Power, Norms, and Balance: The Debate between Realism and Liberalism on Humanitarian Diplomacy

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Abstract: *This paper systematically explains the theoretical logic and practical tension of humanitarian diplomacy from the dual perspectives of realism and liberalism. Realism reveals its power political constraints, instrumental logic and "selective application" dilemma; liberalism focuses on institutional cooperation, normative diffusion and multi-level governance, but faces a crisis of legitimacy. The two are not simply opposites, but complementary prisms: the former warns of moral hazard and power boundaries, while the latter provides institutional paths and normative visions. This paper constructs a dual perspective framework to provide a theoretical reference for China's "creative intervention" to explore the balance of justice and benefit.*

Keywords: *humanitarian diplomacy; realism; liberalism*

Introduction

The positioning of humanitarian diplomacy in the genealogy of international relations theory presents significant paradigm differences. The competition and complementarity of this multi-theoretical perspective provides a key analytical tool for us to understand the complex situation of humanitarian in international politics. [1]The "pluralism-jointism" paradigm proposed by Bull (1966), a representative of the British school, provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding the tension between sovereignty and humanitarian responsibility. Barnett (2011) further pointed out that the differences in the interpretation of humanitarian diplomacy by major international relations theories essentially reflect the different presuppositions of the one-dimensional problem of "the nature of the international community" : realism emphasizes the priority of power distribution.[2]This distinction is clearly visible in the international response to the Syrian crisis : Russia's "sovereign priority" position, the EU's "responsibility to protect" proposition, the Arab countries' "Islamic solidarity" narrative and the post-colonial critical theory's deconstruction of the intervention discourse constitute a multi-prism for understanding contemporary humanitarian diplomacy.

China's academic circles have also formed a research context that echoes and is unique to the West around humanitarian diplomacy. It roughly presents four paths: first, based on realism, it analyzes China's strategic considerations and "creative intervention" positions in participating in humanitarian affairs; the second is to explore the socialization process of China's integration into the global humanitarian governance system from the perspective of liberalism. The third is to follow the policy shaping role of constructivism to explain the identity of 'responsible great power" and the concept of "community of shared future for mankind" ; the fourth is to critically deconstruct Western norms such as "responsibility to protect" and explore alternative humanitarian narratives contained in "global development initiatives". This paper combs the theoretical tradition of realism and liberalism, aiming to carry out an in-depth "inter-theoretical debate". Through the critical integration of Chinese scholars' discourse, it promotes cross-theoretical dialogue beyond Western centralism and explores a more global justice theoretical path for humanitarian diplomacy in a multi-polar world.

1. The Limits of Power Politics: A Realist Examination of Humanitarian Diplomacy

As one of the most influential paradigms in international relations theory, realism's examination of "humanitarian diplomacy" is rooted in a pessimistic presupposition about the nature of international politics. With anarchy, state-centrism, and power politics as its core pillars, realism fundamentally questions the autonomy and moral purity of humanitarianism. This section starts from the theoretical

core of realism, analyzes its fundamental questioning of the autonomy of humanitarianism, then discusses the limited forms of humanitarianism within the realist framework, and finally, from a realist perspective, diagnoses the core dilemmas facing contemporary humanitarian practice, such as selective application, unintended consequences, and moral hazard.

1.1 Anarchy, Power Politics, and the Dilemma of Humanitarian Autonomy

The realist examination of humanitarian diplomacy is built on three core propositions: the anarchic state of the international system, the state as a rational self-interested actor, and the decisive role of power in international politics. Hans Morgenthau's concept of "interest defined in terms of power" fundamentally questions the autonomous space of humanitarian diplomacy. In his view, any state's humanitarian policy declarations need to be examined through a "power lens"—the NATO military intervention in the 1999 Kosovo War in the name of humanitarianism essentially served the United States' strategic goal of consolidating the post-Cold War European security order. Kenneth Waltz's systemic theory further compressed the theoretical position of humanitarianism: under the constraints of anarchy and the self-help principle in the international system, the state's survival and security needs transcend humanitarian concerns in the national interest. Russia's annexation of Crimea in the 2014 Ukraine crisis serves as an example—although it caused hundreds of thousands of displaced people, geopolitical strategic considerations still dominated Russia's decision-making process. John Mearsheimer's "tragedy of great power politics" thesis more thoroughly deconstructs the moral claims of humanitarian intervention: it argues that so-called humanitarian reasons are merely an ideological cloak for power competition. This view shows explanatory power for analyzing the 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya.

1.2 The Limited Accommodation of Moral Factors: Symbolic, Tactical, and Strategic Humanitarianism

Although realism is generally skeptical of humanitarianism, its theoretical tradition still reserves limited space for moral factors. Edward Carr pointed out that a foreign policy that completely rejects moral judgment and emotional appeal cannot provide rationality for action, nor can it sustain long-term political legitimacy. This limited recognition manifests in practice in three forms: first, symbolic humanitarianism as a decoration of power, such as the aid competition between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Third World during the Cold War, which was in fact an ideological contest (Westad, 2005); second, tactical humanitarianism as crisis management, such as the 2015 EU–Turkey refugee agreement, which was a stopgap measure to contain the wave of migration (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019); third, strategic humanitarianism as reputation management, such as China's rapid rescue operation after the Nepal earthquake, which helped shape the image of a "responsible great power" (Hirono, 2018). Neoclassical realist scholar Randall Schweller (Schweller, 2006) pointed out that domestic political processes often serve as a key window for humanitarian appeals to be instrumentalized: domestic actors and lobbying forces package partisan preferences as universal morality and local group preferences as the national will, interfering with a rational grand strategy of the state. The 2004 Darfur crisis is an example: a bipartisan advocacy network in the United States shaped an anti-genocide moral agenda, forcing the government to change its geopolitical interest judgment and implement humanitarian sanctions and judicial intervention against Sudan (Hamilton, 2011). Contemporary critical realist scholar Michael C. Williams, through reconstructing the classical tradition, proposed "Wilful Realism." He pointed out that realism is by no means simply a synonym for power politics; rather, on the basis of a deep insight into the limits of power, it places political prudence, legitimacy claims, and self-restraint of power at the core of theory, thereby maintaining a highly vigilant theoretical tension between real power and moral constraint. This revision has instructive significance for understanding hybrid operations such as Russia's "humanitarian corridors" in Syria.

1.3 Selective Application, Unintended Consequences, and Moral Hazard: A Realist Diagnosis of the Contemporary Era

Realist theory provides three key diagnoses for analyzing the dilemmas of contemporary humanitarian diplomacy. The first is the problem of "selective application." According to Stephen Krasner's theory of "organized hypocrisy," the tension between sovereignty norms and humanitarian intervention is often maintained through differentiated application—the different intensity of international responses to the Yemen and Syrian crises reflects real differences in geopolitical interests rather than humanitarian needs (Guidero and Hallward, 2019).[3]The second is the paradox of

"unintended consequences." John Mearsheimer, in his "Critique of Liberal Hegemony," pointed out that humanitarian intervention may undermine the existing balance of power. The power vacuum and spread of terrorism after the 2011 Libya intervention verified this judgment (Kuperman, 2013).[4]The third is the mechanism of "moral hazard." According to Fiona Terry's critical research, unconditional humanitarian aid may prolong conflict. The case of Rwandan refugee camps becoming bases for Hutu armed regrouping is clear evidence (Barnett, 1997). Facing these dilemmas, John Mearsheimer emphasized that humanitarian intervention must undergo strict cost-benefit analysis;[5] Henry Kissinger advocated maintaining a prudent balance between moral appeals and strategic interests. These realist warnings were partially adopted in the cautious application of the United Nations' "responsibility to protect" (R2P) principle: in the face of the worsening South Sudan civil war in 2014, the Security Council deliberately avoided a Libya-style large-scale cross-border military intervention and only upgraded in-country peacekeeping forces, fully reflecting states' realist concerns about sovereignty risks and geopolitical costs (Bellamy, 2014).

1.4 Creative Involvement and the Integration of Righteousness and Interests: China's Practice and Its Adjustment of Realism

In domestic academic discussions, realist logic has been endowed with distinct Chinese characteristics. Wang Yizhou's concept of "creative involvement" precisely captures the role tension China faces as a rising great power. Li Xing further pointed out from the perspective of South-South cooperation that China's humanitarian assistance embodies a new concept of righteousness and interests characterized by "promoting righteousness while integrating interests." It is neither purely moral dedication nor naked interest competition, but a symbiotic aid model that balances righteousness and interests.

China adheres to a prudent position of being "selective, conditional, and principled," and explores the fine balance between respecting the sovereignty of the parties and fulfilling international responsibilities under the multilateral framework of the United Nations. China's assistance under the framework of South-South cooperation is a unique practice with both altruism and strategic rationality. It is not only a soft power investment in the image of a ' responsible power ', but also a strategic layout to pave the way for long-term economic development and security environment. This "Chinese realism" , which emphasizes both principle and flexibility, enriches and challenges the interpretation boundary of traditional realism theory. This "Chinese realism", which emphasizes both principle and flexibility, is deeply rooted in the strategic tradition of "moving in line with interests and stopping in line with interests". At the same time, it integrates the Confucian ethics of "benevolent love" and forms a practical philosophy that unifies strategic prudence and moral responsibility.

2. Institutional Cooperation and Norm Diffusion: The Liberal Dimension of Humanitarian Governance

Among the major theoretical schools, liberalism has the highest affinity with humanitarian diplomacy. It breaks realism's singular obsession with power politics and instead emphasizes the constructive role of interdependence, institutional constraints, and value diffusion. It argues that through international institutions and transnational networks, humanitarian values can be embedded in the global governance architecture, thereby transcending the narrow logic of state-centrism. This section will first explain the theoretical premise and humanitarian potential of liberalism, and then analyze the multi-layer structure, norm internalization and rule of law trend of the global humanitarian governance system from the perspective of institutional liberalism. Finally, it examines the triple challenges faced by the liberal paradigm in the 21 st century-the legitimacy crisis of interventionism, the rebound of populism and the digital security dilemma of humanitarian governance- as well as its theoretical adjustment and practical innovation.

2.1 Interdependence, Institutional Constraints, and Value Diffusion: The Theoretical Premises of Liberalism

The liberal theory of international relations provides the most friendly theoretical environment for humanitarian diplomacy. Its core propositions—interdependence, institutional binding, and value projection—together constitute the theoretical cornerstone for the development of humanitarianism. The phenomenon of "multiple channels of contact" revealed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye opened space for humanitarian actors to participate in international politics.Liberal internationalist

scholar Michael Doyle pointed out that representative institutions, media oversight, and social organization participation in liberal regimes increase the probability that human rights and humanitarian issues enter the official diplomatic agenda. However, these institutional features do not necessarily produce stable and consistent humanitarian policies; their effects are still influenced by domestic partisan competition, fiscal pressure, and security perceptions. This judgment is confirmed in the practices of "humanitarian middle powers" such as Norway and Canada (Pratt, 1990). Neoliberal institutionalism (Keohane, 1984) reveals the endogenous logic of institutionalized cooperation: the establishment of the post-World War II international humanitarian law system was essentially about constraining the arbitrariness of states in exercising violence through multilateral rules, reducing the coordination costs of humanitarian rescue, and thereby establishing stable behavioral expectations for transnational humanitarian action.[6]In practice, this liberal logic manifests at three levels: global-level humanitarian mechanism building, regional-level humanitarian norm diffusion, and national-level institutionalization of humanitarian policy (Lancaster, 2007). It is precisely this theoretical logic, which closely binds institutional expectations, norm internalization, and domestic democratic procedures, that laid the scholarly foundation for the post-war international community to break through traditional state-centrism and translate humanitarian concerns into concrete global institutional arrangements. Liberalism no longer regards humanitarianism as an accidental moral good deed, but advocates shaping it into a set of multilateral mechanisms with certainty and universal binding force. This directly gave rise to the contemporary fully developed multi-layered humanitarian governance system.

2.2 Multi-layered Governance, Norm Internalization, and Legalization: The Institutional Liberal Architecture of Humanitarian Governance

From the perspective of institutional liberalism, humanitarian governance presents three notable features. The first is the formation of a multi-layered governance architecture—the global humanitarian system has developed into a complex network including UN agencies, regional organizations, state actors, and non-governmental organizations. The second is the role of norm internalization mechanisms: Kathryn Sikkink's "spiral model" shows how human rights norms are gradually internalized into national policies through transnational advocacy networks. The formulation of the Convention on Cluster Munitions is a typical example (Bolton and Nash, 2010). The third is the strengthening trend of legalization: Kenneth Abbott's "hard law–soft law" continuum theory helps us understand the normative spectrum from the Geneva Conventions to the Core Humanitarian Standard. However, this paradigm faces challenges of institutional fragmentation and accountability gaps. According to the assessment of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2021), there are currently more than 4,300 active humanitarian organizations worldwide, coordination costs remain high, and the politicization of humanitarian assistance continues to erode the effectiveness and legitimacy of the international rescue system (Barnett and Weiss, 2008).[7]For example, in the 2019 Venezuela "humanitarian aid" controversy, humanitarian relief evolved into a bargaining lever between external forces and the recipient regime. To this end, the international community promoted the "Grand Bargain" initiative to improve funding transparency and implemented a "localization" strategy to transfer more resources and decision-making power to actors in the Global South (Barbedet, Davies, Flint and Davey, 2021).

2.3 Legitimacy Crisis, Populist Backlash, and Digital Risks: Liberalism's Contemporary Adjustment

The liberal humanitarian paradigm faces three severe challenges in the twenty-first century. The first is the legitimacy crisis of "liberal interventionism": after the Iraq War, Mary Kaldor's "new wars" theory revealed that military intervention in the name of humanitarianism may be counterproductive and exacerbate identity politics conflicts. The second is the impact of populism on multilateralism: populist governments such as Hungary have restricted the activities of international non-governmental organizations through legislation, compressing humanitarian space. The third is digital security risk: with the widespread application of digital technology in humanitarian action, cyberattacks and data breaches pose new threats to the independence and effectiveness of humanitarian action.[8] Facing these challenges, liberal theory is undergoing important adjustments, advocating enhanced strategic resilience while adhering to multilateral cooperation; (Ikenberry, 2020); Cinta O'Hagan and Miwa Hirono call for building an inclusive international humanitarian order coordination framework that fully incorporates the differentiated humanitarian ideas of non-Western actors.[9]These theoretical developments manifest in practice in three trends: the "demilitarization" of humanitarian action, the "diversification" of partnerships, and the "ethicalization" of technology. Particularly noteworthy is the development of global health humanitarianism: the dilemmas and innovations of the international

vaccine distribution mechanism (COVAX) during the COVID-19 pandemic provide a new testing ground for liberal theories of international cooperation.

2.4 Institutional Learning and Rule Reshaping: China's Practice in Global Humanitarian Governance

Domestically oriented liberal research profoundly reveals that China's complex interaction with the global humanitarian governance system is far from one-way "integration," but rather a "two-way construction" full of contestation. The interaction between China and the global humanitarian governance system reflects the Oriental wisdom of "seeking common ground while reserving differences and harmony in diversity". China's acceptance process of the international humanitarian law system is a dynamic process of "choosing the good and changing the bad". This process is not only the internalization of international norms, but also the process of creative transformation of global norms based on the idea of "using etiquette and law" in Chinese traditional culture. The concept of "legal warfare" proposed by Professor He Zhipeng is deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese thought of "governing by law", and at the same time gives it a new era connotation of actively participating in international rule-making. China's "global development initiative" embodies the traditional wisdom of "governing the country, enriching the people first", and elevates humanitarian from crisis response to structural prevention. This development-oriented humanitarianism innovatively combines the ideal of "the world is for the public" in the "Book of Rites·Liyun" with contemporary global governance practices, and injects Chinese ideological resources into the liberal paradigm.

China's process from careful observation to active participation in the international humanitarian law system is a profound process of institutional learning and socialization. However, China's learning is by no means passively accepted, but accompanied by continuous screening, adjustment and remodeling. China's strategy under the framework of the liberal system contains an active dimension of "legal warfare", that is, skillfully using the rules of international law to defend its position and counter the abuse of humanitarian norms by other countries. This dynamic game is embodied in the "Global Development Initiative". The initiative is essentially a "development-oriented humanitarian", which prevents and responds to crises by emphasizing structural measures such as poverty eradication and improvement of people's livelihood. It points to the weakness of the "reactive humanitarian" model dominated by the West and characterized by emergency relief and military intervention, aiming to fundamentally challenge the right to knowledge production and agenda setting in the humanitarian field..

Conclusion: The Tension between Power and Norms—The Balanced Logic of Humanitarian Diplomacy

The theoretical dialogue between realism and liberalism reveals that humanitarian diplomacy always swings between power logic and institutional ideal. Realism effectively dispels the moral illusion of humanitarian action, emphasizing sovereignty constraints and strategic rationality ; liberalism shows the construction power of norm diffusion and institutional cooperation, and provides a feasible solution for global governance. The complementarity of the two enlightens us that effective humanitarian diplomacy needs to actively use institutional space and avoid the trap of "free interventionism" on the premise of recognizing the reality of power.The "creative intervention" and "development-oriented humanism" advocated by China are trying to transcend this dual tension and embed the unity of righteousness and benefit into international practice. In the future, in the context of the digital age and compound crisis, deepening the theoretical integration of realism and liberalism, while absorbing the alternative ideas of the global South, will be the only way to build a more just and effective humanitarian governance system.

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