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The liberal international order, the liberal peace-building mission and the role of American Exceptionalism in it

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Liberal Order, American Exceptionalism and Liberal peace-building mission in
Afghanistan: How does Dual American Exceptionalism impact these?

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies, Department of Political Studies
of Bard College

by
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Dedication

On the face of it, two elements contributed to the collapse of the US-backed democratic government. First, coupled with the shortcomings of the liberal peace-building agenda in Afghanistan and the failure of the US invasion, the fact that the Afghan government was consumed by corruption, high centralization and kleptocracy eventually led to the failure of democratization of Afghanistan. For example, Dr. Lutfi, in his essay titled *Beyond US withdrawal: What Happened in Afghanistan*, explores high centralization in the Afghan government from a decision-making and financial standpoint, and notes that for instance the “Ministry of Internal Affairs was stripped of all hiring and firing authority and the responsibility was transferred to the National Security Advisor’s office, unelected and not vetted for a vote of confidence by parliament individuals”.¹ Second, the unconditional withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan enabled by the Trump administration’s led US-Taliban deal paved the way for the Taliban to re-emerge as a de facto government in Afghanistan. The paranoia was visible in the elite circle in Kabul when excluded in the US-Taliban exit strategy, and therefore the country steadily fell into the hands of the de facto government.

In fall 2022, I took an IR course titled *The Crisis of Global Order* with Prof. Murray who supported me greatly throughout my senior project. Together, we explored the types of orders in the world, the decline of the Liberal order spearheaded by the US, American exceptionalism and the rise of ethnic nationalism in the US in particular during the Trump administration and more. The Trump administration that initiated the US-Taliban deal and the unconditional US military withdrawal that allowed the country to collapse has also been associated with the decline of the Liberal order and US leadership in it, which makes this an important exploratory topic to contribute to the wider debate of power politics on the international level.

¹ Rahimi, Lutfi. (July, 2022). *Beyond US Withdrawal: What Happened in Afghanistan*. p-3

Acknowledgements

In late August, amid political rifts in my country, I left my heart in Kabul to make my way through desperate crowds of fellow Afghan men, women, and children at Kabul airport in search of quality education and safety. The news of my enrollment at Bard College came to me when uncertainties tied with a situation of statelessness loomed in the air. The combination of academic and professional experiences since my enrollment here at Bard College has been greatly enriching. For that, it would be unfair of me not to acknowledge the Afghan community here at Bard College. I applaud them for their courage, admire them for their hopes, and appreciate them for their support for each other at this difficult juncture of our history.

In my first semester, I had the wonderful opportunity to attend a one semester exchange program, Bard Globalization and International Affairs together with Afghan students and students traveling from all over the world. Throughout this semester, I interned for Global Action to Prevent War, a UN-based transnational network of civil society, academic and diplomatic partners, focused on reducing the level of conflict and political violence across the globe. Last summer, I worked with 50 Afghan students between the ages of 14 to 18 who are recently here in the US with or without their families. I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge their talents despite the fact that we all have failed them as far as enabling them to access their fundamental human rights, including and particularly the right to education.

Lastly, I'd like to acknowledge the constructive role of my professors throughout my experiences here at Bard College and at the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul. In particular, my advisors, Prof. Michelle K. Murray, Prof. Aniruddha Mitra and Prof. Christopher McIntosh for their constructive feedback and their support.

Abstract

In the *Rise of the American System*, (2012), John Ikenberry contends that the US emerged victorious from the Cold War “as the world’s most powerful state and set about building an international order [based on the principles of democratic governance]” (2012)². Thus, at least partly, the end of the Cold War enabled the US to create an uncontested liberal order as well as in part due to the civic nationalist ideas rooted in the earlier debates of Western civilizations, the United States carried out a series of *Liberal Peace-Building* globalist projects across the world aimed to achieve political and economic liberalism to consolidate the US leadership in the world order designed post Cold War. This paper argues that the collapse of democracies around the world marks a steady decline of the Liberal order and the US leadership in it. To conceptualize this proposition, coupled with exploring the Trump administration’s America First policies, this paper examines the failure of the US-backed Afghan government to underscore the implication of dual American exceptionalism on the liberal order and democracies protected by it. Guided by American exceptionalism and liberal democratic theory, and meanwhile threatened by transnational terrorism, the US invaded Afghanistan to oust the Taliban and ensure that Al-Qaeda’s ability to carry out attacks against the US is paralyzed and curtailed. Not long after, in 2005, Zalmay Khalilzad said that: “the deep cultural divide in Afghanistan, the prevalence of tribalism, and the absence of any history of democratic governance are formidable obstacles to establishing a democratic regime.”³ After twenty years of liberal peace-building, the Trump administration entered into a bilateral peace agreement with the Taliban to end the longest American invasion. Spearheaded by Zalmay Khalilzad, the paradox of the *Afghan peace process* was that Trump’s administration was also guided by the idea of American exceptionalism, however one with a starkly different definition of American exceptionalism since post-Cold War consensus that reinforced the US leadership and the Liberal order.

Key Words: *Liberal Peace-Building Mission, Liberal Democracy, American Exceptionalism, Democratic Peace Theory, Liberal Oder World (LIO), Communism Containment*

² Ikenberry, G. John, (2012). "Five. The Rise of the American System". *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 159-220. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400838196-007>

³ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. (2021). Why the Afghan Government Collapsed. Retrieved from <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>

Methodologies

The purpose of this qualitative research paper is to examine the role of dual American exceptionalism in the decline of the liberal international order. The study will contribute to the contemporary debates on the role of the US in promoting democratic governance beyond America by examining how the political rifts in Washington impacts the US leadership in the world order. In order to do that, this study uses existing theories and literature on international order, liberal peace-building and democratic development to conceptualize the proposition that American exceptionalism, defined by ethnic strand of American politics, is detrimental for the achieved US leadership in the liberal order since post-Cold war. The case of democratizing Afghanistan is explored to underpin the shift in American foreign policy since the Trump administration and explore how Trump installed elements of ethnic nationalism in American foreign policy that contributes negatively to the prestige, recognition and reliability on the US part as a unipolar actor in the supposed liberal international order.

Research Design and Data Collection

This research will employ a qualitative and exploratory approach by collecting data involving the following main two methods: archival research and expert interviews. The archival research is to generate data by analyzing the primary and secondary sources on American exceptionalism, liberal international order, democratization and liberal peace-building as well as primary and secondary sources regarding the case of democratization of Afghanistan through post Bonn political settlement. The second approach is to gather data from the interviews and statements of national and international stakeholders in Afghanistan to explore the areas of the liberal peace-building mission relevant to this research.

Literature review

Studies on American exceptionalism and the US leadership in the liberal international world took a toll since the Trump administration. The concept of American exceptionalism has been a central theme in the history of American foreign policy. The notion that America is the utopian democracy, an example for others, is rooted in the earlier debates on the superiority of American and European civilization in comparison to others. Studies note that two strands of American exceptionalism have been traditionally shaping American foreign policy. First, since the Cold War, the United States justified, at home and abroad, American interventionism with the idea that

America must engage in democracy promotion across the globe to make it safe for the US to commercially, economically and politically engage with other actors on the international stage. However, since its inception, scholars have associated the Trump administration with the ethnic strand of American exceptionalism that prefers to disengage from world leadership and use America's position/power to pursue bilateral agreements that secure American interests. The literature on the Trump administration notes that the administration believed that the pillars of the liberal order, international nongovernmental organizations and democracy promotion projects have failed to reflect and protect the interests of the US.

Scholars such as John Mearsheimer (2018), Meera Sabaratnam (2011), John Ikenberry (2012) and more trace the role of American exceptionalism in the creation of the liberal order and argue that the US justified international interventionism in the wake of Cold War under the pretext of civic nationalist strand of American exceptionalism, while others such as Restad (2020) traces the fluidity in how American exceptionalism is defined and the author describes the Trump administration as a shift from the continuity in post-Cold War consensus on civic American exceptionalism. On the other hand, the US invasions disguised under the pretext of liberal peace-building mission is criticized by many scholars (for example, Meera Sabaratnam, 2011) for its shortcomings and limitations. Given this, the failure on the side of the US to protect the US-backed democracy in Afghanistan provides insight about the role of ethnic nationalism in the decline of liberal democracies and liberal international order. This coupled with exploring the Trump administration's *America First* policy sheds light on the negative correlation between the liberal international order and the ethnic nationalist strand of American exceptionalism.

Introduction

The liberal peace-building agenda is associated with the rise of American globalist pursuits to consolidate American leadership in the supposed liberal international order. Many scholars (Pugh, Cooler, and Goodhand 2004) defined the liberal peace-building mission as the “pursuit of conflict resolution, market sovereignty and liberal democracy” (Goodhand, 2011). In the article by Meera Sabaratnam titled “The Liberal Peace? An Intellectual History of International Conflict Management, 1990-2010”, Sabaratnam traces the intellectual history of the liberal peace building and marks the end of Cold War as the emergence of the “new world order” on the basis of the promotion of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism particularly in countries emerging from civil war or major national political transitions⁴. According to a prominent International relations scholar, John J. Mearsheimer, the rise of the United States as the victorious side in the Cold War marked the first international order (2018).⁵ Mearsheimer equates the end of the Cold War to the beginning of the first unipolar international order. At least until the end of the Cold War, the world was structured around two primary opposing ideas. The triumph of liberalism over communism positioned the United States at the center of the world order in the absence of any imminent competitor. According to Mearsheimer, international order is based on political and economic liberalism when structured by liberal democracies; thus, the embedding of democracy promotion, promotion of capitalist economies and integrating states into international institutions became the foundational goals of the US as a unipolar actor (2018).

The stance of IR scholars vary as far as the role of communism containment in the creation of the liberal international order is concerned. For example, Mearsheimer is of the view that the United States used communism containment to achieve its national, political and security objectives in the region. It goes without saying that the establishment of liberal democracies in many cases was allowed because of the communism containment aspect of American foreign policy amid the Cold War, which ultimately paved pathways for the US to dominate international affairs as a unipolar actor. Fukuyama, on the other hand, posits that the communism containment aspect of American foreign policy in the wake of the Cold War played a crucial role in the emergence of American unipolarity in the supposed liberal international order.⁶

The liberal international order is rooted in the earlier debates on the role of the US as an ideal form of democracy in the promotion of civil, economic and political liberalism.

⁴ Sabaratnam, M. (2011). ‘The Liberal Peace ? An Intellectual History of International Conflict Management, 1990-2010.’ In *A Liberal Peace ? The Problems and Practices of Peacebuilding*. Campbell, S., Chandler, D. and Sabaratnam, M. (Eds). New York, NY: Zed Books, pp. 13-27.

⁵ Mearsheimer, J. (2018). "The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities". p.20-40

⁶ Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press, 1992, pp. 42-43.

The purpose of the liberal order is to maintain the US unipolarity by protecting and promoting democracies (e.g. political and economic liberalism) abroad as well as integrating nation-states in transnational non-government organizations that promotes liberal ideas in order to make it safe for the US to continue to remain the hegemon in the current world.

Prominent scholar of democracies, Huntington in *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, divided the spread of democracies across the world in three waves, one of which was in the 1990s driven by a variety of reasons (1991)⁷. This paper notes that as a unipolar actor, the United States' engineering of nation and state-building across the world played a critical role in the *Third Wave* democratization across the globe. In addition, the idea that the US will assist countries that adopt democratic government alone had such an impact given that nation-states emerging from conflict wanted to bandwagon with unipolar power and enjoy the benefits of post-conflict aid packages from democracies alike

From its origins in the post-Cold War world to its contemporary manifestations in Iraq, Afghanistan and other international conflict management cases, the liberal building missions promised to local populations a system of democracy that values human freedom and dignity, constitutes inclusive, representative and accountable governance and provides a free-market economy. Largely channeled through military interventions/invasions and international non-state actors, United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and other transnational actors, the US efforts to protect the liberal international order requires for democracies to function in post-conflict societies because the liberal international order benefits from economic and political liberalism across the world. The inability of the liberal peace-building agenda to achieve its promises coupled with the counterinsurgency aspect of the US invasion proved problematic for democracies, for example, in Afghanistan.

During his speech in October 7, 2001, to oust Al-Qaeda terrorist network and the Taliban regime for harboring terrorists, President Bush announced the launching of a "military campaign" in Afghanistan in which he also famously stated: "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists"⁸. The liberal order allowed the President to make this statement in two ways. First, involvement of the UN in the Bonn conference signaled legitimacy for the US ambitions for the post-Bonn political settlement. This was coupled with the ambitions of the War on Terror project aimed to curtail terrorist networks such as Al-Qaeda. Second, as pointed out by Mearshimer, the dissolution of the Soviet Union is the first chapter of a world with a unipolar actor leading the world

⁷ Huntington, S. P. (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press.

⁸ Bush, George W. "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People." United States Capitol, Washington D.C., 7 Oct. 2001.

in the absence of imminent competition⁹. It is partly therefore that the United States could militarily intervene in global conflicts without major practical opposition.

Establishing liberal democracies across the world sparked mixed reactions. Initially, many post-conflict societies seemed to have established functional democracies with political legitimacy on the local level. However, later, many critics of the *liberal peace-building missions*, for example, Sabaratnam highlighted the limitations and shortcomings of the liberal peace, including its tendency to prioritize the interests of powerful states and international institutions over local actors as well as its failure to address the root causes of a conflict, and argued that these reactions marked the beginning of a steady liberal international order decline¹⁰ due to these tendencies. Thus, to argue that democratic governance is incompatible with and/or failed due to realities of the Afghan society is a mischaracterization of the role the shortcomings of the liberal peace-building model in democratic decline. Mischaracterizations of such natures backfired in many cases of international conflict management and should be explored independently.

The article is aimed to examine how fluidity in how American exceptionalism is defined at home contrasts with American globalist ideas to protect and assist nation-states that ascribe to the ideas of political and economic liberalism. The contemporary case of international conflict management in American history, the invasion of Afghanistan to oust the Taliban and eradicate Al-Qaeda is explored to underscore how this fluidity/change is detrimental to the liberal order achieved since the Cold War. By historicizing the US involvement in Afghanistan and examining the compatibility of democracies vice versa other forms of government to the social, political, and religious realities of Afghanistan, the aim is to debunk the argument that the tribal structure of Afghanistan was a formidable challenge against the efforts to democratize Afghanistan and, instead, argue that the tribal structure of Afghanistan has the potential to facilitate democratic form of government in Afghan society.

American Exceptionalism and Liberal Peace-Building Mission

As discussed, many scholars defined the liberal peace-building process as America's globalist ambitions to encourage particularly post-conflict states to ascribe to the idea of "market sovereignty and liberal democracy" (Goodhand, 2011), in addition to partnering with the US to eradicate transnational terrorism. In his essay, *The End of History*, Fukuyama translates the collapse of the Soviet Union and the post-Cold War international liberal order "to an unabashed victory of economic and political

⁹ Mearsheimer, John J. "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics." Norton, 2001.

¹⁰ Sabaratnam, M. (2011). 'The Liberal Peace ? An Intellectual History of International Conflict Management, 1990-2010.' In *A Liberal Peace ? The Problems and Practices of Peacebuilding*. Campbell, S., Chandler, D. and Sabaratnam, M. (Eds). New York, NY: Zed Books, pp. 13-27.

liberalism" which both lie at the center of civic nationalist foreign policy in the United States¹¹. The American foreign policy is heavily shaped by two ideologies, among which the civic nationalist perspectives emerged central at the end and amid the Cold War and defined America as an ideal example of the liberal democracy in the world that, therefore, is responsible for promoting liberal democracies across the world. Referred to as internationalist and interventionist, the civic nationalist perspective in the United States aligns with the goals of the liberal international order. As Mearsheimer argue, the liberal international order promoted the idea of integrating nation-states to international organizations, established and assistant states that ascribed to liberal democracies as well as economic liberalism¹². Civic nationalist narratives are rooted in the earlier debates on the superiority of American and European civilization in comparison to others. Consensus held that the United States, as an exceptional social, political and economic system, must spread liberal democracies across the world to make it safe for the US to engage in the format of commercial, political and social relationships with other nations.

From a Civic nationalist perspective, the American foreign policy's tendency to establish and promote liberal democracies across the globe as well as to protect nations that ascribe to similar ideals stems from the fact that democracies are considered friendly to the US leadership in the world.¹³ The Civic strand of American exceptionalism emerged as the dominant narrative in the post-Cold War US Foreign policy. The US administrations sought to promote liberal democracies across the world, show openness to trading by deregulations, and fostered the role of international organizations in mitigating and intervening in international conflict management. This strand of American exceptionalism has been closely linked to the idea of American leadership in the world, with the United States viewed as a beacon of hope and an exemplar for other countries to follow. In the US foreign policy, the role of the civic nationalist narratives are unprecedented after WWII, and in particular post and amid the Cold War. For example, during the Cold War, the US foreign policy assisted local resistances sparked against the communist influences across different regions. This, in turn, has been a stepping stone of the liberal International order since the US foreign policy promoted international engagement and promoted liberal institutions across the world.

The problematic here are two issues: one is the reaction to American globalist projects on the national and regional level. Second, the civic nationalist narratives in the US are predominantly contested by the ethnic nationalist strand of American exceptionalism. Restad wrote that the "World War II-rejection of the white supremacy of Nazism and

¹¹ Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press, 1992, pp. 42-43.

¹² Mearsheimer, John J. "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics." Norton, 2001.

¹³ Edward A, T. (12 Mar 2018). *Make America Great Again: Donald Trump and Redefining the U.S. Role in the World*. P-1-20

Fascism was an implicit rebuke of America's own ethnic nationalism".¹⁴ The second strand of American exceptionalism is predominantly on the basis of racial composition and, as far as American foreign policy is concerned, it entertains the idea of American isolationism. This strand holds, as Lothrop Stoddard wrote in 1920: "... America ... was founded by White men, who evolved institutions, ideals, and cultural manifestations, which were spontaneous of their racial temperament and tendencies".¹⁵ The supposed liberal order as we know it is created predominantly due to civic nationalist tendencies to promote values that reinforced the liberal international order, for example, the promotion of democracies abroad. Guided by this idea, the US has carried out international liberal peace-building campaigns across the globe to attempt to introduce post-conflict societies to democratic governance in order to establish and foster international economic and political liberalism. However, from ethnic nationalist standpoint, American exceptionalism is strengthened by isolating America and focusing on building democratic institutions abroad.

In the context of US leadership of the liberal order, American isolationism stands in stark contradiction to the liberal order as well as American unipolarity. When the United States wanted countries with territorial disputes, proxy warfare and regional rivalries to adopt a capitalist economic model and create regional and national connectivity, it is imperative that the United States as the unipolar actor lead by example. From an ethnic nationalist point of view, American exceptionalism is defined by (a) American excellence: the fact that America is created on the basis of liberal ideals, and therefore, must building strong institutions and effective governments to stand as an example of good governance and, (b) therefore, America must isolate and achieve her international objectives by projecting American excellence and power. This, in turn, is a practical hindrance to the implementation of the liberal peace-building missions abroad that is a critical component of the US leadership in the liberal order. That is, the ethnic nationalist strand of American administrations prefers to withdraw from supporting international organizations, transnational treaties as well as withdrawing US presence in the globe through liberal peace-building missions.

Traditionally, in the early republic, the ethnic nationalist strand of American exceptionalism was rooted in American foreign policy and described America's role in the world merely as an example of an ideal liberal democracy to look up to and preferred that the US should remain neutral in international politics. For example, Presidents would choose to remain neutral in any conflict happening in the world and President George Washington who declared neutrality of the United States in the

¹⁴ Restad, E. H. (2020). What Makes America Great? Donald Trump, National Identity, and U.S. Foreign Policy. Routledge. P-170-90.

¹⁵ Restad, E. H. (2020). What Makes America Great? Donald Trump, National Identity, and U.S. Foreign Policy. Routledge. P-170-90.

British-French conflict.¹⁶ Large part of American national identity is shaped by civic nationalist narrative that holds America as a country built around “a set of classically liberal ideas, rather than the “blood and soil” identity.¹⁷ Arguably, since President Woodrow Wilson and in the aftermath of the Cold War in particular, American exceptionalism aimed to design the order on the basis of the same “liberal ideas”. The competition between liberalism and communism ideologies on the international level required that the US establish engagement on the international level aiming to foster economic and political liberalism are good examples, and two explicit productions of the civic nationalist perspectives that have been shaping America’s international engagement, especially since the Cold War.

The correlation between the decline of the liberal order and the rise of ethnic nationalist perspectives at home are best seen from the continuity and change standpoint. Post-cold war consensus held that the US must take a leadership role in the liberal order by fostering and protecting democracies and international organizations. However, this consensus is opposed in the US today due to the rise of ethnic nationalism at home. The Trump administration in 2016 is closely associated with and understood as an administration shaped by this standpoint. This article contributes to the debate on how the Trump presidency affected America’s status in the liberal international order to underscore the inherent contradiction between the liberal international order and the ethnic strand of American exceptionalism that promotes, namely, American isolationism. That is, as Ilya Prizel rightly argues, national identity not only defines/engineers the relationship between the citizens and the government but also between the government and the world (1998, p.19). It is particularly true for the United States, taking into account the role of liberal ideas in creating a national identity for a country known to be created by immigrants.

Trump administration and Liberal International Order: Ethnic nationalist perspectives shaping American exceptionalism and America’s Foreign Policy

To understand why states act the way they do, as John Mearsheimer describes, one must note that the international system is based on survival, or as Waltz describes it as an anarchic system.¹⁸ The concept of security dilemma sheds light on the fact that one state's attempt to survive is likely perceived as a threat to another. Therefore, powerful states continue to assert dominant aspects of the international realm while weak states seek to bandwagon with powerful ones to ensure survival. Among a variety of factors, namely the limitation of the liberal-peace building mission and the imperialist aspects of the US foreign policy, and the pandemic, many contenders are discussing the role of

¹⁶ Edward A, T. (12 Mar 2018). Make America Great Again: Donald Trump and Redefining the U.S. Role in the World. P-1-20

¹⁷ Restad, E, H. (2020). What Makes America Great? Donald Trump, National Identity, and U.S. Foreign Policy. Routledge. P-170-90.

¹⁸ Mearsheimer, John J. "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics." Norton, 2001.

the Trump administration in the stark decline of US influence and recognition across the world.

Importantly, many contributors of the literature of LIO— (Abrams, 2017; Brands, 2017; Global Affairs special issue 2020; Mac-Donald, 2018; Mead, 2017; Porter, 2018)— identify a trend in continuity and change in American foreign policy. Based on continuity, America continues to globalize and democratize nation-states to remain leader of the liberal order and an unchallenged unipolar actor able to have presence across the world. From a realist perspective, powerful actors must remain in perpetual struggle of increasing their capacities as a self-defense mechanism. From an American perspective, hence, the liberal order provided the United States with the guarantee of no imminent competition.

On the contrary, the *America First* populist appeal of the Trump presidency marked a radical departure from maintaining the liberal international order to American isolationism. Two important components of the American globalist ambitions paved the way for the liberal order, which are preferred to be changed in the US foreign policy shaped by the ethnic nationalist strand of American exceptionalism. On the one hand, the US engaged in international conflict management to encourage post-conflict societies and/or impose on them economic and political liberalism is believed to have failed to protect and advance American interests. On the other hand, the second component of the liberal order justified the US engagement in contemporary conflict management cases. In his famous essay, "*The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*", Huntington noted that the series of emerging democracies had various reasons, including economic benefits as part of the democratization packages. Therefore, the promotion of international organizations and integrating nation-states to these organizations have been critical in the creation of the liberal order.¹⁹ From an ethnic nationalist standpoint, these organizations have failed to achieve the best outcome for the US and therefore America must pursue bilateral agreements to achieve American interest through projecting power.

For example, Trump's *America First* rhetoric is considered to have had great implications as far as US leadership in the world is concerned, as well as on the recognition liberal order across the world since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As discussed, also emphasized by Huntington, the liberal order attracted many nation-states because recognizing the US as the sole power and adopting democracies attracted funding, support and importantly recognition. This, in turn, is an important element in the recognition and positioning of the United States as a unipolar actor leading the global order.

¹⁹ Huntington, S. P. (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press.

Edward, in his essay, —*What Makes America Great: Donald Trump and Redefining the U.S. Role in the World*—contributes to the debate on the Trump administration’s ethnic nationalist rhetoric that affected the continuity aspect of the liberal order by “analyzing Trump’s America First policy platform through the prism of ethnic versus civic nationalism”.²⁰ From the inception of his presidential campaign until his days in office, Trump criticized American globalism projects, including nation-building and democracy promotion; he also claimed that the international organizations have also failed to advance US interests abroad, and contended that broadly the liberal order has failed to benefit American interests at home and abroad. In his article, *Make America Great again: Donald Trump and Redefining the U.S. Role in the World*, (2018) Edward noted that the Trump administration believed that the US led internationalism is resulting in “an exploding trade deficit, borders unprotected, U.S. sovereignty surrendered to international institutions, and the United States ill-advised democracy promotion to countries that did not want it or could not make it work”.²¹

As noted by Paul K. Macdonald in “American First? *Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump’s Foreign Policy*”, six cases by the Trump administration have pushed American foreign policy to a new direction according to his campaign promises, which also illustrates the inherent contradictions between liberal order and ethnic nationalism in American politics. These shifts are namely “travel ban targeting Muslim-majority countries... declaration [of] withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)”, withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Paris Climate Accords, and abandoning liberal peace-building missions, including and particularly in Afghanistan, are part of the equation²². Considering the importance of the two pillars of the liberal order, the international organizations and the democracy promotion component of it, a change in the American foreign policy is detrimental for the position of the US in the liberal order.

From the civic nationalist standpoint, the **first** key reason why *America First* rhetoric was against the Liberal is because it preferred change over continuity. For America foreign policy, *America First* means a radical departure from America’ international engagements, and as well as shifting from multilateralism to bilateralism which is against fundamental pillars of the liberal order. The Trump administration, for instance, claimed that the international organizations have failed to reflect on American interests abroad, and therefore argued that America can benefit more from bilateral agreements due to its economic, political and military standings that can be used as a bargaining chip. In addition, America First rhetoric went in stark contradiction against values

²⁰ Edward A, T. (12 Mar 2018). *Make America Great Again: Donald Trump and Redefining the U.S. Role in the World*. P-1-20

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²² Macdonald, P. K. (2019). *American First? Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump’s Foreign Policy*. *International Journal*, 74(1), 1-17.

globalized amid democracy promotion; for example, this rhetoric suggested that the US should distance itself from International institutions which are protecting American interests, or at least, American ideals abroad.²³ Guided by ethnic nationalist strand, America's ban on Muslims, slamming of NATO, UN, WTO and more signaled that America is no longer interested in leading the liberal order, which in turn provides space for other powers to emerge, increase influence and contest the American unipolarity.

The **second** important way in which Trump's America First rhetoric was against the liberal order was through his rejection of democratic norms that were fundamental for the reputation of US leadership, as well as the liberal order and emerging democracies in it. Point being, the America First rhetoric is widely argued to consist of Islamophobic elements for example. Restad draws parallel similarities between European far-right movements and Trump administration's policies as far as the treatment of Muslim citizens or immigrants are concerned, and argues that both of these rhetorics have elements of Huntingtonian view of conflict of religions (2020). Quoting, Geidner (2018), Restad provides the Muslim ban as an example in which the Trump administration called for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on".²⁴ This ban combined with hate speech seen by officials of the Trump administration and Trump himself has created a lot of distrust and disrupted the reputation of the liberal order and the US leadership in it.

The **third** key way in which Trump's America First rhetoric was against the liberal order was through his rejection of the US military presence and, thus, liberal peace-building missions abroad. This contradiction is relevant to the decline of liberal order in so many ways. As noted by Paul K. Macdonald in "*American First? Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump's Foreign Policy*", the author posits that Trump's bombing campaigns aligned with the civic nationalist strand, assuming that it benefited the liberal order by eradicating transnational terrorism. This article argues that the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan marked what I coin as the accelerated decline of liberal order for three reasons. First, the promotion of democracies requires the US to gain trust and attract countries to democratization. Failure to establish a sustainable democracy in Afghanistan, which the US promoted as the "good war", has signaled the failure of the US to understand post-conflict societies and advance the type of democracies suitable on a case by case basis.

Taking into consideration backlashes to Trump's *America First* at home and abroad, the overarching effects of the COVID-19 on global economy, the rise of populism at home as

²³ Restad, E. H. (2020). What Makes America Great? Donald Trump, National Identity, and U.S. Foreign Policy. Routledge. P-90-110.

²⁴ Restad, E. H. (2020). What Makes America Great? Donald Trump, National Identity, and U.S. Foreign Policy. Routledge. P-90-110.

well as the failures of the liberal peace-building missions abroad have caused significant disruptions to the legitimacy of US-led Liberal order, therefore enabling competition on the international stage, notably, raising China and Russian urge to re-emerge as a major international actor. In IR, all actors but powerful ones in particular want to be recognized. Theories of the security dilemma posits that because a state's survival depends on power, states thus want to portray a powerful image to the rest. One can argue that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is an explicit example of how Russia wants to be recognized as a major power in the current world. For example, on April 29, 2021, during a United Nations Security Council meeting on Ukraine, the Russian ambassador to the UN, drew a parallel between the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the US-led war on Iraq ("Russia's ambassador to the UN draws comparison between Iraq and Ukraine", 2021). From an American perspective, doesn't this follow the logic of *if you can do it, so can I* - and therefore challenging America's authority on a global level?

Third, in his essay, *Make America Great again: Donald Trump and Redefining the U.S. Role in the World*, (2018) Edward wrote:

"The election of Donald Trump challenges the progressive narrative of the United States at home and abroad. Trump's continued support among voters despite repeated racist remarks, the stoking of white supremacist fears, and an inability to stand up for the 'American Creed' at home (Serwer, 2019) and liberal values abroad (Deyermond, 2020; Posen, 2018) indicates the continued strength of ethnic nationalism in the United States (Holland & Fermor, 2020). Clearly, American national identity is not simply Hartz' "liberal tradition" of high-minded civic ideals."

Clearly, the Trump administration has marked a rise in the ethnic nationalist strand of American exceptionalism which goes in stark contradiction with the US leadership abroad, and has fragmented US politics here at home.

To explore how abandoning the liberal peace-building mission in Afghanistan by the Trump administration in light of the competition posed by China and Russia is an interesting approach to contribute to the debate on the negative correlation between the ethnic nationalist politics here in the US and US leadership in the liberal order. In the absence of civic nationalist standpoints, the US foreign policy assumes that promoting democracies does no good to American interests abroad. In other words, this is to say that the ethnic nationalist strand of American politics is of the view that the US leadership in the liberal order has failed to achieve American interests at best. Thus, the US must disengage from liberal peace-building missions, and negotiate with state as well as organizations bilaterally. To underscore this mischaracterization, the United States' decision to end the Longest War in American History abroad is an interesting exploration considering its initiation under an administration whose foreign policy is

shaped by American isolationism and/or ethnic nationalist strand of American exceptionalism.

Afghanistan in 1979: Soviet Union Invasion and Increasing American Attention

The rise of American globalist pursuit is rooted in the earlier debates on the superiority of the American and European civilization in comparison to the 'rest'. This globalist pursuit coupled with American power paved the way for American unipolarity and the creation of the liberal international order. It is critical to note that the globalist pursuit of America is advanced by civic nationalist narratives in the US. According to this standpoint, as an exceptional role model, America must engage in the international politics to spread liberal democracies across the globe to (a) make it safe for the US to commercially, politically and socially engage with the rest of the world and (b) ensure that political and economic liberalism is adopted by post-conflict societies and societies under the influence of other ideologies, communism for example. Therefore, many scholars have flagged out the importance of communism containment in the creation of the liberal international order.

The absence of democracies across the world, the mistrust created due to the limitations and shortcomings of the liberal peace-building missions combined with the Trump administration's slamming of the components of the liberal order has created room for other ideologies to influence post-conflict societies. This, in turn, allows for alternative regional orders that makes American unipolarity in danger. From the recognition lens, American unipolarity is advanced due to the fact that democratic nations across the world recognize the US as the leader of the liberal order. The absence, reversal and collapse of democratic regimes are therefore detrimental for the US leadership in the world from an economic, political and recognition standpoint. Considering this, historicizing the US involvement in Afghanistan sheds light on the importance of recognition and fostering of democracies and economic liberalism for the US leadership and the liberal international order.

For the context, it is noteworthy to mention that one purpose of this paper is to debunk the assumption that the US invasion failed to establish a democratic governance in Afghanistan due to its social structures, i.g. the tribal *blood and soil* based community structures as well as due to the cultural polarity of Afghanistan as a nation-state. For example, in 2005 in an interview, Zalmay Khalilzad who was appointed by the Trump administration as the *U.S. Peace Envoy to Afghanistan* to play a key role in the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan said that: "the deep cultural divide in Afghanistan, the prevalence of tribalism, and the absence of any history of democratic governance are formidable obstacles to establishing a democratic regime." By historicizing American involvement in Afghanistan, the objective of this paper is to shed light on the fact that Afghan society is comparatively more hostile, resistant and reactionary to regimes that

emerge in the absence of democracy, i.g. communism and totalitarianism, and in fact, the traditionally built social structures of Afghan society are more compatible to democratic forms of governance.

The Evolution of Afghan Foreign Policy

One of the most prominent features of the contemporary world is the emergence of the nation-state as a dominant political actor in international relations. Countries like Afghanistan, unable to sustain themselves, have borrowed or were imposed on the western concept of statecraft as part of their post-independence and post-conflict political realities. As debated, the Westphalian model of nation-states is often based on the principle of state's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The defense of sovereignty and territorial integrity for fragile states come with a cost. Fragile states, as described by the theories of security dilemma, bandwagon with stronger states to seek protection. The Afghan nation-state is traditionally exposed to majoritarianism and elitism, consumed by corruption, insecurity and regional resistance to weak central power. On an international level, the liberal international order integrated weak states to political and economic liberalism in turn for protecting central governments in the face of these threats. In his article *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, Kagan contended that the containment of communism in the US foreign policy "was a necessary condition for the creation of the liberal international order."²⁵ Therefore, to understand the regional aspect of the reaction to the US globalist project in Afghanistan, this paper attempts to historicize the role of the Cold-War in exposing Afghanistan to regional and international rivalries, and making a distinction between caused rebellions and inevitable rebellions to understand the nature of the local resistance to the US efforts to democratize Afghanistan.

Traditionally, as a nation-state, Afghan foreign policy was characterized by the elements of neutrality in its foreign relations—(Maley, 2002, Rashid, 2000)—and for example, particularly during the Musahiban dynasty, Afghanistan's foreign policy remained neutral and was guided by the principle of non-alignment.²⁶ The *Musahiban dynasty* is widely recognized for its relative sustainability as a democratic government in Afghanistan. This dynasty is therefore a crucial exploration in this paper for two primary reasons. **First**, during the Musahiban dynasty, Afghan foreign policy followed the non-alliance principles, which changed when Daoud Khan orchestrated a coup to

²⁵ (Kagan, Robert. *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*. Vintage, 2009.

²⁶ Maley, W. (2002). *Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Modern History*. Routledge.

Rubin, B. R. (1995). *The search for peace in Afghanistan: From buffer state to failed state*. Yale University Press.

Roy, O. (1986). *Islam and resistance in Afghanistan*. Cambridge University Press.

oust the reign of the Musahiban dynasty and steered Afghan foreign policy towards establishing and maintaining relationships with rising powers in light of his ambitions to get Afghanistan recognized as a major regional power (Rubin, 1995). **Second**, the Musahiban dynasty is an example of a democratic body that maintained a weak but relatively stable government from 1929 to 1973 in Afghanistan. In the aftermath of British rule, and the creation of Afghan nation-states, state authority is challenged because of the imbalance in center-periphery relationships – (Rubin, 1995) – and one of the key ways the Musahiban dynasty was sustainable was because it incorporated, or in other words, institutionalized, the tribal structure of the Afghan society and maintained relationships with local communities instead of alienating them. In part, taking this into consideration, this paper argues that institutionalization of Afghanistan’s tribal and religious institutions increases the likelihood of effective and efficient service delivery, improved center-periphery relationships and coordinations, and ultimately the likelihood of establishing and maintaining a politically legitimate democratic system – which is discussed in detail in the last section of this paper.

After introducing Afghanistan to Cold War, Daoud Khan’s regime – characterized by change in the Afghan foreign policy and its relations in particular with the Soviet Union – faced strong opposition originated by the two factions of the *People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan* (PDPA), the *Khalqis* and the *Parchamists* inspired by Marxist and Communist ideologies. In the article titled *Afghanistan: The first five years of Soviet occupation*, (2013), Amstutz wrote that “in mid-1978, the PDPA seized power in a coup, but faced national resistance originated by the two PDPA factions, the *Khalqis* and the *Parchamists*, which were united in their commitment” but the deep fragmentations and factions in the party encouraged/allowed the Soviet Union to carry-out a brutal invasion of Afghanistan under the pretext of protecting the central Communist government in Afghanistan (p-20). Prior to it, Daoud Khan, motivated by mitigating the splits between these two factions of the *PDPA*, wanted to steer Afghanistan to the direction of the United States in order to secure its survival. According to a report from the U.S. Department of State’s Office of the Historian, – despite mistrust particularly on Daoud Khan’s relationship with the Soviets, the US provided limited financial support to Daoud’s regime. It wouldn’t be unfair to assume that the goal of steering Afghanistan away from the Soviet’s influence to bandwagoning with the United States was to consolidate the power of the regime against threats posed to it by these two factions. Even then, the United States continued to keep their diplomatic relationship and fundings to Afghanistan limited²⁷.

²⁷ S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978–1980," accessed April 20, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/soviet-invasion-afghanistan>.

Prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the American leadership was highly contested due to the competition posed by communist influence across the globe. It is contended that the NATO expansion coupled with communism containment paved pathways for the US to eradicate competition and achieve American hegemony. Tarrow (2011) characterized social movements as "non-institutional" associations that are created for the purpose of social change, while somewhat similarly, Soule (2009, p.6) defined social movements as non-institutional association of people aiming to resist or reinforce existing structures of authority, which is a discussion important to explore as far as distinctions between reactions to democratization verse non-institutional reactions to other forms of governance in Afghanistan are concerned.²⁸ Scholars of social movements are in consensus that religion plays a critical role in the creation of such movements, and the reaction in response to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan is a great example. Two predominantly important characteristics of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan played a key role in their ultimate defeat as well as in incentivizing non-institutional opposition to the Soviet influences and presence in Afghanistan.

First, in part, democratic government is suitable to the cultural realities of Afghanistan because it could accommodate the diverse approach of practicing religion, culture and life in general. For more context, Smith defines nation-states as a "named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths, and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (Barrington, 1997, p. 3). While Afghans are a part of the nation-state as a collective, they are also a member of *blood and soil* based communities within the country. Each of these communities uphold diverse cultural values that determine their livelihood and priorities. As pointed out by Gurpreet Mahajan, for example, cultural preservation is considered as a matter in the private realm of individuals.²⁹ This is to say that the nation-states with liberal democracies tend to keep matters at the individual realm untouched for it to grow and prosper, which accommodates such diversity created due to the fact that Afghanistan's different regions have been historically under control of various types of cultures and governments.

One can categorize the reaction to communist ideologies and Soviet Union's invasion as movement and non-institutional association of a network of people aiming to change the existing status quo. Although supported by regional and international stakeholders, the Afghan Mujahideen resisted any communist influence due to its stark contradiction with the cultural and religious values of the Afghan society. For example, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent communist regime is characterized due to

²⁸ Almeida, P., & C. Chase-Dunn. 2018. "Globalization and Social Movements." *Annual Review of Sociology* 44: 189-211.

²⁹ Mahajan, Gurpreet. "Cultural Diversity and Its Relevance for Political Theory." *Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1-22. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40864494. Accessed 20 April 2023.

its suppression and exclusion of religion and culture which as a result alienated the public from the state in Afghanistan. In the *Empires of mud: Wars and warlords in Afghanistan*, (2009), Giustozzi, a scholar on Afghanistan, noted that the Soviet installed communist setup banned religion education, closed Madrasas and separated the government and religion (p.77). These are the two primary reasons behind the local resistance to communist influence in Afghanistan.

Second, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 is characterized by brutal Soviet military campaigns and air engagements for the purposes of eradicating villages. According to Antonio Giustozzi, the number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan reached around 115,000 in early 1985.³⁰ As far as brutal military campaigns are concerned, according to William Maley, the Soviet carried out indiscriminate bombing of the villages and executed suspected opposition—(1998, p. 98)—much like any communist regime if you are either state and/or *party* or against the state and/or *party*. The use of violence instigated in Afghan communities as a sense of fighting a common enemy to protect culture, religion and the sovereignty of the Afghanistan state. Exploring these two elements of the Soviet invasion sheds light on the fact that the absence of democratic government allows for subnational level factions to emerge, and contest for power using religious instrumentalization.

Two important characteristics of the liberal peace-building mission in Afghanistan are important to make a distinction between the reaction against Russian invasion versus the reaction against US invasion post-2001. Kantian and Hegelian philosophers are rooted in the civic nationalist perspective of American exceptionalism. For example, in his essay "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," Kant argued that "the civil constitution of every state should be republican...the law of nations shall be founded on a federation of free states" (Kant, 1795). Since its inception as a unipolar actor, the United States used this theory as a dominant framework for international conflict management and justified a range of invasions under the pretext of peacekeeping, peace building and state-building missions. In the wake of communist and liberal rivalries, persuaded by civic nationalist strand of American politics, the US financed warring factions of the Afghan Mujahideen from 1979 to 1992, notably to oust the competition posed to the liberal order due to Russian influence across the region. As established, the ethnic nationalist strand of America's domestic policy has had and continues to have a contingent relationship with the US leadership in the world. To illustrate, the US had little experience in nation building as well as state-building missions abroad due to her traditionally isolationist foreign policy. In part, this is the reason why the US abandoned Afghanistan and assumed that the failure of the USSR to establish communist regime in

³⁰ Giustozzi, A. (2009). *Empires of mud: Wars and warlords in Afghanistan*. Columbia University Press, p.77.

Afghanistan paved the way for consolidating liberal order and preventing challenges posed to the US leadership due to transnational terrorism.

US invasion and the failure of 20 years of Liberal peace-building Agenda in Afghanistan

The United States foreign policy appetite to strategically engage in Afghanistan exponentially grew in light of the communist containment policy as part of the overarching objective to establish and solidify the liberal order. As noted by Soule, social movements are characterized by the objective to achieve and maintain sovereignty of nation-states (2009, p-6). The Afghan people, devastated by the Soviet military campaign and alienating policies of the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul, organized violent movements to oust the red army and central government in Kabul. Fighting asymmetrical warfare through unorganized groups of Jihadist, the Afghan Mujahideen was covertly supported by the CIA through different informal structures and middlemen, which played a critical role in Mujahideen's victory to oust the red army from Afghanistan.

As a result of political fractions between the groups supported by the US against communist influence in Afghanistan, the Taliban emerged as *de facto* regime in Afghanistan that followed a fundamentalist ideology which allowed terrorist organizations to gain ground in Afghanistan and subsequently the Taliban to take a defiant position against the US and in favor of Al-Qaeda leadership. By 1992 – taking the attacks on Gold Mohair Hotel in Yemen against stationed US troops and bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 – brought about great attention to fundamentalist regimes across the world, particularly the Taliban of Afghanistan. Following this, as the most powerful state in the world, the US was outraged by the tragic attacks of September 9/11 as well as the threats posed by *rogue states to the US* national security as well as US interests abroad. On 19 September 2001, Bush administration announced United States commitments to fight terrorism and states that sponsor or facilitate terrorism:

Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with Terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to support or harbor terrorism will be regarded by the U.S. as a hostile regime (Sardar, 2012, p-2).

In 2001 in particular, the studies on why states fail captured dramatic attention when the US leadership was threatened by transnational terrorism. The United Nations—illustrated by the UN Secretary General's High-level Panel Report on 'Threats, Challenges and Change'—held that fragile states are regarded as one of the "six most pressing threats" in the global arena (United Nations, 2004). For example, Clement argues that fragile states must address four major causes that consume the

abilities of the state to govern properly and legitimately, which is discussed in the next section as we delve deeper into the causes of the failure of democracy in Afghanistan. However, to put into perspective, consider the fact that stagnant states are heavily backed by both developed states and international organizations. Given this, Tilly argues that sudden changes within the international community and preferences of the states is an important cause of the state collapse as well as the reconstruction of a fragile state (Clement, 2005, p. 8).

The article "Analysing US Objectives in Afghanistan: Countering Terrorism to Promoting Democracy" sheds light on two stages of the US foreign policy evolution towards Afghanistan (Sardar, 2012). **Firstly**, guided by Bush Doctrine, the Bush administration proclaimed that the invasion of Afghanistan is the only viable option to prevent the use of Afghan soil by wide-ranging networks of terrorists perpetuating attacks against mainly the US and broadly the West. Prior to any military engagement in Afghanistan, the Bush administration gave the *de facto* Taliban regime in Afghanistan the following ultimatum:

"Deliver to the U.S. authorities all the leaders of al-Qaeda who hide in your land, release all foreign nationals including American citizens, you have unjustly imprisoned. Protect foreign journalists, diplomats and aid workers in your country. Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, and hand over every terrorist, and every person in support structure, to appropriate authorities. Give the U.S. full access to terrorist camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating."

The defiant position of the Taliban in support of the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization against the US ultimately resulted in the announcement of a military campaign to oust the Taliban and Al-Qaeda presence in Afghanistan. In the context of US approach in Afghanistan, the War on Terror composed a minimalist objective to eradicate the transnational terrorist networks using the Afghan soil to target broad the interests of the West and American national security. This minimal objective remained at the core of the liberal peace-building process in Afghanistan, which backfired throughout the last 20 years of war in Afghanistan. **Subsequently, and secondly**, guided by the civic nationalist strand of American nationalism and facilitated due to the components of the liberal order, e.g. international organizations such as the UN, the United States mission in Afghanistan evolved from eradicating terrorism to designing a democratic political settlement between the warring factions in order to build a "meritocratic administrative structure" aimed to promote political, civil and economic liberalism in Afghanistan (Mehran, 2018, p1).

Many studies—(Ebenstein, 1910-1976; Nelson, 2004; Clement, 2005)—discuss major challenges and causes of the failure of weak states. Critics of the liberal peace-building missions have criticized the liberal peace-building mission for failing to address these challenges, and additionally for having counterproductive elements as well. One of the causes of consumed ability to govern, for example, Clement coins the informal structure of power distribution and/or “mobilization of advanced groups” (2019, p. 6). The Bonn conference in the aftermath of the US invasion provided opportunities for flourishing a democratic government in Afghanistan. Traditionally, Afghan politics consist of de jure and de facto power structures, which constitutes a classic problem for states emerging from civil war. Taking the Jihad against red army and United States’ support to Afghan Mujahideen as part of the communism containment policy in mind, many subnational actors had acquired great levels of power and network within the Afghan society and continued to use them in a struggle for power and self-interest.

In the post-2001 Bonn conference, the United States faced the question of transitional justice; one that is a classic conundrum in post-conflict statebuilding. Instead of addressing the cause-roots of this challenge, and strengthening rule of law in the face of subnational actors, the Bonn conference integrated these actors to the post-Bonn political settlement in Afghanistan. The social unrest in Afghanistan, seen through the lens of class struggle, between elites and ordinary citizens, shed light on the deepened social divide created due to this approach. For example, in her Book *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (2014), Dr. Dipali addresses this classic problem by defining warlords, a term dear to many Afghan observers, and by unpacking the court-like informal networks of power distribution, and state-manhood. Later known as *warlords* in American dictionaries, these actors became partners of the United States in eradicating the de facto government of the Taliban as the United States invaded Afghanistan.

In *Beyond US withdrawal: What Happened in Afghanistan*, Dr. Lutfi analyzes the insurgency against the US-backed democracy through the lenses of “grievances” to shed light on the fact that economic, social and political grievances coupled with dysfunctional governance allowed for the insurgency to grow and propagate for the purposes of recruitment and de-legitimizing democracy in Afghanistan. Seen from the lens of grievances, the inclusion of these actors within state institutions was one of the fundamental reasons for the economic, social and political grievances. Essentially, one of the components of a state is to provide basic services to all citizens. The inclusion of the elite class allowed these actors to distribute state resources to the people that associated with them, and hence alienated the Afghan populace by creating disbelief in the post-Bonn political settlement.

Seen from the grievance standpoint, one can argue that it is a mischaracterization to assume that the Taliban's insurgency gained momentum due to their opposition to the democratization of Afghanistan. Critics of the liberal peace-building mission have criticized it for failing to address the root-causes of the insurgency. In a USIP report, *Thwarting Afghanistan's insurgency*, a pragmatic approach toward peace and reconciliation, Stanekzai described the cause-roots of the insurgency in Afghanistan along geographical lines of "regional, national and local" level as well as "more abstract lines of religion, ethnicity, and family."³¹ For example, the report description of a cause-root of the conflict on a local level claimed that:

"Family disputes and feuds are an additional cause of conflict in Afghanistan and mostly involve issues of marriage and shared property. In some cases, ISAF has been intentionally misled by locally hired individuals in the middle of a personal or familial dispute. For example, such individuals have been known to falsely accuse their rivals of having links with al Qaeda, knowing that their homes will be searched or that they will be arrested. Such circumstances in which innocent parties are treated unjustly or unfairly have the unintended effect of damaging the image of the international forces and government in the eyes of Afghans and creating further space for the insurgents."³²

In his book *"Counterinsurgency,"* Kilcullen claimed that US inclination toward militarily dealing with the re-emergence of the Taliban instead of, for example, addressing the problems of social unrest created due to the failure of the Afghan government to do its job was a strategic mistake on the US part.³³ For example, the War on Terror component of the liberal peace-building mission is often associated with the latter characteristic of the USSR invasion in Afghanistan. According to Chris Woods to a report titled *The Covert Drone War* by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, while the US combat mission came to an end in 2015, the US alone carried out "1012 reported strikes" often as part of counter-terrorism objectives.

As a non-institutional movement in the form of an insurgency, the Taliban have continued to propagate that the *raison d'être* of the unconventional warfare carried out by this group is solely for the reason of expelling foreign troops in Afghanistan. The group had insisted that the democratic state established by the US goes starkly against the cultural and religious values of Afghans. Moghadam (2013) argued that social movements inspired by religious arguments continue to be significant in world politics. The ability of the Taliban to instrumentalize religion to continuously recruit insurgents is less because of the incompatibility of democracy with Islam and Afghan cultural values (in its broadest sense), and as well as its incompatibility with the tribally

³¹ Stanekzai, M. M. (2008). *Thwarting Afghanistan's Insurgency: A Pragmatic Approach Toward Peace and Reconciliation*. p.2-8

³² Stanekzai, M. M. (2008). *Thwarting Afghanistan's Insurgency: A Pragmatic Approach Toward Peace and Reconciliation*. p.2-8

³³ Kilcullen, D. (2010). *Counterinsurgency*. Oxford University Press.

structured Afghan society, but more because of the counter-terrorist tactics carried out to eliminate both the Taliban as well as other international terrorist organizations operating from Afghanistan.

In addition, the US withdrawal to end *America's longest war* abroad failed to consider the strategic importance of democracy for the Liberal order and the US leadership as China rises and Russia wants to get recognized as a major competing powerful actor. Struck by Trump whose administration is associated with raising ethnic nationalism in the US, the US-Taliban agreement—signed on February 29, 2020 in Doha—demanded the Taliban's adherence to counterterrorism commitments in the light of the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan (Jazeera, 2020). One important component of the liberal order the US failed to include in the deal is ensuring and protecting the democratic state structure of the post-US withdrawal government in Afghanistan, which, in turn, plays a contributing role in the decline that occurs with the expansion of Chinese or Russian influence in Afghanistan, as well as due to the fact that the government of Afghanistan, in principles, is more inclined to recognizing other types of international order.

Given this, did democracy fail in Afghanistan due to, to borrow Zalmay Khalilzad's words, "the deep cultural divide in Afghanistan, the prevalence of tribalism and the absence of any history of democratic governance" or due to the inability of the state consumed by itself as well as other multiple causes? In his article, *Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-conflict Peacebuilding Processes*, Timothy Donais addresses the elephant in the room for peace-building packages, which is that it lacks political legitimacy due to the fact that it is engineered abroad and implemented on a local population (2009, p.1-10). To provide a legitimate basis for such a political settlement, the United States took two major approaches to building political legitimacy to the post-Bonn democratic setup, which in a nutshell are electoral democracy (free and fair elections) and reconstruction efforts (*winning hearts and minds*).

Was the public will manifested in the elections? Did the government succeed in providing infrastructure, health and education, jobs and security to win political legitimacy in the case of fraudulent elections and political factions? Analyzing these two questions—in light of the approaches taken in Afghanistan for winning political legitimacy—will shed light on another side of the coin: democratic forms of government are rooted in the traditional structure of Afghan society. From efforts of King Amanullah Khan in 1919 to 1929 until its contemporary examples during Khan Zahir Shah, one can characterize Afghanistan as a country eager to enable itself to connect with the region and the world through trading, and has a strategic importance in connecting Central Asia with Indian sub-continent as well as South Asia. However, the efforts have always remained conditioned on how the democratic political setting could

accommodate the religious, ethnic, and cultural diversities of Afghanistan, and importantly, conditioned on whether or not the state has been able to institutionalize the de facto or informal power structure in Afghanistan. For example, the success of King Zahir Shah's three decades of *democracy* is often attributed to the government's success in including the tribal element of Afghan society in the government.

Election and Service Delivery: the Question of Political Legitimacy in Afghanistan

Elections: Was the public will manifested and reflected in the Afghan elections?

In the aftermath of the fall of Taliban, electoral democracy made one of the two major approaches for collecting political legitimacy to the post-Bonn political setup (Coburn, 2015, p.1). For historians and political theorists, the primary method of distinguishing legitimate governments from illegitimate ones is through focusing on a "wide public participation and ensuring procedural regularity, especially provisions dealing with majority rule, minority rights, and accountability in regular and frequent elections" (Weatherford, 1992, p.150). Moreover, even Rothstein who challenged the idea of electoral democracy as means to establish legitimacy has endorsed Beetham's argument in which he contended that people will accept a leader for many reasons, of which one is a "fair and procedural mechanism" for election (Rothstien, 2009, p.313). Among the United States' missions in Afghanistan, Afghan citizens and international stakeholders, hopes for a democratic regime stemmed from the fact that the elections will achieve a democratic government which represents the will of the public.

However, in the article "Analyzing US Objectives in Afghanistan: Countering Terrorism to Promoting Democracy", the author provides a historical account of the fraudulent elections, the absence of political parties, disputes on election results, insecurity and lack of infrastructure which ultimately resulted in public disbelief in Afghan democracy as the Taliban continued to gain momentum. Among the local population in particular, at least after a few elections, this approach clearly failed to attract public will to support the government. This is because despite the involvement of the UN and other international organizations, there was a lack of transparency, many occurrences of fraud and threats of violence in all the elections, notably more in 2014 and 2019 that created a stalemate. In the 2014 elections, low voting turnout in the first round of the elections left many surprised (Coburn, 2015, p.2). It showed that Afghans had started to believe that the fraudulent elections had only tokenistic value. This idea was particularly discussed when the second round failed to meet the expectations of a "timely and a transparent transfer of power" and ultimately resulted in creating a "Chief Executive Office" through a power-sharing deal brokered by the US (Coburn, 2015, p.2).

The presidential election in 2019 was another explicit example of the lack of political legitimacy of the US-backed government, considering the notably low political participation and voting turnout. According to a BBC news report (2019), the 2019 presidential elections hit the lowest turnout record partly due to threats of violence by the Taliban but more importantly due to the output of the government made by power-sharing deal after the 2014 electoral crisis. The presidential elections in 2019 was also reminiscent of the 2014 elections when the results were disputed. In 2019, the presidential candidate, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, proclaimed the majority votes, thereby, avoiding a run-off round too (BBCnews, 2019). It is widely argued that both crises severely impacted the output or quality of government in Afghanistan. As prescribed in the Fareed Zakaria's liberal democracy, alongside rule of law, separation of powers, the protections of basic liberties and more, free and fair elections is also a factor of the liberal democracies (Zakaria, 1997, p.1). In the context of Afghanistan, where electoral democracy was considered an important means of gaining political legitimacy, where a large portion of the citizenry understand democracy as conducting free and fair elections, it is fair to conclude that the United States relied heavily on a tool to collect legitimacy, which failed to gain legitimacy to the US-backed democratic setup.

Service Delivery: Did the government succeed in providing infrastructure, health and education, jobs and security to win political legitimacy in the case of fraudulent elections and political factions?

Bo Rothstein (2009) challenged the idea that political legitimacy can be established through electoral democracies. In doing so, he argued that the "output" (or the quality) of the government is more necessary than the "input" (or elections) (Rothstien, 2009, p.312). Therefore, the efforts to win the "hearts and minds" of the local populations to win political legitimacy for the counter-terrorism and state-building mission remained a central element of the US invasion. From the world society perspective, scholars are beginning to recognize that the "diffusion of cultural norms" within states combined with uneven direct intrusion of international actors in nation-states account for the collective actions on the local level (Almeida & Chase-Dunn, 2018, p.192). The US-backed democratic government failed to provide adequate services to Afghans, remained consumed by corruption and elite embezzlement, continued to discriminate against minorities while the international aid remained focused on urban areas, and the country still remains unconnected due to lack of infrastructure.

From the grievance standpoint, the service delivery in the Afghan state remained under the influence of state actors, particularly the elite in Kabul. Political appointments, reconstruction projects, local appointments, fiscal system, national army and budget were all decided by a small group of influential elites in Kabul, which left the ordinary

Afghans and local authorities alienated from the central administration in Kabul. Dr. Lutfi, in his essay 'Beyond the US withdrawal: What Happened in Afghanistan', argues that following are the important sources of grievances created in the Afghan society: "(1) centralized administration and a centralized fiscal system; (2) systematic corruption, perception of injustice & insecurity; and (3) anti-foreign resistance narratives" (2022, p-2). Dr. Lufti notes that, for example, the "Ministry of Internal Affairs was stripped of all hiring and firing authority and the responsibility was transferred to the National Security Advisor's office, unelected and not vetted for a vote of confidence by parliament individuals".³⁴

Conclusion

American exceptionalism defined by the ethnic strand of American politicians has created unrest both within the US, take for example the rise of populist appeals in the US, and has proven disastrous for the US leadership in the liberal international order, considering the fact that it promotes American isolationism. American exceptionalism defined by the civic nationalist strand of American politics aligns with the continuity of the supposed liberal international, considering that it sets in motion the idea of establishing democracies abroad and keeping international organizations under United States' influence. Civic nationalist debates are rooted in the early history of the American republic, and therefore have adopted a one-size fits all approach which has proven to backfire. For example, the liberal peace-building missions continue to impose an American style of democracy at the cost of melting other cultures.

One must take note that the fostering of economic, civil and political liberalism does not have to mimic American systems to reinforce liberal international order. On the face of it, the unconditional US military withdrawal set in motion the collapse of democracy in Afghanistan. Guided by ethnic nationalist perspective, the Trump administration assumed that democracy is not compatible with the social and political realities of Afghanistan. This mischaracterization is dangerous for the future of Afghan nation-states, and for the liberal international order because it drives the Afghan nation-state, unable to sustain itself, to alternative ideologies and alternative alliances. For example, as seen, the alternative ideology controlling the state in Afghanistan in the absence of democracy, leans more on bandwagoning with countries like China, which is considered a rising competition to the liberal order.

For related, see:

³⁴ Rahimi, Lutfi. (July, 2022). Beyond US Withdrawal: What Happened in Afghanistan. p-3

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