major offensive and successfully overtook several ISGS bases. Since then, the group, while still posing a considerable threat to the Sahelian governments, shifted towards consolidating its presence around its territorial base (Nsaibia, 2024).

Since the spread of violence in the region had not been curbed and the grievances of marginalized populations had not been resolved, local governments started facing mounting contestation. In early 2020, social unrest broke out in Bamako, following the contested re-election of IBK. The government was ousted by a coup in 2020, before another coup unseated the interim President Bah Ndaw in 2021, bringing to power a military junta run by Colonel Assimi Goïta. The so-called 'coup within the coup' marked a tipping point for regional equilibrium and democratic backsliding. In April 2021, the sudden death of Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno paved the way for the army's seizure of power and the appointment of his son, General Mahamat 'Kaka' Déby Itno, as president. In January 2022, another coup took place in Burkina Faso as Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba dismissed President Kaboré, who had faced public disapproval for his management of the democratic transition started with the resignation of the dictator Blaise Compaoré in 2015. Damiba's rule lasted shortly, as profound rifts within the army and strong discontent with his political direction forced him to resign and to give up his seat to Captain Ibrahim Traoré in September 2022. Finally, in July 2023, the Head of the Presidential Guard in Niger, General Tchiani, detained President Bazoum in

the presidential palace and proclaimed himself the leader of a new military junta, marking the fall of the last democratic bastion in the region.

Notwithstanding the increased security footprint given by the new putschist governments, “extremist violence has metastasized” (Inman and Edds-Reitman, 2024). In 2023, the number of deaths resulting from extremist violence in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger increased by 38%. Across the Sahel region, the annual incidence of such fatalities has tripled since the 2020 coup in Mali, while attacks targeting civilians rose fourfold in the month following the military seizure of power in Niger (Inman and Edds-Reitman, 2024). Of even greater concern is the widened geographic scope of jihadist actions to the regions bordering Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria. The net effect of this is that jihadist-related instability from Central Sahel enabled al-Qaida and the Islamic State to establish footholds in coastal West Africa.

### **The Western Decade (2012–2021)**

Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Sahel had been indisputably the focus of Western peacebuilding for almost a decade. The unfold of foreign interventionism has been strongly shaped by the role of France and its capacity to transform its vision for the region into a global approach, by leveraging its historical presence in West Africa and by carving out a primary role as a penholder both within European institutions and within the UN, where it led the Department for Peace Operations (DPO, formerly DPKO) for 27 years (Adebajo, 2023). Following the outset of the Malian crisis, France activated its diplomatic channels to obtain approval from the UNSC to support the ECOWAS plan to mobilize 3,000 troops to Mali (Petidis, 2024). Though he had initially vowed not to send troops, President Hollande authorized Operation Serval in January 2013, fearing the disintegration of Mali’s territorial integrity and its impact on regional stability and French national interests. It was intended to be a time-limited operation, confined within the territorial borders of the Malian state. As presented in an article by the *Wall Street Journal*: “A short mission [...] end[ing] with a clear victory [would have been] beneficial for Mr. Hollande” (Parussini, 2013). However, the French troops never left, and Serval was turned into Barkhane. In the meantime, the Paris initiative had received support from the American government, in terms of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, and the collaboration of many African regimes (Charbonneau, 2021).

In its *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel* (2011), the EU embraced the French – and American – view of the Sahel as a major security concern and their interpretation of the region as an assemblage of ‘ungoverned spaces’ and ‘fragile states’ that could have paved the way for jihadist proliferation. Its adoption was justified in the following way:

An urgent [...] priority is to prevent AQIM attacks in the Sahel region and its potential to carry out attacks on EU territory, to reduce and contain drug and other criminal trafficking destined for Europe, to secure lawful trade and

communication links (roads, pipelines) across the Sahel, North-South and East-West, and to protect existing economic interests and create the basis for trade and EU investment.<sup>2</sup>

Until then, EU engagement in the Sahel region had consisted essentially of development cooperation aid. The Strategy thus marked a reversal in the order of priorities between security and development, where the former was conceived as a *conditio sine qua non* for the latter, and not vice versa (Mateos, 2022).

Following the 2012 Malian crisis and the so-called migrant crisis in 2015, the EU further strengthened its securitarian approach with the publication of the *Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020* (SRAP). Besides the adoption of a more ‘regional’ approach, the main novelty of the SRAP was the introduction of border management and the fight against illicit trafficking as one of its core priorities, reflecting an externalization of the internal political agenda. Thus, the adoption of a security-oriented approach was not only instilled from outside but was also an expression of the will of part of the European establishment and member states to pursue more pragmatic and self-centred goals, as later asserted in the European Global Strategy (2016). The promulgation of the Sahel strategies led to the deployment of three CSDP missions. Brussels launched the civilian mission *EUCAP Sahel Niger* in 2012 with the aim of helping the country fight terrorism and organized crime. The mission provided advice and training to support Niger’s security authorities in strengthening their capacities. *EUCAP Sahel Mali* was launched in early 2015, with the task of supporting the Malian internal security forces in ensuring constitutional order. In 2013, the EU also established a Military Training Mission in Mali (*EUTM Mali*) to strengthen the capacity of the Malian armed forces by ‘training the trainers’ and providing advisory and educational support for security sector reform. After the adoption of the SRAP and the Global Strategy, both capacity-building missions introduced among their objectives the support to the governments of Mali and Niger in the management of migration flows and border security (Raineri and Baldaro, 2020).

The key institutional and legal parameters of intervention in the Sahel were defined by and through the mandate of MINUSMA, which provided legal cover for the activities of the French, the EU, and the G5 Sahel (Cold-Ravnkilde and Nissen, 2020). MINUSMA was authorized by UNSC resolution 2100 in 2013, “expressing [...] continued concern over the serious threats posed by transnational organized crime in the Sahel region, and its increasing links [...] with terrorism”. MINUSMA was the fourth largest peacekeeping mission of the UN – after MINUSCA, UNMISS, and MONUSCO – and counted with more than 13,000 uniformed personnel, mostly from Western African countries, and a field presence in 13 locations in Mali. Its strategic priorities remained largely constant since its creation: to support stabilization efforts, to restore Malian state authority, and to protect civilians. Following the signing of the Algiers Accords between the government and the MNLA, MINUSMA was also charged with helping in the implementation of the peace agreement. Since the beginning, it made a clear difference between legitimate interlocutors, namely, the governmental authorities and the MNLA, and

other groups, labelled as terrorists, which were excluded from the political process. As these groups were considered ‘local spoilers’ of peacebuilding, they became legitimate targets of violence in an expanded interpretation of the use of force under the notion of ‘robustness’, which implied the use of *any means or measures necessary* to fulfil the mission’s mandate. Resolutions 2295 (2016) and 2364 (2017) tasked MINUSMA with actions “in support of the Malian authorities [...] to anticipate, deter and counter threats, including asymmetric threats, and to take robust and active steps to protect civilians [...] engaging in direct operations”. Moreover, MINUSMA’s mandate was the first with so many clear references to counter-terrorism activities. Resolutions 2295, for example, stressed the need “to forestall attempts by terrorist groups to derail the implementation of the [peace] Agreement” (Longobardo, 2020).

For their part, the Algiers Accords represented an example of an attempt at a comprehensive liberal peace agreement to promote “durable peace and stability in [Mali and the Sahel region], and to make real the rules of good governance, transparent management, respect for human rights, justice and the fight against impunity”.<sup>3</sup> Measures to establish peace were taken from the liberal handbook and entailed: the denomination of the Azawad as a socio-cultural reality for the Tuareg people, the enhancement of local governance with the creation of regional assemblies, the commitment to equitable representation for northern populations in the national government, the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms, the creation of pathways for the demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants, and the launch of development programmes in the North.

Despite criticism for the overlapping of mandates, the international security architecture in the Sahel entailed a clear separation of tasks between peace-enforcers and peace-builders, which also reflected competing agendas and a more general tension between a military-securitarian and a civilian-liberal component of Western interventionism in the region. French-led troops were mainly responsible for the use of force, supported by MINUSMA, EU member states (*Takuba Force*), and the G5 Sahel Joint Force. This military-securitarian component was aimed towards stabilization and the creation of a space for development and liberal political solutions to be implemented by the civilian component, mainly constituted of UN agencies and EU Commission programmes. On the one hand, therefore, EU action did not entirely promote a defensive and inward-looking agenda. Numerous references to altruistic and values-based concerns can be found in the main strategic documents related to the Sahel. The same applies to the mandates of CSDP missions, which have continued to be non-executive and promote long-term reforms. Moreover, there were conflicting agendas at the EU policy-making level, as the bureaucratic dimension of the organization, consisting of the EEAS and the European Commission, has continued to push for long-term liberal reforms against short-term military solutions (Cold-Ravnkilde and Nissen, 2020). On the other hand, observers pointed out that MINUSMA, throughout its existence, was a divided mission. They spoke of two missions rather than one, long before its withdrawal, with the civilian and military components operating in parallel, but

not integrated as expected. This was largely due to the ‘robust mandate’ that caused divisions (Wilén, 2024b).

In a nutshell, recent interpretations of IOs’ peacebuilding in the Sahel as a total departure from liberal peace towards illiberal solutions seem short-sighted (Karlsrud, 2019). Rather than constituting the abandonment of liberal peace, Western interventionism in the Sahel during the decade 2012–2021 was the product of its time. The high centrality of the region for many Western governments, combined with the increasing evidence of failure of liberal state-building coming from Iraq and Afghanistan, contributed to a growth in importance of the military-securitarian component, with priority given to the intergovernmental dimension. A specific interpretation of the problem portrayed security as a necessary precondition for peace and development, thus configuring, rather than the abandonment of the fundamental liberal goals of democratization and inclusion, a shift in the order of priorities. Even more importantly, most of the civilian staff remained committed to the pursuit of comprehensive solutions to the root causes of the conflict, in line with a classical liberal peace approach. They maintained their position by trying to mitigate the impact of the military-securitarian footprint from the micro level of individual officials to the macro level of decision-making (Cold-Ravnkilde and Nissen, 2020). It is also interesting to note that, after the wave of coups, the new Sahelian authorities challenged their traditional allies precisely because their securitarian approach was still too ‘principled’ (Baldaro and Strazzari, 2025). However pragmatic, the UN and EU missions contained clear limitations in their mandates concerning the possibility of pre-emptively engaging insurgent groups, or supplying lethal equipment to armed forces, just as much of their support remained conditional on the adoption of liberal reforms (Table 5.1).

### **The Strategic Shift (2021-)**

The military takeover of power in Sahel countries, which took place between 2020 and 2023, was followed by a strategic realignment, whereby the new political entities turned away from long-term Western security partnerships and realigned with non-Western authoritarian actors. The three states of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have also withdrawn from ECOWAS, in the aftermath of a threatened military intervention in Niger by the Regional Community. The move, which concluded with the creation of a new institution – the AES – divided a security architecture that had been in place since 1975. Nina Wilén (2024c) described the ‘contagious coups’ as the combined outcome of a long domestic history of putsches; the central status of the military, also prompted by external SFA programmes; and global power competition. To this must be added ‘learning and emulation’ among military juntas as an additional factor, along with a widespread anti-French/anti-colonial resentment, especially among the youth, amplified by disinformation campaigns (Sandor and Berlingozzi, 2025).

Taken as a whole, non-Western offers appear poorer in objective terms than Western ones, especially those of IOs, which, despite an overemphasis on security,

*Table 5.1* Major regional security initiatives in the Sahel (adapted from Osland and Erstad, 2020)

| <i>Security Initiative</i>                                | <i>Personnel</i> | <i>Start/End Date</i> | <i>Mandate</i>  | <i>Main Tasks</i>                 | <i>Founding Countries</i>                                |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| MINUSMA                                                   | 15,610           | 2013–2023             | UN (Ch. VII)    | Stabilization and transitions     | UN                                                       |
| G5 Sahel                                                  | 5,000            | 2017–2024             | UN/AU-endorsed  | Coordination of security response | Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Chad              |
| Barkhane (formerly Serval)                                | 5,100            | 2014–2022             | UN-endorsed     | Anti-insurgent operation          | France                                                   |
| EUTM Mali                                                 | 745              | 2013–2024             | EU              | Military training                 | EU                                                       |
| EUCAP Mali                                                | 140              | 2015-ongoing          | EU              | Military capacity-building        | EU                                                       |
| EUCAP Niger                                               | 200              | 2012–2024             | EU              | Civilian capacity-building        | EU                                                       |
| Alliance for the Sahel                                    | 500              | 2017-ongoing          | EU              | Coordination of dev.ass.          | Germany, France, EU, African Dev. Bank, World Bank, UNDP |
| Takuba Force                                              | n/k              | 2020–2022             | G5 Sahel, Mali  | Special forces operations         | Mali, Niger, EU                                          |
| Int'l Coalition for the Sahel                             | n/a              | 2020-ongoing          | EU (Pau Summit) | Coordination of response          | G5 Sahel, France, UN, EU, AU, OIF*                       |
| Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) | n/a              | 2019-ongoing          | France, Germany | Identify security needs           | France, Germany                                          |

still offered a more transversal approach with policy instruments ranging from development cooperation, humanitarian aid, to support for institutional reforms and post-conflict reconstruction. Thus, according to Watling and Wilén (2024), the motives behind Sahelian strategic realignment can be traced back to the perceived failures of Western actors and the aspirations of the military elites. Non-Western offers, especially Russian, entailed the promise to empower national authorities “to fight the war as they wanted, irrespective of whether they believed the approach would ultimately succeed” (2024, p. 69). One major problem for Sahelian stakeholders had always been the imposition, especially by France, of a specific idea of how counterinsurgency operations should be conducted, namely, through a strike force, while national militaries would have preferred to arm local communities to cover more ground. Similarly, from the point of view of the Malian authorities, “the separatists were as important to combat as the jihadists, while the French approach simply protected them while they continued to ferment unrest” (2024, p. 67). Another important factor is the allure of sovereignty provided by the alliance with what were perceived as non-colonial powers, in the wake of an anti-French and nationalist narrative. Finally, new actors came with the promise of regime maintenance. At the base of liberal peace is the creation of democratic regimes, where governments are elected through peaceful transitions of power.

The Russians rejected this premise by enabling authoritarian regimes to remain in power, making them resistant to coups and popular dissent. As soon as the military juntas came to power in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, they suspended security cooperation with France and prompted the closure of Operation Barkhane. Colonel Goïta demanded the withdrawal of MINUSMA, while Niger ended the presence of the EU missions, including the newly approved *EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger* (EUMPM Niger), which never became fully operational. A few months later, General Tchiani also severed a decade-old defence partnership with the US. Russia has become the main beneficiary of the Western retreat, having signed security partnerships with the three regimes and being the most important sponsor of the AES. Its presence in the Sahel has primarily taken the form of formal and informal military cooperation, including arms exports, military equipment supplies, and troop deployments. Since 2021, the paramilitary company *Wagner Group* has been present in Mali, having been actively involved in combat operations against jihadist groups and armed separatist movements amid multiple accusations of human rights violations. Initial successes, such as the conquest of the city of Kidal (2023), were soon overtaken by a general increase in violence and some serious military setbacks, such as the ambush in Tinzaouaten (2024), northern Mali, in which 84 Russians were killed. In Niger and Burkina Faso, Russian troops have been more focused on protecting the regimes. Since the end of 2024, a transition of Wagner forces to the *Africa Corps* is reportedly underway.

China’s presence in the Sahel region reflects its broader footprint on the continent: a stable and growing influence, primarily in the economic and natural resource spheres. Although less committed than in other parts of Africa, China is increasing its security engagement in the Sahel with the state-owned defence conglomerate NORINCO opening a sales office in Dakar with the aim of expanding its

military procurement in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Nyabiage, 2023). In line with the Global Security Initiative's goal of making the People's Liberation Army a 'world-class force' by 2030, China is also expanding its combat capabilities on the African continent through a series of military exercises, some of which took place in the Gulf of Guinea (e.g., Eku Kugbe).

Other relevant non-Western actors which increased their presence following Western retreat are Turkey and the Gulf States (i.e., the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar). On its side, Turkey became one of the main arms suppliers to the Sahelian states, notably thanks to its Bayraktar TB2 drones (Donelli and Cannon, 2025). After France closed its Madama base in northern Niger (2023), Ankara signed a defence pact with Niamey, which provides training for Nigerian forces. Since 2018, Turkey has also been hosting Malian officers for training. Furthermore, leveraging a common religious identity, it has engaged in cultural and public diplomacy initiatives through the construction of mosques, hospitals, and schools. The Gulf States are projecting their influence in the Sahel by combining security, economic, and religious strategies. The UAE plays a leading role through a militarized approach, funding and training armed forces in Mali, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar favoured a more state-centric model focused on diplomacy and development (Wilén, 2025).

### **Continuities and Discontinuities in Liberal Engagement**

In 2022, Western attention has been forcefully redirected towards the Eastern front with the Russian aggression against Ukraine markedly shifting foreign policy priorities away from the Sahel. This, along with the strategic shift I just described, pushed Western actors on the back foot, mainly relying on two separate strategies. On the one hand, a handful of actors have tried to maintain a presence in the region by means of bilateral agreements. Italy, in particular, remained significantly engaged in the Sahel. Driven by its political agenda focused on migration control, Rome maintains a military presence in Niger as part of the *Bilateral Support Mission in the Republic of Niger* (MISIN), launched in 2018 to support local authorities in combating terrorism, human trafficking, and organized crime.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Western security priorities have been moved further south. In July 2025, US President Trump invited the presidents of five West African coastal countries (Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mauritania, and Senegal) to the White House to counter Chinese economic involvement in the region and strengthen its military footprint with the announcement of the possible opening of a military base in Gabon (Diédhiou et al., 2025). In December 2023, the EU SDI GoG was launched, a security and defence initiative in support of West African states of the Gulf of Guinea "to tackle the spillover of insecurity from the Sahel".<sup>5</sup> The EU SDI GoG is not a standalone mission with a fixed staff and has a modular mandate focused on the specific needs of its partners (i.e., Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Ivory Coast).

In the central Sahelian states, peacebuilding efforts have been delegated to the UN and the EU, now largely emptied of their military-security component. Both have remained present on the ground, albeit in a different configuration than in the pre-coup period, and are mainly concentrated in the low politics areas of

development cooperation, humanitarian aid, human rights monitoring, and good offices, led by the civilian-liberal component.

With the closure of MINUSMA, political leadership passed to UNOWAS, a special political mission active since 2016, whose mandate is to prevent conflict, support peace, and consolidate peacebuilding efforts in partnership with regional entities through preventive diplomacy, good offices, and political mediation. In 2023, Leonardo Santos Simão succeeded Annadif Mahamat Saleh as Special Representative of the SG and head of UNOWAS. While Annadif's experience was marked by his time as head of MINUSMA (2015–2021) and AMISOM (2012–2014), both peacekeeping missions characterized by robust mandates and counter-terrorism tasks, SRSB Simão brought a different perspective as an experienced peace mediator. He is promoting a policy of constant dialogue with the governments of central Sahel, while encouraging democratic transition and cooperation between the AES and ECOWAS countries, including through the promotion of old coalitions, such as the *Accra Initiative*, which sees Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger cooperating with Ghana, Benin, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire, within the framework of Resolution 2719 (2023).<sup>6</sup> Post-MINUSMA engagement is therefore placing more emphasis on the first and second pillars of UNISS, governance, and resilience, rather than the third, security, with UNDP and UN Country Teams playing a central role in advancing development programmes geared particularly towards climate and disaster risk resilience (e.g., Sahel Resilience Project, #IAM-Sahel Campaign, Bamako Declaration).

In 2021, the EU adopted the *Integrated Strategy in the Sahel*, moving away from the security-centred and militarized approach that had characterized the previous strategies and portraying a more normative approach that prioritizes promoting good governance, human rights, and economic development to address the root causes of violence. EUCAP Mali remained the only mission actively in place in the central Sahel, though with a slimmer, advisory-based mandate focused on strengthening the operational efficacy of Malian internal security forces. Besides this, the Union stopped budget support to the military juntas pending return to democracy and disengagement from Russia and diverted funds to activities directly beneficial to local communities. In parallel, in 2024, the EU allocated €144 million in humanitarian assistance to the Sahel region, more than any other foreign actor, providing support to both displaced people and host communities affected by conflict and insecurity. Development programmes have also remained in place, like AGIR (the Global Alliance for Resilience Initiative), focusing on the 'zero hunger' goal by 2032.

Both IOs have also assumed a tougher, principle-first stance both at the discursive and practical level. The accusations made by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights against the Malian army for the commission of crimes against humanity in Moura<sup>7</sup> have reportedly been one of the main drivers behind the request for closure of MINUSMA. On their side, EU authorities refused to recognize the military juntas and deployed targeted sanctions against Sahelian officials obstructing the democratic transition. In one of his last statements as HR/VP, Josep Borrell said that "democracy must prevail in the Sahel".<sup>8</sup>

IOs' response to the major upheavals prompted by Sahelian rapprochement to authoritarian actors was not an evolutionary or paradigmatic shift, but rather a return to the foundation of liberal peace, with a focus on the needs of the local population and the root causes of conflict. As I will demonstrate in the next chapters, strategic inertia played a key role in maintaining strong institutional constraints during the Western decade to prevent a full-fledged shift to military solutions. Therefore, once the security dimension dictated by national interests had vanished, the bureaucrats were ready to regain control and resume the old liberal script, which, in any case, was never completely abandoned.

## Notes

- 1 Until 2016 Office for West Africa (UNOWA).
- 2 Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, p. 4.
- 3 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali Resulting from the Algiers Process (2015), UN library (online), p. 2.
- 4 Italian Ministry of Defence.
- 5 Council of the EU. (2023). Gulf of Guinea: Council launches an EU Security and Defence Initiative, Press release. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/11/gulf-of-guinea-council-launches-an-eu-security-and-defence-initiative/>.
- 6 The resolution provides a funding scheme for African peacekeeping missions.
- 7 United Nations (2023). Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights \_Rapport sur les événements de Moura du 27 au 31 mars 2022. <https://bit.ly/3X3Sx5t>.
- 8 Borrell, J. (2023). Democracy must prevail in the Sahel. EEAS. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/democracy-must-prevail-sahel\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/democracy-must-prevail-sahel_en).

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# 6    The UN Politics of Continuity in Action

## The Bureaucratic Structure of UN Peacebuilding

In 2005, former Secretary General Kofi Annan, speaking of a ‘gaping hole’ in the UN’s institutional capacity, recommended the creation of a structure entirely dedicated to the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts. In response to this call, the General Assembly and the UNSC adopted resolutions 60/180 and 1,645 establishing the *UN Peacebuilding Architecture*. This is constituted of three organs: the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), and the Peacebuilding Fund. In 2019, following a comprehensive institutional reform of the peace and security pillar, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) incorporated the PBSO and the former Department of Political Affairs. Following the reform, shared regional divisions were also created between the DPPA and the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) – in charge of peacekeeping operations – to settle the historical rivalry between the military and the civilian components of peace missions (Figure 6.1).

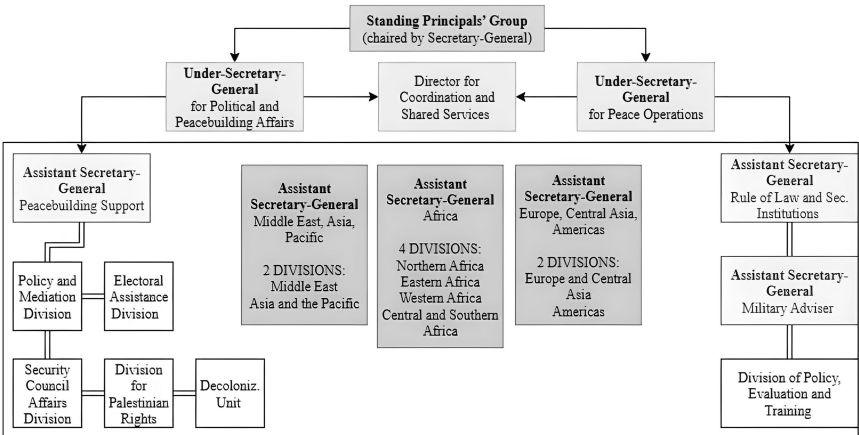


Figure 6.1 Organigram depicting the Peace and Security pillar structure (UN webpage).

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Within this structure, the PBC is the intergovernmental decision-making body composed of 31 member states, whose purpose is to bring together all relevant actors to pool resources and to advise and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and peace recovery.<sup>1</sup> The DPPA, on the other hand, forms the framework of a supranational sub-structure comprising other peacebuilding bodies that report directly to the SG. The DPPA (former Department of Political Affairs – DPA) supports the SG and its envoys, as well as the UN Special Political Missions (SPMs) deployed around the world, in defusing crises and promoting lasting solutions to conflicts, and promotes international support for local peacebuilding efforts. The work of the DPPA focuses on four main areas: ensuring early warning and sound conflict analysis, conflict prevention and engaging in peace-making, managing political crises and violent conflicts, and sustaining peace and strengthening partnerships. The Department has often been regarded as in contrast to the DPO (former Department for Peacekeeping Operations – DPKO), which is dominated by the member states and largely staffed by military planners and logisticians from Western militaries. According to Salton (2024), under Annan’s secretariat, the balance of bureaucratic power shifted from the DPA and peacebuilding towards DPKO and peacekeeping, marking a preference for robust solutions over political processes. The PBSO plays the role of the PBC secretariat, manages the Peacebuilding Fund, and ensures coherence within the UN system regarding the design and implementation of peacebuilding strategies. For this reason, although it is not an operational office, the work of the PBSO has a significant impact on shaping UN peacebuilding policies (Cavalcante, 2019). Their implementation and their contextual adaptations are entrusted to Special Political Missions (SPO), which include country missions and regional offices, such as UNOWAS, or to peacekeeping missions, such as MINUSMA, depending on the setting of UN presence in the field. Both SPO and peacekeeping missions report to a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), who holds political authority on the ground. UN missions are thus decentralized by design and enjoy significant autonomy. If the political dimension is constituted by the SRSGs and their offices, the development dimension is constituted by the Resident Coordinators’ (RCs) system. The RCs serve as the voice of the UN development pillar at the field level, guiding and supporting the action of the UN Country Teams (UNCTs), which bring together all UN agencies operating in the country (e.g., UNDP, UNEP). In 2018, with resolution 72/279, the General Assembly decided to reform the development pillar to better align it with the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, by means of a reinvigorated, strengthened, and independent RCs’ system. Accordingly, the functions of the RCs were decoupled from UNDP, of which they were the heads, to ensure independent and full-time leadership for the coordination of the UN structure at the country level. The task of coordinating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals was transferred to the Development Coordination Office (DCO), which also serves as the secretariat for the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG).

In March 2025, UN SG António Guterres launched the *UN80 Initiative* on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the founding of the world organization. He suggested a massive overhaul and restructuring of the UN, driven primarily by the liquidity crises in the UN Secretariat and budget cuts by relevant member states. The initiative is structured around three workstreams: efficiencies and improvements, mandate implementation review, and structural changes and programme realignment. As a consequence, UN components handling peacemaking, peacekeeping, and counter-terrorism are coming under heavy scrutiny. The two most prominent entities involved are the DPO and the DPPA, which, despite efforts to improve coordination, continue to fight over which should lead peace efforts in places like Sudan. According to Richard Gowan (2025), “While fights tend to pivot on budgets and reporting lines, they can shape – or distort – how the UN thinks about conflict resolution”, as the DPO is focused on getting uniformed personnel on the ground, while the DPPA is more centred on mediation and political solutions. As for now, options on the table include merging the two entities and creating an overarching peace and security entity, and moving peacebuilding staff away from New York and Geneva to offices nearer the situations they deal with. Observers are raising concerns over the scope of UN80, which seems so far limited to reducing spending and avoiding duplication without putting forward any concrete proposal regarding what a reformed UN should do to promote peace and security in the midst of increasing threats to the LIO.

### **UN Inertial Mechanisms at Play in the Sahel**

The UN in the Sahel has been under pressure to respond to the changing needs and demands of national authorities and to counter illiberal contestation, while trying to maintain its identity as a liberal actor. In this scenario, strategic inertia became a key tool in the hands of UN bureaucracies, which opportunistically used everyday bureaucratic arrangements, such as rules and procedures, to maintain the political course. During the liberal decade, the civilian-liberal component of the organization used inertial mechanisms to prevent a complete securitarian drift led by the then-dominant military component. This bureaucratic effort to maintain a principled approach to intervention was later the main reason for the realignment of Sahelian states towards illiberal actors, who were offering a harder-line approach. In the post-2021 period, the retreat of the military component allowed the civilian one to restore the policy course, thus configuring, in the recourse to strategic inertia, a political response to the contestation of authoritarian actors. In what follows, I will go into detail about the functioning and the empirical manifestations of the three inertial mechanisms as presented in Chapter 4.

In the absence of a clear political strategy on how to improve peacebuilding approaches in the face of the growing complexity of contemporary conflict contexts and illiberal competition, the UN peacebuilding bureaucracy has found a way out of disarray in the reaffirmation of a liberal identity. This remains at the core of the organization’s mission and continues to frame its global role and self-perception

against the growing strength of an illiberal and authoritarian posture that emanates not only externally – from West’s rivals, such as Russia or China, and illegitimate local authorities – but also internally – from the intergovernmental sphere, which is increasingly characterized by the pursuit of national interests rather than the achievement of peace. The evidence reveals how liberal values and goals are never open to debate. Through reactive inertia, political continuity is maintained by pushing for analogy-based solutions and actively manipulating information. Yet, adherence to liberal peace does not only manifest itself in the policy implementation phase, as policy continuity in times of competition requires constant work. Before and during the adoption phase, anticipatory inertia works to ensure bureaucratic homogeneity by inducing or imposing a supranational behaviour through the selection and management of personnel, by making the civilian-liberal component impervious to (deviant) external influences through taxonomy procedures employed to limit the access of CSOs, and by exerting as much influence as possible during the decision-making process.

## **Groupthink**

### ***Staff Filtering***

As legitimacy is the perception of audiences that an organization is normatively appropriate, a necessary first step to achieve this is to promote a commonality of beliefs among the members of the bureaucratic body. Sarah von Billerbeck (2020) associated this identity need with self-legitimation practices, whereby only if staff share a pool of common beliefs “can [be] expected to form a sufficiently reliable basis for the authority of the institution, making it well equipped to operate” (Gronau and Schmidtkem, 2016, pp. 544–545). This inertial mechanism stems directly from this strong sense of self, as it is aimed at maintaining a consistent view of the world and the organization’s role within it.

Given that the UN is a very complex organization characterized at times by contradictory mandates among its units, the promotion of a stable self-identity requires active engagement, especially considering the system’s predilection for short-term appointments.<sup>2</sup> A prolonged exposure to organizational culture would allow ‘in-house socialization’, based on the psychological need among individuals to rely on beliefs conveyed by others (Trondal and Veggeland, 2014). As this precondition is largely absent in the case of the UN, it configured an exclusionary recruitment system privileging pre-socialized individuals around liberal values and beliefs. The organization notoriously relies on a series of structural and material obstacles to filter aspiring staff members. For Michael Davies (2017), the exam administered to potential candidates for entry into the UN roster (*National Competitive Recruitment Examination* – NCRE) is at least inadequate, if not culturally biased. Other entry channels are offered through extra-budgetary positions, such as the UN Volunteer programme, which consists of unpaid internships, Temporary Job Openings, or the Junior Professional Officers (JPO) programme. Such positions, bilaterally supported by specific donors, are more widespread than those

funded from core budgets, which are bounded by geographical diversity criteria, and often result in uneven representation in favour of Western liberal democracies. As one interviewee explained:

*JPOs usually come from the usual countries, so in most cases they are European or North American. In very few cases, you have JPOs with a mixed background and dual nationality. So, there is some imbalance here.*<sup>3</sup>

While Western countries are frequently overrepresented at the HQ level, with Novosad and Werker (2019) affirming that Western Europe and its offshoots retained control over a disproportionate share of positions within the UN Secretariat for over 60 years (1947–2007), field missions typically see the prominence of African and Asian countries as the main troops' contributors. In the case of MINUSMA, two-thirds of the uniformed personnel were from West Africa, especially from Burkina Faso, Chad, and Togo, partly as a result of the integration of AFISMA's troops in the UN mission. Nevertheless, MINUSMA also saw a significant presence of European personnel, which led analysts to speak of "Europe's return to peacekeeping" (Koops and Tercovich, 2016). This alleged return came with conditions to occupy high-level, low-risk jobs, which generated a bifurcation of status between European and African blue helmets. Hence, "the post of Command Group Advisor was staffed successively by several US army officers, while the rest of the key headquarters posts were occupied by Europeans" (Oksamytna and von Billerbeck, 2024, p. 7). While the direct contribution of European member states to the peacekeeping mission in the Sahel had been mainly driven by national interests, especially related to the fight against terrorism and the containment of migration to Europe, it was also the result of a specific will of the UN leadership, which invested particular effort in the integration of European states, as they were expected to bring both required high-end or mobile capabilities and political capital. Behind the choice, there would also have been ideological reasons, concerning an implicit association between Western peacekeepers and a higher attachment to liberal norms and standards. This conclusion is shared by Clausen and Albrecht (2021), who attributed the bifurcation between Western and African peacekeepers to a deliberate political choice of maintaining Europeans in roles of coordination and strategy-setting. Reasons related to the commonality of values and beliefs behind the formation of European-only divisions have also been reported at lower ranks in the hierarchy and were traced back to more or less implicit organizational rules, as described by a UN official:

*If I become the head of PoC in Bamako, I will be more inclined to hire people who have European origins, or who have studied in Europe or who have done studies that resemble our studies, [perhaps this is] out of ignorance, because we don't know the 'background' of the other countries.*<sup>4</sup>

The geographical division also acquired a spatial dimension and partly reflected a broader civilian/military cleavage. At least until 2018, "the civilian and military

components of MINUSMA in Bamako were located in separate bases in different sections of the capital. Significant time was required to travel between the two bases, which undermined regular communication, coordination, and planning” (Spink, 2019, p. 5). Out of logistic non-sense this decision seems to be the reflection of a net separation of tasks between the two components following the signing of the Algiers Accords, as the civilian sphere remained committed to support the implementation of the peace agreement dealing with political aspects, while the military side shifted towards counterinsurgency in the fight against spoilers in the North and emerging security threats in the central regions, also under increasing pressure from the US government to engage in this type of activities. As a consequence, observers argued that the mission’s military was perceived as an alliance of military contingents reporting to their own governments, rather than to the principal authority of the mission, triggering the decision of the civilian side to insulate itself from it.

Once appointed, UN officials rarely stay in the same place for long, as short-term appointments also imply a high level of mobility and internal turnover. The impact of this is especially evident in the field. According to Natascha Hryckow,<sup>5</sup> an expert from the Conflict Analysis Network, reporting on the case of MINUSMA, the lack of adequate preparation by officials on the intricate local dynamics related to security issues led to mistrust among the national authorities. UN peacekeepers were far removed from local contexts. When foreign staff were deployed, they often had no in-depth understanding of the societies and cultures within which they were operating. Consequently, they applied universal templates to the situation, based on information gathered from elites, with groupthink frequently taking hold (Snyman, 2024). While extreme turnover may impede the acquisition of context-specific knowledge, it has a clear organizational advantage, as it promotes loyalty to the organization as a whole rather than to a single unit. As one UN official observed:

*If you have a person who has worked with five different agencies, (s)he will be less committed to a single one as opposed to the values of the UN.*<sup>6</sup>

Conversely, permanent contracts are reserved for high-level officials, who are also responsible for preserving organizational (liberal) identity. Given this key role, their appointment is the result of a complex balancing of interests. The Joint Inspection Unit<sup>7</sup> acknowledged the discretionary power of the SG in the selection of senior-level managers, which therefore often takes place outside established rules. Throughout its existence, MINUSMA has been led by four different SRSGs whose appointment reflected specific balances of power and a commitment by the UN Secretariat to reach time- and context-specific goals.

Reflecting the leading role played by the Netherlands among the European contingents, Bert Koenders (2013–2014) was elected as the first head of mission. His appointment is also attributable to the pressing need felt by the UN Secretariat to reach some sort of peace agreement in Mali, whose absence had been one of the main causes of resistance by many member states to the mission’s deployment. Mr. Koenders had extensive experience in peace processes, having served as SRSG

and head of the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) and having been involved, in the quality of the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation (2007–2010), in peace initiatives in Afghanistan, Burundi, the DRC, and Sudan. His role was key in achieving the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement that opened the door to the Algiers peace process. However, his engaging nature has also been a source of criticism from national stakeholders, as he was perceived as closer to armed groups due to his attempt to use good offices to encourage the parties to move towards inclusive talks.

His resignation led to the nomination of Tunisian Mongi Hamdi (2014–2015) as the new SRSG, appointed for his good relations with Algeria. Mr. Hamdi's closeness to Algeri, however, prevented him from avoiding the Algerian government from taking the lead in the process and sidelining the UN, a move qualified as detrimental by the SG himself, leading to Hamdi's replacement by the Chadian Mahamat Saleh Annadif (2015–2021). Chad was the first contributor of troops to MINUSMA and also a close French ally. On the other side, his appointment was anticipating the prospect of a more robust mandate in virtue of Mr. Annadif's previous experience as head of the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). By early 2016, in fact, MINUSMA's leadership had become very concerned about the situation in central Mali and conveyed to the Secretariat that this conflict would have likely required attention from the mission. The securitarian turn prompted by SRSG Annadif, however, was judged as too radical and provoked internal resistance from the mission's civilian component.

Just when the first coup d'état in Mali had prompted the new authorities to demand an even more security-oriented mandate and a more active role for MINUSMA in the fight against insurgencies, Mr. Annadif was replaced by the Mauritanian El-Ghassim Wane (2021–2024). The appointment of Mr. Wane followed months of deadlock, which saw the US and France clashing over the nomination of the new SRSG. The Trump administration had been lobbying the UN to appoint David Gressly, a veteran American UN official who had held the position of Deputy SRSG in both MONUSCO and MINUSMA, while France preferred the post be filled by an African candidate from a French-speaking country. The SG mediated the dispute, leading to the appointment of the Mauritanian, which also reflected the Secretariat's attempt to re-prioritize the political and peacebuilding dimension over the security one and to regain the legitimacy of the population. Besides having worked in New York as Assistant Secretary-General for peacekeeping operations, Mr. Wane was also known for his loyalty to the African Union (AU) and his interest in African solutions for African issues. During his time at the AU, he gave a fundamental contribution to the development of the African peacebuilding framework, the *Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development Policy* (PCRD).

This shift away from the security-first approach in response to the entry of illiberal actors in Mali and the authoritarian turn of many countries in the region has also been reflected in the appointment of the new head of UNOWAS, which, following the closure of MINUSMA in 2023, became the first political authority of the UN in the Sahel. The Mozambican Leonardo Santos Simão replaced Mahamat Saleh Annadif, who after his term as head of MINUSMA had been assigned

to UNOWAS, as the new SRSG for the regional office. After his appointment, Mr. Simão strongly condemned the seizure of power by the military in Niger in July 2023. At the same time, in line with his experience in mediation, he has pursued an approach of open dialogue with the de facto Sahelian authorities while persuading them to rejoin ECOWAS and return to constitutional order.

Ultimately, the succession of SRSGs in MINUSMA and UNOWAS exemplifies how leadership selection operates as the uppermost layer of the UN's broader staff filtering scheme. From entry-level recruitment to senior appointments, the organization continuously reinforces its liberal-institutional identity by privileging individuals whose backgrounds, beliefs, and professional trajectories align with its dominant normative framework. The filtering of staff – whether through exams, donor-funded entry schemes, or politically negotiated senior posts – thus serves not only an administrative function but a legitimizing one: it safeguards a coherent organizational self-image in the face of internal diversity and external contestation.

### ***Rule Following***

Where staff filtering alone fails to separate the 'true believers' from those who subject the defence of the system to certain conditions, the embracement of a supranational behaviour was ensured through the use of internal forms of dissent control. Basically, to maintain a cohesive identity, bureaucratic leaders discourage dissent, pushing those who are not fully committed to organizational policies to engage in preference falsification, namely to disguise their private beliefs when in contrast to those of the organization. The interviewees reported the existence of spaces for sharing ideas, but they also agree that these are often routine exercises and report disciplinary consequences for anyone who advances critiques. One UN staff member recalled that:

*Those who dared to denounce things that do not work, well, they didn't last long.<sup>8</sup>*

Many MINUSMA and UNOWAS officials reported that the limitations imposed on criticism have mainly to do with the content and target of the complaints rather than with the criticism itself. This is to say that officials were encouraged to contribute to missions' adjustments as long as their ideas did not contrast with the core features of the UN liberal policy in the Sahel. Another interviewee noted:

*When it comes to structural issues, there is nothing we can do.<sup>9</sup>*

This is far from being an isolated or random practice rather configuring an enduring praxis within the organization, which is geared towards reducing the space for critical reflection and fostering inertia. Ben Christian (2022), in a study on how the UN Secretariat handles internal criticism, confirmed this finding by reporting data from the 2019 UN Staff Engagement Survey showing that only 31% of the staff consider that in the UN Secretariat it is safe to challenge the status quo.

A percentage even lower for mid-career staff (P4-P5, 20%) and early-career staff (P1-P3, 9%).

In this sense, mechanisms of dissent control operate as a complementary means for staff filtering: when recruitment strategies alone cannot guarantee ideological conformity, the disciplining of internal critique ensures that only those willing to internalize and reproduce the organization's liberal orthodoxy remain, thereby stabilizing its legitimacy from within and creating the conditions for groupthink.

## **Backlash Prevention**

### ***Engagement with External Actors***

UN bureaucracy reflects the commitment to liberal norms and practices by constantly persuading relevant audiences of their validity (Lenz and Söderbaum, 2023). To do so, bureaucrats used their strategic position within the system to control and manipulate both external (CSOs) and internal (military-securitarian component) inputs to be in line with their policy preferences.

Officials affirmed that the relation between the UN and the Sahelian civil society was, and still is, largely instrumental. At the strategic level, exchanges with local nongovernmental actors were limited to occasional meetings, mostly of a dissemination nature, which did not involve their active participation. In practice, local civil society was used as a source of legitimacy through one-off consultations before the final approval of specific initiatives. On the aspect of 'temporariness', Kimber (2023) stated that although civil society is formally integrated into UN decision-making processes, in practice, its involvement remains only temporary, resulting in exclusionary practices by bureaucratic apparatuses. Although a more active role of CSOs is discernible in the development dimension, where local partners can be the beneficiaries of funding programmes, such as the *UN Support Plan for the Sahel*, classification and hierarchisation practices have built an exclusionary system conditioning the cooperation with CSOs to specific parameters (Guilbaud, 2023). These can be grouped into three areas: the financial one (i.e., having a sound financial system), the technical skills one (i.e., having a recognized expertise in a particular field, such as education and agriculture), and the political one (i.e., having an irreproachable human rights track record). The first two refer to the technical nature that these organizations are expected to have, in line with the widespread image, among UN bureaucrats, of peacebuilders as conflict 'fixers'. The *Regional Humanitarian Fund for West and Central Africa*, for example, established in June 2021 as the first-ever regionally hosted pooled fund managed by OCHA, links access to funds to a due diligence process, and the participation in a capacity assessment conducted by its regional humanitarian financing unit. The assessment, which can last several months, involves the evaluation of CSOs' institutional, technical, managerial, and financial capacities and consists of on-site visits, interviews, and documents reviews. Many officials manifested that these criteria are simply not suitable for most Sahelian CSOs, which are frequently excluded because they lack an office or computers. On the last criterion, the 'political one', officials stated

that in the Sahel, this was applied in a purely arbitrary way, as there are no specific guidelines. It was specifically used to avoid the involvement of ‘politicized organizations’ which were seen not only as a source of potential accusations of partisanship but also as disruptive agents. The UN’s suspicions about possible deviations from outside were not the result of paranoia but that of a contextual assessment of the Sahelian social landscape, particularly that of Mali. In the aftermath of 2012, several pan-African and anti-globalization associations were born, inspired by a shared anti-French and anti-Western sentiment. These associations remained particularly influential in many sectors of the Malian elite close to the military and rooted among the local population. In 2020, they united under the *Movement of June 5 – Rally of Patriotic Forces* (M5-RPF), which has been instrumental in the fall of President Keita. In the post-coup period, the use of CSOs for propagandistic purposes became even more widespread with the Malian and Burkinabé juntas hiring hundreds of influencers, or ‘videomen’, to disseminate anti-French and pro-Russian narratives (Cold-Ravnkilde and Sylla, 2024).

While, on the one hand, these exclusionary practices safeguarded the UN from possible infiltrations by non-aligned CSOs and external saboteurs, on the other, they consistently reduced the scope of its intervention. Officials reported that UN agencies often did not have access to many troubled areas in Mali for security reasons. Despite the presence of local CSOs operating in these places, the fact that they maintained relations with armed groups, an obvious precondition to operate, prevented them from being recognized as legitimate partners by the UN. As reported by an official deployed to the field:

*We need to keep in mind the situation in Mali, particularly between the government and France. The government has taken some measures to prevent financing from France to local CSOs. [...] We need to keep that in mind because we don’t want those funds to go to organisations that have no other means of operation. We will never invest in a CSO that has no record of anything, but at the same time, we recognise that we need them to reach out where we cannot go.<sup>10</sup>*

Thus, in discerning which actors to collaborate with, the UN showed a fixed idea of their ‘sources of legitimacy’, namely, of which audiences are considered important for the prosecution of the organization’s policy goals.

### ***Engagement with Internal Actors***

Von Billerbeck (2023, p. 974) outlined that “while [UN] staff recognize that they are at the service of member states, they bristle at being micro-managed by them”; hence, bureaucrats push to exert as much influence as possible on intergovernmental decision-making. Officials accounted for the central role played by the DPPA in defining the UN’s Integrated Strategy for the Sahel. The Secretariat had been concerned about the region before the 2012 crisis, having anticipated the destabilizing effects of the Libyan civil war on the Sahel in a detailed report by the DPPA

Western Africa Division<sup>11</sup> warning about the weakening capacity of Sahelian states due to the influx of returnees, the outflow of arms, and the proliferation of armed groups and militias. The Department also maintained a central role in the development of the legal and institutional framework that paved the way to the Algiers Accords. The main goal was to promote an inclusive and participatory process, in line with the traditional UN liberal peace approach. Hence, the DPPA brought together ex-combatants, representatives of different political parties, and representatives of the civil society, including women's and youth associations, academics, and administrators. These were selected among the participants from previous attempts at political resolutions, including an earlier Algiers Agreement signed in 2006, in order to develop a common understanding about why previous attempts at peace had failed. These efforts led to a more inclusive framing for the Algiers negotiations compared to the past but ultimately had limited impact since Algeria asserted a leading role in the political process, and MINUSMA's leadership was not able to define an influential role for itself. UN mission's bureaucracy reacted to this by taking full advantage of its technical and supporting roles in the process. This included, for example, conducting informal meetings with the parties and working through side channels to ensure the parties understood proposed components of the agreement (Gorur, 2020).

Within the framework of the field mission, the civilian-liberal component insistently resisted the securitarian drift that followed the signing of the peace agreement, when priorities shifted to the fight against terrorism in the Lipatko-Gourma region. In 2018, an investigation on an operation conducted in Mopti, central Mali, under the command of the G5 Sahel force, to which MINUSMA provided operational and logistical support, concluded that Malian soldiers had summarily executed civilians at the Boulkessy cattle market in retaliation for the death of a fellow soldier (Van der Lijn, 2020). Following this setback, an independent review of MINUSMA took place, led by Ellen Margrethe Løj. The results, which were never published in full but summarized by the SG,<sup>12</sup> criticized the mission's involvement with counter-terrorism actors and urged for a more active political role. The adoption of the review's recommendations by the UNSC was conveniently interpreted as a call to reinforce the civilian component in strategic planning and mission control. As a result, civilian presence was extended throughout the mission, and the role of the civilian-led Strategic Planning Unit (SPU) was widened to engage in whole-of-mission planning with POC advisors, military, and police counterparts.

Among UN bureaucrats, those who enjoy the largest autonomy are the top-level managers, especially the SRSG and special envoys, who can act without prior authorization from the intergovernmental body and are thus able to set the political agenda by bringing particular issues to the attention of member states along with a list of solutions. Paradoxically, SRSG Annadif, who was the highest UN civilian authority in Mali between 2015 and 2020, has been one of the major advocates for the increased securitarian approach adopted by MINUSMA post-Accords, in demonstration of the fact that while the focus on conventional peacebuilding and mediation was extremely widespread and majoritarian among supranational staff, the division between a civilian and a military component was not necessarily fully

congruent with policy preferences. The then-SRSG became particularly concerned about the situation in central Mali and informed the UNSC, through the Secretariat, about the need to adapt MINUSMA's mandate to address this challenge. The Council was initially reluctant to put heavy political pressure on the Malian government to allow the mission to take greater action in the centre. Thus, in 2016, it added the general instruction to adopt a "more proactive and robust posture to carry out its mandate".<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding the resistance from the Malian government and large part of the Secretariat, in 2018, after attacks against civilians in the centre had grown to alarming levels, the UNSC added support to the restoration of State authority in central Mali as the second priority task for the mission, with the implementation of the Algiers Accords remaining the sole strategic priority.<sup>14</sup> It was only in 2019, after the shocking massacre that killed more than 157 civilians in the town of Ogossagou, that the reestablishment of state authority in central Mali became MINUSMA's second strategic priority<sup>15</sup> (Van der Lijn, 2020). Interestingly enough, the SRSG had already begun the logistical planning for the implementation of the new mandate's task well before it was approved, having been persuaded by the evolution of the situation on the ground that his advocacy efforts would have been successful. As seen above, the approval of a more robust mandate also coincided with an extension of the civilian presence that prevented a complete drift towards counter-terrorism activities, ensuring that the footprint of interventions was aligned with the political objectives of the entire mission and not just the military ones.

## **Pathological Behaviours**

### ***Bureaucratic Universalism***

In conflict management and resolution, there are moments when normative goals and operational obligations clash, running the risk of exposing the organization's inconsistencies. This leaves the IO's staff making difficult decisions about what to prioritize: sacrifice principles for outputs or delay results in favour of norm compliance (Von Billerbeck, 2023). The evidence revealed that the latter is the most frequent decision when it comes to UN peacebuilding bureaucracy.

Instruments' choice is usually based on analogical reasoning and is directed towards identifying possible similarities among different contexts to maintain liberal policy continuity rather than focusing on their specificities. An effective example is that of the early warning system, one of the core instruments within the UN toolbox for the protection of civilians. After the military junta led by Colonel Goïta came to power in 2021, it imposed a series of different constraints on MINUSMA's activities, mainly in order to give free leeway to Malian armed forces and the Wagner group. As stated by a UN official,<sup>16</sup> during the Western decade, the early warning system worked because MINUSMA operated alone ("*You got the call and the helicopter took off*"). Subsequently, the system stopped working properly because authorities imposed airspace control procedures which seriously overstretched the time of response ("*Rapid response [was] no longer rapid*"). In particular, since January 2022, the military junta imposed major no-fly

zones for UN planes over half of the country, followed by a requirement of 48–72 hours' demands in advance, many of which were either denied or did not receive a response.<sup>17</sup> The decision took a normative dimension, considering that the early warning machinery was also used to monitor possible human rights violations by armed groups, including Malian armed forces. This capacity was severely undermined by the junta, labelling it as an illegitimate interference in the regime's internal political affairs. However, despite evident limitations, the mission continued to use early warning. The decision is the outcome of an inertial behaviour by UN bureaucrats geared towards two goals: an internal one and an external one. The former refers to legitimacy. A MINUSMA's official admitted:

*We continue[d] with the early warning system because New York like[d] it, and this applie[d] to many other things).*<sup>18</sup>

Interviews highlighted how, behind the reproduction of a policy instrument, even in the face of an apparent lack of effectiveness, there is not only the desire to reproduce an outcome but, above all, the intention to reproduce a political advantage. In this sense, decisions based on analogy provide organizational benefits as they allow the decision-making process and its outputs to be routinized (Dörfler and Gehring, 2021). Established problem schema are applied to situations that are perceived as similar even if the scope conditions for policy effectiveness are no longer in place. From this perspective, the continuation of ineffective early warning represents a strategic decision, allowing for organizational stability, preserving established chains of accountability, and avoiding the political risks associated with policy change. The external goal is linked to the will of the UN leadership to preserve an instrument of persuasion against the junta's demonstrated tendency to target civilians as a counter-terrorist strategy and its decision to open up to Russia. In March 2022, more than 500 people were killed, the majority in extrajudicial killings, by Malian troops and Wagner group militiamen in the village of Moura in the central Mopti region, which was believed to host combatants from the jihadist group Katiba Macina. In May 2023, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report<sup>19</sup> accusing Malian armed forces and Russian paramilitaries of having perpetuated crimes against humanity, including summary executions, rape and torture. The report, which gave an hour-by-hour account of the events, had a fierce impact on the image of the junta, unveiling the substance of its collaboration with Wagner. Authorities in Bamako described it as "biased" and "based on a fictional account" (Burke, 2023), further deteriorating the relations between the junta and the UN. The fact-finding mission was carried out by the Human Rights Division of MINUSMA, despite the resistance by the Malian authorities, which had denied requests by the team to access Moura. Even more than the decision to publish the report, MINUSMA's full disclosure of sensitive information against the government appeared to be a reaffirmation of the mission's and the UN's commitment to liberal values in the face of mounting pressure to abandon normative judgements and instead adopt a firmer, more pragmatic military approach. As evidence of the intentionality of this choice, officials referred to a widespread practice

among UN bureaucracies whereby potentially incriminating information, which could undermine the government's consent to the mission, is often concealed or handled 'privately'. This practice was deliberately not employed in Moura's case, hence demonstrating how seldom deviations from bureaucratic routines are acceptable when employed for the purpose of policy continuity.

### ***Feedback Manipulation***

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is based on the mission's adherence to the mandate's goals and principles rather than on its overall performance. As these are often ambiguous, and success difficult to define and observe, M&E configures a messy and political process in which the organization frequently lacks the genuine will to measure itself. For Rober Watkins,<sup>20</sup> former SRSg, the lack of proper information flow is endemic within the UN. Evidence on MINUSMA and UNOWAS suggested three dynamics at play when it comes to M&E, namely, the hyper-classification of information, the falsification of reports by missions, and the manipulation of feedback. On the first point, the extensive use of rules and procedures for secrecy, while considered to be excessive by many observers, was partly explained by the complex relations with Sahelian governments. In the post-coup period, many Western officials, including the RC of Burkina Faso, Barbara Manzi, had been declared *persona non grata* by the authorities, thus increasing the fear of information leaks by the UN. On the second point, I found that missions edulcorated their reports to reflect narratives instrumental to the political interests at stake. This practice was corroborated by numerous interviewees, who spoke openly about falsifications and reticence on the part of the missions in admitting failures. A MINUSMA official explicitly said that as long as the goal was to keep the mission open, problems and negative aspects were not reported:

*We did a code-cable last week on a road we were trying to protect from jihadists. I had written that there were these and those problems, but my boss said, 'No, let's take away the problems, let's just put the things that work', this must be a 'feel good report' (s)he told me).*<sup>21</sup>

Put another way, through these narratives, the "organization is stripped of any negative features and portrayed in unrealistic, idealistic ways" in order to maintain institutional legitimacy (Von Billerbeck, 2023, p. 967). On the latter aspect, when negative feedback succeeds in getting through filters and resisting manipulation, the bureaucratic elite engage in organized hypocrisy, thus adopting decisions that rhetorically address the issue without taking any substantive action towards policy change (Lipson, 2007). In January 2023, MINUSMA's last internal review (S/2023/36) showed the deep contrast between the Malian government's demands and the mission's proposals for its future engagement, especially with regard to political issues, which had been dismissed by Bamako. In particular, Malian authorities asked MINUSMA *not* to "focus on issues that undermine the territorial integrity of Mali", like "placing the emphasis on ethnic, regional or religious

issues, including the politicization and instrumentalization of the human rights issue". Notwithstanding the push by the UNSC and the military component of MINUSMA for increasingly robust mandates, the Malian junta repeatedly complained that the mission was not offensive enough and demanded that it "change its static posture, move out of the camps and engage in offensive actions and patrols" and "enhance its support to the Malian Armed Forces in terms of food rations, fuel, transportation/logistics and medical evacuation". On the other side, mission leadership enhanced the relevance put on political aspects, including the monitoring and safeguarding of human rights, and foresaw a renewed engagement with political transition after the coup. In the review's conclusions, the UN Secretariat remarked that:

*The ability of MINUSMA to effectively deliver on its mandate and support the improvement of the political and security situation [...] hinge on four key parameters: (a) advances in the political transition [...]; (b) progress in the implementation of the [Algiers] Agreement; (c) freedom of movement, including for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets critical for the safety and security of peacekeepers; and (d) the ability to implement the entirety of the Security Council mandate, including its human rights provisions.<sup>22</sup>*

A few months after this assessment and just a few weeks away from Moura's report, the Malian regime asked MINUSMA to leave. The demand provoked a political dilemma, as it came from a military junta which had taken power illegally. At the same time, staying in the country without consent from the de facto authorities implied going against the UN's own principles, not to mention the safety risks for MINUSMA's staff. Hence, ultimately, the UNSC decided to abide by the military authorities' demand with the adoption of resolution 2690 (Table 6.1).

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Overall, the analysis showed that UN bureaucracy in the Sahel strategically employed inertia to safeguard policy continuity. Through *Groupthink*, the organization reinforced its identity by filtering staff and senior appointees who shared its liberal worldview, ensuring cohesion even amid mounting illiberal contestation. Through *Backlash Prevention*, it bureaucratically managed both external and internal actors, promoting engagement with civil society and political institutions only insofar as they aligned with its normative agenda, thereby constraining the scope of participation. Finally, through *Pathological Behaviours*, it prioritized normative consistency over operational effectiveness, reproducing established instruments and practices – even when their functionality was compromised – and manipulating feedback to defend its legitimacy. Taken together, these dynamics reveal that UN inertia in the Sahel was not the by-product of inefficiency but a deliberate bureaucratic strategy aimed at preserving the organization's liberal identity and authority amid a changing peacebuilding landscape.

**Table 6.1** Key contradictions between UN proposals for the reconfiguration of MINUSMA and the Malian government's demands based on S/2023/36

| <i>Issue</i>                          | <i>UN Position</i>                                                                                        | <i>Malian Government Request</i>                                            | <i>Contradiction</i>                  |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Joint Operations</i>               | MINUSMA is a peacekeeping mission not a combat force. Limited coordination only                           | Joint planning and active support of military operations in reclaimed areas | Peacekeeping vs combat operations     |
| <i>Support to Malian Armed Forces</i> | Limited to medevac, fuel, transport, with HR due diligence                                                | Broader logistical and infrastructure support, including construction       | Funding/logistics role debated        |
| <i>Intelligence Sharing</i>           | No formal commitment to share intelligence with national forces                                           | Explicit request for intelligence support                                   | Security sensitivities and neutrality |
| <i>Human Rights Oversight</i>         | Core component of MINUSMA's mandate, non-negotiable                                                       | Malian authorities reject perceived 'instrumentalization' of human rights   | Differing views on accountability     |
| <i>Mission Footprint</i>              | UN suggests scaling down in the centre and consolidating in the north (implementation of Algiers Accords) | Mali wants expanded military support, including in central areas            | Opposing visions for deployment       |

## Notes

- 1 A/RES/60/1, par. 97–98.
- 2 Officials are hired under three types of contracts: *Temporary* (up to 1 year), *Fixed Term* (1–5 years), and *Continuing* (indefinite term). The system makes heavy use of the first two types, which together account for 71.5% of staff (A/76/570).
- 3 Interview with UN official, 13 April 2023.
- 4 Interview with UN official, 21 April 2023.
- 5 Interview conducted on 11 April 2023.
- 6 Interview with UN official, 8 March 2023.
- 7 A/66/380.
- 8 Interview with UN official, 19 May 2023.
- 9 Interview with UN official, 19 April 2023.
- 10 Interview with UN official, 5 May 2023.
- 11 S/2012/42.
- 12 UN Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali,” S/2018/541, New York: UN, 6 June 2018.
- 13 S/RES/2295: para. 18.
- 14 While strategic priorities define the overarching political objectives that guide the mission's purpose and legitimacy, priority tasks refer to the specific, operational responsibilities that support those broader goals.

- 15 S/RES/2480.
- 16 Interview with UN official, 21 April 2023.
- 17 SC/1532.
- 18 Interview with UN official, 21 April 2023.
- 19 Rapport sur les événements de Moura du 27 au 31 mars 2022.
- 20 Interview conducted on 27 April 2023.
- 21 Interview with UN official, 21 April 2023.
- 22 S/2023/36, para. 62.

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## 7 The EU Politics of Continuity in Action

### The Bureaucratic Structure of EU Peacebuilding

In the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), as in other areas of European policy, authority is distributed among different levels and actors (Dijkstra and Vanhoonacker, 2017). Within the EU, therefore, there is no single body dedicated to peacebuilding; this capacity is shared between the member states (MS), the European Commission (EC), and the European External Action Service (EEAS).

While the Council of the EU is the intergovernmental decision-making body and the EC is primarily responsible for financing and managing the development dimension, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) and the EEAS occupy the central position in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Since EEAS officials are responsible for the planning and act as the link between crisis management operations and discussions among MS in Brussels, they are central to everything the EU does in the field of security and defence (Dijkstra, 2012). The EEAS was established in 2011 by merging all EU offices dealing with foreign and security policies. According to the Treaty of Lisbon, Article 27(3), the EEAS's responsibilities consist of assisting the HR in fulfilling her/his mandate in cooperation with the diplomatic services of the MS. The EEAS is organized into geographical and thematic desks and also includes the EU delegations in third countries. The delegations act as the diplomatic service of the EU and constitute the eyes, ears, and mouthpiece of the Commission vis-à-vis the authorities and population in the host countries.

The EC has several directorates that are involved in the implementation of EU external policies. DG ECHO, for example, is in charge of ensuring a swift, effective, and coordinated response to crises and disasters worldwide. DG NEAR is responsible for taking forward the EU's Neighbourhood and Enlargement policies by implementing assistance actions in Europe's eastern and southern neighbourhood. In the field of peacebuilding, the most important role is played by DG INTPA (former DG DEVCO), which is tasked with leading international cooperation and building partnerships with countries and organizations across the globe, to contribute to sustainable development, the eradication of poverty, and peace. DG INTPA

has also been entrusted with the coordination of the *Global Gateway Strategy*, which was created in 2021 to serve as the EU's main investment strategy for international partnerships and to compete with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

Within the EEAS, the geographical desks<sup>1</sup> act as the interface between Brussels and the country delegations. They are the main pen-holders for the various national and regional strategies, including the Sahel Strategies, and are also responsible for drafting the *Political Framework for Crisis Approach* (PFCA) as part of the crisis management procedure, which serves to inform discussions on how the EU should deal with a particular situation. The EEAS thematic desks provide expertise and advice in cross-cutting areas such as human rights, democracy, and electoral observation. The Deputy Secretary-General is responsible for the EU's CSDP and Crisis Response, which includes the Directorate-General for Peace, Security and Defence (MD-PSD), the Civilian Operations Headquarters (former CPCC), the European Union Military Staff (EUMS), and the Military Operations Headquarters (MPCC). Within the MD-PSD, on the one side, the Peace, Partnerships and Crisis Management Directorate, in collaboration with the geographical and thematic desks, ensures effective coordination of the EU's response in line with the *Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises*, the European strategy to deal with conflicts and crises adopted in 2018. On the other, the Security and Defence Policy Directorate supports efforts to implement the Integrated Approach in the field of security and defence, in particular concerning the development of policies and instruments commensurate with the EU's level of ambition in this area; it is also responsible for promoting EU relations with third countries and international organizations in the context of the CSDP (e.g., G5 Sahel).

The Treaty of Lisbon established the crisis response operations, which are either military or civilian. Therefore, within the framework provided by the CSDP, missions involving military personnel are called 'operations', while civilian activities, including peacebuilding, are called 'missions'. Unlike the UN, where the SRSG is responsible for activities in the field, the EU has a highly centralized command structure that prevents mission leaders from deviating from the text of the mandate (Eckhard and Dijkstra, 2017). Therefore, operational command is entrusted to the Civilian and Military Operations Headquarters, which, from Brussels, advances mission planning and coordinates activities on the ground (Figure 7.1).

A series of backdrops regarding the effectiveness of both military and civilian instruments, which also involved a general negative assessment of the EU action in the Sahel, prompted a recalibration of intervention tools. The two main novelties have been the creation of the *European Peace Facility* (EPF) and the adoption of a *Civilian CSDP Compact* (CCC). The former was introduced in 2021 and allows the EU to fund capacity-building activities in support of third countries' armed forces, including, for the first time, the provision of weapons and ammunition. This stemmed from a recognized lack of effective financial instruments for military operations. Officials from EUTM Mali, for example, reported how general shortages, like uniforms and communication tools, together with the lack of adequate weapons and ammunition for the Malian armed forces, had threatened the strategic

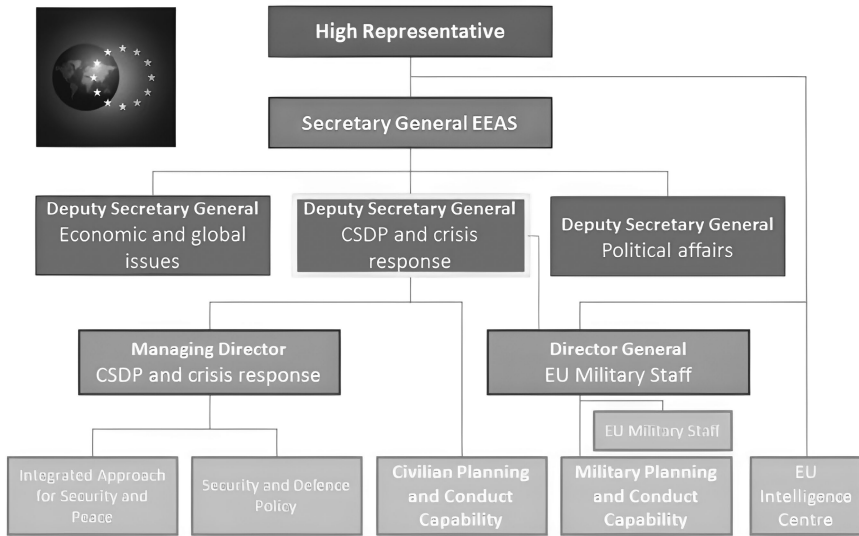


Figure 7.1 The CSDP and crisis response structures of the EEAS (CSDP Handbook, 2022).

goals of the mission. The CCC was adopted in 2018 as the outcome of a reform effort that tried to tackle the institutional deficits and shortages of capabilities and resources suffered by civilian CSDP missions. The CCC widened the scope of civilian missions to issues such as irregular migration, cybersecurity, hybrid threats, terrorism, organized crime, and border management and security (Bergmann and Müller, 2021). Moreover, it laid out concrete commitments, deliverables, and timelines that should lead to a more capable, effective, and joined-up civilian CSDP. A new CCC was approved in May 2023, followed by the establishment of a Civilian Capability Development Process in 2024.

Despite some evident improvements, European peacebuilding continues to suffer from conflicting tasks and a serious lack of coordination among its components. Moreover, CSDP missions and operations, which constitute the most visible tool of European conflict management, remained characterized by a gap between the capacity to deliver and transformative ambitions.

### EU Inertial Mechanisms at Play in the Sahel

Until the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Sahel was at the forefront of European foreign and security policy priorities. Due to the transnational character of the threats and their closeness to European soil, European MS provided more support to the Sahel than to any other conflict zone on the African continent. The priority given to the southern flank was also highlighted by the fact that the last

two HRs before the election of the Estonian Kaja Kallas in 2024 came from two countries, Italy and Spain, directly involved in the region due to their position and strategic interests, especially linked to the management of migration. However, despite the interventionist agenda that characterized Brussels' relations towards the Sahel during the Western decade, the security situation never stopped worsening. Scholars working on the CFSP agree that the EU failed to meet its ambitions in the Sahel and attributed this to the inability to respond to local demands (Baldaro and Strazzari, 2025), the underestimation of popular resentment stemming from the colonial legacy (Wilén, 2024), and the imposition of its political priorities on regional partners. Plank and Bergmann (2021) advanced a further explanation related to the idea of 'foreign policy entrapment' as the result of path dependencies and lock-in effects created by the initial decisions on the overall direction of EU foreign policy towards the Sahel, marked by the prioritization of security over development and an exclusive focus on the state dimension. In line with my argumentation, I argue here that this policy rigidity has rather stemmed from the tension between conflicting objectives and norms within the EU's peacebuilding system and from the strategic use of inertia by part of the European bureaucracy to safeguard liberal policy continuity. Although inertia has failed to prevent a degeneration into a security-driven approach, it has nevertheless prevented the adoption of fully illiberal measures such as military support for illegitimate regimes or direct participation in counterinsurgency operations as well as the abandonment of conditionality on democracy and human rights. In the post-2021 period, as the EU was prevented from further pursuing its security agenda by the interruption of relations with the military juntas, it moved backwards, retrieving its liberal stance, despite the announcements for a 'renewed approach' to the Sahel made by the HR Kaja Kallas (Crisis Group, 2025).

In what follows, I will describe how, at the European level, strategic inertia is displayed as a combination of two parallel processes. On the one hand, the EEAS, which had been largely uncritical of the securitarian drift, resisted the interference from MS and strove to preserve supranational autonomy against partisan national interests. On the other hand, the EC opposed the excessive emphasis given to security and military solutions and tried to restore the centrality of development and people-centred peacebuilding.

## **Groupthink**

### ***Staff Filtering***

EU bureaucrats are simultaneously agents obliged to fulfil tasks mandated by MS and autonomous experts who do not answer to any particular national government. This can generate contradictory obligations (Von Billerbeck, 2020). Hence, the bid to maintain a stable sense of identity, which is linked to the ability to act in accordance with liberal policy preferences, is actively pursued within the EU bureaucracy by instilling a sense of supranational belonging in its staff to create a network of professionals who rely on the same policy-relevant knowledge and who share the same views.

The EU peacebuilding system has a hybrid composition in terms of staff, which guarantees MS the opportunity to exert its influence over the bureaucratic apparatus. The EEAS, for example, has been defined as an ‘interstitial organization’, not only because it operates in multiple fields and has multiple principles but also because one-third of its workforce is seconded by MS (SNEs) or comes from national administrations (Henökl, 2014).<sup>2</sup> There is a stark contrast between the identities and views of EU career bureaucrats and MS diplomats, as the former share a sense of belonging and a belief in the liberal values of the organization, while the latter are more aligned with the interests and views of their country of origin. National staff are considered Trojan horses of MS, as they constantly leverage their influence to place fellow nationals in positions they want to prioritize. When it comes to the Sahel, it is mostly France that had staff seconded to related desks and departments:

*It is no coincidence that the person responsible for Burkina Faso is a French diplomat.*<sup>3</sup>

Hence, EU officials tried to minimize the chances of MS, such as France, intervening in bureaucratic dynamics by insulating them from organizational decision-making. Despite claiming to welcome ‘Brussels outsiders’, officials showed a general prejudice towards colleagues employed by MS and reported practices of exclusion and insulation, like limiting the access of SNEs to the deliberative arenas (e.g., Council committees) or prohibiting them from reporting on behalf of the institution. Moreover, according to organizational rules, SNEs are prevented from occupying managerial positions or being part of hiring committees. The prejudice is also reflected in recruitment processes and selection criteria, which tend to favour technical expertise over diplomatic experience (SNEs). To counter MS’ attempts to obstacle “processes of [...] socialization and identity formation by instilling a more national-minded agenda in the selection, training, promotion and posting of diplomats” (Müller et al., 2021, p. 524), bureaucrats verbalized the resort to a ‘pressure to socialize’, which can lead to role-playing and groupthink (Bremberg et al., 2022).

CSDP missions are typically considered an almost exclusive governmental domain, with 70% of personnel directly recruited from MS (Pirozzi et al., 2018), aiming to reach 100% soon.<sup>4</sup> An official from EUCAP Mali outlined how MS do not want European bureaucrats to join the missions in the field. Similarly, an interviewee from EUCAP Sahel Niger stated that each MS manages its staff so that they report to them first:

*The French used us as political leverage.*<sup>5</sup>

This influence exerted by MS is counterbalanced by the strict control imposed on CSDP missions by Brussels bureaucrats, to whom the missions must formally respond. According to Cornelius Friesendorf and colleagues (2024), the Brussels-based Civilian Operations Headquarters strove to remain involved in the minutiae of recruitment for the two Sahelian capacity-building missions by

producing job descriptions that met bureaucratic rather than practical needs on the ground in order to influence the profile of personnel.

As in the case of the UN, the appointment of senior-level managers results from the balancing of interests between the MS and the European bureaucracy. The creation in 2013 of the office of the Special Representative for the Sahel (EUSR) was meant to support the EU's integrated approach by fostering political dialogue, coherence, and coordination in the region. The EUSR is appointed by the Council on a proposal from the HR, to whom s(he) reports directly. Therefore, although formally representing the choice of MS, her/his appointment is strongly influenced by organizational priorities. The designation of the Frenchman Michel Reveyrand-de Menthon, former French ambassador in Mali, as the first special representative of the EU was a recognition of France's role in the region and took into account the country's historical presence in the area and its close ties with West African political authorities. The appointment of the Spanish Ángel Losada Fernández in 2015 marked instead both the intention on the part of the European bureaucracy to sideline the French and to adopt a more autonomous role in the region and the desire on the part of MS to maintain a 'robust' approach to security issues, given the experience of Losada as an ambassador in the NATO military mission in Afghanistan (ISAF). Similarly, the choice of the Italian Emanuela Del Re in 2021, an academic with experience in development cooperation, stemmed from the manifested interest of Italy to be a leading player in the 'enlarged Mediterranean' region<sup>6</sup> and from a rethinking of the approach focused on military training and counter-terrorism, which had long been advocated by much of the European bureaucracy. The (re)turn towards a more liberal approach after 2021 has been reaffirmed in the designation of the Portuguese João Cravinho as the new EUSR in 2024, backed by his extensive experience in peace issues as Minister of Defence in António Costa's government, during which he provided command and troops for the EU training mission in Mozambique, which is considered by observers to be a rare example of success of the European integrated approach to conflicts. The new EUSR has been trying to reconcile the different perspectives among MS to craft a new EU outlook. In particular, he is mediating between the intransigent position of countries such as Denmark and Sweden and the overly accommodating stance towards the military regimes of countries such as Italy and Hungary to build consensus around a new strategy that takes into account the changed situation in the Sahel after 2021.

### ***Rule Following***

Policy continuity rests on continuously maximizing identity coherence and (self) legitimacy, so, as for the UN, European bureaucrats are discouraged from adopting positions and behaviours that are not in line with the liberal paradigm. Sanctions mainly coincide with career opportunities and are targeted not only at actions against the system but also at expressions of disagreement (Christian, 2022). Thus, the 'obedience factor' is considered an essential attribute that conditions the tenure of EU staff, both among administrators, who are bound by periodic rotations, and

among temporary agents, who self-censor to increase their chances of being hired in the future. However, officials reported that it is not a matter of lack of freedom of expression but rather of how, when, and what is criticized:

*You must talk not about ‘gaps’ but about ‘consistency’; the issue must be framed in a specific way*<sup>7</sup>

In general critics and proposals framed as an ‘augmentative discourse’, hence directed at improving the organizational performance in terms of coordination and flow of information, are taken openly and quite seriously, even though they have to make their way up the chain of command and, in the best-case scenario, be heavily modified or only partially accepted (Braun and Capano, 2010). On the contrary, those that are framed as ‘transformative discourse’, hence targeting the core elements of the liberal approach, are either dismissed or openly condemned, often by denying the existence of any acceptable alternative. As one interviewee rhetorically asked:

*Can you really propose something else [other than criticism]? [...] but then what is the alternative?*<sup>8</sup>

Potential alternatives inspired by approaches from non-Western countries are not taken into consideration. In the Sahel, a widespread opinion among European bureaucrats is that, although countries such as Russia and China are to be considered geopolitical rivals, they do not propose any alternative model of conflict resolution to the European integrated approach to conflicts and therefore do not constitute real competition. As one official explained, these actors are seen as driven primarily by transactional interests:

*They don’t give a damn [...] they are just business, and squeezing the states with rules that I would never dare to sign. [...] The big mistake is to pretend that we have to [compromise], because otherwise they will take our place. This is ridiculous. Which place do we speak about? [...] At the end of the day, we are those who respect the most those people, this is for sure.*<sup>9</sup>

## **Backlash Prevention**

### ***Engagement with External Actors***

Through the decades, the notion of ‘civil society’ has become increasingly broad, also in relation to conflict environments, to include national and international NGOs, community-based organizations, religious groups, think tanks, universities, private companies, and more. The increasing diversification of potentially relevant audiences to international organizations, such as the EU, that declare themselves open to the participation of non-state actors, increases the likelihood that different components of civil society will have divergent views on the norms they consider

important and the conflict resolution practices they consider legitimate. Therefore, to maintain policy continuity, audience coherence is important (Lenz and Söderbaum, 2023). It is therefore not surprising that data show that the EU favours interactions with actors who share its values and policy ideas.

Beyond a generic call to engage with “accountable and transparent CSOs which share [EU] commitment to social progress and the fundamental values of peace, freedom, equal rights and human dignity”,<sup>10</sup> there are no legal criteria for partner selection. Therefore, the decision is essentially political. On the ground, the EU delegations are expected to engage with CSOs. However, interaction with local groups usually passes through international networks already accredited by the EU, such as the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), or high-skilled local staff, to the point that many interviewees stressed that defining CSOs as ‘local’ in the case of the Sahel is rather problematic. As one official reflected:

*The question is, what is local in this context? As an officer [...] I’m in contact with several CSOs [but] I wouldn’t call them local at this stage, but international CSOs working in Brussels and working on peace and security-related issues. So, in particular, I am in contact mainly, as many of us, with the EPLO network. So, usually when we organize civil society consultations, exchanges, it is most of the time with EPLO.*<sup>11</sup>

EPLO works as a bridge between local CSOs and the EU delegations and/or the HQs in Brussels. In providing this connection between the different levels, EPLO also plays an essential role as an EU proxy for socializing local organizations to the Union’s *modus pensandi* and *modus operandi*. As complex forms and abstruse legal language often prevent local CSOs from participating independently in funding applications, they are forced to form partnerships with larger European networks, like EPLO, which instruct them not only on the technical aspects of EU bureaucracy but also on how to frame specific issues, thus forcing them to confront European policy priorities and liberal agenda (Sigillò, 2024):

*In the Sahel, we go to member organizations and ask them to put us in touch with people. We explain what contributions to make [...] CSOs often find themselves at a loss when faced with the EU’s complex decision-making processes, so it is up to us to educate them in this regard.*<sup>12</sup>

As in the case of the UN, behind the ‘taxonomy work’ that characterizes the day-to-day work of the EU bureaucracy in the Sahel with civil society, there is also the recognition of the politicization of local actors and the impossibility of separating the technical aspect from the political one when it comes to conflict-related issues. Plank et al. (2021) spoke of the possibility of ‘outside-in politicization’ of EU policies, referring to the process whereby the politicization of EU external policies in third countries influences (de-)politicization dynamics in the EU, to highlight the awareness by EU policymakers of potential deviations coming from outside. In the elaboration of EU policies, for example, the proposal for the Capacity Building in

Support of Security and Development programme, which led to the establishment of the EU Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell (RACC) in 2019, the role of Western African CSOs has been limited. Although some Sahelian CSOs initiated the first coordination efforts, such as the People's Coalition, their influence has been constrained (2021). Over the years, the G5 countries have seen a deteriorating situation for local CSOs, particularly in terms of state repression and control. As a result, EU institutions perceived them as an extension of the state and reportedly confronted them with a 'take it or leave it' approach. As one EU official explained:

*Civil society in Africa is important [but] is often politicized [...] They are often captured by partisan interests.*<sup>13</sup>

Regarding EU civilian missions (EUCAP Mali, EUCAP Sahel Niger) and military operations (EUTM Mali), their mandate was not directly people-centred, as they focused on strengthening the regional armed forces and internal security apparatuses. Hence, they mainly interacted with three types of actors. The first corresponds to security officials who received operational training (i.e., members of the army, police, and gendarmerie). The second refers to local experts who acted as intermediaries between the missions and both security officials and governmental actors. The third type was the political authorities governing the security sector, such as the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior (Colomba-Petteng, 2023).

The relation between the missions and the local authorities was characterized by a mixture of cooperation and mutual suspicion. Since EU interventions require consent to be implemented, efforts were made to please regional governments, including through direct funding (e.g., budget support). On the other hand, Brussels retained control of policymaking by relegating the participation of authorities to mere consultation. Hence, despite preaching 'local ownership', the 'real' decision-making process remained in the hands of European institutions. This detachment of 'actions' from 'talks' has been described by Lipson (2007) as a classic move to foster inertia. According to Lopez Lucia (2017), the 2011 Sahel Strategy was the first EU document concerning the region that was not agreed upon jointly. Officials stated that this practice was repeated for the subsequent strategies of 2015 and 2021. The justification put forward was that, as foreign policy strategies guided by the EU's strategic interests, they should not be negotiated with local partners. According to a senior EU staff member, however, the limited inclusiveness also stemmed from a perception that Sahelian states lacked the cohesion and political maturity to act collectively:

*The Sahel is a non-entity politically, they don't like each other, there is a huge history of rivalry between the [Sahelian] countries, there is the history of white Africa against black Africa, old slavery and whatever [...] They are not the most natural partners. Of course, you will tell me it was their initiative, okay, but many people have children and then don't take care of them.*<sup>14</sup>

Many officials also reported that local partners were uninterested in discussing political issues, often viewing the EU more as an economic resource than as a genuine political actor.

Therefore, even before the post-coup period, local governments primarily sought economic profits, material advantages, and professional opportunities from EU security policies. Local authorities employed extraversion strategies to secure budget support over time while eluding the demands that came with it, like by choosing to apply selectively the political recommendations from the EU. In response, CSDP missions hired auditing advisors to ‘help’ authorities formulate their requests. In addition, EU staff prioritized engagement with those political actors who were considered to fully comply with their recommendations, as in the case of the European Capacity Mission in Niger. After several years in which mission’s recommendations were not implemented, the EU staff on the ground decided to favour collaboration with those political actors and institutions who were believed to comply with their recommendations by, for example, privileging engagement with the Nigerien Police Nationale over the Garde Nationale (Colomba-Petteng, 2023).

### *Engagement with Internal Actors*

In terms of institutional decision-making, inertial processes developed along two cleavages: a national-supranational one and a security-development one. The former focused on limiting the influence of governmental actors, favouring bureaucratic preferences. The latter was dedicated to preserving more traditional measures of development and peacebuilding against the advance of a securitarian agenda.

Oscar Mateos and colleagues (2024) warned against viewing the EU as a monolithic entity in the field of foreign and security policy, rather being a multifaceted amalgamation of perspectives and power dynamics. This consideration is particularly relevant in the case of the Sahel, where strategies and policies arose from the complex interplay between the EEAS, MS, and DG INTPA. The last two Commissions led by Ursula von der Leyen have strengthened the geopolitical role of the EU by increasing the importance of the security dimension. In the Sahel, the attention given to the security-migration nexus as the main framework for EU political engagement in the Sahel reflected the crucial influence of MS on CSDP, rooted in the defence of national interests and underpinned by a desire to improve the EU’s geopolitical position in an increasingly competitive global landscape.

To counter this predominantly securitarian imprint, the EEAS deployed a series of countermeasures entailing the strategic use of inertia. While not openly against the security-related narrative contained in the first two Sahel strategies (2011, 2015), the Brussels-based institution saw this as an improper interference by MS and a threat to its autonomy. Hence, it pushed for a more technical approach to local problems. Such countermeasures mainly involved ‘venue shopping’ and ‘conflict expansion’. The former refers to the strategy of “raising issues in the most receptive venues” (Dijkstra, 2012, p. 456). Bureaucrats selected, each time, the most favourable governmental actors and decided the order of their involvement. The

latter consisted of expanding the group of political actors supporting the proposal while isolating alternative constituencies. Another common strategy was to ignore or obstruct government inputs when they contradicted bureaucratic preferences:

*Whenever the COAFR<sup>15</sup> decides something, we should, at least in theory, abide by it [however] there are cases where we do not take action because it does not seem appropriate to us, and so we try to bury it.*<sup>16</sup>

For Lopez Lucia (2017), the 2011 and 2015 Sahel Strategies have been a ‘laboratory of experimentation’ driven by the desire of EEAS officials to promote their role within the EU foreign policy process and their vision of the EU as a strategic actor. Many of the practices established through the two Strategies aimed to reduce the autonomy of the EC, especially of DG INTPA, and reorient development objectives within the wider strategic objectives of the EU in the Sahel. EC staff resisted taking on an implementation role for EEAS policies and remained guided by a vision of the EU as a normative (liberal) actor (2017). A Commission official complained that:

*They talk about this security-development nexus, which [in theory should be] a form of working together, of coordinating among actors, but it responds to a division that has occurred within the EU institutions [between the EEAS and the EC].*<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, INTPA officials started confronting the EEAS in their everyday work through a series of strategies that exploited bureaucratic procedures and ordinary organizational politics. One method was to mirror the organizational structure of the EEAS, in particular by creating geographic desks able to compete with EEAS services. Another one was leveraging its central role in managing EU funds to hamper the prioritization of security imperatives within development programming. As an EC official explained:

*The whole area of conflict prevention, peacebuilding and security is seen as a political area [EEAS], but projects are done with development money [EC].*<sup>18</sup>

A further method consisted of controlling the EU delegations. These, while formally under the EEAS umbrella, are still mostly composed of EC officials who remained interested in development and peacebuilding. This results in delegations often withholding information from Brussels and CSDP missions to increase their margins of autonomy or translating HQs instructions into provisions more in line with the needs of the local populations.

The year 2021 marked a (re)turning point with the recalibration of the EU’s objectives in the region and distribution of power among EU institutions, conditioned by the constraints of the post-coup strategic environment. Security projects managed by the EEAS were discontinued, while the EU remained committed to providing direct support to the population through EC-managed socio-economic

development programmes. The 2021 Strategy for the Sahel promoted a ‘civil and political surge’ alongside military efforts. The strategy stressed the importance of good governance, human rights, and the rule of law and addressing the root causes of instability, such as poverty, climate change, and lack of access to basic services. This marked a return to traditional liberal peacebuilding, which, as it turned out, was never entirely abandoned, having remained alive underneath the securitarian momentum (Bøås, 2021). This recalibration toward a more liberal normative stance was also reflected in the tone of the HR speeches. Former HR Joseph Borrell went from calling for the need for weapons in 2020 (“*We need guns, we need arms, we need military capacities and that is what we are going to help provide to our African friends because their security is our security*”),<sup>19</sup> to calling for democratization in 2023 (“*Democracy must prevail in the Sahel [...] The democracy that the people of Niger want, the one that ECOWAS is promoting, and the one that the EU is defending around the world*”).<sup>20</sup>

## **Pathological Behaviours**

### ***Bureaucratic Universalism***

CSDP missions are seen as the trademark of the European external action for crises and conflicts.<sup>21</sup> These are not necessarily the best tools, but they are the easiest to use and the most visible, compared with long-term development and peacebuilding programmes, which nevertheless continue to be part of European action. Although they require the active involvement of MS, on which the Organization depends for material resources and political capital, the drafting of mandates falls within the specific remit of the EEAS. Former HR Federica Mogherini and the EEAS played an important role in shifting the mandate of CSDP missions in the Sahel towards a stronger focus on border management and the fight against organized crime and terrorism, but they did so without renouncing to use a strong, although vague, liberal normative language, prompting a clash between protection goals and solidarity goals. Scholars such as Michael H. Smith and Richard Youngs (2018) started to define this approach as ‘contingent liberalism’, to refer to a conditional and context-dependent application of liberal values. In practice, the EU continued to defend multilateral rules, open trade, cooperative security, and human rights, while balancing these against strategic interests and constraints on a case-by-case basis.

The drafting of missions’ mandates falls under the competencies of the Peace, Partnerships and Crisis Management Directorate, which takes care of this without the systematic involvement of the seconded agents deployed in the field, who may be the bearers of specific national interests. A head of an EU delegation in the Sahel highlighted how mandates are deliberately framed in a vague idealist language (“*They use big words that nobody [here] can understand like ‘integrated approach’ and ‘triple nexus’*”),<sup>22</sup> to allow ignoring calls for material support, like weapons, coming from host states (“*they say they want weapons and we give them cars*”).<sup>23</sup> The emphasis on liberal values and goals rather than on performance provides organizational benefits. As these are expansive and often aspirational, they gloss

over the difficulties that staff may encounter in the implementation stage. Whenever goals clash with operational vicissitudes, officials can, under the moral incontestability of their work, decide either to compromise (and by how much) their stated goals and values to reach practical results or to disregard them altogether while expressing their continued dedication to the principles of the organization.

Thus, on the one hand, the creation of the *European Union Emergency Trust Fund* (EUTF) for Africa in 2019 marked a significant novelty, subsequently taken over by the EPF, which allowed for diverting development funds to finance border management projects and build security infrastructures (e.g., boats, planes, and border posts). On the other hand, the EU superseded local requests, especially after the coups, to adopt a harder stance and to prioritize the provision of military equipment and combat training over political reforms. Following the report of possible human rights violations by Nigerien armed forces, the EEAS imposed the creation of two positions within EUCAP Sahel to monitor the delivery of lessons on gender and human rights within the training courses given to national security forces and to ensure that the training material sufficiently included these elements. This move has been seen by observers as reflecting European priorities rather than the needs and realities of local counterparts (Friesendorf et al., 2024). Similarly, EUTM Mali last mandate (2020–2024), which operated under the coup regime, not only continued to provide only ‘basic training’ to the armed forces, despite authorities’ demands for more effective combat preparation and active assistance in neutralizing organized crime and terrorist threats, but added a human rights component to mission’s task that was absent before, which included the monitoring of the performance and behaviour of the Malian armed forces concerning the respect for human rights and international humanitarian law.

The overall strategic response of the EU to the wave of coups in the Sahel and the conflict management approaches of non-Western countries in the region is an expression of strategic inertia. Rather than change its goals and aspirations for the Sahel, the EU adopted a ‘wait and see’ strategy, whereby the reproduction of liberal formulas stemmed from the combination of a policy of strategic patience and bureaucratic activism:

*Logically, we should have reformed our institutional architecture, but this has not been done because they want [Brussels] a strategy to last many years.<sup>24</sup>*

EU response to its marginalization in the Sahel by illiberal actors has been to abandon the security sector and focus instead on development cooperation, humanitarian aid, and technical assistance, where, thanks to EC projects and the presence of EU delegations, it has maintained a leading role over rival actors. Although this shift was coincident with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which could suggest a tactical retreat from security in the Sahel to privilege the Eastern front, officials interrogated on the matter reported a sense of dismay and frustration at the reduction of security engagement in the region, suggesting a lack of planning behind this move. The Sahel remains a key priority for the EU, particularly for Mediterranean countries, not only because of its role in the migration issue, which remains relevant domestically for much of Europe, but also in view of its entanglement

with the Ukraine conflict, as Russia's partnerships with the Sahel provides political and economic assets for the continuation of its military operations. Such a shift of resources and political endeavour to low politics areas has been accompanied by a reshaping of the official narrative around traditional liberal themes. Officials have been emphatic in stating that the main difference between the European approach to the Sahel conflict and that of non-Western actors is primarily a normative one. As one senior official observed:

*Actors like China, Russia, Turkey, they don't care at all what is the political situation, what is the situation of human rights, what is the situation of minorities, etc. They don't care about that at all*<sup>25</sup>

Behind this, there is also the conviction that Sahelian countries cannot prescind from European help and that non-Western approaches to conflict, which are exclusively focused on security and counterterrorism, are inconsistent and unsustainable in the long term. Thus, for EU officials, it is just a matter of time, but eventually illiberal interventions will fail, and when that happens, the EU will be ready to re-engage.

### ***Feedback Manipulation***

Considering the peculiar composition of the European CFSP, the retention, manipulation, and falsification of information have been common practices among all EU stakeholders in the Sahel, meaning the EEAS, MS, and the EC. Although the combined effect of these practices caused a lock-in effect on policies, each of these actors has strategically used privileged access to information to increase their autonomy and leeway. MS, who remained largely in control of field missions, exploited their ground-knowledge, provided by loyal seconded staff, to acquire a strategic advantage in foreign policy decision-making not only over EU institutions but also over other MS. Several interviewees suggested that missions often sent 'sugar-coated' reports to Brussels to demonstrate progress (Friesendorf et al., 2024). Similarly, the Civilian and Military Operations Headquarters, while formally being bureaucratic organs placed within the EEAS, are constituted of seconded staff coming from national police and armed forces, who often inform their capitals rather than Brussels when they receive sensitive information coming from the ground.

EU bureaucrats have reportedly sought to anticipate and counter this type of behaviour by gathering intelligence from personal contacts or private contractors in the region. The other source of information for Brussels is countries' delegations, which have political reporting among their tasks. However, delegations sometimes act as brokers, withholding information that could compromise their aim, which is focused on development and peacebuilding rather than security. This tangle of dynamics has been effectively described as follows:

*There is a dual structure between the delegation and the CSDP missions. Furthermore, within the missions, there is a division between military and administrative personnel, which often entails divergent perspectives. The*

*delegation and the mission do not communicate with each other. In the field, there are two leaders, the delegation leader and the mission leader, who act separately, following their own specific agendas and creating grotesque situations in which the mission leader and the delegation leader hold parallel meetings with stakeholders. There is no communication between the mission and the delegation; the mission reports to the Civilian/Military Operations Headquarters, which then, if necessary, passes on the information to the delegation. This entails not only costs in terms of efficiency (duplication of efforts) but also economic costs.<sup>26</sup>*

The combined effect of these inertial activities prevented the EU from receiving proper feedback and therefore from examining possible policy failures.

Beyond this, interviewees also highlighted the absence of structures dedicated for the processing of feedback and their translation into action. While this limitation has been partly addressed in the *Civilian Compact* review of 2022, which included for the first time the need to develop a knowledge management capacity, it has not yet been followed by concrete steps, thus showing how reforms can also become a means to preserve the policy continuity when adopted solutions rhetorically address the problem without taking substantive action.

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Overall, the EU's engagement in the Sahel reveals how bureaucratic inertia became a deliberate strategy to safeguard policy continuity under conditions of contestation. Through *Groupthink*, EU officials consolidated a supranational identity that prioritized bureaucratic coherence over MS influence, reinforcing internal solidarity and the predominance of career bureaucrats. Through *Backlash Prevention*, the EU contained potential challenges from both external and internal actors, engaging selectively with civil society and host governments while containing a looming securitarian drift through orchestrated tensions between MS, the EEAS and the EC. Finally, through *Pathological Behaviours*, the EU leveraged aspirational language in mission mandates to balance liberal values with strategic interests, while manipulating information to inhibit policy transformations. Rather than signifying mere organizational paralysis, these inertial dynamics illustrate a strategic form of resilience through which the EU maintained coherence, legitimacy, and control, upholding its liberal self-image even as its effectiveness and local relevance diminished.

## Notes

- 1 The EEAS has six geographical departments headed by a director-general. The departments divide the world into the following: (1) Africa, (2) Americas, (3) Asia and the Pacific, (4) Europe, (5) Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and (6) the Middle East and North Africa.
- 2 EEAS human resources report 2024.
- 3 Interview with EU official, 8 March 2023.
- 4 Civilian CSDP Compact 2018, p. 16.

- 5 Interview with EU official, 9 March 2023.
- 6 See Italian Ministry of Defence, White Paper for International Security and Defence, Rome, 2015, [https://www.difesa.it/Content/Pagine/Libro\\_Bianco.aspx](https://www.difesa.it/Content/Pagine/Libro_Bianco.aspx).
- 7 Interview with EU official, 14 April 2023.
- 8 Interview with EU official, 18 April 2023.
- 9 Interview with EU official, 23 September 2024.
- 10 European Union, “The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe’s engagement with Civil Society in external relations”, European Commission, Bruxelles (2012), p. 3.
- 11 Interview with EU official, 14 April 2023.
- 12 Interview with EPLO, 8 May 2023.
- 13 Interview with EU official, 9 March 2023.
- 14 Interview with EU official, 13 March 2023.
- 15 An intergovernmental body within the Council responsible for the management of EU external policy towards sub-Saharan Africa.
- 16 Interview with EU official, 22 February 2023.
- 17 Interview with EU official, 24 March 2023.
- 18 Interview with EU official, 24 March 2023.
- 19 Borrell. Africa “needs guns” for stability, available at: <https://euobserver.com/foreign/147577>.
- 20 Borrell. Democracy must prevail in the Sahel, available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/democracy-must-prevail-sahel\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/democracy-must-prevail-sahel_en).
- 21 EU, Global Strategy (2016), p. 47.
- 22 Interview with EU official, 22 February 2023.
- 23 Interview with EU official, 22 February 2023.
- 24 Interview with EU official, 3 April 2023.
- 25 Interview with EU official, 21 August 2024.
- 26 Interview with EU diplomat, 2 May 2023.

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# Conclusions

## The Liberal International Order at a Crossroads

The Liberal International Order (LIO) is under threat. Its core values and institutions are being challenged by both internal and external adversaries, who contest the failure of the post-Cold War order to provide a (supposedly) fair distribution of resources among states and populations. For decades, ‘peace’ has been the most valuable common good offered by the LIO under the auspices of a model that championed democracy and human rights as a panacea to solve problems related to armed violence. Resounding failures, such as those in Afghanistan and Libya, eroded the consent around this liberal model, which started to be contested increasingly vocally by a group of non-Western actors who were simultaneously making headway on the global stage against US supremacy.

International organizations (IOs), such as the UN and the EU, which had been the spearheads of an idea of peacebuilding involving local participation, addressing the root causes of war and the struggle for long-term solutions, are being sidelined in places like Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, and Palestine by single states or ad hoc coalitions fostering a narrow idea of peace guided by a transactional logic and geared towards partial deals and short-term ceasefires which do not address social grievances and structural violence. Authoritarian countries, such as Russia and China, are proposing illiberal approaches to conflict resolution based on their understanding of social order and stability. Other countries, such as Brazil, India, South Africa, Turkey, and the Gulf States, are forging hybrid approaches which reject the universalism of liberal solutions while not totally disregarding them. A fascination with pragmatic and unilateral methods has also spread among traditional Western allies, with the Trump administration breaking its ties with liberal interventionism to adopt a ‘peace doctrine’ based on the pursuit of American interest, aggressive negotiations, and the use of force. The multiplication of actors, approaches, and initiatives marked the surge of a conflict management and resolution market where the driving engine is constituted by competition, not only between international rivals but also between foreign interveners and local actors, who are now more active than ever in the shaping of peace interventions. Hence, in the new multipolar

era, conflicts have transformed from global problems to be solved collectively into arenas of strategic competition between alternative visions of world orders. On the one hand, in a context where IOs' envoys are sidelined, peacekeeping missions are disparaged, and intergovernmental fora are paralysed by vetoes, IOs are showing all their limitations in navigating such a hostile environment. On the other hand, the unprecedented increase in conflicts worldwide and the effect of exclusion of humanitarian agencies from war zones, as seen in Gaza, are providing a catastrophic glimpse of how a world without peacebuilding IOs would look like.

Stemming from these considerations, this book offered a comprehensive examination of the evolution, crisis, and resurgence of liberal peacebuilding, arguing that despite unique shocks and the rise of authoritarian alternatives, IOs demonstrated remarkable policy continuity having embodied a role as guardians of liberal peace amidst the fragmentation of efforts and the increased heterogeneity of peace provisions that characterize today's conflict resolution. The central argument advanced in the text is that this policy continuity, far from being a passive outcome of institutional rigidity or simple inaction, is largely the product of *strategic inertia*, namely, a deliberate attempt by international bureaucracies to preserve their foundational liberal peace paradigm. This is based on bureaucratic rules, procedures, and organizational politics, which are used opportunistically to maintain the policy course against possible deviations in a contested global arena.

The novel character of the study rests on two aspects. One is a complex, and not linear, understanding of competition as the defining feature of the new world order. This is not only about great powers clashing for influence abroad, but it is a structural condition. As such, it involves multiple actors and dynamics, and mixed effects that escape the control of single actors. Local authorities, civil society organizations, and single individuals can all shape competitive processes through targeted actions. In this scenario, the role of international bureaucracies is far from marginal. Moving away from a narrow idea that sees them as neutral actors serving member states, international bureaucracies are instead independent and authoritative actors with a strong sense of mission and clear policy preferences, capable of defending themselves against attacks from powerful states and proving especially resilient to external turbulence. The second aspect concerns the novel interpretation of inertia as a deliberate and extraordinarily imaginative exercise of manipulation of internal rules and procedures by international bureaucracies through which IOs adopted a defensive stance against the pressures to make peacebuilding less liberal. Usually depicted as 'business as usual' for bureaucracies or as the result of an automatic reproduction of the bureaucratic vicious circle, inertia acquires strategic value in times of competition and illiberal contestation. The threat shared among bureaucrats concerning the tenure of the liberal norms and practices around which they have been socialized and upon which peacebuilding organizations have been founded confers a sense of intentionality to inertial processes, as these entail the retention of certain practices and goals at the expense of others. According to

such an interpretation, following a norm is a rational choice rather than something solely linked to habit or a specific identity.

This book provided empirical evidence for this argument by delving into the competitive dynamics underlying the UN and the EU peacebuilding efforts in the African Sahel. At the crossroads between terrorist violence, fragmented statehood, illegal trafficking, and foreign states' interests over local natural resources, the region represents a least-likely case for liberal peace continuity, where Western security interests are at stake and the initiatives of the UN and the EU have been jeopardized by illiberal alternatives offered by non-Western powers to local elites. Within this scenario, the proven existence among the two IOs of a similar set of inertial processes which fostered policy continuity cannot reasonably be detached from a bureaucratic willingness to adhere to the liberal policy paradigm as a source of institutional legitimacy. In both cases, during the Western decade of intervention (2012–2021), international bureaucracies prevented the two IOs from undergoing a full militaristic-securitarian turn by retaining control over critical positions within the decision-making apparatus and isolating them from illiberal deviations and external interferences, while continuously advocating for political solutions. The exhaustion of security instruments in the post-coup period (2021–present), characterized by a strategic shift in alliances by regional partners lamenting intrusion into domestic affairs and reluctance of multilateral actors to provide more robust solutions, triggered a (re)turn to more traditional approaches to peacebuilding and liberal rhetoric sustained by those same international bureaucracies that were, and continue to be, reluctant to accept any illiberal policy deviation.

### **IOs as Guardians of Peace**

As highlighted through this book, IOs can resist both internal and external pressures to abandon a traditional view of peacebuilding, rooted in the pursuit of positive peace through long-term and inclusive measures, by assuming instead a role as guardians of liberal peace. IOs' bureaucracies face the challenges posed by a changed conflict resolution field, with the surge of rising powers and illiberal approaches, by securing the core of the liberal policy paradigm through the strategic use of inertia. This challenges traditional understandings of inertia as an unintended byproduct of bureaucracy or as a sign of immobility. Instead, inertia can be understood as a deliberate and performative act, whereby IOs leverage their internal structures, norms, and information asymmetries to selectively ignore, deflect, or undermine demands for transformations that contradict their embedded liberal vision of peace.

The crisis of the LIO and the emergence of non-Western authoritarian actors represented an unprecedented shock to the peacebuilding sector. However, contrary to the expectation that such upheavals would lead to radical policy changes, IOs adopted conservative behaviours. This defence mechanism is not simply about maintaining the status quo through mere inaction but about actively reinforcing their ontological security and liberal identity in the face of a shared perception of

the threat posed by illiberal contestation. Hence, liberal peace's norms and practices are not just policy options but the very essence of IOs' (self-)conception and (self-)legitimacy.

The 'why' behind strategic inertia lies in a logic of appropriateness guiding bureaucratic action. Peacebuilding bureaucrats are driven by a collective orientation and a strong sense of mission. They see themselves as part of an enlightened elite uniquely tasked with maintaining international peace and security. Their career aspirations and professional identities are fundamentally intertwined with liberal mandates and goals, making any shift away from the paradigm a threat to their very existence and influence. Therefore, preserving liberal peace is a matter not only of policy preference but also of organizational survival.

The 'how' of strategic inertia is meticulously demonstrated through the three mechanisms. *Groupthink* ensures internal coherence and loyalty to the liberal paradigm. By filtering staff through recruitment processes that favour pre-socialized individuals and by implementing disciplinary measures that discourage transformative discourse, IOs cultivate a unified front against alternative visions. This creates an elite of officials whose shared beliefs reinforce the liberal framework, making it highly resistant to deviation. *Backlash Prevention* safeguards the liberal paradigm from external and internal contestation. IOs strategically engage with external actors, particularly civil society organizations, by imposing strict (often arbitrary) criteria that implicitly favour Western-aligned groups and exclude 'politicized organizations' that might challenge the liberal agenda. Internally, bureaucrats actively influence decision-making processes, frame information, and engage in 'venue shopping' to shape policy proposals and limit the influence of member states or internal components (e.g., military) that might push for illiberal or purely securitarian approaches. *Pathological Behaviours* allow IOs to maintain normative consistency even when operational effectiveness is compromised or when faced with failures and illiberal contestation. By resorting to 'bureaucratic universalism' (applying analogy-based solutions despite context-specific challenges) and 'feedback manipulation' (hyper-classifying information, 'sugar-coating' reports, or engaging in organized hypocrisy), IOs can gloss over inconsistencies and failures without abandoning their liberal principles. This strategic use of organizational pathologies allows them to absorb shocks and resist fundamental transformations, presenting a continuous dedication to their stated liberal goals.

The Sahel case study powerfully illustrates these dynamics. Despite a decade (2012–2021) where Western intervention was heavily focused on military-securitarian approaches, driven by national interests and counter-terrorism concerns, IOs' bureaucratic civilian-liberal components never fully abandoned the liberal script. This underlying commitment, sustained by strategic inertia, prepared the ground for the post-2021 'return to foundations' after Sahelian states turned to authoritarian actors. This demonstrates that strategic inertia has not only sought to preserve past conditions but also contributed to the shaping of a future scenario by ensuring that, even amidst shifting priorities and normative contestation, liberal peace remained the guiding framework for IOs' conflict resolution.

### **The UN and the EU Compared**

The UN and the EU present striking similarities in the strategic use of internal procedures and organizational politics to maintain liberal policy continuity in the face of growing competition and contestation from multiple actors. Both have extensive bureaucracies, and liberal norms are thoroughly entrenched within them. This shared ontological root is what primarily drove their strategic use of inertia. The two organizations also experienced the same internal tension between a military-secitarian component and a civilian-liberal one, which has been frequently reflected in contradicting tasks and ambiguous goals in peace interventions. Furthermore, both organizations followed a similar policy path in dealing with the conflict situation in the Sahel. Under the framework provided by the Algiers Accords, they collaborated extensively in both security and development, with mission mandates including mutual support and intelligence sharing among their tasks. Following the military coups and the turn towards authoritarian actors in the Sahel, both the UN and EU significantly scaled back their previous military-secitarian engagements and refocused on more traditional tasks such as development cooperation, humanitarian aid, human rights monitoring, and political mediation, effectively reverting to type and affirming their liberal foundations.

There are also a number of differences between the two organizations related to their structure, composition, and mandate, which highlight that while the core strategic intent of maintaining liberal policy continuity is shared, the specific mechanisms and battlegrounds for strategic inertia vary. On the one hand, the UN has a more decentralized structure, where the SRSG is responsible for activities in the field, while the EU has a highly centralized command structure that prevents mission leaders from deviating from the text of the mandate. On the other hand, the UN has to constantly deal with a broad contradiction between member states that reflects the unequal global distribution of power and resources, especially within the Security Council between the P3 (France, the UK, the US) and the P2 (China, Russia). Compared with the UN, where liberal peace provisions are sometimes openly contested by member states, the EU constitutes a much more homogenous institution. While there can be divergence among its members, there is a shared agreement over the substantive norms that frame the EU's action. This point is related to the question of mandate. The UN, as a world organization, is in charge of maintaining international peace and security and fostering cooperation, with a focus on advancing the cause of the most fragile and least developed countries (e.g., G77). The EU, while sharing norms and practices with the UN, is first and foremost a regional organization aimed at fostering the economic prosperity and security of Europe, whereby the pursuit of peace must be interpreted as a way to defend European well-being.

Therefore, while both the UN and the EU exemplify strategic inertia in their peacebuilding endeavours, their specific structures, composition, and mandate introduce distinct nuances in how this continuity is enacted. The UN's challenge often lies in internal bureaucratic fragmentation and external political pressure

to adapt robust mandates, while the EU's challenge involves balancing member states' national interests with its supranational liberal identity and fragmented foreign policy apparatus.

### **The Strategic Value of Sustaining Liberal Peace**

As long as peacebuilders are deployed to address the causes of conflicts, peace missions will continue to embody normative assumptions about which modes of social, political, and economic organization are conducive to peace. Thus, the question is not whether peacebuilding should advance a particular model, but rather which one. In an era of increased illiberal competition, the imitation or validation of authoritarian models would constitute a strategic error for IOs like the UN and the EU, as not only would it cause a fatal loss of credibility, but it would also diminish their counterbalance to the influence of countries such as Russia and China.

A sustained engagement with liberal peace is not an anachronistic choice, but rather a coherent and value-based decision amidst the marketization of conflict resolution. IOs should embrace the current fragmentation and acknowledge the potential generative effect of competition seen as a complex process. Clinging to liberal values provides both a necessary normative anchor, allowing IOs to define themselves in opposition to authoritarian alternatives, and an opportunity to keep a model of peace based on human rights, democracy, and local inclusion, available as a policy option in the market. Whereas illiberal solutions are predominantly focused on security aspects and transactional economic exchanges, liberal peace, in its core formulation, aims at addressing the root causes of conflicts, focusing on comprehensive political reforms, promoting human rights, and combating poverty. Hence, it may still represent an attractive option for many countries emerging from violent conflicts which share the desire to live in a free and inclusive society.

Despite some elements of concern, like the transversal cut to the UN peacebuilding budget and the rapid militarization of Europe, including through new EU financial instruments (e.g., SAFE), the role of both institutions for world peace remains central. The UN Security Council continues to be a key organ to diffuse conflicts worldwide; protection of civilian is still guaranteed by international peace missions in places like the DRC, the CAR, and Lebanon; and mediation efforts by the Secretary General and his Special Representatives remain essential in many parts of the world, including Colombia, Sudan, Myanmar, and the Great Lake region. On its side, the EU holds a leading role as a peacekeeper and mediator in its Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, being committed to the promotion of peace in the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova, and being a major provider of development aid to Africa.

A sustained engagement with liberal peace does not mean glossing over its past failures and flaws. By capitalizing on its inherent vagueness, IOs should implement targeted adjustments and recalibrate their approaches to ensure continued relevance. In its upcoming strategy for the Sahel (expected during the term of the current Commission 2024–2029), for example, the EU should maintain a value-driven approach without imposing externally designed models of democratic governance

on reluctant states, instead supporting local demands for political representation and preserving civic space. At the same time, the UN could further invest in building adaptive and context-sensitive capacities by strengthening the role of the UN Country Teams and increasing the resources available to the Resident Coordinators and the Peace and Development Advisors.

In conclusion, the UN and EU are navigating the turbulent waters of an evolving global order by strategically employing inertia to preserve liberal policy continuity. Their acquired role as ultimate guardians of liberal peace makes them crucial actors in shaping the future of conflict resolution, offering an alternative path toward order and stability in a world grappling with violence and authoritarian visions of peace.

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