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Power, Agency, and the Hybrid Peace Paradigm: a Post-colonial Analysis of the US-led Invasion of Afghanistan

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SOCIOLOGIA
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*“The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.”*

Maya Angelou, Caged Bird, 1983.

To those who resist,

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Resumo

Abordagens híbridas de construção da paz e do Estado, que combinam métodos e locais e internacionais, são frequentemente apresentadas como uma alternativa emancipatória aos modelos mais convencionais de gestão de conflitos e reconstrução pós-guerra. Neste contexto, esta dissertação investiga até que ponto as abordagens híbridas, apesar de serem enquadradas como uma abordagem mais inclusiva, flexível e sustentável para a construção da paz e do Estado, perpetuam lógicas neo-coloniais. Usando a intervenção liderada pelos EUA no Afeganistão como estudo de caso, esta dissertação demonstra como estas práticas contribuem para naturalizar o domínio das ideologias e interesses ocidentais, reduzindo assim a agência de atores locais e, ao fazê-lo, facilitando a reintegração de tensões internas e da instabilidade social. Este estudo começa por traçar a evolução histórica dos paradigmas de construção da paz, demonstrando como cada geração tem sido sustentada por pressupostos e interesses ocidentais e, quando traduzida para a prática, tem mantido dinâmicas e relações neocoloniais. Utilizando, para o efeito, a intervenção no Afeganistão (2001-2021), que evoluiu para uma abordagem abrangente de construção estatal, esta dissertação explora como os atores internacionais ditaram os processos políticos e económicos no país, muitas vezes em detrimento das necessidades e da legitimidade local. Esta análise revela as contradições inerentes à construção híbrida da paz, onde a inclusão superficial de elementos locais mascara continuidades mais profundas nas hierarquias globais. Os resultados sugerem que, embora as abordagens híbridas afirmem promover o domínio local, estas acabam por perpetuar discursos neo-imperiais que priorizam os interesses dos Estados com mais poder.

Palavras-Chave: Paz Híbrida, Afeganistão, Pós-Colonialismo, Construção da Paz, Intervencionismo.

Abstract

Hybrid approaches to peace and statebuilding, combining both top-down and bottom-up, local and international approaches and methods, are often presented as an emancipatory alternative to more conventional approaches to conflict management and post-war reconstruction. Against that backdrop, this dissertation investigates the extent to which hybrid approaches, while being framed as a more inclusive, flexible, and sustainable approach to peace and statebuilding, often perpetuate neo-colonial logics and power structures. Using the US-led intervention in Afghanistan as a case study, it demonstrates how this discourse and its concomitant practices help to naturalise the dominance of Western ideologies and interests, therefore reducing the agency of local and indigenous actors and, in doing so, facilitating the reintegration of domestic tensions and social instability. The study begins by tracing the historical evolution of peacebuilding paradigms, demonstrating how each generation has been underpinned by Western assumptions and interests and, when translated into practice, has maintained neo-colonial dynamics and relations. Following from that, and focusing on the US-led intervention in Afghanistan (2001-2021), which evolved from a conventional to a hybrid peace and statebuilding initiative, this dissertation explores how, in that specific context, international actors dictated political and economic processes, often at the expense of local needs and legitimacy. The analysis reveals the inherent contradictions of hybrid peacebuilding, where the superficial inclusion of local elements masks deeper continuities in global hierarchies. The findings suggest that while hybrid approaches claim to foster local ownership, they often perpetuate neo-imperial discourses which prioritise the interests of powerful states.

Keywords: Hybrid Peace, Afghanistan, Post-colonialism, Peacebuilding, Interventionism.

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Glossary of Acronyms

ANA – Afghan National Army

ATA – Afghanistan Transitional Authority

COIN – Counterinsurgency

ELJ - Emergency Loya Jirga

ICR – International Conflict Resolution

IDPS – The International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding

ISAF – International Security Assistance Force

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NGO – Non-governmental Organisation

ONUC – United Nations Operation in the Congo (*Opération des Nations Unies au Congo*)

UN – United Nations

UNOGIL – United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon

UNPSO – United Nation’s Peacebuilding Support Office

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

US- United States of America

Introduction

From an early age, I have been deeply interested in understanding the enduring legacies and complexities of colonialism. This interest stemmed from a belief that such a pervasive and long-lasting system could not simply disappear without leaving profound structural imprints on international relations and on the way in which nations interact and perceive each other. Growing up in the early 2000s, I was also frequently exposed to media coverage of the war in Afghanistan. Although I did not fully grasp the nuances of the conflict at the time, I vividly remember not being quite capable of comprehending how the goal of bringing peace and democracy to a country could result in such suffering. As I embarked on my academic journey, particularly during my master's studies, I developed a profound interest in Peace and Security Studies and Postcolonialism and began to critically engage with the connections between the lingering effects of colonialism and modern-day externally led interventions. This exploration also drew me to stories of resistance, to those who defied imperial rule, those who fought and continue to fight to reclaim their agency and self-determination. The resilience and defiance of colonized peoples throughout history became a powerful reminder that even the most entrenched systems of domination could be challenged. Understanding these struggles fuelled my commitment to examine how present-day interventions continue to echo these dynamics, often cloaking neo-imperial ambitions under the guise of peace and stability.

1.1 - Research Puzzle and Questions

In the post-Cold War era, peacebuilding has emerged as a critical component of international efforts to stabilise conflict-affected regions. The field has evolved significantly, with hybrid approaches- which blend elements of traditional, liberal, and local actors and practices – gaining prominence to create more sustainable and culturally relevant peace processes. These approaches aim to integrate the strengths of both local and international methodologies ostensibly fostering ownership and legitimacy among local populations while benefiting from the resources and expertise of international organizations (Richmond, 2015; Mac Ginty, 2010).

Notwithstanding, adopting hybrid peacebuilding practices raises crucial questions regarding the underlying power dynamics and ideological frameworks that govern these

interventions. Critics argue that hybrid approaches may perpetuate neo-imperial and neo-colonial logics despite their collaborative veneer, subtly reinforcing the dominance of Western norms, values, and interests (Nadarajah, 2015; Laffey & Nadarajah, 2012). This dissertation seeks to critically examine the extent to which hybrid peacebuilding practices replicate these power structures, thus questioning whether they genuinely contribute to emancipatory and equitable peace or merely serve to maintain global hierarchies.

To ground this investigation, the dissertation will focus on the US-led invasion of Afghanistan as a case study. The intervention in Afghanistan, initially justified as a response to terrorism, quickly evolved into a comprehensive statebuilding project involving a plethora of international actors alongside Afghan authorities. This hybrid approach, while aiming to reconstruct and stabilise the country, has faced significant criticism for its outcomes and underlying motivations. By critically examining the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, the dissertation aims to illuminate the often-unseen continuities in global power relations and propose pathways towards more just and effective peace-building practices.

In summary, this research addresses a vital and timely question: “To what extent do hybrid approaches to peacebuilding actually function to empower and emancipate local actors, rather than reproduce neo-colonial logics and relations?”. To address this primary question, the dissertation will delve into two sub-research questions: “How do neo-imperialist discourses and practices impact peacebuilding efforts?” and “Was the inclusion of local ownership, as advocated by post-liberal approaches to peace, translated from theory into practice in Afghanistan? If so, with what consequences?”

1.2 – Theoretical approach: Towards a postcolonial critique of hybrid peace

In this dissertation, the analysis of hybrid peacebuilding is framed through a postcolonial lens, recognising that peacebuilding, as it is commonly practised, is not a neutral or apolitical practice. Postcolonial theory, as advanced by scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, provides a lens through which to interrogate the enduring legacies of colonialism in contemporary global politics. While the very definition of postcolonialism has been subject to much debate, Huggan defines it as “a performative mode of critical revisionism, consistently directed at the colonial

past and assessing its legacies in the present, but also focusing on those forms of colonialism that have surfaced more recently in the context of an increasingly globalised but incompletely decolonised world” (2013, p. 10).

A critical component of this postcolonial critique is understanding how Eurocentrism shapes global security frameworks. As Barkawi and Laffey (2006) argue, security studies and its underlying understanding of what security means has been deeply influenced by Eurocentric assumptions and European historical experiences, worldviews and geopolitical interests which prioritise the experiences of Great Powers. More specifically, both the empirical agenda, and meta-theoretical assumptions that underpin this area of study have been disciplined, by and large, by US political concerns and priorities, thus often functioning as instruments to orient and legitimise US foreign and security policies and, in doing so, silencing the security concerns and worldviews of other, mostly non-Western, actors. Ultimately, the foundations of security thought fail to provide adequate analytical tools for understanding the security concerns of the Global South. This Eurocentric bias reflects a broader tendency in peacebuilding, where interventions are often designed and justified in terms that align with Western interests and priorities, while local contexts and the needs of conflict-affected regions are sidelined.

A foundational element of postcolonial critique, Edward Said’s (1978) concept of Orientalism, is paramount to understanding these dynamics. Said describes how the West has historically constructed the “East” as a place of backwardness, exoticism, and irrationality, positing that these depictions, rooted in colonial mindset, functioned not merely as innocent stereotypes but as powerful discourses which justified and sustained Western dominance over Eastern societies. By presenting the “Orient” as fundamentally different and inferior, Orientalist representations create a binary between the “civilised” West and the “primitive” East (Said, 1978). This constructed difference not only legitimised colonial expansion by portraying it as a civilising mission—where Western intervention was deemed necessary to bring order, progress, and modernity—but also continues to shape contemporary narratives and justifications for Western involvement in various regions, particularly in the Middle East (Sa’di, 2020).

Moreover, in the context of this discussion, it is essential to recognise that these frameworks are not only Eurocentric but also deeply gendered. Building on the work of

scholars like Spivak (1988) and Abu-Lughod (2002), this dissertation also considers how gendered Orientalist narratives shape the discourses and practices of hybrid peacebuilding. Women from the Global South are often depicted as oppressed and in need of saving, a narrative that legitimises interventions framed as emancipatory but that, in reality, perpetuate neo-colonial logics of control and dominance. Such gendered constructions reinforce paternalistic attitudes, positioning Western actors as protectors or liberators while denying agency to local women who are often presented as passive victims rather than active participants in peace processes (Spivak, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 2002).

Beyond its epistemological alignment, the postcolonial critique adopted here also carries significant ethical and political implications. This perspective emphasises that despite the language of “local ownership” and “hybridity”, externally-led interventions frequently replicate the hierarchical power structures that were established during colonial rule (Nadarajah, 2015; Blaney and Inayatullah, 2002; Bhabha, 1994). Hybrid peacebuilding approaches ostensibly seek to foster more culturally relevant and sustainable peace processes (Richmond, 2013). However, this dissertation argues that such approaches often disguise deeper continuities in global power relations, as they tend to privilege Western norms and interests while marginalising genuinely local solutions. In doing so, the dissertation engages with and follows a burgeoning literature that both critiques dominant, Western and liberal, understandings of peace and statebuilding, and searches for alternative, inclusive, indigenous and post-liberal forms of thinking about peace from a postcolonial perspective (Barkawi and Laffey, 2006; Richmond, 2011; Jabri, 2016).

By adopting a postcolonial lens, this study intends to provide a critical reading of peacebuilding as a tool for legitimising and reproducing Western values, hierarchies, and practices as hegemonic and necessary for ensuring global stability. In that sense, the US-led intervention in Afghanistan provides a privileged entry point to discuss and examine how, despite its emancipatory rhetoric, post-liberal and hybrid forms of statebuilding often replicate rather than resolve these structural issues. As a space that has been recurrently under external control and occupation, Afghanistan highlights the limitations of these approaches, revealing how external actors’ dominance continues to shape local realities and reinforce existing global power imbalances.

1.3 – Methodology and Sources

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, consistent with the postcolonial epistemological framework that informs the analysis. The qualitative method, particularly the use of a single case study, is best suited to explore the power relationships and discourses embedded in peacebuilding practices. A quantitative approach, by contrast, would risk reducing these nuanced dynamics to generalizable patterns potentially obscuring the specific ways in which power is exerted and maintained in post-conflict settings like Afghanistan.

By focusing on a single case study – the US-led intervention in Afghanistan – this research aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms and processes through which international and local actors interact, and how power imbalances are maintained or disrupted. The case study method was selected for its ability to offer detailed insights into specific contexts, allowing for a focused investigation of the Afghan conflict and peacebuilding efforts. Afghanistan was chosen for this purpose since it represents one of the most significant and prolonged examples of externally-led intervention in recent history, where hybrid peacebuilding approaches were explicitly attempted. While other cases, such as Iraq or Bosnia, could have been analysed, Afghanistan provides a unique and critical context, due to the scale of international involvement, diversity of local actors, and the historical backdrop of colonial and imperial interactions.

The research is anchored in an extensive literature review, drawing on key scholarly works that link debates about liberal international peace and statebuilding with post-colonial thinking. This literature was selected based on its relevance to the research questions and its contribution to understanding the theoretical frameworks surrounding hybrid peacebuilding. In addition to these secondary sources, primary sources such as the Bonn Agreement and several UN Documents were analysed to contextualize the international community's approach and its implications.

For the inclusion and exclusion criteria when selecting literature, academic rigour and relevance were prioritised. Sources were chosen if they provided significant theoretical or empirical contributions to the understanding of the development of peacebuilding practices or neo-colonial dynamics. In contrast, sources were excluded if they lacked scholarly credibility, had a narrow focus not aligned with the research questions, or were overly descriptive without offering analytical depth. Historical analysis was also a key

methodological tool, enabling a thorough examination of peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan and their historical parallels with colonial interventions.

Crucially, it is also important to reflect upon the limitations of this thesis. One limitation lies in the case study methodology, which allows for in-depth analysis but limits the ability to generalise findings to other contexts. While the focus on Afghanistan provided valuable insights into the dynamics of hybrid peacebuilding and neo-imperialism, the conclusions drawn are specific to this case and may not apply universally. Furthermore, the absence of interviews reduces the direct engagement with local actors, which could have enriched the analysis with firsthand perspectives. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that, given the extensive body of literature on Afghanistan, it was not feasible to cover every source comprehensively, despite efforts to engage with the most relevant and significant scholarship.

1.4– Structure of the Argument

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. The second chapter, following the introduction, offers a comprehensive exploration of the historical evolution and conceptual underpinnings of the Hybrid Peace Paradigm, situating it within the broader trajectory of peacebuilding and conflict resolution approaches, particularly those shaped by external interventions. The chapter begins by outlining the establishment of the UN in 1945, charting its role in the development of First-Generation Peacekeeping operations during the Cold War, while highlighting the main foundational principles and operational mechanisms of this approach. It then transitions into an analysis of Liberal Peacebuilding, highlighting the shift towards more comprehensive statebuilding efforts aimed at fostering democracy and market-based reforms in post-conflict societies.

By tracing this evolution, I will argue that each approach, despite its distinct characteristics, has been grounded in an “emancipatory” promise, as it is intended to redress the limits of its predecessor and put forward an alternative, more inclusive, effective and sustainable model of conflict resolution. However, this analysis reveals that all of these paradigms have consistently fallen short of their emancipatory aspirations. Instead, they have perpetuated practices rooted in neo-colonial assumptions and logics, with powerful states continuing to dictate the terms of intervention and imposing their

ideologies on post-conflict societies. The second chapter thus sets the stage for a deeper critical engagement with the limitations of these frameworks and the persistent legacy of external domination in peacebuilding efforts.

The third chapter critically assesses the repercussions of the Hybrid Peace Approach following the US-led intervention in Afghanistan. It begins by providing a concise historical overview of external interventions in the Middle East, focusing on how imperial and neo-imperial powers, particularly Western nations, have shaped the region's geopolitical landscape. Beginning with the rise of the Ottoman Empire, this section will trace the trajectory of foreign domination, highlighting key events like the European mandate system post-World War I, and the shift from European to US influence during the Cold War and beyond. This historical context underscores how these interventions disrupted local governance, fostered instability, and established power dynamics that persisted in modern peacebuilding efforts.

This chapter then focuses on the case of Afghanistan by exploring the tensions between foreign intervention and local legitimacy, the detrimental impact of the war economy, and the reliance on local militias in counterinsurgency efforts. Notably, this chapter highlights how hybridity in Afghanistan allowed international actors to dictate the country's political and economic restructuring, often prioritising their own security and geopolitical interests over genuine local needs. Additionally, it is argued that the lack of contextual understanding by the US and its allies coupled with an inability to adapt to changing power structures, led to the prolonged nature of the intervention, culminating in the Taliban's resurgence.

Finally, by answering the research questions proposed for this study, the fourth chapter argues that neo-imperialist discourses significantly shape peacebuilding practices, often justifying interventions under the guise of stability and modernization while prioritizing the interests of powerful states over local needs. I will argue that the limitations of hybrid approaches are starkly evident in Afghanistan, where international actors dictated key decisions and processes, transforming local governance into an intermediary role rather than a legitimate authority.

Chapter 2

From Peacekeeping to Hybridity: The Colonial Continuity in Peacebuilding

In order to fully understand the emergence and evolution of the Hybrid Peace Paradigm, as well as the reproduction of a logic of external control inherent in preceding conflict resolution approaches, a thorough historical contextualisation is essential. This chapter delves into this background, beginning with the establishment of the UN in 1945 and tracing the paradigm's development throughout the Cold War period, leading up to the early 2010s.

2.1 United Nations Peacekeeping Operations

The development of an agenda for peace is often characterised as a complex international experiment, that requires attentive scrutiny and critique since it aims to change the social foundations of post-conflict societies structurally (Chandler, 2010; Philipsen, 2014). Since its inception in 1945, the UN has viewed itself as particularly well-fitted for building sustainable peace, a task that is understood as being far more difficult than winning a war. The UN defines peacebuilding as:

“A range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development. Peacebuilding is a complex, long-term process of creating the necessary conditions for sustainable peace. It works by addressing the deep-rooted, structural causes of violent conflict in a comprehensive manner. Peacebuilding measures address core issues that affect the functioning of society and the State and seek to enhance the capacity of the State to effectively and legitimately carry out its core functions”. (UN 2008, p. 18)

Peacekeeping stands as a high-profile cornerstone of the United Nations' efforts to fulfil what the Chapter I of the Charter of the UN calls the “maintenance of international peace and security” (United Nations Charter, 1945). While the UN does not hold control over

conducting or authorising peace operations, it remains the single most important institution in the field, since, over the decades, it has undertaken a far greater number of operations than any other actor.

Notwithstanding its protracted development and the frequency of deployment by the United Nations, peacekeeping, as a distinct set of tasks and activities undertaken by the organisation, continues to defy a universally accepted definition. Ultimately, while the Charter itself does not explicitly mandate these activities (Koops et al., 2015), several key provisions contribute to its legitimacy and framework.

The organisation's foundational document highlights that the UN Security Council has the primary responsibility for maintaining peace and possesses a range of options for addressing threats. Under Chapter VI ("Pacific Settlement of Disputes"), the Council may acknowledge a threat and recommend a peaceful resolution to the conflicting parties. Alternatively, Chapter VII ("Action with Respect to Threats to Peace, Breaches of the Peace and Acts of Aggression") empowers the Council to take binding enforcement measures to address conflicts directly (de Coning & Peter, 2019). While the Security Council has primary responsibility for maintaining peace and security, Chapter IV ("The General Assembly") dictates that the General Assembly can also make recommendations with regards to the maintenance of international peace to the Members or the Security Council or both. Simultaneously, by means of Article 99, the Secretary-General is entrusted with the responsibility to bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter that might threaten international peace and security, allowing for proactive measures to be taken to prevent conflict and promote peace.

2.2 - Conflict Resolution in the Cold War Period

From the outset, the UN emerged as a purportedly unbiased, non-aligned entity, focused on development, drawing from its expertise in rebuilding Europe after World War II. This reputation prompted post-colonial nations to turn to UN-led peacekeeping for conflict resolution. As the UN expanded its membership in the 1950s due to decolonization, its role shifted from dispensing victor's justice to becoming a battleground for Cold War rivalries and holding former colonial powers accountable (Babbit, 2009; Peter, 2019).

During this period, peacebuilding mainly focused on the interposition of UN military forces to monitor ceasefires, facilitate the withdrawal of military troops or, in some cases, act as a buffer between countries in tense situations. In fact, First-generation Peacekeeping constituted a great power management mechanism which aimed to contain conflicts and maintain stability so that, subsequently, states could achieve a political solution (Newman et al, 2009).

This approach was informed by Westphalian norms such as impartiality, consent of local parties to the conflict, and the non-use of force except in cases of self-defence and was based on the primacy of international security among states. Furthermore, part of the existing literature contends that Classical Peacekeeping reflected, to a certain extent, a pluralist view of international relations, recognizing the principle of sovereignty and elements of cooperation that structure peace between states, such as mutual recognition and non-interference in the internal affairs of the state (Newman et al, 2009; Peter, 2019). Since aggression and war between states were considered the principal challenges to international security, peacekeeping's main purpose was to assist states in resolving disputes in a peaceful manner in the interests of international order and stability.

Almost all of the major operations in this period represented a classic model of inter-state conflict aiming at containing- and not solving- the sources of international instability (Newman et al, 2009). To further understand how these principles were reflected in reality, it is fundamental to analyse some examples of the missions that were deployed. The UN Truce Supervision Organization was established in 1948 to supervise armistice agreements, avert possible escalation of tensions and give assistance to other UN peacekeeping missions in the Middle East. The first UN Emergency Force, established between 1965 and 1967, aimed to secure and supervise the ceasefire in the Suez War, the withdrawal of French, Israeli and British troops from Egypt and, subsequently, functioned as a buffer between the Egyptian and the Israeli armed forces (Peter, 2019). Additionally, the second UN Emergency Force, operating between 1973 and 1979, was established to control the cessation of hostilities between Egypt and Israel and to supervise the buffer zones that were created under those agreements. Another interesting example is the establishment of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon in 1978 whose purpose was to supervise the Israeli forces' withdrawal from Lebanese territory, restore international peace and security and aid the government of Lebanon in recovering its authority within

the country (Novosseloff, 2015). The country also saw the deployment of the UN Observation Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL) in 1978, which aimed at preventing the illegal entry of personnel or arms supplies within the country's borders (Mesquita & White, 2015). Lastly, one should consider the example of the operation in Congo (ONUC) since it constituted the major exception of deployment in the case of civil war, though, ultimately, its final purpose was to secure the territorial integrity of the country and not resolve the internal conflict (Peter, 2019).

Nevertheless, a substantial post-colonial critic in the literature posits that, during this period, peacekeeping operations perceived post-colonial sovereignty as both inviolable and violable depending on the state's geopolitical position within the international order, differentiating states' access to sovereignty. Tudor (2020) argues that whilst peacekeepers reinforced the nation-state framework through their mediation spaces and mandates, they simultaneously paved the way for international interventions under the guise of peacebuilding, during a period in which ideas about sovereignty were being renegotiated by emerging and older global powers. Similarly, Adom Getachew contends that "The protections that guarantee sovereign equality and non-intervention were unevenly distributed, making new and weak postcolonial states vulnerable to arbitrary interventions and encroachments at the hand of larger, more powerful states as well as private actors" (2019, p. 113).

In fact, during the 1950s and 1960s, peacekeeping missions were perceived by UN staff as an encouragement for their interference and statebuilding ambitions. Peacekeeping personnel, ranging from technicians and politicians to mediators made political decisions which strongly influenced the future of host states' diplomatic affiliation but also territorial integrity and self-determination. During peacekeeping missions, the staff would set the boundaries for 'acceptable or credible' nationalist movements and paternalistically police the ideological future of decolonizing countries. Simultaneously, these missions, which functioned as knowledge producers for the UN Secretariat, also cemented colonial categorizations and hierarchies in post-colonial government settings through racialized narratives and development advice (Tudor, 2020). Furthermore, local populations were excluded from the decision-making by the organization that was invited by their governments, due to the organization's self-interested practices and racialised prejudices (Darby, 2009).

2.2.1 - UN Peacekeeping and Liberal internationalism

In order to fully grasp the ongoing reconfiguration of peace and statebuilding practices and problematize its drawbacks and limitations, it is essential to first unpack the specific worldview upon which they rest, liberal internationalism, and explore its historical evolution, underlying assumptions and immanent contradictions. Liberal internationalism has been a guiding framework for external-led peace and statebuilding, evolving over the past century to adapt to shifting global dynamics. At its core, Liberal Internationalism envisions an open, rule-based international system where states cooperate through trade, shared institutions, and democratic governance to achieve mutual benefits. This paradigm rests on the assumption that economic interdependence, institutional frameworks - such as international law and organisations - and democratic governance can minimise international conflict by fostering cooperation, stability, and collective security (MacMillan, 2007).

The evolution of Liberal Internationalism, as traced by Ikenberry (2009), spans three phases: Liberal Internationalism 1.0, Liberal Internationalism 2.0, and the emerging Liberal Internationalism 3.0. The first, associated with Woodrow Wilson's post-World War I vision, emphasised state sovereignty, self-determination, and a collective security system through the League of Nations. However, this vision was ultimately limited due to 'thin' institutional commitments and an overreliance on states' adherence to international norms. The second phase, Liberal Internationalism 2.0, emerged post-World War II and was marked by a more complex, institutionalised framework led by the US, integrating its political and economic systems into a broader Western alliance. This era saw a shift towards deeper cooperation underpinned by 'national security' and economic interdependence, resulting in a network of alliances and organisations, such as NATO, the World Bank, and the UN.

It was within the context of Liberal Internationalism 2.0 that peacekeeping emerged as a tangible practice of liberal internationalist principles. Tudor underlines that "the invention of peacekeeping in 1956 was liberal internationalists' most substantial experiment since the construct of the UN" (2020, p.13). Liberal internationalism, which positions the state as the central unit of world politics, sought to build stable democratic states, and the UN's peacekeeping missions became a tool to support this aim. The procedures and organs of the UN were geared toward securing the nation-state

paradigm, reflecting a transnational conception of peace that extended beyond diplomatic exchanges to the practical deployment of international peacekeepers.

First-generation UN peacekeeping missions thus became mechanisms for translating the liberal internationalist vision into post-colonial settings. These missions aimed to stabilise newly independent states by fostering democratic governance, underpinned by the belief that democratic states would be less likely to engage in armed inter-state conflict. As a result, peacekeeping staff often used their authority in host states to steer political directions, reinforcing Liberal Internationalism's core assumption that economic and political liberalisation were pathways to global stability.

Ikenberry's (2009) notion of a 'hegemonic liberal order' was embodied in these peacekeeping efforts, where the US played a dominant role in managing and promoting a stable liberal internationalist order through the UN. The application of these principles, however, was not without much criticism. Tudor (2020) concludes that liberal internationalism manifested in peacekeeping missions as a form of multilateral imperialism, where peacekeepers tried to impose democratic norms onto decolonising and post-colonial territories. This practice often masked deeper continuities in global hierarchies, allowing powerful states to dictate the terms of engagement under the guise of promoting peace and stability.

The emerging Liberal Internationalism 3.0 hints at a more complex, multi-polar form of global cooperation, where sovereignty is increasingly redefined, yet the fundamental tenets of Liberal Internationalism persist (Ikenberry, 2009). However, across its iterations, this paradigm has consistently operated on the belief that democracies are uniquely suited to cooperate for mutual gain, with trade and institutional rules seen as having a 'civilising' effect. This has led to peacebuilding policies that often visualised alternative global or national visions as threats to international peace and security. As seen in UN peacekeeping missions, the imposition of liberal democratic norms and market economies onto diverse contexts can perpetuate neo-imperial dynamics, continuing to prioritise the agendas of powerful states over the self-determined paths of post-colonial nations.

2.2.2 - The Shortcomings of First-Generation Peacekeeping

As this analysis has demonstrated, UN peacekeepers were fundamental to implementing unequal respect for sovereignty in the post-colonial international order, while counterintuitively seeking to idealize democratic countries through political interference. Paradoxically, the inviolability of state sovereignty was reinforced by staff which also legitimized intervention through these multilateral peacekeeping missions. Thus, domestic human rights violations in West Papua, for example, were protected by its right of non-interference, whilst UN staff repeatedly intervened in the internal affairs of states considered vulnerable, such as Congo, to control its political future.

Peacekeepers became central elements in debates regarding the collapse of European imperialism, the threats deriving from the Cold War and the future of the nation-state system in the Global South, even though their approaches were highly influenced by their personal views and political motivations (Cunliffe, 2012; Tudor, 2020). Furthermore, they, not only reshaped sovereignty but also reforged international interventionism, perpetuating hierarchies of race and expertise into new independent units and providing the structure for peacebuilding efforts that came afterwards.

It is within this broader, evolving, and hegemonic institutional arrangement—where democratization, economic interdependence, and adherence to international norms are seen as essential pillars of global stability—that we can better understand the role of peace and statebuilding as liberal ordering practices. This framework has laid the groundwork for the development of Liberal Peacebuilding, which sought to further entrench these principles in post-conflict settings, yet also revealed significant limitations and contradictions in its application.

2.3 - Liberal Peacebuilding

As mentioned above, during the Cold War, International Conflict Resolution (ICR) was primarily focused on the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union and on colonial accountability. However, following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989, there was a profound shift towards the rapid development of international peacebuilding efforts within conflict-prone and post-conflict societies. These efforts span various domains such as security, development,

humanitarian aid, governance, and the establishment of the rule of law. Recently, these initiatives have experienced significant growth, both in terms of the scale of activities undertaken, and in the number and diversity of international entities engaged in these missions.

Simultaneously, the evolution of peace operations mirrors changes in the security landscape in the post-Cold War era, particularly after the events of 9/11 2001, when civil wars and state collapse started to be perceived as significant threats. This shift in mainstream thinking is evident in statements such as Fukuyama's assertion that "weak and failing states have arguably become the single most important problem for international order" (Fukuyama, 2004), or in Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" (1993), that underscored that the post-Cold War world would be characterized by clashes between different civilizations, primarily along cultural and religious lines, rather than ideological ones. Consequently, statebuilding became a paramount strategic and moral imperative and peacebuilding, particularly in the context of (re)establishing state institutions in failed or conflict-ridden states, started being perceived by powerful developed nations as a crucial strategic objective for international intervention.

Newman, Paris, and Richmond (2009) posit that this surge in engagement after the Cold War was driven by changing norms, in particular, the diminishing of the inviolability of territorial sovereignty, and an increasing willingness to consider certain forms of intervention. Accordingly, these operations represent a, possibly post-Westphalian, departure from traditional methods of conflict resolution and security management, emphasising that maintaining peace in post-conflict regions demands a comprehensive approach that addresses a broad spectrum of social, economic, and institutional requirements. This process of the metamorphosis of conflict resolution initiatives reflects a liberal project, aiming to both manage the instability among states and foster peace through the spreading of liberal democracy and market economics.

The publication of the UN Agenda for Peace, in 1992, by then-Secretary General Boutros-Ghali constituted a fundamental development in ICR since it established a framework of action that prevails to this day, outlining four primary responsibilities for the UN and other actors: conflict prevention, peace-making, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. While there may still be ongoing debates regarding the exact definitions of these terms within

the ICR community, Boutros Boutros-Ghali's report provides the most accepted definitions, which represented a major shift from the emphasis that was previously put on bilateral bargaining.

<i>Conflict Prevention</i>	Designated “preventive diplomacy” by the U.N., it is defined as an action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur (Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 1992).
<i>Peace-making</i>	Action to bring hostile parties to agreement, essentially through such peaceful means as those foreseen in Chapter VI of the Charter of the United Nations (Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 1992).
<i>Peacekeeping</i>	Deployment of a United Nations presence in the field, hitherto with the consent of all the parties concerned, normally involving United Nations military and/or police personnel and frequently civilians as well (Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 1992).
<i>Peacebuilding</i>	Action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict (Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 1992).

Table 1. Primary responsibilities for the UN and other actors outlined in the UN Agenda for Peace, in 1992

2.3.1 - Democratic Peace Approach

The Liberal Peace Theory, which has gradually garnered international consensus in addressing violent conflicts, posits that liberally constituted societies are inherently more inclined towards peace, both internally and in their foreign policy, and acts as the theoretical basis of liberal peacebuilding practices (Newman, et al., 2009). In the international sphere, this theory expresses itself as the “democratic peace theory”, which argues that consolidated democracies are less likely to engage in conflicts with each other due to institutional constraints that are put upon leaders which make starting wars more challenging. Additionally, since democracies are economically interdependent, initiating a war could disrupt economic and trade relations. In the post-Cold War era, there has been a resurgent interest in the domestic manifestation of liberal peace theory, which suggests that states structured according to liberal principles are internally more peaceful, prosperous, humane, and even better at managing the environment than illiberal states.

The convergence of the international and domestic variants of liberal peace theory has led to broad assertions about the diverse benefits of democratisation and market-oriented economic policies in promoting peace, which, in turn, led to the structuring of the 'Liberal Peace Project'. According to Jabri (2013), the Liberal Peace Project emphasizes the practical endeavour of transforming societies into as near a reflection of liberal democracies as can be achieved in the unique historical and cultural contexts of each society. Thus, the peacebuilding project primarily involves institution-building, which is aimed at fundamentally transforming the state itself.

The UN, confronted with atrocities in an international context that had seen the establishment of a normative order based on human rights and international law, had the duty of mobilising its resources to prevent such atrocities, which often meant prioritising human rights over sovereignty. Additionally, interventions carried out under the banner of human rights became central to form the core of another significant concept: the "Responsibility to Protect". Under this paradigm, protection became the immediate response, driven by necessity, whilst 'Peacebuilding' sought to prevent future atrocities. (Jabri, 2013). Hence, the concept of protection became underpinned by a logic of policing, focusing on immediate actions aiming at rescuing people from violent contexts. On the other hand, prevention went beyond the immediate urgency of policing operations, encompassing broader perspectives that sought to address the underlying causes of violence.

Similarly, the concept of "failure" within the liberal paradigm implies an inability to adapt to the imperatives of the neoliberal global political economy. According to David Harvey, Neoliberalism constitutes "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2005, p. 2).

Furthermore, the Liberal Peace Approach encompasses a wide of efforts, including: facilitating ceasefires and peace negotiations; demobilising and disarming former combatants as well as assisting their reintegration into society; stabilising the economy and fostering employment opportunities; facilitating the return or the resettlement of refugees and internally displaced persons; addressing food insecurity and health issues; enhancing law enforcement and maintaining public order; promoting and facilitating the

implementation of democratic processes; strengthening legal institutions; improving public services; advocating for human rights and reconciliation; addressing land disputes and reform claims; and, finally, drafting or amending constitutions to ensure inclusivity and representation (Newman et al. 2009).

2.3.2 - The Crisis of the Liberal Peace Approach

The last decade has seen a surge in critical assessments highlighting the unintended consequences of over two decades of foreign intervention in conflict-affected regions. One critique emphasises that, although local actors often play key roles in implementing liberal peace efforts, the underlying framework is inherently Western, which can deeply influence the host society and its culture. Despite the rhetoric of "participation," "local ownership," and "partnership," power dynamics persist, with Western agendas driving the conception, design, funding, timetable, execution, and evaluation of programs and projects (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Mac Ginty contends that the “liberal peace effectively minimises the space available for indigenous and traditional approaches to peace-making” (2008, p. 140), while Richmond (2010) argues that this top-down, institutional approach fails to adequately address the requirements for a social contract beyond political rights for grassroots actors, thereby undermining its legitimacy with local actors. This dynamic can lead not only to the rejection of the entire liberal peace process but also to local efforts to co-opt it or resist it.

In fact, peacebuilding operations’ ultimate goal to reshape societies into conflict-free, non-violent, states, implies that a country undergoing extensive peacebuilding efforts may not function as a self-governing entity during the operation (Jabri, 2016). While it may have a nominal government, the actions of international military and civil personnel within its borders are often accountable to external institutions, with local involvement tending to be secondary, with individuals often employed on local, and therefore cheaper, terms.

In post-conflict societies, governance is predominantly driven by private institutions, with resources often favouring transnational entities over local ones. Thus, post-colonial states frequently grapple with territorial control, civil society influence, and commitment to political and economic transformation, often succumbing to a colonial legacy perpetuated

by neo-colonialism (Jabri, 2016). This presents a paradox in peacebuilding practices: it employs illiberal methods to promote liberal values (Williams, 2005). Ultimately, the Liberal Peace approach serves the interests of powerholders, including elites and their private-sector allies, rather than empowering the general population. In this sense, the liberal peace transforms into a neoliberal peace, prioritising the private sector over the common good and leading to significant human consequences.

Additionally, peacebuilding practices often categorise the “local” population based on tribal and ethnic affiliations, which can undermine the achievement of post-coloniality aiming to create a political community based on the idea of a liberated and abstract state, as it reinforces cultural and tribal divisions within the population (Jabri, 2016). It appears as though there is an assumption that the 'failure' of the modern post-colonial state stems from the neglect of tribal and ethnic identities, and therefore, emphasising these divisions is seen as the 'solution'.

Moreover, despite being the prevalent framework in international interventions, the liberal approach faces four fundamental threats (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Firstly, its efforts have been accompanied by practical shortcomings, particularly evident in interventions such as Iraq and Afghanistan, which range from the failure of democratic processes to the appropriation of economic development models that prioritise international markets over local ones and can lead to the impoverishment of entire populations. Secondly, one must underline its own crisis of confidence, evidenced by the acknowledgement of its high costs and unintended consequences by some liberal interventionists. This has resulted in a more cautious approach among liberal interventionists, who are less inclined to undertake large-scale interventions. Subsequently, the authors underline the possibility of non-compliant local reactions to the peacebuilding efforts, which can range from resistance to non-engagement. Finally, non-liberal actors like China, Russia, and Israel may impose their own solutions to conflicts, disregarding liberal peace principles, often without repercussions (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013).

Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness in the literature of evolving circumstances. Randazzo and Torrent (2020) as well as De Coning (2018) highlight that the UN has shifted away from the “liberal peace theory of change” in its policy frameworks, opting for a more pragmatic approach that recognises peacebuilding as a political endeavour

requiring tailored solutions rather than one-size-fits-all approaches. This shift acknowledges the non-linear and complex nature of conflicts and the need for adaptive interventions. In fact, in 2015, the UN conducted significant reviews of its peacebuilding architecture, introducing the concept of ‘sustaining peace’ as a replacement for peacebuilding, which emphasizes the importance of establishing legitimate institutions while recognizing that progress towards sustainable peace is not a linear process.

The UN’s Peacebuilding Support Office (UNPSO) has also acknowledged the challenges that arise when legitimacy and governance are disconnected in its 2010 report “UN Peacebuilding: An Orientation” (UNPSO, 2010). This document, which stands out because of its significant focus on critical reflection, emphasises that the success of peacebuilding efforts depends on the political decisions made by various actors, including national and local governments, donors, and the UN itself, as well as effective leadership and available resources such as human capital and financing. It recognised that “national ownership”, deemed essential to create stability within communities, can only be achieved through the involvement of civil society organisations, resident NGOs and “traditional actors”.

However, scholars such as Ross (2020) and Autesserre (2019) argue that the translation of these policies into practice has been limited, since the UN continues to prioritise liberal democratic peace in its international engagements, overlooking the iterative and cyclical nature of peace processes. These scholars identify several constraints hindering the adaptation of international institutions namely: i) the reluctance among peacebuilding organisations, donors, and UN member states to implement new frameworks; ii) inadequate understanding of the “sustaining peace” agenda and its implications for established practices; iii) restrictive funding mechanisms for peacebuilding that hinder flexible and expansive operations; iv) a lack of willingness among decision-makers to embrace complexity and uncertainty.

Ultimately, Peacebuilding constitutes another stage of modernisation (Jabri, 2016). The key distinction in the contemporary context is that the architects of this new phase are not post-colonial leaders who were politically accountable to their newly decolonised populations, whose identity was tied to the nation-state. Rather, they are primarily international bureaucrats, whose conception of governance is shaped by a script derived from global or Western national institutions. This script operates under the assumption

that conflict arises from the failure of the post-colonial state and its inability to govern effectively.

The widespread acceptance of the “Liberal Peace” approach in international and academic circles is based on the belief that its norms and governing models are universally applicable. However, this consensus has largely been shaped by a narrow consultation process which primarily involves the victorious powers of the Second World War (Richmond, 2010). This analysis has attempted to show that this limited dialogue has reinforced the dominance of official actors and powerful states and their institutions, whilst marginalising non-state actors and developing and postcolonial states.

This approach is primarily a Western liberal institutionalist ideal, which seeks to establish a Lockean social contract where governance is exchanged for various forms of security and freedoms. However, the outcomes of liberal peacebuilding efforts have often resulted in the creation of governing institutions that struggle to gain legitimacy among citizens. Instead of focusing on individual rights and needs, these institutions prioritise state security and regional stability.

The social contract arising from liberal peacebuilding tends to emphasise the development of a neoliberal framework, but local participants often do not fully adopt these institutional structures. This can lead to the emergence of an elitist and ethno-political peace that disregards the rights and needs of individuals, which represents a significant regression from the democratic ideals on which this paradigm is based upon. (Richmond, 2010).

In conclusion, the liberal peacebuilding approach, while designed to foster stability and governance in conflict-affected regions, has faced substantial criticism for its unintended consequences. Despite its emphasis on local participation and ownership, this approach remains rooted in Western frameworks, often marginalising indigenous practices and imposing external agendas. Additionally, the persistence of neo-colonial power dynamics undermines the legitimacy of these interventions, as local actors struggle to navigate imposed liberal structures. Furthermore, the liberal peace process often privileges state security and regional stability over individual rights resulting in elitist governance models which fail to resonate with local populations.

2.4 - Hybrid Peace Approach and the myth of post-liberal peacebuilding

Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) argue that much of the academic and policy literature on ICR tends to oversimplify conflict analyses by presenting them in linear timelines, focusing on a limited set of issues and featuring a narrow cast of actors. These accounts often portray conflicts as static, unchanging behaviours and the perpetual animosity between actors. Additionally, they regularly adopt a top-down approach, primarily focusing on principal actors such as governments and armed groups, thereby overlooking the agency and diversity of local-level actors.

Recently, another trend in the ICR literature has involved the romanticisation of local, indigenous, customary, and traditional approaches to peacebuilding. Faced with the shortcomings of liberal peace and the high costs of international interventions, many observers see 'the local' as the solution to improving international efforts, thus, advocating for local ownership and participation as means to enhance the success and sustainability of peace and development initiatives and reducing dependency on external support.

Notwithstanding, Mac Ginty (2011) suggests that this current emphasis on local and Indigenous knowledge in peacebuilding and development initiatives, while undoubtedly valuable, can inadvertently curtail critical analysis since it risks overlooking potential limitations within these approaches. The author argues that the concepts of hybridity and hybridisation offer a valuable framework to address these shortcomings by challenging the reification of categories such as “local”, “indigenous”, and “international” and highlighting their inherent fluidity and potential for productive interaction. Consequently, there has been a push for hybrid approaches which combine elements of liberal internationalism with non-liberal Indigenous institutions, norms, and practices at the local level (Laffey & Nadarajah, 2012).

As the academic debate moved from an explanatory paradigm towards a more transformative hybrid paradigm, critical scholars faced the challenge of going beyond the liberal-local dichotomy and rethinking the fixed relationship between power and emancipatory agency (Graef, 2015). On the one hand, Chandler (2010) posits that we are witnessing a new mode of international governmentality -post-liberal statebuilding- where local autonomy is framed as a risk to be managed rather than supported. The author contends that critical scholars misunderstood the crisis of liberal peace as a failure of liberalism itself, whereas the real issue lies in the shift towards a governmental logic of

managing societies through deep social interventions which aim to transform ‘risky’ local social conditions into neo-liberal ones which produce a civil society. Chandler’s contribution lies in his focus on ‘international policy-practices’, which, he argues, offer a way to analyse statebuilding on its own terms rather than through universal frameworks (Graef, 2015).

In contrast, Richmond (2011) sees post-liberalism as continuing the emancipatory process, particularly through the transformative potential of everyday life. He critiques the uncritical use of “the local” and argues that it should be understood materially as the specific space where peace interventions take place. Richmond introduces the concept of “critical agency” to capture the proactive transformative actions emerging from everyday practices, which exist beyond the liberal local binary. He proposes the concept of “peace formation” to describe networked, emancipatory processes that operate across international and local boundaries, emphasising positive hybridity over coercive forms (Richmond, 2013).

Moreover, Homi Bhabha (1994) describes hybridity as an intermediate reality that defines the existence of post-colonial subjects, positioning them neither wholly within nor outside established categories. Instead, they form a distinct entity, characterised by its own images, representations, and narratives. Hybridity emerges from the interaction between hegemonic forces and efforts to decolonise peoples, territories, and knowledge, acknowledging the strategies of those resisting both overt and subtle forms of colonisation (Kapoor, 2003, p. 568). This concept challenges colonial expectations and allows for the recognition of political agency in constantly evolving forms, creating space for difference and resisting colonial norms. In anti-colonial and post-colonial struggles, this understanding of hybridity serves as a critical tool to question colonial assumptions and practices while affirming the self-determination and autonomy of colonised peoples.

Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) propose a four-part model to understand hybridization in societies undergoing international peace-support interventions. These four factors, which constantly interact in various geometry include: (i) the compliance powers of liberal peace agents, networks, and structures; (ii) the incentivising powers of liberal peace agents, networks, and structures; (iii) the ability of local actors to resist, ignore, or adapt liberal peace interventions; (iv) the ability of local actors, networks, and structures to present and maintain alternative forms of peace-making. The intersection of these

factors constitutes the "hybrid peace," where social processes merge to create blends and composites. This state is dynamic and continually evolving due to ongoing processes of hybridisation. Consequently, actors involved in peace and conflict must navigate the circumstances shaped by others rather than pursuing unilateral courses of action.

2.4.1 - Hybrid Peace and Hybridization

The concept of hybridity becomes useful when we differentiate between the process of hybridisation and the outcomes of Hybrid Peace, which can vary in their desirability (Bargués-Pedreny & Randazzo, 2018). While hybrid politics represent the moment of encounter and mediation between local and international scales, norms, institutions, laws, rights, needs, and interests, influenced by both power dynamics and legitimacy considerations, Hybrid Peace refers to the result of these encounters and can be either positive or negative. A negative Hybrid Peace may involve the transfer of power and norms from the international to the state or society without addressing broader political and social injustices, whereas a more positive hybrid form would involve a contextually rooted process that addresses such injustices across local and international scales.

Liberal peace policies and their proponents are themselves products of past hybridisation, seeking to influence environments already shaped by hybridity due to experiences like civil war or authoritarian rule. As local and international actors interact, conflict, and collaborate, further hybridisation occurs. This intricate interplay results in a complex yet more accurate understanding of conflict compared to explanations relying on discrete actors and linear historical narratives.

Importantly, this interaction isn't unidirectional. Local actors, through their own agency, can resist, engage with, or exploit the liberal peace efforts. The concept of hybridisation sheds light on the repercussions faced by the Liberal Peace, revealing that it's not always about the Liberal Peace dictating terms and locals reacting. Local actors can leverage the liberal peace and its resources for their own purposes. In some cases, this pushback can reshape the implemented peace and even alter the identity of liberal peace actors.

In practice, hybrid approaches to political reconciliation have taken various forms, such as the integration of formal commissions with customary norms and everyday reconciliation practices. This approach has been observed in cases like Timor Leste,

Solomon Islands, and Bougainville in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in response to the shortcomings of liberal peacebuilding projects (Bargués Pedreny & Randazzo, 2018).

2.4.2 - The Shortcomings of the Hybrid Peace Paradigm

The emancipatory potential of hybridity is not inherent; rather, it is contingent on the specific historical and social context in which the concept is applied. Recent research on the interactions between liberal and non-liberal contexts views hybridity as a pragmatic social scientific concept associated with blending or engagement (e.g., Mac Ginty, 2011).

The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States (IDPS, 2011), developed by fragile and conflict-affected states along with international partners, is seen by McCandless and Tschirgi (2012) as reflecting the concept of hybridity in significant ways, particularly in its emphasis on inclusive politics. However, concerns about the superficial use of hybridity by international actors, which mirrors past trends with concepts like local ownership and civil society, still persist. Indeed, even when hybridity is embraced, it may not necessarily lead to a genuinely hybrid and non-hegemonic peacebuilding strategy, but rather a continuation of working with familiar, capital-based NGOs aligned with Western norms.

Post-colonial scholars caution against sanitising hybridity into a reconciliatory concept, which could diminish its critical, anti-colonial potential. (Bargués-Pedreny & Randazzo, 2018). They argue that a reconciliatory interpretation of hybridity portrays colonialism as a tragic event with a positive resolution through global integration, overlooking its destructive aspects such as ethnocide. This perspective constructs hybridity as a “third space” where the interaction between local and international actors is envisioned as a corrective mechanism for the negative consequences of prior top-down liberal interventions. However, this framing inadvertently obscures alternative possibilities within the concept of hybridity. Specifically, it overlooks the potential to prioritise the self-governance of local communities and contemplate scenarios of external withdrawal (Bargués-Pedreny & Randazzo, 2018).

Material power imbalances persist in post-colonial relations between the dominant players in the modern international system and marginalised individuals, communities, or "developing" states. Hybridity reflects these power imbalances, which are often distorted,

and any attempts by the marginalised to modify them are typically limited (Bhabha, 1994, p. 330). Modernisation, development, peacebuilding, and statebuilding practices maintain similar structural engagements with their subjects as colonialism did. Blaming local actors for their challenges and imposing conditions on them are common patterns from the perspective of interventionist powers, leading some analysts to view these practices as having a neo-colonial character (Blaney & Inayatullah, 2002).

Suthaharan Nadarajah (2015) argues that, although the Hybrid Peace Approach appears to depart from traditional liberal peace by emphasising local agency, cultural sensitivity, and the 'everyday', it remains a problem-solving mechanism within a broader liberal order. According to the author, this approach integrates local customs and practices not to empower them genuinely but to make the liberal governance framework more adaptable, thereby reinforcing global liberal governmentality. Moreover, Nadarajah (2015) posits that the 'progressive' engagements and partnerships characteristic of hybrid peacebuilding are embedded in asymmetrical power relations. Such engagements, often portrayed as collaborative, are conditioned by global networks of power that reinforce and reproduce neo-colonial frameworks, leaving little room for genuine autonomy or resistance from local authors. Without challenging these foundational power structures, hybridity remains an illusion of cooperation, masking deeper issues of domination and control under the guise of inclusivity and partnership.

According to Richmond (2015), the encounter between local peace formation agency and the apparatus of the liberal peace and neoliberal state raises two main sets of dilemmas. From the perspective of international actors, the focus is on using their capacity to induce a top-down liberal peace, addressing local conflict causes. From the local perspective, the challenge lies in learning from peacebuilding efforts to address conflict roots while maintaining necessary autonomy within existing power structures and identities.

However, the key dilemma concerns balancing freedom with reasonable limits agreed upon by society's majority. Liberalism and neoliberalism pose questions about the extent of intervention or conditionality needed to overcome local barriers to constructing liberal peace and marketisation processes. Additionally, legitimacy presents dilemmas rooted in differing understandings of liberalism since, while international forms of legitimacy often rely on conditionality, local actors may have different views on who legitimises actions and why.

Furthermore, Mark Laffey and Suthaharan Nadarajah (2012) underline two major concerns in hybridity. Firstly, it continues to treat the territorial state as the primary unit of analysis, perpetuating a 'territorial trap' (Agnew, 1994). This approach limits the understanding of hybridity to shallow terms, mainly concerning the interaction between external actors and local communities in adopting non-liberal decision-making or conflict-resolution methods. Secondly, much of the existing literature views hybridity as a recent development in liberal peacebuilding, portraying it as a positive interaction between liberal and non-liberal spheres. However, without a thorough consideration of the postcolonial perspective on global order, this view presents an ahistorical understanding of liberalism and its modes of governance. Despite occasional recognition of past instances of external actors co-opting local practices, a deeper historical analysis is often lacking (Mac Ginty, 2011, p. 64).

In conclusion, the concept of hybridity in peacebuilding is far from inherently emancipatory, since its application is deeply context-dependent and shaped by historical power dynamics and the socio-political landscape. While hybridity offers the potential for more inclusive, context-sensitive approaches, it often risks being co-opted by dominant powers to maintain familiar neoliberal structures and alignments. Furthermore, post-colonial scholars warn that sanitising hybridity into a reconciliatory tool undermines its critical edge, reducing it to a mechanism for managing rather than transforming, global inequities. Without addressing the material power imbalances between international actors and marginalised communities, hybridity may perpetuate rather than dismantle neo-colonial dynamics. Thus, true emancipation through hybridity requires a radical rethinking of how local agency and external interventions intersect, emphasising autonomy, self-governance, and alternative frameworks beyond the liberal paradigm.

Chapter 3

The Limits of Hybridity: Assessing the US-Led Intervention and Its Consequences in Afghanistan

3.1 - Imperial Legacies: The Geopolitical Shaping of the Middle East Through External Interventions

To elucidate the nature of peacebuilding initiatives within the Middle East and their potential perpetuation of colonial practices and discourses, a comprehensive understanding of the region's historical context of interventionism by external imperial powers, particularly those of Western origin, is paramount. This section aims to provide a concise overview of this historical background, from the rise of the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the 21st century, highlighting the recurring pattern of external control over the region.

The Middle East, henceforth to be considered along with the bordering areas of the Caucasus and ex-Soviet Central Asia, has traditionally assumed a position of fundamental significance within the geopolitical calculus of imperialism. This pivotal role can be attributed to a confluence of three factors, namely its prodigious oil reserves, its strategic location at the heart of the Eurasian landmass, and its designation as the 'soft underbelly' of the global order (Amin, 2004).

Simultaneously, the region has emerged as one of the most internationalised regions within the Global South since the turn of the 20th century, leading to successive waves of violence perpetuated by global powers (Nakhaei, 2023). Nevertheless, whilst the Middle East stands as one of the regions that has been most exceptionally penetrated and subordinated within the global hierarchy, it paradoxically exhibits the most persistent resistance to this subordination (Brown, 1984).

The rise of the Ottoman Empire fundamentally reshaped the region's political landscape, since previously independent entities were incorporated into a powerful imperial structure (Hinnebusch, 2012). This incorporation effectively suppressed the region's ability to grow and develop on its own terms, since political, economic, and social structures were reshaped to serve the needs of the Ottoman central authority. Ultimately, while the empire flourished, the colonised area stagnated (Kieh, 1992).

The aftermath of World War I marked an important turning point. Whilst the conflict, coupled with the intensifying rivalry amongst various imperialist powers, culminated in the Ottoman's defeat and the subsequent disintegration of their vast empire, it also led to the emergence of a new form of imperialism. Capitalising on their dominant positions within the nascent League of Nations, Britain and France exploited the organisation's "mandate system" as a pretext to exert control over the region and incorporate the Middle East into their expansive networks of overseas possessions, effectively treating it as an extension of their Third World colonial empires (Kieh, 1992).

This policy effectively resulted in the continued exploitation of the Arab populace that had initially held onto the hope that the Western powers would uphold their ideals of democracy and self-determination. Furthermore, disillusionment grew and fuelled the rise of powerful nationalist movements, which were driven by the unwavering determination to reclaim Arab control over their political destiny (Kieh, 1992). Ultimately, the British and the French empires were compelled to relinquish some degree of control, in the 1920s, which marked the beginning of the decolonisation process that gradually unfolded across the region.

However, the arbitrary boundary drawing by which the departing imperial powers divided the Arab world, reflective of their own self-interests and political expediency, blatantly disregarded the existing social and cultural realities and the wishes of the indigenous population. Ultimately, this resulted in the creation of inherently weak artificial states (Halliday, 2002) which lacked a natural sense of unity among their citizens whose loyalties remained rooted in smaller sub-national groups like tribes or sects, or conversely, in larger pan-Arab or Islamic identities (Hinnebusch, 2012).

This process of arbitrary boundary drawing also guaranteed that the Middle East continued to be a supplier of raw materials and buying finished goods and technology from stronger economies (Amin, 1978; Owen, 1981; Issawi, 1982; Bromley, 1994). The concentration of vast oil reserves in a few, often smaller, client states ensured that these countries accumulated significant capital surpluses that were regularly exported to the West for investment, while larger states lacked capital to develop robust, diversified economies, despite having greater land and labour potential for diversification (Hinnebusch, 2012). The post-imperialist period witnessed the continuation of commercial competition amongst European countries in the region. This competition was

particularly evident in the arms trade, with European powers supplying weaponry to oil-rich, insecure micro-states, thus facilitating the “recycling” of petrodollars back to Europe (Owen, 1981).

Even as the era of direct European colonialism came to an end, the West sought to maintain control and influence in the Middle East through a post-imperial treaty system (Hinnebusch, 2011). The Baghdad Pact of 1955, later bolstered by the Eisenhower Doctrine, aimed to secure Western military presence and influence, ostensibly to counter the spread of communism but also, in practice, to contain the growing Arab nationalism.

However, this strategy faced a major challenge with the rise of Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, a champion of Arab Nationalism who defied the Baghdad Pact. Ultimately, Britain, France, and Israel attempted to defeat Nasser in the Suez War of 1956 which resulted in Europe’s political retreat from the region (Hinnebusch, 2012). Britain’s withdrawal from the Gulf in 1974 marked a turning point: the perceived “power vacuum” created by the European departure was gradually filled by the US (Kieh, 1992), through the forging of new alliances with conservative and non-Arab states like Shah’s Iran, Turkey, and Israel, and the establishment of a growing military presence in the Gulf (Hinnebusch, 2012). In the ensuing years, these reliable regional alliances proved essential after the Iranian Revolution which represented both a military and ideological threat and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which generated a perception of Soviet penetration of the region (Hinnebusch, 2012).

It is important to consider that the region evolved into one of the primary arenas during the Cold War, and thus, the power struggle between the superpowers limited the United States’ ability to fully control the region (Kieh, 1992). However, the end of the conflict represented an opportunity for the new hegemon to reestablish a strong Western influence in the territory (Hinnebusch, 2011). Without the threat of communism, the new mission to be pursued by the hegemon would be a Pax Americana. This term refers to a period of relative peace and stability in the world particularly in the Global North, associated with the overall dominance of the United States which involved the defence of the liberal world order against the threat of Islamist pariah states (Hinnebusch, 2003). Furthermore, the Pentagon advocated for an unrestrained application of the United States’ overwhelming military might and advanced technological capabilities in prosecuting this mission.

Hinnebusch (2011) posits that this same desire to achieve undisputed hegemony led the United States to intervene in Iraq in 1991 and 2003, although securing access to oil reserves concentrated in the area factored heavily into these decisions (Klare, 2003). Yet, despite attempts to establish American hegemony in the region, Pax Americana ultimately proved unsuccessful due to a multiplicity of factors. One of these factors is the continued US support for Israel's ambition to incorporate the "Occupied Palestinian Territories", which drives an increasing wedge between this country and the Arab-majority world (Hinnebusch, 2011). Ultimately, this failure stemmed from the inability to legitimise the neo-imperial presence of the United States, namely in Iraq and Afghanistan, which instead served to incite a counter-hegemonic movement of radicalised Islamic resistance (Halliday, 2002).

In sum, the intricate history of foreign intervention in the Middle East, which has been marked by successive waves of imperial and neo-imperial domination, has profoundly shaped the region's current geopolitical landscape. From the Ottoman Empire's consolidation of power to the post-World War I European mandates and the subsequent American interventions, these historical processes, not only disrupted indigenous political and economic structures but also laid the groundwork for enduring instability and resistance. This historical context provides a crucial foundation for understanding the complex challenges facing peacebuilding efforts in the region and how these initiatives may inadvertently replicate these colonial practices, further entrenching the power imbalances and narratives established by centuries of external dominance. Recognizing these patterns is essential for analysing how the hybrid peacebuilding approach in Afghanistan extended similar dynamics of external control seen throughout the region's history.

3.2 - The Historical Background of Intervention in Afghanistan:

Throughout its history, Afghanistan has endured successive sustained external interventions. Its strategic location made it exceptionally attractive to invaders, not due to its own wealth, but rather because controlling this territory provided access to more prosperous regions such as India or Central Asia, while affording dominance over key regional trade routes (Barfield, 2010). Hanifi (2018) argues that these interventions have consistently been influenced by Orientalist and neo-imperial dynamics. Orientalism, as

defined by Edward Said (1978), refers to the Western construction of Eastern societies as exotic, backward, and inferior, thereby justifying their domination. In Afghanistan's case, this narrative of cultural and political superiority has persisted for centuries, serving to legitimize foreign intervention (Hanifi, 2018). From Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC to Tamerlane in the 14th century, numerous foreign powers have endeavoured to conquer or control Afghanistan, only to be met with resolute resistance (Gilmour, 2013).

Afghanistan has also been described as a “mosaic of different ethnic groups” (Hussaini, 2023, p. 130). The country is comprised of four predominant ethnic groups: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. Alongside these larger groups, there are numerous smaller ethnicities, contributing to its designation as a “land of minorities” (Santos 2003; Rahimi, 2020). This ethnic diversity has presented a significant challenge in forging a unified national identity throughout Afghan history.

Over the past two and a half millennia, the area that we today consider Afghanistan has primarily existed as a peripheral territory within expansive empires, which constituted a contested borderland between neighbouring states. The country would not become one unified state ruled by a Pashtun elite until 1747 (Barfield, 2010).

During the 19th century, Afghanistan became the focal point of the Great Game, a geopolitical struggle between Britain and Russia for dominance in Central Asia and India (Bearden, 2001). The attempt to impose British influence over the country resulted in the three infamous British-Afghan wars (1838-1842, 1878-1880, 1919-1921), which ultimately ended in a negotiated peace treaty and the affirmation of Afghanistan's status as a fiercely independent nation (Barfield, 2010).

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded the country in support of the then-communist regime, which prompted a call to arms by religious leaders, who advocated for *Jihad*, or resistance. In response to this invasion, the United States began to financially support Afghan resistance groups, known as the Mujahideen, in their fight against Soviet forces (Hanifi, 2018). The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 ushered in a period of violent intrastate conflict, marked by warfare between warlords who terrorised the civilian population (Jarstad, 2013).

Multiple variables converged to create a fertile ground for mass hostility in Afghanistan during these years. These factors included the presence of rational grievances stemming from political and economic marginalisation, the prevalence of negative ethnic stereotypes, disputes over culturally charged symbols, anxieties surrounding demographic shifts, and a long history of external domination (Hussaini, 2023). Furthermore, a weak central government in Kabul created a vacuum of power, allowing ethnic leaders to exploit these grievances for their own political gain, which fostered the emergence of ethnic political parties. These parties functioned not only to mobilise their respective ethnic groups (in-group) but also to marginalise outsiders (ethnic out-groups), often by reviving and amplifying pre-existing ethnic narratives (Hashmi & Majeed, 2015). The arrival of the Mujahideen forces to Kabul in 1992 effectively dismantled the vestiges of a functioning central government, plunging Afghanistan into a state of anarchy (Barfield, 2010). In an attempt to quell the civil war, the Taliban, a political movement largely comprised of Pashtun students educated mostly in Pakistani refugee camps, emerged.

One must underline that the 1990s in Afghanistan witnessed the involvement of numerous foreign powers. At the regional level, Pakistan played a significant role, not only due to the religious affinity between its Sunni Muslim majority and the Afghan Mujahideen but also because the substantial Pashtun population along the shared border fostered a strong sense of cultural and ethnic kinship with Afghan Pashtuns (Saikal, 1998). At the international level, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates tried to assert their influence over the country due to concerns regarding potential Iranian encroachment. This strategic interest was made clear by their financial support for the Taliban, which provided the insurgent group with access to sophisticated weaponry and contributed to its growth beyond its initial base of supporters seeking stability after years of civil war (Hussaini, 2023).

The Taliban's motivations extended beyond mere security. As argued by Shahrani, the movement also aimed to re-establish Pashtun dominance within Afghanistan and revive traditional ethno-political structures (2015, p. 278). This aspiration resonated with many Pashtuns, garnering support from diverse segments of the population, including former communists, monarchists, Islamists, and even secular nationalists (Shahrani, 2013).

The Taliban seized Kabul in 1996 and, by 1999, controlled a significant portion of the country, reaching an estimated peak of 90% in September 2001. Initially, there was a sense of optimism that the Taliban's rise would bring an end to warlordism and usher in a period of peace for Afghanistan. The Taliban's consolidation of power initially brought a semblance of stability. They effectively disarmed much of the populace, curtailed lawlessness, and eradicated poppy cultivation. However, these measures came at a cost. The Taliban's rule challenged preexisting power structures, and the Afghan population endured the rigours of a strict *Sharia* legal code, while simultaneously, human rights abuses were widespread (Jarstad, 2013).

The Taliban imposed a comprehensive ban on all forms of entertainment, particularly music, and systematically excluded women from public life, barring them from education and subjecting them to a rigid code of veiling and seclusion (Barfield, 2010). Furthermore, the regime established a stringent moral police, the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which was granted unchecked authority (Terpstra, 2020). Offenders faced severe punishments, unprecedented in Afghanistan for generations, which included amputations for theft, execution by collapsing mud walls for homosexuals, and public executions in stadiums for murderers and women accused of adultery (Barfield, 2010).

3.3 - The US-led invasion of Afghanistan and the Bonn Agreement

On September 11, 2001, the US experienced a devastating terrorist attack coordinated by the Islamic group al-Qaeda, led by Osama Bin Laden. Nineteen militants hijacked four commercial aeroplanes, crashing two of them into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City, causing them to collapse. Another aeroplane struck the Pentagon, the headquarters of the US Department of Defence, near Washington D.C. The fourth plane crashed in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after passengers and crew attempted to retake control (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, 2004). "On the command of Osama bin Laden, [-], 2,986 American civilians perished in the space of minutes" (Cobbs & Blum, 2017, 496), leading former President George W. Bush to declare what became known as the War on Terror. The term refers to the global military, political, and legal campaign initiated by the United States following the 9/11 attacks, aimed at eliminating international terrorism. According to Noam Chomsky (2003), this

campaign often involved military actions and unilateral policies that heightened global tensions and sometimes exacerbated the very threats it sought to eliminate.

Afghanistan was at the epicentre of President Bush's War on Terror, as it became evident that al-Qaeda was operating out of its territory under the protection of the Taliban regime. This connection made Afghanistan the initial and most crucial target in the broader strategy to combat global terrorism. President Bush underscored Afghanistan's pivotal role in this campaign, declaring, "The leadership of al Qaeda has great influence in Afghanistan and supports the Taliban regime in controlling most of that country. In Afghanistan, we see al Qaeda's vision for the world." (Bush, 2001)

One should also highlight that this campaign was driven by incendiary rhetoric which framed the conflict as a struggle between the civilised world and a barbaric evil (Chishti, 2020). Post-colonial scholars have argued that this enduring Orientalist view, which has long shaped Western views of Afghanistan, portrays the country as an isolated, troubled land populated by backward dangerous people, and has served as a justification for Western intervention and control (Gregory, 2004, Porter 2009). President Bush epitomised this dichotomy when he stated, "We wage a war to save civilization, itself. We did not seek it, but we must fight it -- and we will prevail." (Bush, 2001), further reinforcing the narrative that Afghanistan was a land of barbarism in need of Western salvation.

The Orientalist framing of Afghanistan was not only racialised; it was also profoundly gendered. Gendered Orientalism, as explored by Khalid (2011) and Ho (2010), extends Edward Said's critique of Orientalism by highlighting how these portrayals are intertwined with gendered stereotypes. In the context of Afghanistan, the Bush Administration's rhetoric frequently invoked the imagery of oppressed Afghan women, using their plight for military intervention. Laura Bush's statement that "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights of women" (Bush, 2001) epitomises how gender was weaponised to garner support for the invasion, framing the mission as a moral crusade to liberate women from the tyranny of the Taliban.

The narrative of 'saving' Afghan women reinforced Western perceptions of the East as in need of civilisation, thereby justifying military intervention under the guise of humanitarianism. Khalid (2011) argues that this gendered framing perpetuated a binary

that portrayed Western societies as progressive and rational, while the East, particularly Muslim societies, was depicted as irrational, patriarchal, and oppressive. In doing so, it not only dehumanised Afghan men, portraying them as inherently violent and misogynistic, but also infantilised Afghan women, reducing their complex realities to a single narrative of victimhood. This form of Orientalist feminism simplified the issue of gender oppression, ignoring the broader structural and socio-political conditions exacerbated by war and occupation, consequentially serving to legitimise and perpetuate Western dominance in the region.

The Taliban's refusal to expel al-Qaeda ultimately resulted in the invasion of Afghanistan. In October 2001, the United States, supported by the United Kingdom and Afghan forces, launched “Operation Enduring Freedom,” a joint military operation aimed at addressing the threat posed by al-Qaeda.

In the wake of the Taliban regime’s collapse in December 2001 by the Coalition forces and the United Front, international and domestic actors convened at the Bonn Conference, which saw Hamid Karzai and other Afghan stakeholders sign an agreement establishing a three-year timeline for a transition to free and fair elections (Jarstad, 2013). This critical gathering presented an exigent challenge: the negotiation of a post-war “Grand Bargain” for Afghanistan (Goodhand & Sedra, 2009). The Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, or, as it is best known, the Bonn Agreement, mirrored key features of a democratic peacebuilding project, including the establishment of a national Constitution and the conduct of elections for a representative government. These objectives were demonstrably achieved by 2004, with the adoption of a new constitution in January 2004 and the holding of presidential elections in October 2004 (Ozdemir, 2019). The table below, created for this dissertation, outlines the key characteristics of the Bonn Agreement.

Establishment of an Interim Government	• The Bonn Agreement called for the creation of an Afghan Transitional Authority (ATA) to govern the country until a more permanent government could be established. • Hamid Karzai was appointed as the Chairman of the ATA.
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Convening of an Emergency Loya Jirga (ELJ)	• The Bonn Agreement mandated the convening of an ELJ within six months to elect a Transitional Administration, which would govern for an additional two years. • The ELJ is considered a crucial step towards forming a representative government in Afghanistan.
Central Role of the UN	• The UN was given a central role in overseeing the Agreement's implementation. It was responsible for ensuring the coordination of international assistance to Afghanistan and for helping to facilitate the political process.
Security Arrangements	• The Bonn Agreement recognised the need for international peacekeeping forces to ensure security and stability in Kabul and surrounding areas. • This led to the establishment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), authorised by the UN Security Council.
Human Rights and Judicial Reform	• The Bonn Agreement emphasised the importance of respecting human rights, particularly the rights of women and ethnic minorities. • It called for the establishment of a Judicial Commission to rebuild the justice system in Afghanistan, ensuring it was based on Islamic principles, international standards, and Afghan legal traditions.
Constitutional Process	• The Agreement laid out a timeline for drafting a new constitution, to be adopted within two years by a Constitutional Loya Jirga. • This Constitution was meant to establish the legal framework for a democratic government in Afghanistan.
International Support and Aid	• The Agreement highlighted the importance of international assistance in rebuilding Afghanistan, both economically and institutionally. • It underscored the need for donor countries to provide financial and technical support to help the country recover from decades of conflict.
Promotion of National Unity	• The Agreement sought to promote national reconciliation and unity among Afghanistan's various ethnic and political groups. • It encouraged the inclusion of diverse groups in the political process to prevent further conflict.

Table 2. Key characteristics of the Bonn Agreement

The United States' primary objective of pursuing the global "War on Terror" significantly influenced the parameters of the Bonn talks. This influence manifested in the selection of Afghan interlocutors and the architecture of the post-Taliban transition. Notably, the Agreement did not constitute a formal peace accord between warring parties. Rather, it functioned as an externally controlled process, resulting in the distribution of political

influence among a pre-selected group of stakeholders deemed strategically aligned with the objectives of the “War on Terror” (Goodhand & Sedra, 2009).

While establishing a framework for a post-Taliban Afghanistan, the Bonn Agreement demonstrably failed to address fundamental power imbalances within the country, since it did not accurately reflect the *de facto* distribution of power amongst various factions. Moreover, the agreement marginalised key regional layers, particularly Iran and Pakistan, whose influence transcended Afghan borders, as has been previously mentioned. Notably, the Taliban were also not included in this agreement (Wardak & Hamidzada, 2012). Furthermore, by neglecting to address critical issues like past human rights abuses, the Bonn Agreement’s legitimacy was undermined in the eyes of a significant portion of the Afghan population. Despite the installation of a Pashtun Prime Minister, a substantial segment of the citizenry perceived the post-war order as an illegitimate attempt to structure domestic power dynamics in service of external agendas (Goodhand & Sedra, 2009).

Further solidifying the international presence, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 authorised the creation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to maintain security in Kabul (United Nations Security Council, 2001). While NATO assumed leadership of ISAF, it is important to acknowledge that several troop-contributing nations were not members of the alliance. It is also worth mentioning that, while the United Nations and donor organisations had previously advocated for a political settlement between the warring factions and the development of community-based structures throughout the 1990s, formal UN-led peacebuilding efforts only commenced in 2001 (Jarstad, 2013).

Ultimately, the Bonn Process is perhaps most noteworthy for its utilisation of two consecutive Loya Jirga gatherings to legitimise nascent institutions of democratic governance (Wardak & Hamidzada, 2012). The Loya Jirga, at its core, represents an indigenous conflict resolution mechanism with a rich history dating back several centuries among the Pashtun ethnic group. Asra Olesen (1994) situates its symbolic origins in 1747 when a Loya Jirga convened to select an Amir for the nascent Afghan political entity. During the Bonn Process, these gatherings served the fundamental purposes of establishing a more inclusive transitional administration, crafting a

constitutional framework for a new democratic political order, and facilitating the resolution of other unresolved conflicts.

The first meeting, an Emergency Loya Jirga (ELJ) held in June 2002, and the subsequent Constitutional Loya Jirga held from December 2003 to January 2004, brought together tribal elders and a broad spectrum of representatives from across Afghanistan, including the diaspora (Wardak & Hamidzada, 2012). The ELJ, convened to “decide on a Transitional Authority (...) and lead Afghanistan until such time as a fully elected government can be elected” ([Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions (Bonn Agreement), December 2001], p. 2). The selection of the President and other cabinet-level members of the Afghanistan Transitional Authority (ATA) constituted two of the ELJ’S primary agenda items. Marking the first moderately democratic Loya Jirga to confer indirect popular legitimacy on an Afghan head of state, Hamid Karzai secured a landslide victory (Saikal, 2002).

In addition to fostering a more representative government, the ELJ achieved a high level of participation, with no major groups formally opting out of the political process, with the notable exception of the Taliban and its affiliated militia groups. Notwithstanding, while widespread participation is commendable, concerns have been raised regarding the use of pressure tactics and intimidation by informal militia leaders, the chairing of the event, the clarity of procedural rules, and potential instances of key decisions being made outside the official forum (Wardak & Hamidzada 2012). Additionally, according to Harpviken, Strand, and Suhrke (2004, 29), the UN and the US reportedly undermined the establishment of a proposed advisory council intended to function alongside the transitional authorities, due to concerns that the council would lead to an uncontrollable political process. Furthermore, the international community’s unofficial policy of accommodating and even recruiting Afghan militia groups, as pursued alongside the U.S.-led Coalition’s focus on counter-terrorism efforts, overshadowed efforts to prioritise the institutionalisation of stable democratic governance (Wardak & Hamidzada 2012).

In conclusion, the 9/11 attacks served as a catalyst for a dramatic shift in global geopolitics, culminating in the US-led invasion of Afghanistan to dismantle al-Qaeda and depose the Taliban regime. The subsequent Bonn Agreement outlined a framework for Afghan reconstruction and democratic transition, yet its implementation was profoundly

influenced by the overarching goals of the War on Terror. The reliance on traditional Afghan mechanisms like the Loya Jirga offered a semblance of Indigenous participation, but questions of external influence and the sidelining of crucial advisory structures hindered the process of establishing a truly representative and stable governance framework. Consequently, while the Bonn Process achieved some initial successes, it also sowed the seeds of future challenges by prioritising short-term strategic interests over long-term stability and inclusivity in Afghanistan's political landscape.

3.4 - The “Accelerating Success” Policy and the COIN Doctrine

The early stages of the invasion of Afghanistan, from November 2001 to June 2003, were characterised by the deployment of minimal US troops and resources on the ground (Dodge, 2021). This minimalist approach to defeating the Taliban and dismantling al-Qaeda in Afghanistan found support in the policy advocated by Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations Special Representative for the country. Brahimi argued that a large-scale international presence was neither feasible nor conducive to long-term stability. Instead, he advocated for a “light footprint” on the ground, prioritising the development of indigenous Afghan capabilities through externally funded capacity-building programs (Suhrke, 2011).

By late 2002, concerns regarding the effectiveness of the minimalist approach began to emerge within the US administration. Detailed intelligence reports reaching then-Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld suggested that the dominance of the Northern Alliance in the fledgling government and the re-empowerment of pre-Taliban warlords were endangering alienation among key interest groups and impeding the rebuilding of administrative capacity (US Government Accountability Office, 2005). Condoleezza Rice, the National Security Advisor, tasked Zalmay Khalilzad, an American diplomat, with developing a new Afghan policy to address these unforeseen problems. The deliberations culminated in a new policy, dubbed “Accelerating Success”, which was adopted by President Bush and the National Security Council in June 2003. This new policy involved the appointment of Khalilzad as US Ambassador to Afghanistan, a position he accepted only after securing a significant increase in US resources and commitment to the country (Rohde & Sanger, 2007).

The “Accelerating Success” policy pursued a multifaceted approach, encompassing political, institutional, economic, and coercive measures. The political track prioritised the twin objectives of legitimising Afghanistan’s new leadership and fostering responsible governance through the expeditious organisation of presidential and parliamentary elections (Dodge, 2021). This strategy aimed to bolster the state’s legitimacy by ensuring the ethnically and religiously inclusive composition of personnel within key ministries.

From an institutional perspective, the intervention aimed to empower the Afghan government towards self-sufficiency, which entailed establishing an effective governing apparatus. Additionally, a collaborative effort was envisioned to enhance the quality of life for the Afghan people, alongside the creation of a robust economic infrastructure that would foster a private sector-driven economy. Finally, the plan sought to cultivate a state with sufficient coercive power to ensure stability and the rule of law throughout its territory. This objective necessitated the development of Afghan security institutions, with a particular emphasis on the rapid and significant expansion of the ISAF (White House, 2005). The U.S. response to the evolving situation in Afghanistan encompassed a significant escalation of troop deployments alongside a substantial financial commitment to state reconstruction efforts. While Congress appropriated a total of \$87 billion in November 2003, \$11 billion of this sum was specifically earmarked for reconstruction initiatives (Dodge, 2021).

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1510, adopted in October 2003, marked a further departure from the initial commitment to a “light footprint” in Afghanistan. This resolution prioritised the expansion of central government authority throughout the country, in response to the increasing insurgency. To achieve this objective, the UNSC authorised the ISAF to broaden its operations beyond Kabul and encompass the entire nation. Notably, Resolution 1510 conferred a comprehensive mandate upon ISAF, encompassing the creation of a secure environment conducive to reconstruction efforts and the establishment of the foundational elements necessary for lasting peace in Afghanistan (United Nations Security Council, 2003).

The 2003 US initiative to establish a robust centralised Afghan state, if successful, would have represented a paradigm shift. Khalilzad’s advocacy for and implementation of the “Accelerating Success” program presumably entailed an awareness that such an endeavour would necessitate a fundamental restructuring of the historical dynamic

between the Afghan state and its populace (Barfield, 2010). His confidence in the feasibility of this undertaking likely stemmed, not from a clear-eyed assessment of the US government's capacity to transform Afghanistan, but rather from his belief in the universal efficacy of the liberal peacebuilding model. Notwithstanding, while this model effectively diagnosed the issues plaguing weak states and outlined potential solutions, its success hinged on a prolonged, expensive, and ultimately untenable commitment to statebuilding (Dodge, 2021). Furthermore, the "Accelerating Success" policy not only resulted in a significant influx of international personnel and funding into the country but effectively eroded the earlier emphasis on a more modest approach.

Escalating insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq served as a catalyst for this expanded commitment, which was solidified on an institutional level by NATO's adoption of the "Comprehensive Approach" at the Riga Summit in November 2006. The Riga Summit Declaration enshrined the concept of a "Comprehensive Approach" in response to the critical realization that security and development in Afghanistan were inextricably linked. Drawing on lessons learned from past operations, particularly those in Afghanistan and Kosovo, the document emphasized the importance of a holistic approach in planning and executing future operations, which would often necessitate the coordinated use of a broad range of civilian and military instruments (Riga Summit Declaration, 2006).

Moreover, it emphasized the importance of forging productive partnerships with allied governments who shared the objective of global security and prosperity. On a national level, the "Comprehensive Approach" emphasized the interconnectedness of security forces, the broader government apparatus, and Afghan society as a whole, which would necessitate the comprehensive involvement of both Afghans and the international community. Ultimately, this approach strived to achieve the highest degree of coordinated action, collaborative effort, and unified purpose among all stakeholders involved by positing a spectrum of interconnected efforts, ranging from security to humanitarian assistance (Stavridis, 2011).

The trajectory of escalating resource allocation continued with the Obama administration's policy review in December 2009, leading to another substantial increase in troops and resources deployed to Afghanistan (Obama, 2009). By August 2021, the U.S government's cumulative expenditure on rebuilding the Afghan state had reached a staggering \$145 billion, with an additional \$837 billion dedicated to combating the

Taliban's insurgency (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2021, p. 4).

The US-led intervention in Afghanistan, spanning two decades, witnessed numerous pivotal moments which shaped its trajectory. Below is a chronological overview of key events, providing a structured understanding of the war. These milestones outline the initial military invasion, key policy shifts, changes in international engagement, and the eventual withdrawal of foreign forces.

Prelude to the Invasion (September-October 2001)	- September 11, 2001: Al-Qaeda terrorists, based in Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban regime, carry out the 9/11 attacks on the United States. - October 7, 2001: The U.S., supported by the United Kingdom, launches "Operation Enduring Freedom," beginning with airstrikes against Taliban and al-Qaeda targets in Afghanistan.
Initial Invasion and Fall of the Taliban (October - December 2001)	- October 2001: U.S. Special Forces and CIA operatives, alongside Northern Alliance fighters (a coalition of Afghan groups opposed to the Taliban), begin ground operations. - December 6-7, 2001: Taliban stronghold Kandahar falls, effectively marking the collapse of the Taliban regime.
Bonn Agreement and Interim Government (December 2001)	- December 5, 2001: Afghan factions, under UN auspices, sign the Bonn Agreement, - December 22, 2001: Hamid Karzai is sworn in as the head of the Afghan Interim Administration, marking the beginning of a new political order in Afghanistan.
Early Reconstruction and International Presence (2002 - 2004)	2002: The Force ISAF was established to help maintain security in Afghanistan. - June 2002: The ELJ is convened, electing Hamid Karzai as the interim head of state for the Transitional Administration. 2003: U.S. and NATO forces continue operations against remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. At the same time, the "Accelerating Success" policy is adopted, and reconstruction efforts begin, including building infrastructure and establishing a national army.

Constitutional and Political Milestones (2004 - 2005)	- January 2004: A new Afghan Constitution is adopted, establishing a presidential system and a framework for democratic governance. - October 9, 2004: Afghanistan holds its first direct presidential election, with Hamid Karzai winning a majority and becoming the first democratically elected president. - September 2005: Afghanistan conducts its first parliamentary elections in over 30 years, marking another step toward political normalization.
Resurgence of the Taliban and Escalation of Conflict (2006 - 2009)	2006: The Taliban begin to regroup and launch a renewed insurgency, particularly in southern and eastern Afghanistan. NATO assumes command of ISAF and expands its operations across the country. - November 2006: The “Comprehensive Approach” is adopted at NATO’s Riga Summit.
U.S. Surge and Counterinsurgency Strategy (2009 - 2011)	2009: President Barack Obama announces a troop surge, increasing U.S. forces in Afghanistan to over 100,000 to stabilise the country and counter the growing Taliban insurgency.
Death of Osama bin Laden and Transition to Afghan Control (2011 - 2014)	- May 2, 2011: U.S. Navy SEALs kill Osama bin Laden in a raid on his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. 2011: President Obama announces the beginning of a drawdown of U.S. troops, with plans to transition security responsibilities to Afghan forces by 2014. 2014: NATO formally ends its combat mission in Afghanistan.
Post-Combat Mission and Continuing Conflict (2015 - 2021)	2015-2021: Despite the end of the combat mission, the Taliban insurgency continues, and U.S. forces remain in a reduced capacity to support Afghan forces. - February 2020: The U.S. signs a peace deal with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar.
U.S. Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover (2021)	- April 2021: President Joe Biden announces the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. - August 2021: As U.S. and NATO forces withdraw, the Taliban launched a rapid offensive, capturing major cities and provincial capitals with little resistance. - August 15, 2021: The Taliban enter Kabul, and the Afghan government collapses. The Taliban declared the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

	• August 30, 2021: The last U.S. military plane departs from Kabul, marking the official end of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.
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Table 3. Chronological overview of the main events of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan

Moreover, counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan can be characterised as an integrated military intervention which incorporated the diverse expertise of humanitarian, reconstruction, and governance specialists (Holmqvist et al., 2015). This revised conceptualisation of counterinsurgency defines it as “a comprehensive civilian and military effort designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes” (US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2013). This approach adhered to the core principle of liberal interventionism, implying that the reconstruction of war-torn, illiberal societies according to the political and economic development models of the liberal world can foster peace and enhance international security, and aimed to “win the hearts and minds” of the local population by supporting the legitimacy of the host-state government (Ozdemir, 2019).

However, as will be further elaborated upon in the following section, despite being promoted as a population-centric approach emphasising the importance of winning hearts and minds, this counterinsurgency doctrine faced criticism for prioritising the national security and geopolitical interests of the intervening powers (Holmqvist et al., 2015). Ozdemir (2019) argues that this focus relegated the population-centric narrative to mere discourse, failing to translate into genuine efforts to address the grievances of the Afghan people. Moreover, it maintained a top-down logic, which emphasised the imposition of peace through institutional frameworks that did not truly consider or resolve the underlying issues faced by the local population.

3.5 - The Repercussions of the Hybrid Peace Approach in Afghanistan:

As the previous analysis has demonstrated, the US intervention in Afghanistan underwent a dramatic metamorphosis. Initially launched as a targeted military response to the 9/11 attacks, it swiftly transformed into a comprehensive nation-building project under the auspices of the United Nations. This ambitious undertaking encompassed a wide range of programs aimed at fostering disarmament, security sector reform, establishing the rule of

law, combating narcotics trafficking, reforming the civil service, promoting human rights and gender equality, tackling corruption, and building robust institutions.

Notwithstanding, this ambitious undertaking exhibited a persistent tension between transformative ambitions and pragmatic considerations (Goodhand & Sedra, 2013). On the one hand, the intervention aimed to achieve the ambitious goals of statebuilding, democratisation, and the promotion of human rights. On the other hand, it necessitated pragmatic, and at times illiberal, practices to establish a coercive apparatus for maintaining control. This inherent tension became particularly pronounced as the insurgency intensified, a development partly attributable to the expanding international footprint (Suhrke, 2013). Consequently, the international community shifted its approach, prioritising “local”, “hybrid”, and “Afghan-led” strategies for stabilisation, while receding from the lofty aspirations of statebuilding (Goodhand & Sedra, 2013).

Suhrke (2013) identifies three key tensions inherent in the blueprint for post-conflict statebuilding within the liberal peacebuilding project in Afghanistan. Firstly, the influx of aid associated with the war economy fostered a “rentier-state condition” prioritising resource extraction over broader development goals. This extensive foreign presence clashed with traditional sources of legitimacy in Afghanistan, namely religion and nationalism. Secondly, tensions emerged regarding “ownership and control” of programs due to conflicting demands between international actors and their Afghan counterparts.

Finally, Suhrke highlights the inherent incompatibility between waging war and building peace simultaneously. The arming and forging alliances with local militias by the US and NATO forces, while seemingly rational short-term strategies in counterinsurgency efforts, ultimately undermined the long-term legitimacy of the Afghan government and its monopoly on the use of force (Suhrke, 2013). By empowering local warlords and powerbrokers, external forces created parallel power structures that weakened the central government’s authority and hindered efforts to build a cohesive national security apparatus. These militias, loyal to individual commanders rather than the state, often engaged in corrupt practices and human rights abuses, further alienating the Afghan population and fuelling mistrust. As militias grew stronger, they started to compete with the government for power, contributing to the fragmentation and the eventual collapse of statebuilding efforts.

Additionally, shortcomings of the Afghan state relative to the initial statebuilding blueprint can be attributed to a critical underestimation of several pre-existing conditions within Afghanistan (Van Bijlert, 2016). First, a deeply embedded war economy acted as a persistent obstacle to economic diversification and long-term stability, while the pervasiveness of patronage networks significantly undermined efforts to establish a meritocratic system of governance. Second, the presence of numerous unresolved local conflicts presented opportunities for exploitation amidst new forms of competition and instability.

International statebuilders also contributed to the shortcomings through their own limitations in approach. The unrealistic assumption of a “blank slate” scenario disregarded the existing power dynamics within Afghan society (Van Bijlert, 2016). The expectation that newly formed institutions would immediately function flawlessly proved to be unfounded. Complex political challenges were often treated as intellectual exercises requiring purely technical solutions, overlooking the importance of political negotiation and compromise. For instance, during the development of the Afghan National Army (ANA), rather than engaging in a deeper political dialogue aimed at addressing the underlying ethnic, tribal, and regional tensions that have historically fragmented Afghan society, the international community largely focused on the technical aspects of training, equipping, and expanding the Afghan security forces, overlooking the need to build a truly inclusive and politically legitimate security apparatus that could command the trust and loyalty of all Afghan groups (Suhrke, 2006). Finally, mere activity (“process”) was frequently mistaken for meaningful progress (Van Bijlert, 2009).

Furthermore, while in the diplomatic realm, and subsequently in counterinsurgency and stabilisation initiatives, the importance of power dynamics and political competition was acknowledged, this analysis often relied on overly simplistic frameworks (Van Bijlert, 2016). Early on, statebuilding efforts primarily viewed the Afghan state through the lens of a core-periphery divide. This binary perspective framed local strongmen as external threats rather than recognising their embeddedness within the Afghan political landscape. Consequently, the initial solution focused on co-optation, aiming to incorporate and neutralise these figures (Bose & Motwani, 2014). However, this approach failed to adapt to the evolving situation. While the power dynamics shifted- with strongmen becoming integrated into the formal state structure – the analytical framework remained static. As a

result, these co-opted figures, rather than being external threats, became a source of internal fragmentation due to the significant discrepancy between the *jure* (legal) and the *facto* (actual) power within the Afghan state (North et al., 2005)

De Guevara (2012) argues that statebuilding efforts in Afghanistan followed a well-established pattern of interventions in the Global South which often fail to account for the unique historical and socio-political dynamics of the targeted nation, significantly undermining the legitimacy and stability of the newly established state. Accordingly, the U.S. and its Western allies' lack of understanding of the Afghan context, coupled with the flawed peace and statebuilding policies, significantly contributed to the protracted nature of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, the ultimate collapse of the Afghan democratic state, and the Taliban's return to power (Abawe et al, 2022).

In conclusion, the fundamental challenge that plagued post-9/11 involvement in Afghanistan was the vast scope of the undertaking (Dodge, 2021). The mission's expansion from the initial targeted removal of al-Qaeda and its Taliban host regime in 2001 to the pursuit of establishing a democratic society through liberal peacebuilding efforts initiated in 2003, proved to be a costly and unsustainable endeavour that ultimately shaped the mission's trajectory until its unsuccessful conclusion in 2021.

Despite the declared goal of statebuilding and establishing a liberal peace, the intervention was ultimately undermined by two key factors (Van Bijlert, 2016). Firstly, the ongoing "war on terror" relied upon the support of non-state auxiliary forces, creating tensions with the nation-building project (Suhrke, 2011). Secondly, the sheer scale of the challenge attracted a multitude of actors with diverse agendas, leading to a confusing array of programs (Van Bijlert, 2009). Additionally, donor motivations varied considerably, with some attempting to mould the Afghan state according to their own models. Over time, a harsh reality emerged: instead of fostering a stable state capable of surpassing past power struggles and violence, the intervention may have inadvertently established new patterns of impunity and fuelled opportunities for corruption and violence.

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge that the portrayal of Afghanistan as a failed state devoid of governance and modernity overlooked the nation's rich history and the profound impact of previous Western interventions (Gregory, 2004). By framing the invasion as a civilising mission, the United States and its allies were able to justify their

actions as benevolent and indispensable, while obscuring the geopolitical and economic interests that underpinned the intervention.

These Orientalist practices yielded significant repercussions. They perpetuated stereotypes and provided justification for an enduring military presence and actions that frequently exacerbated the very problems they purported to rectify (Chishti, 2020). By viewing Afghanistan through an Orientalist lens, the U.S.-led coalition underestimated the complexity of Afghan society and the resilience of indigenous power structures, contributing to protracted conflict and instability.

Chapter III

Discussion

While hybrid peacebuilding approaches are often presented as a solution to the failures of previous paradigms, the case of Afghanistan illustrates how these approaches can, in practice, perpetuate the same neo-imperial power dynamics they claim to overcome. The problem at hand is not merely about evaluating the effectiveness of hybrid peacebuilding practices but about understanding the deeper structural forces that drive these processes, including the persistence of external control, the marginalisation of local agency, and the replication of Western-centric governance models. By examining Afghanistan, this dissertation highlights the need to further question whether hybrid approaches truly create space for locally driven peace or simply mask the continuation of neo-imperial dominance under a new guise.

In positioning Afghanistan within the literature, I posit that the case aligns more closely with Mac Ginty's (2011) critique of the Hybrid Peace Approach, rather than more idealised notions of hybridity, which emphasise equal interaction between local and international actors. As Mac Ginty (2011) suggests, hybrid peacebuilding often results in fragmented outcomes, where international actors dominate the agenda while local agency is marginalised or instrumentalised. This is particularly evident in Afghanistan, where international actors – primarily the US, NATO, and international donors – dictated key decisions such as statebuilding, security strategies, and economic reconstruction, leaving little room for meaningful local participation. Despite efforts to incorporate local actors and institutions, these were often co-opted to serve short-term international goals rather than fostering genuine, locally driven peace.

This also aligns with Nadarajah's (2015) critique of hybrid peacebuilding, which emphasises how the approach, rather than breaking away from the liberal peace paradigm, functions as a tool to manage resistance and maintain the liberal order. In Afghanistan, the hybrid strategy's integration of local governance structures with international norms was framed as empowering Afghan agency while promoting stability. However, while this integration often operated under the guise of inclusivity and partnership, it ultimately aimed to align local systems with Western liberal frameworks. Like historical colonial

practices of indirect rule, local customs were co-opted to sustain the political and economic dominance of external powers, reinforcing hegemonic structures rather than enabling genuine autonomy. Despite claims of promoting a ‘bottom-up’ approach, hybrid peace strategies in Afghanistan perpetuated hierarchies and marginalised local voices that did not conform to liberal ideals, intensifying control rather than facilitating a genuinely plural and emancipatory peace.

Richmond’s (2015) argument regarding the dilemma between top-down liberal peace and local autonomy is also pertinent in Afghanistan, where international actors prioritized neoliberal statebuilding, often at odds with local structures and practices. While the international community sought to impose liberal democratic ideals and market reforms, local leaders – especially warlords and traditional elites – adapted to these interventions to maintain their own power. This created a hybrid peace that reflected unequal power dynamics rather than a balanced fusion of local and international efforts.

Moreover, the case of Afghanistan exemplifies Mark Laffey and Suthaharan Nadarajah’s (2012) critique of hybrid peacebuilding’s territorial trap. The state-centric approach to peacebuilding in Afghanistan, driven by external actors, largely failed to account for the complexity of local power structures and identities, perpetuating a narrow, top-down model of governance that undermined long-term peace efforts. As a result, the hybrid peace strategy in Afghanistan ultimately reinforced the very hierarchies it sought to dismantle, revealing the limitations of attempting to integrate local autonomy within a framework that remains fundamentally rooted in external, neo-colonial logics.

The thesis set out to answer the three research questions outlined previously, beginning with the first one: “How do neo-imperialist discourses and practices impact peacebuilding efforts?”. During this research, I have concluded that neo-imperialist discourses have significantly affected peacebuilding practices throughout history, by shaping how conflicts are understood, managed, and resolved, particularly in post-colonial and conflict-affected regions. These discourses perpetuate power imbalances, justify foreign interventions, and prioritise the interests of powerful states or institutions over the needs and perspectives of local communities. I argue that the evolution of conflict resolution approaches has consistently been grounded in an underlying “emancipatory” promise, intended to address the shortcomings of previous paradigms. Yet, this analysis has demonstrated that from First-Generation Peacebuilding to Liberal Peacebuilding or the

Hybrid Peace approach, all have fallen short of this promise. Instead, all these paradigms have perpetuated practices that mirror colonial dynamics, with powerful states dictating the terms of the intervention and reshaping post-conflict societies according to their own ideologies.

Additionally, external intervention in conflict zones has consistently been framed as a *sine qua non* condition for bringing “stability”, “democracy” or “modernisation” to supposedly failing states, while presenting Western powers as altruistic saviours, and downplaying the economic, strategic, or political interests that may drive their involvement. This results in peacebuilding processes which frequently prioritise Western interests such as resource access and geopolitical influence, over sustainable peace or addressing the root causes of conflict. Moreover, neo-imperialist discourses reify the assumption that Western models of governance and economy are universally applicable, leading to the imposition of liberal democratic systems and free-market reforms that may be misaligned with local contexts, which, in turn, can produce governance structures disconnected from local realities and exacerbate existing inequalities. In addition, these discourses also reinforce global power hierarchies, positioning Western states and international organizations as dominant actors in peacebuilding while reducing local actors to passive recipients.

The second question addressed was: “Was the inclusion of local ownership, as advocated by post-liberal approaches to peace, translated from theory into practice in Afghanistan? If so, with what consequences?”. Hybrid peacebuilding approaches emerged as a response to critiques of top-down, externally driven interventions, advocating for greater inclusion of local actors and processes. This paradigm seeks to combine both international and local efforts, aiming to balance the strengths of each while addressing their respective weaknesses.

Notwithstanding, this analysis has demonstrated that, despite the intention to create a collaborative framework, international actors frequently retain more power and control, overshadowing local voices and priorities. This often results in the tokenistic involvement of local actors, which are instrumentalized as tools for legitimizing international interventions, rather than being empowered to lead peacebuilding efforts. Additionally, international funding and expertise often drive these processes, with local actors adapting

to donor priorities rather than addressing community needs, leading to dependency and compromising local ownership.

The failure of the Hybrid Peace Approach in Afghanistan, following the US-led invasion of 2001, offers a stark illustration of these limitations. Although, initially, the intervention followed a more conventional statebuilding model, focused on top-down efforts to establish central governance and rebuild institutions, over time, this approach evolved into a hybrid model, as international actors sought to integrate local dynamics into their strategies. Afghanistan offers a compelling representation of how failing to balance power between local and global actors can result in unsustainable outcomes. International stakeholders, including the US, NATO, and international donors, set the agenda for statebuilding and peace efforts, leaving little room for genuine local participation. As a result, the Afghan government and local institutions were often seen as subordinate to international forces, undermining their legitimacy among the Afghan population, while key decisions, such as the design of political institutions, the allocation of aid, and military strategies, were primarily controlled by external actors, despite efforts to involve local elites or leaders.

Additionally, one must underline that local elites, including warlords with questionable records, were co-opted into the peace process to secure short-term stability rather than representing genuine local interests. This not only alienated the broader Afghan population but also reinforced the perception that the peacebuilding process served external interests rather than addressing the grievances and needs of ordinary Afghans.

International donor-driven agendas further exacerbated the problems in Afghanistan. The influx of foreign aid, tied to donor priorities, fostered a culture of dependency and corruption within the Afghan institutions, with aid distribution often bypassing local governance structures, weakening the legitimacy of the Afghan government and undermining the sustainability of development efforts. Lastly, the securitization of peacebuilding also played a critical role in the failures of the hybrid approach in Afghanistan. The focus on counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban resulted in short-term security gains but failed to address the deeper social, political, and economic causes of the conflict. Moreover, the reliance on militias and paramilitary groups created new sources of conflict and instability, further eroding trust in the peace process.

The third and last question was: “To what extent do hybrid approaches to peacebuilding actually function to empower and emancipate local actors, rather than reproduce neo-colonial logics and relations?”. In this regard, I concluded that, while hybrid peacebuilding is intended to balance the strengths of both international and local actors, in practice, since it tends to privilege international interests, norms, and agendas over those of local communities, it results in the perpetuation of external control and dependency and the reproduction of patterns of domination similar to earlier forms of imperialism. Yet again, the case of Afghanistan offers a compelling case study of these dynamics.

Firstly, I argue that international actors, particularly those of Western powers or international institutions, frequently retain disproportionate influence during hybrid peacebuilding processes. This manifests in their control over decision-making, resource allocation, and the design and implementation of peacebuilding strategies. Despite rhetorical commitments to local ownership and partnership, the reality is that local actors are often marginalised or instrumentalised to legitimise externally driven interventions, which mirrors the neo-imperial practice of asserting dominance while maintaining the appearance of cooperation. In Afghanistan, international actors dictated the country’s political and economic restructuring, prioritising their own security and geopolitical interests, while the Afghan government served mainly as an intermediary between these foreign powers and the Afghan population. This essentially produced neo-imperial dependency dynamics, with the local state reduced to an appendage of foreign interveners.

At the same time, during peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan, the role of international donors in shaping the priorities of reconstruction efforts led to the imposition of external values and systems. Aid flows were often conditional on compliance with donor expectations, which frequently did not align with local needs or cultural realities. This reflects a neo-imperial form of governance, where aid and development become instruments for maintaining control over post-conflict societies. Simultaneously, Afghanistan’s economy became heavily dependent on international funding and reconstruction efforts, and, while this was framed as a legitimate effort to rebuild the country, it created a neo-colonial economic relationship, where the country’s economy was tied to international aid flows, leaving little room for sustainable, locally driven

economic development. Moreover, this created a system where Afghanistan's economic survival was tied to continued international support, mirroring the extractive and dependent economic relationships of colonial empires.

In addition, just as colonial powers used "civilising missions" to impose Western values, as mentioned before, contemporary peacebuilding efforts employ the language of "modernisation" and human rights to justify interventions that reshape societies to serve Western political, economic, and ideological interests. In Afghanistan, these norms were often transplanted with little regard for local cultural and social contexts, leading to resistance or superficial compliance. Moreover, I argue that hybrid peacebuilding repeats the mistakes of previous paradigms, as it fails to reconcile local practices with international norms, particularly around democracy, human rights, and gender equality, since, although framed as universal, these norms when imposed without local adaptation or consent, risk perpetuating imperialist cultural dominance.

Lastly, I contend that the militarized approach to peacebuilding in Afghanistan mirrored colonial practices of using military force to maintain control over territories and populations, with little regard to local political dynamics or sustainable peace. For instance, the surge of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan in the late 2000s was framed as necessary for combating the Taliban insurgency and securing the region. However, this strategy largely sidelined local peacebuilding initiatives as the focus was on militarily defeating the insurgents rather than fostering an inclusive political dialogue. As a result, Afghan civilians, especially in rural areas, bore the brunt of this militarisation, deepening anti-Western sentiment and alienating local communities.

In sum, while hybrid peacebuilding approaches aim to address the shortcomings of top-down interventions by integrating local and international efforts, the case of Afghanistan reveals that, when translated from discourse into practice, they actually help to perpetuate neo-imperial logics and relations, in which the inclusion of local actors helps to facilitate the acceptance of the decisions taken by external stakeholders. This dynamic has resulted in a peacebuilding process that appeared collaborative but, in practice, led to the reinforcement of external dominance and dependency which mirrored earlier colonial practices.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore the extent to which hybrid approaches to peacebuilding reproduce neo-imperial logics and relations, using the US-led intervention in Afghanistan as a case study. By tracing the historical evolution of conflict resolution paradigms, this postcolonial analysis has demonstrated that hybrid approaches emerged as a response to the limitations of Liberal Peacebuilding, which often imposed external models of governance and economic management, reflecting international interests over local needs. Yet, although the Hybrid Peace seeks to blend international norms and local agency, integrating local actors into the peacebuilding process, it fails to fundamentally alter the dynamics of external control.

Focusing on Afghanistan, this study illustrated how the hybrid peace framework allowed international actors to dominate the country's political and economic restructuring, often prioritising their security and geopolitical agendas over genuine local needs. Despite claims of fostering local autonomy, international donors shaped key decisions, leading to the development of a war economy, the reliance on local militias, and policies which often undermined the legitimacy of local governance. Furthermore, the lack of contextual understanding by the US and its allies, coupled with their inability to adapt to Afghanistan's complex and evolving power structures, contributed to the prolonged nature of the intervention. The resurgence of the Taliban underscored the failure of the hybrid peace model to create sustainable, locally-driven peace. Instead, hybridity in this context became a tool for external actors to manage their own strategic interests, leaving local actors with limited agency and control.

Moreover, this analysis highlights that neo-imperialist logics continue to shape peace and statebuilding practices, often masking the underlying priorities of powerful states under the guise of promoting stability, modernization, and democracy. The hybrid approach to peace in Afghanistan transformed local governance into an intermediary role, where local actors were engaged not as legitimate authorities but as facilitators for externally defined agendas. This transformation illustrates the limitations of hybrid peacebuilding, revealing how it can replicate, rather than challenge, the hierarchical structures that sustain global inequalities.

While this dissertation has provided a critical analysis of hybrid peacebuilding, it acknowledges its limitations. Future research should build upon its findings by incorporating interviews with local actors and stakeholders to provide deeper, firsthand insights into the dynamics of hybrid peacebuilding. This would address the gap left by the absence of direct engagement in this study. In addition, future investigations could adopt a comparative approach, examining hybrid peacebuilding across multiple contexts to explore how these dynamics manifest in different regions. This comparative analysis would offer a broader understanding of whether hybrid peacebuilding consistently reproduces neo-imperial dynamics or varies depending on local conditions.

This study underscores that, while peacebuilding is fundamentally an experimental field where new models and strategies are tested, these approaches, when put into practice, often reveal significant limitations. There is, and there can be, no universal approach to peacebuilding, and the Hybrid Peace paradigm recognises this, presenting itself as a potentially emancipatory framework. Yet, as this analysis has shown, in practice, hybrid peacebuilding often reinforces existing neo-colonial and neo-imperial power dynamics rather than offering truly transformative possibilities. Ultimately, this highlights the need for a critical re-examination of peacebuilding practices in order to ensure that they genuinely empower local actors, address the root causes of conflict, and avoid perpetuating cycles of dependency and external dominance.

As I conclude this dissertation, I am reminded of why I embarked on this journey in the first place. The legacies of colonialism are not just remnants of the past; they are living, breathing forces that continue to shape the world we live in. Yet, just as the echoes of imperial power endure, so too does the spirit of resistance, adaptation, and resilience. The people and communities at the heart of conflict zones are not passive recipients of externally imposed solutions; they are agents of their own futures, capable of reimagining peace on their own terms. While hybrid approaches to peacebuilding have often faltered in their attempts to reconcile local and international interests, they have also exposed the limitations of imposing a singular vision of order onto a diverse and complex world. In that exposure lies hope—the possibility of rethinking peacebuilding in ways that genuinely prioritize local agency, dignity, and self-determination. My hope is that this work serves as a small contribution to that larger, ongoing conversation, encouraging future scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to challenge the status quo and imagine

new pathways to peace that are truly just, equitable, and free from the shadows of the past.

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