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The liberal peace is over and it is not coming back: hybridity and the emerging international peace system

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits and updates the concept of hybridity in order to take account of the fragmentation of power and structures in a multipolar international and transnational system. Earlier accounts of hybrid peace and hybrid political orders tended to be Eurocentric and concentrated on a liberal peace--local binary. Drawing on interviews with senior peacemakers and mediators, the article rejuvenates the concept of hybridity. A four-part analytical framework is developed to explain the changing international peace landscape: the fragmentation of the rules-based international order, the increasing prominence of non-western peace actors, the stubbornness of the residual international order, and the impact of the so-called local turn. The article puts forward an expanded notion of hybridity and recommends it as a sense-making tool.

Introduction

This article revisits and updates the concept of hybridity in the light of real-world developments. The concept retains a use as a sense-making device, but it requires updating in order to take account of the fragmentation of power and structures in a multipolar international and transnational system. Earlier accounts of hybridity (Coning and McDonald-Colbert 2021; Partis-Jennings 2017), hybrid peace (Belloni 2012; Mac Ginty 2011) and hybrid political orders (Richmond and Mitchell 2012) tended to be Eurocentric and were usually deployed as a way of understanding relationships between Western 'liberal peace' actors on the one hand and national and local actors on the other. Fragmentation in the peacemaking sphere, and especially the withdrawal of liberal peace actors and the concomitant greater prominence of 'non-western' peace actors, necessitate that we revisit notions of hybridity to broaden the range of actors and, crucially, take account of external factors that shape peace and conflict environments.

To help illustrate the changing peacemaking context, and therefore the need to re-evaluate and update the concept of hybridity, this article draws on interviews with senior peacemakers and mediators who themselves are coming to terms with, and also co-constituting, an

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emerging peacemaking landscape. They are aware of the fraying of the established structures and processes that were influential in peacemaking over recent decades and are seeking to understand and participate in the activities of emergent, or at least increasingly prominent, actors in the peacemaking sphere. At the same time as this flux, substantial remnants of the established peacemaking system remain, meaning that a hybrid system pertains, one that contains considerable tension and dysfunction. The liberal peace, in the sense of the structures and processes that constituted internationally sponsored peacemaking in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is over. Remnants of the rules-based international order remain alongside other sources of peacemaking, and a hybrid lens can help us make sense of it.

The article begins with a brief note on methodology and then reintroduces the concept of hybridity as a way of conceptualising the complex interplay between multiple factors that constitute the composite of processes that contribute to contemporary peacemaking. The analysis of the changing international peacemaking context uses a four-part analytical framework that is informed by the interview material. The four factors in the analytical framework are the fragmentation of the rules-based international order, the emergence of apparently new peace actors, the stubbornness of the residual international order, and the impact of the so-called local turn. There is considerable overlap and interplay between these factors, and it is worth noting that the list is not exhaustive.

The original contribution of this article is sense-making through a revised notion of hybridity and the hybrid peace. The concept was popularised in the academic literature over a decade ago and had some traction in the policy sphere. It would, however, benefit from an updating that takes account of changing geo-political dynamics and a de-centring of a Western-bias that has been implicit and explicit in some conceptualisations (Nadarajah and Rampton 2015; Sabaratnam 2013). The revised version of the hybrid peace notion is scaffolded by the views of experienced peacemakers and mediators at a pivotal moment in international peacemaking.

Methodology

Thirty interviews were conducted *via* Zoom with senior peacemakers and mediators between May and August 2024 based on informed consent and complete anonymity. No identifiers are used in this manuscript, as many of the interviewees work in sensitive contexts, and for many interviewees, a condition of being interviewed was complete anonymity. All of the interviewees had at least two decades of experience as peacemakers and/or mediators, although some had considerably more experience and can be said to have seen the developmental arc of the profession in its modern format. Most had worked in more than one conflict-affected context. Verbatim notes were taken synchronously during the interviews. Ethical approval for data gathering and a data management plan was received from Durham University. Interviewees worked for a range of organisations, governmental and non-governmental, and a good number worked independently. Many of the interviewees could be described as post-national or transnational. While interviewees could be stretched along the peacebuilder to peacemaker continuum, most lay towards the peacemaker end of the continuum.

Hybrid peace redux

The notion of hybrid peace was part of attempts to understand and situate liberal internationalism and other actors in the first decade or so of this century. It was a mainly scholarly exercise to explain the interplay between top-down and bottom-up actors in contexts of peace-support intervention. This was a period following extensive international intervention, often in the name of peace and rights, but also a period in which those interventions met with considerable critique on the basis that they lacked transparency and legitimacy. They also faced considerable resistance (Mac Ginty 2011; Richmond and Mitchell 2012), drawing western states into attritional wars. Moreover, criticisms were made that these interventions used the language of liberalism (for example, in relation to democracy and rights) but actually were illiberal, and sometimes violent, in nature (Pickering and Pecemy 2006).

Roberto Belloni saw hybrid forms of peace as an interruption to the consensual forms of peace that the liberal peace imagined; '… a far cry from the liberal idea of peace based on legitimate and accountable democratic institutions, the rule of law, human rights, free media, market economy and an open civil society' (Belloni 2012, 21). For Richmond and Mitchell, hybridity was a vehicle through which to capture local agency, including resistance, dissent and mimicry. It was a way of underscoring the importance of the everyday and of the possibility of local agency constructing alternative forms of peace and society (Richmond and Mitchell 2012). A number of studies sought to show how the complex interaction between local, national, international and transnational actors resulted in hybrid outcomes or uneasy compromises that developed in real-time and often involved external funding and direction and local implementation (Wilén 2012). For Jarstad and Olsson, the key issue was power and the need to somehow match the immaterial power of local actors and the material power of external actors (Jarstad and Olsson 2012, 116). In Oliver Richmond's conceptualisation, hybrid peace was a site of constant negotiation between multiple actors and forms of peace that could veer towards positive or negative forms of hybrid peace depending on how unbalanced it was in terms of international or local elites (Richmond 2015, 62). Paalo regarded hybridity as an opportunity to incorporate traditional approaches to peacemaking into the work of the African Union and de-centre international norms that may fit uneasily into local contexts (Paalo 2021, 24). For Johnston, hybrid processes and outcomes were a vehicle for feminist peacebuilding and opportunities to include women and other marginalised groups in peacemaking processes and governance (Johnston 2023, 184).

Richmond, this time with Mac Ginty, warned against the shallow instrumentalisation of hybridity (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2016). Case study work on Colombia by Ornilla noted how strategic decisions in peacebuilding following the 2016 Government-FARC peace accord lay with national and international actors, thus limiting the true extent of hybrid processes and outcomes (Ornilla 2024, 13). Bargués-Pedreny and Randazzo cautioned that the concept might encourage over-binarised thinking that separated the local and the international, and may lead to versions of peace that are minimally localised but fail to confront a series of structural impositions that characterise the liberal peace (Bargués-Pedreny and Randazzo 2018, 1553).

Considerations of hybridity extended to governance and the blending of administrative practices and cultures, and the tensions and opportunities therein (Höglund and Orjuela 2012; Mac Ginty 2013). Such considerations included issues of mimicry (Bhabha 1994) and knowledge hierarchies. Essentially, these issues centred on power, and the power of some

actors to set the terms of debate, to recommend 'solutions' and define what was a crisis and what was not. Both Kosmatopoulos and Cruz have provided particularly insightful analyses of how liberal peace powers were able to mobilise a range of material and knowledge power that not only defined problems and solutions, but installed themselves as the actors best placed to intervene (Cruz 2021; Kosmatopoulos 2021). As will be discussed in the next section, this closed epistemic loop is fragmenting.

Fundamentally, hybridity offered scholars a lens and language with which to interrogate the complex interactions between multiple actors in the peace and conflict sphere. Many of these interrogations were able to uncover the subtle nature of relationships. George and Kent noted that 'hybridity has a shadowy aspect' and pointed out that local populations often had to work hard to navigate around imposed narratives and assumptions (George and Kent 2017, 531). Simangan's work on Cambodia showed how local elites were able to game the system and produce a 'negative hybrid peace' that reinforced their position; 'The local elite exclusively benefitted from the existing oppressive structures and the legitimacy brought by their partnership with the UN's liberal peacebuilding agenda. These structures of violence remained in Cambodia after the internationals left …' (Simangan 2018, 1536).

It is worth noting that processes of hybridisation in relation to peace and conflict occur within much broader contexts of social and cultural hybridity. The 'long trajectory' (García Canclini 2005, 241) of hybridity has involved transcultural dynamics that have facilitated delocalisation and deterritorialization (Yoon and Garcia 2024, 606). These processes of fusion, negotiation and competition (Grennell-Hawke and Tudor 2018, 1531) have resulted in contexts that can be described as polycultural and 'between cultures' (Valgardsson and Nardon 2025, 8, 1). Post-colonial critiques have been particularly useful in deploying hybridity as a lens and have been alert to the possibility of appropriation, essentialism, and above all power (Lee 2022, 50–54). Important in this regard are the 'epistemologies of the south' that can identify absences, and move beyond disciplines that might be said to be 'falsely universal' (de Sousa Santos 2, 3)

To advance this article, we will take Mac Ginty's conceptualisation of hybrid peace (Mac Ginty 2010, 2011) to illustrate the opportunities and limitations of the concept. He proposed a quadripartite composite arising from the interactions between on the one hand, the compliance and incentivisation powers of liberal peace actors, and, on the other, the ability of local actors to resist, ignore and tailor liberal peace interventions and to devise alternative means of governance. As set out in Figure 1 (Mac Ginty 2011, 9) this was a model made up of two sets of actors (liberal peace and local) and four sets of actions: incentivisation, enforcement, resistance, and the building of alternatives. Although Mac Ginty noted that actors were 'neither consistent nor homogenous' and that there was considerable 'flux' in processes of hybridisation (Mac Ginty 2010, 406), there is a sense that the model is static and limited in the light of a changing peacemaking landscape and its emerging geopolitics. The model takes no account of emerging or non-western peace actors, nor of the significant impact of illiberal peacemaking or authoritarian conflict management. Moreover, there is an overemphasis on international-local interactions and a consequent lack of focus on state-local interactions (Paalo and Issifu 2021). As a result, a more complex conceptualisation of hybrid peace is required. The new model (Figure 2) still retains the essential notion of hybridity or the complex processes of contestation, compliance, and co-existence whereby an array of actors (international organisations, states, communities, transnational organisations, corporations and many others) jostle to make peace, conflict and all situations pertaining in between.
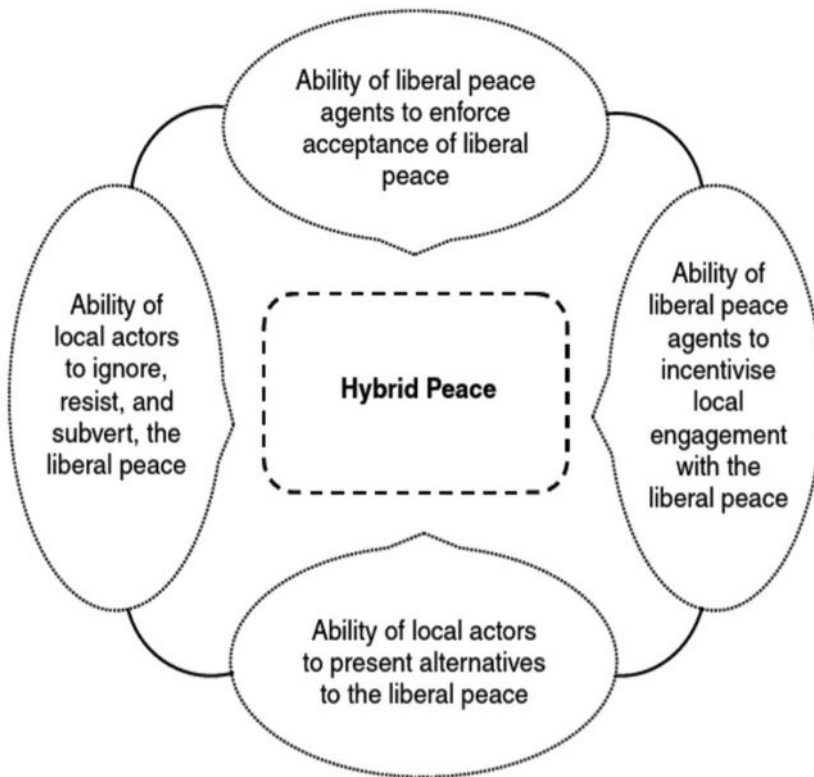
Figure 1. The hybrid peace (source: the author).

Figure 2 is an attempt to characterise this hybrid space in which multiple actors operate at multiple levels with differing strategic goals and normative aims. In this depiction, peace is at the centre of the model and regarded as attempt to reduce harm and suffering. It may or may not involve institution-building and governance reforms to achieve this goal. The actors in the model (an expanded list to take account of a more crowded peacemaking field) are actors that consciously claim to be contributing to peace. Of course, actors can both contribute to peace and diminish it, sometimes being able to do both simultaneously. A state, for example, may be actively mediating in one conflict while contributing military support for one side in another violent conflict. The United Arab Emirates' mediatory role in relation to Ukraine and Russia, while aiding the Rapid Support Forces in civil war in Sudan, illustrates this point (Levinson, Lewis, and Levinson 2024). It is worth stressing that Figure 2 is a simplification; actors defy neat categorisation and may overlap with other categories. Moreover, actorness is dynamic (as depicted by the quadruple arrows); capability, political willingness, humanitarian imperatives, popular interest, and leadership are all subject to change. The updated characterisation of hybridity is in keeping with changing circumstances. 'The era of big peace processes is over',[1] there is now 'a field of too many mediators',[2] there are cuts to peacebuilding budgets,[3] and dysfunction in the United Nations Security Council[4] means that there is little international consensus that would allow peace-support operations to be initiated. As a result, the original four-part model is no longer fit for purpose. Adding complexity to all of this are a series of structural head and tail-winds that apply pressure and offer opportunities (illustrated by the arrows in Figure 1). These are the great dynamics of
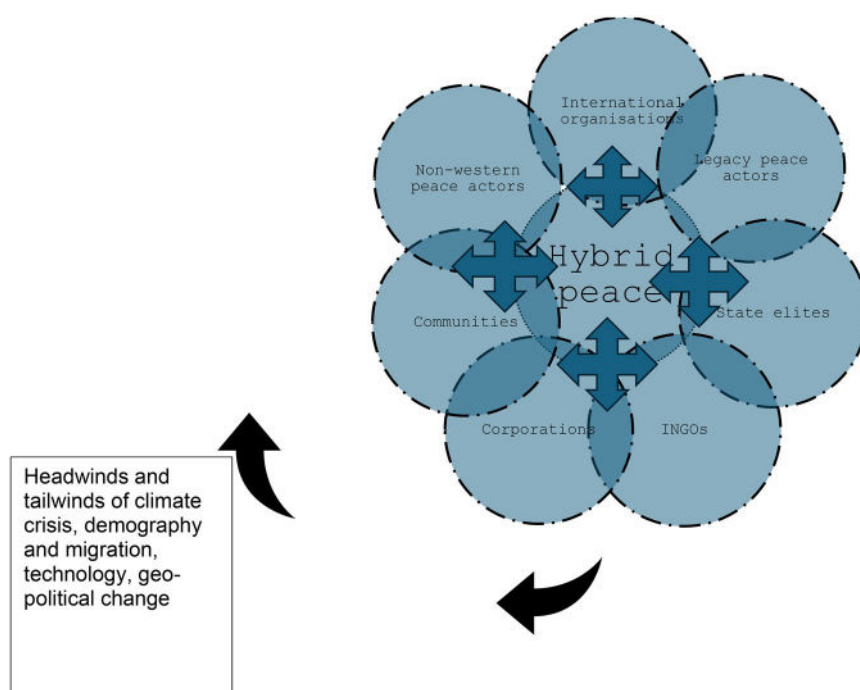
Figure 2. Revised hybrid peace with multiple actors and head and tailwinds (source: the author).

our time and include climate change, the shift of the global economy eastwards, a greater mobility of people (including displacement), and technology. These dynamics do not happen independently, with actors both abetting them and suffering from their consequences.

A key point to note is that the 'hybrid peace' at the centre of the illustration may not necessarily be particularly pacific, despite the stated intentions of actors. This was acknowledged by earlier work on the hybrid peace that noted that it could be positive or negative (Richmond 2015). Evidence from multiple case studies shows that declaratory peace, in the form of peace processes, peace accords, and ceasefires does not always equate to peace on the ground. Instead, the peace may be partial (only including some actors and some territory), contested, exclusionary, and offering few tangible benefits. As noted above, the actors forming the ring around hybrid peace on the updated illustration may be both peace contributors and diminishing. As a result, they may be imagined as oscillating inwards and outwards from the centre circle. Moreover, their level of power will also be dynamic and will change according to the issue and time.

An institutional recognition of hybridity comes through various coordination initiatives, notably the Triple Nexus, or an attempt to integrate planning, resourcing and programme execution by international organisations and others in relations to humanitarianism, development and peacebuilding (Howe 2019; Nguya and Siddiqui 2020). Interconnectedness is well recognised on the ground, as one interviewee noted, 'Working at the intersection of things is crucial. Our Somali partners would always say that people have got hungry bellies and that peacebuilding could be enhanced by just providing development support'.[5]

The key take-aways from a revised notion of hybridity are that multiple actors are in contact with one another in a highly dynamic system. There are complex webs of interaction and complicity. Marbled through the entire system is the issue of power, material and

immaterial (Bakonyi 2022; Boulding 1990; Chinn and Falk-Rafael 2015). While material power may be quantified and compared with relative ease, immaterial power, including normative power, is less amenable to scholarly capture and includes the ability of some actors to set priorities and identify particular issues as crises or worthy of attention and resources. It is not necessarily that the contemporary era is more complex than earlier eras. As one interviewee asked, 'Was Bosnia simple?'[6] There are, however, demonstrably more actors in the field, with greater prominence and power equivalence.

Having set out the need for an updated version of hybridity, this article moves on to present its interview-informed four-part analytical framework:

- The fragmentation of the rules-based international order
- The increased prominence of non-western peace actors
- The remnants of the liberal peace
- The impact of the local turn

These four factors help explain the changing peacemaking landscape and the need for analytical tools cognisant of multipolarity and dynamism. There is considerable overlap between the parts of the analytical framework, as well as some contradiction. The rules-based international order is fragmenting, whether through a return to trade protectionism or the withdrawal of the United States from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). At the same time, substantial remnants of the rules-based international order remain in place, stretching from state sovereignty to legal frameworks in relation to trade, travel and communication. All four parts of the analytical framework are dynamic and impact one another, producing a hybridised system.

Fragmentation of the liberal international order

The post-1945 system of a rules-based international order has not fragmented in the sense that there has been a single major trauma that has sundered it apart. Instead, there has been sustained fraying of the system to the extent that parts of it are dysfunctional and not fit for purpose. Importantly, much of the fraying predates Donald Trump's second stint as United States President. An initial point to make is that the post-WWII and post-Cold War international systems never had a halcyon moment. They have always been *ad hoc* and reactive systems that struggled to meet challenges. Yet, at particular times and on particular issues, they have managed to have a coherence matched by a capability to dispatch peacekeeping and peace support missions to conflict-affected areas. There have been notable internationally supported peace processes and peace accords, as well as reconstruction efforts. Moreover, there have been substantial international and transnational campaigns that have helped mainstream important programmes like Women, Peace and Security, and Youth, Peace and Security, as well as a list of United Nations and other resolutions that have sought to regulate war, armaments and exploitation (Berents and Mollica 2022; Shepherd 2021). It is important to note, however, that the rules-based international 'order' worked for some but meant authoritarianism, control, extraction and exclusion for others.

Liberal internationalism was at its zenith in the last years of the twentieth century and early years of this century and manifested itself in Western-led interventions, often using

the language of rights, human security and democracy. It is worth mentioning four factors in relation to the unravelling of the rules-based liberal international order. The first has been fatigue among the liberal peace leaders as interventions in the Balkans, West Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere failed to produce intended outcomes (McCrisken 2012). Through a mix of conflict recidivism, corruption, and the failure of Western notions of democracy or civil society to flourish, it became clear that these interventions would have to be costly, long-term and messy. As one interviewee commented, 'Following the standard liberal peace recipe in Iraq and Afghanistan did not work. Setting up shell governments in Iraq and South Sudan does not work'.[7] Another observer captured the uncertainty over the purpose of intervention, 'A version of a liberal looking state seemed to be the end goal and now that does not seem to be viable, so what is it that you are trying to build?'[8] The weariness and uncertainty is well-summed up by the phrase 'forever wars' and the seeming endlessness of peacemaking, peacebuilding, statebuilding and reconstruction tasks. In short, the liberal peace failed to deliver desired outcomes for its champions. The hubris of the early twenty-first century (Mandelbaum 2002) has evaporated and major initiatives such as human security or responsibility to protect have fallen by the wayside (Jarvis 2022).

A second factor explaining the fraying of the liberal international order has been the rise of other powers, global and regional, that have been less easily stewarded by self-appointed global leaders. With multiple sources of leadership, as well as competing interests and narratives, the notion of a single rules-based international order, in which those rules reflect the values of Atlanticist and global north powers, has been less appealing. For Ikenberry, the global order is divided into three broad coalitions – the East, the West and the South – suggesting a multipolar dynamic in which established rules can be challenged (Ikenberry 2024). New economic constellations have emerged (Financial Times 2024), with a push towards dedollarisation (Yelery 2016) and China becoming the world's largest creditor and thus rivalling the International Monetary Fund as lender/rescuer to distressed states (Behsudi 2023).

An important part of the rise of non-western powers as alternative sources of resources and support has been that the contradictions of the liberal peace, and how the justificatory narratives that underpinned the liberal peace are seen as hollow. One interviewee noted the 'double standards in relation to Gaza' and how some of the biggest funders of peacebuilding and peacemaking, the UK and Swedish governments, are also among 'the biggest arms dealers in Europe'.[9] Another interviewee observed that 'African countries are fed up with western peacemaking … There is this binary of the west and rest. The rest doesn't want to play the game anymore'.[10]

Thirdly, and crucially, the global north leaders have withdrawn from leadership roles in the liberal peace. Western states, militaries and publics suffered fatigue as interventions dragged on and failed to produce the intended results (Berdal 2019). The interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, in particular, resulted in shifts towards stabilisation or security-led regime retrenchment operations rather than more expansive operations that had a focus on peacebuilding or democracy. One interviewee pointed to the short-termism linked with the 'obsession with stabilisation': 'They know that something has to happen after stabilisation, but they do not know what it is'.[11] The withdrawal from peacemaking is not only a physical withdrawal (for example, from Afghanistan) but also a mental withdrawal from liberal optimism or the sense that intervention can improve other societies. This withdrawal

was reinforced by populism in domestic politics that often frowned upon overseas 'entanglements' and celebrated the withdrawal from international organisations and treaties (Pacciardi, Spandler, and Söderbaum 2024; Wajner, Destradi, and Zürn 2024). There has been a shift towards illiberal notions of sovereignty that favour a withdrawal from multilateralism, hard bordering, and a lack of both curiosity about the external world and optimism that intervention can work (Paris 2022).

Trump's foreign policy stance does much to illustrate the retreat from international leadership, but it does not explain everything. His two predecessors prioritised stabilisation and securitisation over staples of the liberal peace such as democratisation and human rights. Moreover, European states have also led the way in stepping back from 'civilising' aspects of international humanitarian law. In 2025, for example, Poland and the Baltic States withdrew from the Ottawa Convention that sought to eliminate anti-personnel landmines, while the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Switzerland and others have cut overseas aid (Galvin 2025).

The second and third points are well-summarised by a highly experienced mediator:

> The big change is the decline of the western powers and their economic and military power in comparison to others. Twenty years ago we did not have the active engagement of Russia, China, Turkey or the Gulf Countries. There was a framework for resolution – we have no framework. The West is not a predominant political and military power anymore. There are a lot of other powerful actors asserting themselves in the conflicts we work in.[12]

Fourthly, and compounding all of the above, there has been a greater prominence of seemingly insurmountable transnational issues that appear immune to policy responses. Whether climate change, human migration or long-running wars that do not end in complete military victory or a peace accord, there are a series of issues that have challenged the utility of the existing international mechanisms charged with dealing with these issues. These issues require sustained and resource-intensive responses, something that is politically difficult to achieve. One interviewee, commenting on the magnitude of peacemaking challenges, noted that 'We have never applied the resources to the scale of the problems we see'.[13] A response by some states has been to lose faith in the very organisations they have mandated to deal with these issues. Thus, for example, the United Nations has faced a hollowing out, with member states paying less attention to the organisation, underfunding it, closing down existing peacekeeping missions and not mandating any further peacekeeping missions (Karlsrud 2023).

Taken together, the above four factors coalesce into a declining relevance and legitimacy for the rules-based international order. As the upcoming section entitled 'The remnants of the old system' makes clear, the system that upheld the rules-based international order is not redundant. Substantial elements of it remain in place, and a nostalgia attends it. As one interviewee reflected, 'If I had a magic wand, then I would want to go back to the sense of possibility that existed in the late 1990s in the international system …'.[14] The sense that history was 'won' and there was one logical – liberal – outcome in the developmental trajectory of states has evaporated, however (Fukuyama 1989). Moreover, the rise of authoritarian conflict management, or actors who have no interest in negotiated outcomes, underscores the extent to which the liberal peace shares space with alternative approaches to conflict (Heathershaw and Owen 2019; Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018).

The increasing prominence of non-western peace actors

Two initial points are essential before any survey of the apparently new peacemaking actors. The first is to question the extent to which these actors can be termed 'new'. Non-western actors have played a significant role as mediators and peacekeepers for many decades. What may be new is their prominence, or that established peace actors have noticed them. Certainly, there are 'new mediation constellations' whereby a combination of actors that previously have not worked together cooperation in forms of multimediation (Bell 2024, 28). A very public Qatar Mediation Forum in December 2024 illustrated the confidence of non-western actors in claiming mediation space (Gulf Times 2024). A second point to make is to draw attention to the nomenclature of these apparently 'new' peace actors and how calling them new, non-western or alternative risks betraying an ethnocentric bias (Peter and Rice 2022, 8).

The extent of peacemaking by new or non-western actors is difficult to gauge given that much of it is subterranean and does not occur through established institutions. Moreover, it is a fast-moving space. As one interviewee pointed out, 'these forms of power are building and their sheer number and type is having influence and will continue to build'.[15] It is worth pointing to Qatar's role as a mediator between the United States, the Afghan government and the Taliban (*BBC News* 2020), its attempt to mediate between Israel and Hamas (Bulos and Wilkinson 2024), and its role in facilitating exchanges of displaced and captured Russian and Ukrainian children (Al Jazeera 2024a). The United Arab Emirates has played an almost institutionalised role in facilitating repeated prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine (BBC News 2024). Turkey has sought to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, and brokered the Black Sea Grain Initiative, staving off food shortages in a number of countries (Prokopenko 2022). Turkey has also sought to mediate between Ethiopia and Somalia (Fraser 2024). The summer of 2023 saw an African peace mission to both Russia and Ukraine (Pilling, Seddon, and Olearchyk 2023), while the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has sought to mediate in the Sudanese civil war (Al Jazeera 2024b).

China has been particularly prominent in peacekeeping, with 1,885 personnel devoted to United Nations missions as of May 2025 as against 23 personnel from the United States (United Nations Peacekeeping 2025). Indeed the pattern of global south or non-western states dominating the UN troop contributing country list is well established (Oestman 2023). China has been steadily developing its mediation capacity as part of its wider Belt and Road Initiative (Patey 2024). A Saudi-Iran deal was formalised in Beijing in 2023 following talks facilitated by Iraq and Oman (Jash 2023) and in May 2024, Brazil and China proposed a six-point peace plan for Ukraine and Russia (Lewis 2024).

The picture that emerges is of multiple sources of mediation and peace support ('thousands of initiatives'[16] according to one interviewee), much of it *ad hoc* and regional, and some of it by-passing liberal peace actors and the institutions they established. One interviewee referred to 'good enough coalitions' or diverse constellations of actors that come together on particular issues.[17] A question that we will return to in the concluding discussion is the extent to which this peacemaking activity has wider ideological aims.

The remnants of the old system

While the rules-based international order is fraying, substantial elements of it remain in place. Although an obvious statement, it is worth noting that the state remains the primary

unit of political organisation, with states and international organisations (populated by states) still engaging in extensive diplomacy and lawmaking to regulate trade, travel and good relations. Summitry persists although there has been diversification of summits. Despite its many critics, the United Nations still exists with near-universal state membership. While the organisation, especially its Security Council, is deeply dysfunctional, its agencies have extensive reach. Permanent Five members in particular have convening power and can mobilise resources and formulate mandates.[18] The Sustainable Development Goals and other initiatives point to an organisation that retains some convening power and can set agendas and provide information. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), for example, is widely respected and can marshal considerable scientific intellectual capital.

Yet, as outlined throughout this article, the established system is under threat, hence the argument that the liberal peace in its current format is over, and it is difficult to see how it could be reconstituted. A key trend is the extent to which states have been able to ignore, bypass or derogate from international norms. In the contest between multilateralism and national sovereignty, the latter often trumps. Moreover, the new global power in the form of China and a range of regional powers (sometimes called middle powers) are anxious to display autonomy (Wu and Ding 2024). It is instructive that sanctions against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine have not been directed through the United Nations. As Russia is a Permanent Five member of the Security Council, it can veto such sanctions, meaning that the sanctions are imposed by a voluntary coalition of states and can be subverted. In addition, however, the western narrative of a grave injustice perpetrated against Ukraine has not been universally accepted, especially in some Global South contexts (Brosig 2024).

The position of the United States, as the leader of the erstwhile liberal peace, well illustrates a contradictory and interstitial stance that is simultaneously supportive of multilateralism and unilateralism. The US plays a leadership role in the United Nations and uses the body to chide other states and build coalitions, for example, in support of Ukraine. At the same time, the US has an ambivalence to multilateralism. Along with China, India, Israel and Russia, it is not a member of the International Criminal Court, and signed but did not ratify the 2014 Arms Trade Treaty, and neither signed nor ratified the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty 1997 (Wahal 2022). The picture is one of sclerotic and selective networked multilateralism that signals ambivalence and equivocation. The key point is that the liberal peace, as it was formerly understood, is over. Many liberal peace institutions and assumptions remain in place, however. This makes for a hybrid international order and a space of contestation.

The impact of the local turn

The local turn was an attempt by scholars and many in the practice and policy worlds to take local perspectives seriously. Notions of the local and the subaltern have a rich intellectual history (Scott 1990; Spivak 1988), and Thania Paffenholz has reminded us that the interest in local voices and empowerment in the 2010s was predated by work by Lederach and others in the 1990s as well as earlier cycles of interest in all things local (Paffenholz 2015, 857–58). The 2012 New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, marshalled by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) noted that, 'The current ways of working in fragile states need serious improvement' and that 'International partners can often bypass national interests and actors, providing aid in overly technocratic ways that underestimate the importance of harmonising with the

national and local context' (Development Assistance Committee 2012, 1). There followed a headlong rush among bilateral donors, international organisations and INGOs towards local-isation agendas that involved the extensive use of the prefix 'local' (local ownership and local participation, local buy-in, local stakeholders etc). The rationale behind this rush to the local was that if local communities were involved in managing and implementing interventions, then those initiatives would have a greater chance of sustainability.

The greater attention to local voices came at a time when many states, international organisations and INGOs were recognising the limitations and expense of their overseas entanglements. The impact of the local turn has been hotly debated, with some questioning the extent to which it was a genuine devolution of power rather than shallow 'local-washing' that gave the appearance of local participation and ownership. For some critics, it was a way for international actors to absolve themselves of responsibility and lower costs, while engag-ing in the performativity of local consultations. For others, it placed heavy costs, and some-times risks, on local communities as they competed for funds and strived to provide evidence of deliverables and audit compliance (Florez and Friedman 2023). Oliver Richmond has pointed to the instrumentalisation of the local turn, 'The local turn debate was soon often understood as a literal and uncritical 'impact' oriented call for better local data, in parallel to working with (or 'on') local actors and micro issues, while disregarding structural and macro issues' (Richmond 2024, 5).

The local turn has been useful in that it prompted a re-orientation of much scholarship to take local actors and dynamics. Elements of the practice world also sought to be more inclusive and take note of civil society. The greater visibility of local actors fits with the hybrid analysis. Ultimately, though, a power analysis of the peacemaking landscape points to a continued emphasis on political and militant elites. One interviewee recognised that 'bottom-up driven versions of peacebuilding … have appealing features' but 'unless you include political elites it is fundamentally flawed'.[19] While interviewees did not universally share this scepticism, it is worth putting the local turn into perspective and recognising that it was often a site of shallow instrumentalisation rather than a recalibration of power interests. One interviewee commented on how 'The machinery of the liberal peace rewards those in power and destroys indigenous movements'.[20] An unresolved question concerns the extent to which the emerging reorientation of peacemaking may promote or ignore local participation.

Concluding discussion

The chief conclusion is to underpin the usefulness of an updated concept of hybridity as an aid to understanding the contemporary peace and conflict landscape. The concept can take account of the multiplicity of peace actors, the fragmentation of the rules-based international order, and contextualisations that take into account of power. Three points are worth high-lighting in relation to the utility of the lens offered by hybridity. The first is the multiplicity of peace. There is no single prefix that can be used to characterise the types of peace that are being made and advocated in the contemporary world. There are multiple peace actors, different approaches to peace, and different end-goals, resulting in an era of hybridised peacemaking. As one interviewee observed, 'There is disagreement on the ambition of what peace is … it is increasingly diverse and complicated'.[21] It is worth noting that the homoge-neity and extent of the liberal peace were overstated in the past, yet there was a time when

'the liberal peace' was touted as the dominant approach to peacemaking on the planet (Freedman 2017).

Important in this regard is the lack of consensus about the end goal of contemporary peace efforts. In the liberal peace model, the end goal seemed to be a stable state (McCormack 2021) and this goal was often accompanied by an ideological orientation that used the language of liberalism. That goal has not survived the shift towards stabilisation and less expansive western visions of peace. As noted in the article, multiple non-western actors now also occupy the peace space. What is not clear, however, is the extent to which ideological orientations are attached to these attempts to reach, and a vision of, peace. Certainly, Qatari and United Arab Emirates' work on ceasefires and prisoner exchanges has saved and improved lives. A humanitarian motive is clear in relation to individual mediatory acts, but more ambitious strategies; for example, to put in place peace processes aimed at securing a comprehensive peace accord, do not seem apparent. While official documentation on foreign policy strategy exists, details are sparse. The United Arab Emirates, for example, lists 'the pursuit of stability and prosperity in the region and the world' and promoting 'global dialogue' as strategic aims (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024a), while Qatar mentions an onus for peacemaking in its constitution.

A hybridisation of versions of peace seems to be taking place. Western state-led versions of peace and peacemaking have become more security-oriented through policies of stabilisation. At the same time, authoritarian conflict management has taken root in many contexts. Coterminously, other actors, many with poor human rights records, have become more prominent in the peace field, most notably through mediation activities. If peace can be conceptualised as a continuum stretching from positive to negative peace, then a consensus seems to be emerging that is more firmly in the latter than the former.

A second, and related, argument in favour of using hybridity to understand and characterise the nature of contemporary peacemaking is the crowding of the peace field with western and non-western actors. Indeed, even this binary does not fully capture the hybridised nature of peacemaking. Contemporary peacemaking has always been hybridised in the sense of involving multiple actors, but the trend seems to have accelerated with more actors in the field, whether through multimediation, planned and unplanned networked multilateralism, sub-contracting and some 'mediator shopping'. Moreover, there has been very significant localised peacemaking (Bell and Wise 2022). The multiple peace actors co-exist, co-operate and compete to co-produce a hybridised field.

A third factor underscoring the utility of hybridity, as a sense-making tool is the prevalence of hybridised outcomes that are neither peace nor war. Definitive conflict endpoints are difficult to identify. Indeed, as one interviewee put it, 'Conflict actors are working hard to avoid being cornered into peace negotiations – certainly of the type we had in the 1990s … The contemporary international environment gives them resources'.[22] As a result, what the United Nations terms 'entrenched conflict' drags on, with, on average, greater numbers of conflict actors involved in each conflict (PRIO 2024; United Nations 2020). The fragmentation of conflicts and conflict actors, together with state incapacity, external conflict sponsors, and a dysfunctional United Nations Security Council, means that comprehensive and fully inclusive peace processes are difficult to marshal (Badanjak 2022). Thus conflicts in Myanmar, Yemen, Colombia and many other contexts do not seem to have a definitive endpoint.

All of this leads to the important question: Is the hybrid peace described above really peace? A similar question could apply to other forms of prefix peace such as the liberal peace or everyday peace. In the case of a hybrid peace, what we seem to be seeing is a hybridisation of peacemaking with multiple actors, fora and approaches. The processes, governance and sources of initiative have multiplied and diversified. It is useful to think of these forms of hybridised peacemaking as sitting side by side or occupying a broad and dynamic space rather than as one form of peacemaking grafting onto another to produce a new type of peace.[23] Characterisations of the peacemaking space, once dominated – in scholarly texts at least – by the liberal peace, need to be updated to take account of the multiplicity of actors and processes. The emphasis is very much on the process (hybridisation) rather than an end result.

There is an argument to be made that many western states, the erstwhile leaders of the liberal peace, are in a new era of honesty and no longer feel compelled to cloak their national interests in a language of humanitarianism or peace. Populism at home and threats abroad mean that many leaders are comfortable in using a language of securitisation to justify cutting overseas aid budgets and ramping up defence spending. Just as this discursive retreat is occurring, other actors, particularly Gulf States, are using a language to humanitarianism to explain their mediation. Thus, for example, the United Arab Emirates noted, following its facilitation of a Russian-Ukrainian prisoner swap, that it 'aims to support all initiatives to mitigate the humanitarian repercussions resulting from the crisis, including on refugees and captives' (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024b). Yet it is reasonable to assume that some level of national interest was at play, perhaps linked to regional rivalry or boosting the state's image. Thus the global picture is jumbled with western states reverting to unalloyed national interests and other states deploying humanitarian language, but not language that stretches towards political forms of emancipation.

A concluding consideration is to ask if western and non-western approaches to peace-making are compatible. The question is important in scoping out whether a competitive or cooperative dynamic can develop and in judging the utility of different approaches to peace-making. Western approaches to peacemaking have been accompanied by a signalling of 'moral imperatives'[24] that can be listed as 'human rights and democracy and transitional justice and delivery of services and decentralisation'.[25] Of course, whether these aims were realised is another matter. What is important from our point of view is that they were part of the intellectual and ideological scaffolding or accompanying narrative of the liberal peace. The threadbare nature of the liberal peace seems particularly visible (Moyn 2023), especially given its record of failing to support civic movements that sought to oust authoritarian governments. One interviewee recounted, 'If you go to an armed group and talk about International Humanitarian Law or Responsibility to Protect they laugh at you … They just look at Gaza'.[26] Yet Western peace actors have no monopoly on double standards. What seems to be missing is an accommodation between the multiplicity of peace actors. There is some limited evidence of collaboration between western and non-western actors in a pragmatic way. Examples include 'the Quad' of South Africa, Egypt, the United Arba Emirates and the United States in relation to the civil war in Sudan, or Qatari-Norwegian cooperation in relation to women's rights in Afghanistan.

The ad hoc initiatives mentioned above seem some way off constituting a system in the sense of a permanent, integrated mechanism or network with institutional features and a recognised membership. Instead, pragmatism would appear to be a motif. This may have

value in that different mediatory actors may have different levels of acceptance among conflict parties. Non-western peace actors may, for example, be able to talk to conflict parties who are proscribed or deemed incorrigible by western states.[27] Beyond pragmatism, what has yet to become clear are the deep value systems that lie behind the various types of peacemaking on offer. This is important as it shapes the very meaning of peace. For decades, if not centuries, the most prominent versions of peace have been western, complete with ideological and moral scaffolding. That period is over, but what comes next is unclear.

Ethical approval

Written and/or verbal consent was given by all interviewees. Interviewees were provided with a participant information sheet and could withdraw from the interview at any time. All interviewees were adult and interviewed on the basis of informed consent. Ethical permission and a data management plan was approved by Durham University.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. Interview 14, 4 July 2024.
2. Interview 8, 26 June 2024.
3. Interview 18, 5 July 2024; Interview 21, 10 July 2024.
4. Interview 21, 10 July 2024.
5. Interview 21, 10 July 2024.
6. Interview 23, 22 July 2024.
7. Interview 7, 19 June 2024.
8. Interview 15, 4 July 2024.
9. Interview 5, 10 June 2024.
10. Interview 7, 19 June 2024.
11. Interview 21, 10 July 2024.
12. Interview 23, 22 July 2024.
13. Interview 4, 6 June 2024.
14. Interview 25, 29 July 2024.
15. Interview 11, 1 July 2024.
16. Interview 27, 29 July 2024.

17. Interview 3, 29 May 2024.
18. Interview 10, 28 June 2024.
19. Interview 4, 6 June 2024.
20. Interview 7, 19 June 2024.
21. Interview 15, 4 July 2024.
22. Interview 10, 28 June 2024.
23. I am grateful to Sara Hellmüller for this point.
24. Interview 7, 19 June 2024.
25. Interview 6, 10 June 2024.
26. Interview 23, 24 July 2024.
27. Interview 1, 28 May 2024 and interview 24, 22 July 2024.

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