The relevance of state-building in the 2020s and the case of Africa[1]

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Abstract:

The study examines the relevance of state-building in the 2020s within the framework of International Relations (IR) theories, with a focus on the Liberal World Order (LWO). Rooted in liberal ideology, the theory of state-building asserts that adherence to universally accepted norms and regulations by sovereign states best achieves global security. We explore the concept of 'offensive liberalism', emphasising the proactive role of stable states in enforcing these norms in regions where state capacity is lacking. The paper revisits the literature on state-building and the international system, noting a decline in scholarly focus over the past fifteen years. However, contemporary conflicts such as the war in Ukraine have brought state-building back to the forefront of global political discourse. The study underscores the importance of state-building in maintaining the stability and security of the LWO and emphasises the need for comprehensive reconstruction efforts in war-torn regions. It argues for the continued relevance of state-building in maintaining the LWO, particularly in regions facing instability. It calls for flexible, context-aware strategies that prioritise local engagement and regional cooperation to address Africa's unique socio-political landscape's challenges and opportunities.

Keywords:
Africa; instability; IR theories; Liberal World Order (LWO); state-building.

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Introduction

State-building literature has roots in the belief that the world is universally safe for everyone if all countries follow the same liberal rules. Similar principles, reinforced and expanded globally after the end of the Cold War, form the basis of these rules. The rise of neoconservatives to prominence in the George W. Bush administration further heightened the international community's sense of responsibility to actively support the non-functional actors of the Liberal World Order (LWO). In the 1990s, this 'liberal offensive'[4] attitude was reflected in the principles and practices of the humanitarian interventions.

However, following the events in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, state-building also emerged as a practical tool in the hands of major powers. Particularly, Washington's foreign policy prioritised the previously overlooked field of post-conflict reconstruction after the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Fukuyama, 2004). It is therefore no coincidence—as Francis Fukuyama argued—that the most important global question in the post-9/11 era was no longer how to roll back statehood but how to rebuild state capacities. In this context, the basic assumption of 21st century state-building is that the United States (US) can establish what it considers the most perfect order in unstable regions by exporting the political system, thereby preventing the proliferation of crisis hotspots (Csicsmann, 2009: 7).

This approach originates from the theoretical belief that the LWO provides a framework for mutual development and security. Moreover, the US must not only maintain this framework but also actively expand it for its own security and the global 'common good'. In this way, along the lines of 'offensive realism' (Jervis, 1999), state-building projects can be placed within the theoretical framework of 'offensive liberalism'.[5] The building blocks of the LWO are the sovereign states, which feel responsible for this order. In case some states are not able or willing to live with this responsibility, the order's stable states can intervene to enforce the universal norms and regulations.

This paper aims to clarify the elements of a logical and conceptual system within the relevant contexts of the LWO, utilising a revised set of fundamental concepts and a shared interpretive framework for analysing the international system. This framework can also be applicable to the state-building literature. State-building, state failures, and

[4] The phrase is absent from literature, in contrast to the 'offensive realist' label. Nevertheless, Ikenberry (2020) references it within a comparable framework. It is worth mentioning that the authors of this article have reached a similar conclusion as Miller (2010), who enriched the overall critique of the neoconservative foreign policy of the Bush administration by incorporating theoretical requirements while discussing aggressive liberalism. The LWO does not inherently imply the policy of actively enforcing the principles of order. However, it is undeniably associated with state-building, as external actors may need to intervene in internal policy relations to establish order. This intervention is logically inconsistent with liberal ideals. The failure and criticism of the Bush administration's neoconservative foreign policy since 2009 have directly hindered state-building efforts.

[5] Refer to the previous footnote.

failed states were prominent topics in the scholarly literature during the late 2000s and early/mid-2010s. However, the number of published works has decreased due to the Obama-Clinton foreign policy, which explicitly avoided discussing democracy promotion and state-building to differentiate it from the Bush years. The 2008–2009 financial and economic crisis clearly showed that US foreign policy had overstretched itself, and Obama's main goal became to end the parallel operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (Zakaria, 2011).

In the 2020s, the relevance of state-building has resurfaced, particularly considering contemporary conflicts such as the war in Ukraine that necessitate comprehensive reconstruction efforts. This study revisits state-building literature and its relevance to the international system, emphasising its applicability in current geopolitical contexts, including the reconstruction of war-torn regions. Furthermore, this paper examines state-building within the African context. Post-colonial Africa presents unique challenges and opportunities for state-building, shaped by historical legacies, ethnic diversity, and socio-economic dynamics. The study looks at how these factors affect the efforts to build states in different African countries and shows how important it is to use approaches that are tailored to each situation and include local knowledge systems and indigenous ways of running governments. This perspective is crucial for understanding the diverse outcomes of state-building initiatives across the continent and for formulating strategies that can effectively address the complex realities of African states in the changing LWO.

Presumptions about the LWO

While it is evident that Biden's critics view the withdrawal from Afghanistan as premature and the unstable regional situation in the Middle East, North Africa, or the Sahel as a pressing security challenge, it is unclear what these experts would expect from the US. While US-style nation-building with a unilateral military element has not proven successful, the completion of these operations raises additional questions. Is it possible that the problem was not with the principle of nation-building itself but with its implementation? The present study does not wish to add to the list of analyses that have interpreted, evaluated, or criticised the latter based on a particular set (and many times flawed) of criteria. We set out to examine the theoretical and conceptual framework, acknowledging that the failure lies not in the theory itself, but in the US-led implementation. Such an undertaking is necessarily interdisciplinary in its theoretical perspective and eclectic in its methodology. The present paper seeks to address issues of practical relevance, but the specific character of the topic necessarily precludes it from being empirical.

According to the original idea of formal logic, a purely philosophical-theoretical study would not necessarily be deductive, nor would the formulation of hypothesis(es) necessarily be necessary. However, when formulating a central proposition to explicate, it is beneficial to begin with a compound proposition, which is composed of a series of interrelated presumptions:

- The organising force of the international system follows the logic of the LWO;
- The basis of this logic are the sovereign and equal states with a similar understanding of their responsibilities;
- According to the 'offensive liberal' concept, state-building may be necessary to enforce these universally valid norms and rules.

Why is state-building relevant again?

While the topic may not appear to address the most pressing issue in current world politics. However, when we consider state-building within the broader context of the post-war proceedings in Ukraine—which we hope will become relevant sooner rather than later—it becomes crucial to understand how the West, having provided arms to Ukraine during the war, can contribute to the reconstruction of a stable and democratic Ukraine. While it may be morally challenging to broach the subject at this juncture, Russia's stability will largely rely on the West's assistance following the war. This is because it is a mistaken belief that Russia can remain stable without assistance in state-building over the long term. During the 1990s, Russia did not receive enough Western assistance to democratise the entire structure of the state, which later was considered by neoconservative or 'liberal offensive' authors as one of the most serious missed opportunities by the US.[6] Russia will certainly not be alone, because it will have the support of China, which has been increasingly close to Russia in this respect since the outbreak of the war, even risking that the US imposes economic sanctions outright.[7]

John Ikenberry (2020, 2022) presented a convincing argument for the LWO and the place of democracies in it in several of his works, emphasising that modernity is (or has been) a challenge that all societies are struggling with. The aim has been, of course, to harness the positive effects and avoid the negative consequences. At the same time, throughout history, the faster and better performing 'liberal top learners' have tended to intervene in internal processes driven by a kind of messianic sense of mission.[8] The ideological basis of this, beyond David Hume's 'imprudent vehemence' concept, was the idea that the US should exercise the role of 'international policeman' in extreme cases.[9]

This argument was later extended to include a new one that everyone must respect human rights and that this implies an obligation to assist people 'whose poor circumstances prevent them from achieving a just and equitable political and social system' (Rawls, 2008: 18). Moreover, the US, as a genuine liberal power, tends to clothe

[6] See, for instance, the recent works of the leading neoconservative Robert Kagan (2018, 2022).
[7] See, for instance, the main topic of the meeting between Joe Biden and Ursula von Der Leyen and the meeting's joint statement on the website of the White House in which China is not mentioned explicitly but many areas are related to control the Chinese rise and political power globally. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/10/joint-statement-by-president-biden-and-president-von-der-leyen-2/
[8] In the literature it is a common reference to the poem of Rudyard Kipling from 1899. 'White Man's Burden' assumes that it is the responsibility of civilised states to help and intervene in not functioning states (Rada, 2011).
[9] Theodore Roosevelt's message to Congress on December 6, 1904 (cited in Peterecz, 2016: 159).

this in a moral context, according to which the US 'interests, even if they do not directly touch upon human rights, are generally moral in nature' (Kaplan, 2018: 58). This in turn led, according to many, to the US becoming the policeman of the world under the auspices of the Pax Americana, institutionalised by the doctrine formulated by Truman in March 1947. The doctrine aimed to explicitly state that the US possessed 'universal interests and global military commitments throughout the world. …U.S. policy must support free peoples who resist armed minorities or external pressures' (Békés, 1982: 10). The assumption of this role, the often-forced democracy export, and the use of outdated strategies have also led to anomalies in the recent past.

According to Daniel L. Davis (2016), aggressive US foreign policy has failed spectacularly. US interventions, whether alone or as part of a coalition, often escalate previously unfavourable situations. State-building strategies and interventions inspired (also) by neoliberal (neoconservative) ideology failed to consider that 'the implementation of universal approaches to the imported state and liberal peace and policies dreamed up in Western centres in the country concerned, i.e., top-down, posed too many structural problems' (Illés, 2018: 66). To understand the above, it is sufficient at this point to refer to the failure of the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, or even to the failure of the Arab Spring and the temporary rise of the Islamic State (IS).

We can add that the earlier strategic project of state-building, which is the focus of our study and which was managed primarily by the European colonial powers, is not universally appreciated in the literature; Charles Tilly (2012: 3), for example, has argued to the extreme that 'the risk of war and state-building, which is essentially defensive blackmail backed by the benefit of legitimacy, may be the best examples of organized crime'. We could view this as somewhat ambiguous, leading us to reluctantly acknowledge that Tilly has, in a sense, accurately captured the essence.

On state-building

Returning to the problem of state-building and the scholarly state-building literature (Rada, 2011; Farkas & Pongrácz, 2018), which became known in the 1990s and dominated the 2000s, we can outline the motivation as maintaining the international system's stability, or more narrowly the framework of our own security, as opposed to the altruistic examples of foreign aid. There is a long history of political philosophy of state-building within the liberal stream, such as Immanuel Kant's (Kant, 1998) republican world order project, Michael Doyle's democratic peace system (Doyle, 1986), or even earlier Adam Smith's free trade principle (Szentes, 2002). These are all the basis of the LWO, and they are all clearly relevant in this context.

Indeed, by favouring democracy over aristocracy and free trade over autarky, the scholars who laid the groundwork for 18th-century liberal internationalism hoped to secure the prospect of ending wars (Burchill, 2005: 58). In line with the above, the Clinton Doctrine of the 1990s argues that democratic expansion, i.e., the introduction of Western political systems and institutions and an understanding of democracy in developing countries, will lead to the disappearance of armed conflicts (Csicsmann,

2009: 7). These principles, arranged in a complex theory, form the foundation of a vision of the LWO. These pillars include the belief in the mutual benefits of free trade, the universality of human rights, and the potential for peaceful coexistence between sovereign states (Kagan, 2022). Mearsheimer also points out that a 'strong state' seeking liberal hegemony seeks to mould the entire international system in its own image, which in addition to the spread of liberal democracy, includes the promotion of an open economy and the building of international institutions to address economic and security issues.

However, it is important to distinguish between self-recognition driven by self-interest and recognition forced by external forces[10]. This paper refers to the latter as the 'offensive liberal' approach. State-building motivated and supported by external actors certainly falls into this category, since it is based on the belief that the logic of rationality is universal and that the agenda-setters at the core of the LWO, such as the US or the European Union (EU), have a moral obligation to coordinate their joint efforts and to act in a pragmatically organised way so that the other actors in the order can also enjoy benefits.[11]

However, we must acknowledge that every international intervention and operation stems from a political decision. Therefore, just like in other domains, we must provide unambiguous directives for action to those engaged in the political decision-making process. We must acknowledge that politicians make decisions based on moral obligations, as demonstrated by the example of Ukraine. Consequently, it is necessary to develop a model that clearly defines why we need to address the problems of state failure. The model should consider the state-building attempts that have taken place throughout history and include the proposals that have been made so far so that we can answer the question of exactly what can be done. Furthermore, the model must be able to deal with the complexity of the problem, the different dimensions, and the conflicting forces within a single model. Both authors of this paper have discussed this model and its possibilities in their previous works (Rada, 2006, 2009, 2011; Pongrácz, 2015, 2018, 2019). This paper mainly analyses the theoretical framework that allows for the interpretation of the model, rather than the model itself. However, the model warrants attention due to the pressing need for reconstruction in Ukraine, a topic that will be the focus of future papers and research.

A significant number of state-building scholars have explored the phenomenon using the limited possibilities of some sub-disciplines of international relations, identifying, for example, democracy export or economic reconstruction with complex state-building. The term 'nation-building', which has been used by mainly US authors (see, e.g., Dobbins et al., 2007), can be misleading, however. State-building is a multi-stage process that includes creating and maintaining security, increasing social cohesion, institution building, democracy building, and the creation of a sustainable framework for economic development. The liberal logic interlinks democracy-building and state-building because

[10] Refer to the later discussion about cooperative sovereignty.
[11] John Ikenberry (2020: 32) shares similar views.

stability serves as the foundation for a belief in sustainability, and the democratic system is capable of delivering it. Of course, a plethora of literature suggests that the path to democracy is the most perilous,[12] but due to numerous positive examples, we tend to accept liberalisation as a universal formula when viewed from a Western perspective. The Western perspective is not entirely incorrect, and it is easy to understand why this way of thinking is so powerful and convincing when viewed from the perspective of Central Europe (as a member of the EU, Central Europeans are at the centre of the LWO). But it is important to remember that Central Europe and its successful democratic transitions and Euro-Atlantic integration show that a real and united internal demand for state-building is a must[13] for success.

Excursion: the nature of sovereignty in Westphalia

According to a similar logic, the existence of the sovereignty of the Westphalian state and the assumed functioning of the most important components of the order, the states, is an indispensable condition for a LWO (Ikenberry, 2020: 215). It is a well-known fact that the system constituted in 1648 after the Peace of Westphalia represented a real Copernican Revolution in that it named—and made—the state the foundation of the European order, as opposed to empire, dynasty, or religious affiliation. In an ideal-typical sense, the establishment of the concept of state sovereignty allowed each or some of the contracting parties to choose—and, in principle, free from any external intervention—their own internal political structure and—though this is not relevant to our discussion—their own religious orientation. Therefore, by aligning with the procedural clauses of the Westphalian system, 'it could be recognized as an international citizen able to maintain their own culture, politics, religion and internal policies, shielded by the international system from outside intervention' (Kissinger, 2014: 27).

Consequently, a world of states organised in differentiated political spaces replaced the former common structure of religious and secular power, the *respublica christiana*, and the organic unity of mediaeval Christian society—and its imperial, confederal, and city-state rivals.[14] From a theoretical point of view, sovereign states are, as we have seen, considered equal among themselves, irrespective of their power potential and territorial scope. All this has made it possible to link the power and sphere of action of the state to a specific territory, and the sovereignty of the Westphalian state meant that 'each state would exercise supreme, comprehensive, unqualified, and exclusive rule over its territorial jurisdiction' (Scholte, 2005: 188). Ultimately, the state became the representative of an impermeable, spatially self-enclosed territorial order—or, in Schmitt's (2006: 128–129) terminology, a spatial order—and, as an autonomous entity, it could assert a specific type of external relations with other similar representatives of the territorial order.

[12] See, for more information, the literature on turbulent democratisation, and, more broadly, the literature on democratic transitions (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2005).
[13] Mearsheimer (2018) also addresses this from a realist perspective.
[14] See, also, Spruyt (1994).

The external aspect derived from the original principle of sovereignty implies that states are not subject to any political power higher than themselves; the internal aspect of sovereignty implies that individual states are free to choose their own political systems and are not accountable to any external power for their internal affairs (Kiss, 2003: 14 and 225). (With regard to the internal aspect, the aim of the sovereign state is in fact to gain control over society; this is why the territorial state can be seen by sociological theorists such as Anthony Giddens (1987: 120) as the most significant 'containment of power', the power-container of modernity.) The Westphalian system also sought to adapt one of the fundamental basics of the system into practice: the balance of power between the powers as a guarantee of peace (Péterffy, 1942: 50).[15] In the Peace of Utrecht of 1713, the parties also later expressed their 'prior recognition by all signatories', regardless of their Catholic, Protestant, monarchist, or republican status (Koselleck, 1988: 48–49).

The ideal-typical construction of the Westphalian system, however, concealed certain illusory features from the beginning, which meant that it was possible to, de facto, break these provisions. Emer (Emmerich) de Vattel engaged in a discussion with Hugo Grotius, who argued that other states' right to intervene was justified by a clear breach of the moral law of nature and adopted a stance of non-intervention. However, at one point, he was able to overcome this conviction, recognising the legitimacy of intervention to prevent the scourge of religious civil war. When a nation asks for help from outside to escape religious terror by state means, the intervention is considered legitimate (Koselleck, 1988: 46). Later, 'organized hypocrisy' actually took hold, as powerful states only adhered to the Westphalian system's maxims when it suited their interests (Krasner, 1999).

Numerous factors have undermined and continue to undermine the autonomy resulting from the Westphalian system. According to Krasner, such factors included conventions, coercion, and imposition (Krasner, 1999: 116–117). International treaties have also laid down various exceptions to the principle of non-intervention in each other's internal affairs. Moreover, against states that mock the rule of law and are considered 'rogue' and 'pariah' states that disregard the rule of law, nowadays force can be used 'in the name of a presumed right and the reason of the strongest' (Derrida, 2005, 69, 80). One could read János Arany's poem Civilisation as a malicious expression of this organised hypocrisy, which states that '...The world has/ A more legalistic flavour:/ When the strong now do some mischief/They confer and – vote in favour' (Arany 1888: 414).

Africa and state-building

The state-building literature has significantly evolved, particularly through the lens of African experiences and perspectives. Post-colonial Africa offers a complex and

[15] Péterffy (1942: 50) also referenced Swift's scathing remark that the equilibrium of power creates a situation akin to a 'house built with a perfect balance of weight ... on which, when a sparrow stepped on it, the whole thing collapsed'.

multifaceted landscape where the interplay of historical legacies, ethnic diversity, and socio-economic challenges has shaped the discourse on state-building. Initially, state-building was closely associated with efforts to stabilise war-torn regions and establish governance structures in countries emerging from colonial rule. A top-down approach characterised these early efforts, heavily influenced by external actors and international organisations (Paris & Sisk, 2020). This logically validates the 'offensive liberal' perspective.

The need to address the arbitrary borders drawn by colonial powers, which often group disparate ethnic groups without regard for historical, cultural, or social affinities, has deeply influenced Africa's state-building narrative. This has led to persistent internal conflicts and challenges in building cohesive national identities. The literature usually stresses the importance of context-specific approaches that account for these unique historical and cultural factors (Richmond, 2020). African scholars and policymakers have increasingly advocated for indigenous state-building models that leverage traditional governance structures and local knowledge systems instead of the external solutions dictated by the 'offensive liberal' logic (Autesserre, 2021).

The evolution of state-building literature also reflects a growing recognition of the limitations of externally imposed solutions. Many African countries have experienced the shortcomings of international state-building efforts that prioritise Western models of governance and economic development. This has led to calls for more inclusive, bottom-up approaches that engage local communities and stakeholders in the state-building process (Chandler, 2020). Such approaches are seen as essential for ensuring the legitimacy and sustainability of state institutions in Africa.

Recent contributions to the state-building literature highlight the role of regional organisations, such as the African Union (AU) and sub-regional bodies, in promoting peace, security, and governance reforms across the continent. The AU's 'Agenda 2063', for instance, outlines a vision for a prosperous, integrated, and peaceful Africa, underpinned by strong, democratic states capable of delivering development and security for their citizens (AU, 2021). This regional perspective underscores the importance of African-led initiatives and the potential for regional cooperation in addressing common challenges.

Moreover, the literature has increasingly focused on the intersection of state-building and economic development in Africa. The continent's rich natural resources and young, growing population present both opportunities and challenges for state-building efforts. Effective state-building strategies view sustainable economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction as critical components (Call, 2021). This holistic view recognises that political stability and economic prosperity are mutually reinforcing and essential to the long-term success of state-building in Africa.

The African continent presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities for state-building initiatives. Post-colonial Africa has witnessed numerous state-building efforts aimed at addressing the legacy of arbitrary borders, ethnic divisions, and weak institutions left by colonial powers. Internal conflicts, corruption, and economic

underdevelopment have exacerbated these challenges. Despite these difficulties, state-building in Africa has shown varied results, with some countries making significant strides toward stability and development while others continue to struggle.

A focus on African states

In recent years, international actors have increasingly focused on Africa as a critical region for state-building efforts. Initiatives such as the already mentioned the AU's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have emphasised the importance of building strong, resilient states capable of providing security, governance, and economic opportunities to their populations (AU, 2021; UN, 2022). Various international donors and development agencies have supported these efforts by providing financial assistance, technical expertise, and capacity-building programs to African states.

Rwanda

One notable example of state-building in Africa is the case of Rwanda, which, following the 1994 genocide, has undergone significant transformation under the leadership of President Paul Kagame. The Rwandan government's focus on reconciliation, economic development, and institutional reforms has been credited with stabilising the country and promoting rapid growth (Beswick, 2020). However, critics argue that this success has come at the expense of political freedoms and human rights, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of such a state-building model (Reyntjens, 2021).

South Sudan

Another important case is South Sudan, the world's newest country, which gained independence from Sudan in 2011. Despite initial hopes, South Sudan has faced severe challenges in its state-building journey, including ongoing conflict, political instability, and humanitarian crises (Rolandsen, 2021). The international community has played a significant role in supporting state-building efforts in South Sudan, but the complexity of the situation has highlighted the limitations and challenges of external interventions in deeply divided societies.

Somalia

The case of Somalia provides insights into the difficulties of state-building in contexts of protracted conflict and weak governance. Following the collapse of the central government in 1991, Somalia experienced decades of civil war and lawlessness. International efforts to rebuild the Somali state have faced numerous obstacles, including clan rivalries, terrorism, and corruption. Despite these challenges, recent years have seen some progress, with the establishment of a federal government and international support for security and governance reforms (Williams, 2020).

Nigeria

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, presents another complex scenario for state-building. Despite its status as a major oil producer, Nigeria has faced challenges such as corruption, ethnic conflict, and terrorism, particularly in the form of the Boko Haram insurgency. Efforts to strengthen the Nigerian state have focused on improving governance, addressing regional inequalities, and enhancing security capabilities. However, persistent challenges highlight the need for comprehensive and context-specific state-building strategies (Akinola, 2021).

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's recent history underscores the dynamic nature of state-building in Africa. Under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the country has undergone significant political and economic reforms, including efforts to resolve ethnic conflicts and liberalise the economy. However, the outbreak of conflict in the Tigray region in 2020 has posed a serious threat to these reforms, demonstrating the fragility of state-building efforts in the face of internal divisions and political instability (Hassen, 2021).

Democratic Republic of Congo

Other examples include the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where state-building efforts have been ongoing for decades amidst chronic instability and conflict. The vast mineral wealth of the DRC has both facilitated and hindered conflict and corruption, while simultaneously providing potential resources for development. International state-building efforts have focused on security sector reform, governance improvements, and economic development, but progress has been slow and uneven (Autesserre, 2021).

Liberia and Sierra Leone

In Liberia and Sierra Leone, state-building efforts have been somewhat more successful. Following brutal civil wars in the 1990s, both countries have made strides in rebuilding their institutions, with significant support from the international community. The establishment of democratic governance, efforts to promote reconciliation, and investments in development have contributed to greater stability and economic growth. However, challenges remain, particularly in terms of corruption and political accountability (Call, 2021).

Conclusion

The strengthening and building of Westphalian sovereignty, regardless of the possible anomalies in the system, is a necessary condition for the stable functioning of the world order since 'weak governance undermines the principle of sovereignty' (Fukuyama, 2004: 129). Then, functioning states will be able to collectively shape the rules of international cooperation, create international organisations, and effectively use them to pursue their own well-understood interests and goals. A basic tenet of the 'offensive liberal' orientation is that the LWO provides a framework for its democratic members

to maintain security and create economic prosperity. This logic is expansionist in any case, because within a framework of interdependence,[16] it is in the interests of the liberal core—in a form that is already rather realist—that all the world's actors should operate in a similar way. The link between the liberal literature and the literature on democratisation and democratic transitions occurs at this point (see, O'Donnell et al., 1986). The US brought the liberal order and democracy together in practice after the Second World War, and while dismantling the systemic power of the imperial logic by the 1990s,[17] designated or kept the sovereign Westphalian state as the basic unit in the international LWO.

This logic intertwined sovereign independence with the prohibition of aggression against sovereignty, establishing it as the norm within the order. However, this was not the case outside the order, and armed state-building missions accurately reflected the expansive constraints of the order. The bulwarks of the LWO reinforced and maintained by the US are the alliances of like-minded states, from which the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU stand out. This line of thinking describes the expansion of NATO and the EU, where Western states increasingly recognise and value the cohesive power of shared culture and roots (Huntington, 1996: 307). However, it is not surprising that countries outside the core of the order, who fundamentally disagree with it, see this very expansion as a threat to their own sovereignty. As Mearsheimer puts it, the most threatening aspect of the strategy to integrate Ukraine into the West for Moscow was NATO's eastward expansion (Mearsheimer, 2018). However, it should also be seen that the 'offensive liberal' logic does not even help refute this, while in terms of vague Putinian neo-Soviet imperial plans, NATO or EU expansion is not in fact a security threat but a limit to the level of ambition of the Putin dream.[18]

Indeed, the liberal states of the West may appear to be pragmatically trying to impose their own democratic systems at all costs on all the weaker actors of the international system, and the wild extremes of the liberal order even provide examples of how the 'West' wants to implement its grandiose 'social engineering'[19] plan based on its universal approach. However, the inherent purpose of the complex state-building attempts cited as examples was to re-establish the failing state, a state incapable of exercising its sovereignty in the Westphalian sense. The international community as a whole, as well as failed states themselves and their regions, face significant challenges due to the spillover effect. Furthermore, from a realist perspective, the latter goal is justifiable (Mearsheimer 2018: 59), even though state-building is an inherently liberal formula for maintaining order and security.

The validity of the state-centred system in Westphalia is based on full sovereignty, as understood territorially (Mearsheimer 2018: 100). When another state violates

[16] This aligns with the fundamental assumptions of the (neo)liberal movement. See, for instance, the works of Robert Keohane (Keohane et al., 1977; Keohane, 1984).
[17] Fukuyama referred to this as the victory of democracy.
[18] Kagan (2022) argues similarly in his recent article; see, also, Alexandr Dugin's (2022)—who has been Putin's main ideologue—collection of studies about Russia's Eurasian mission.
[19] Mearsheimer (2018) also notes that the focus of liberal foreign policy today is social engineering.

sovereignty or non-state actors emerge on the national and international political stage, forcing the transformation of the international institutional system, we face a serious dilemma: who should rebuild sovereignty and how? From this perspective, the intensification of the consequences of state failure is one of the most serious challenges we face. One might provocatively ask whether it is not the Westphalian system that is in crisis, since the model of statehood established in Europe and North America is rather the exception than the rule.

The rethought definition also provides a justification for external intervention. Indeed, a failing state is an international threat in and of itself because the negative consequences spread across borders to neighbouring countries, creating regional and, in the worst case, international instability. In the world of sovereign states, sovereignty protects against interference by other states, but 'cooperative sovereignty' (Marton, 2008) means that sovereignty is not necessarily and not always the property of the state. The territory of the world is the common good of the people of the world, and it is the responsibility of states to protect that common good for the people of that territory, as well as to protect the people themselves and protect the world from spill-overs. Territoriality in this sense is not a right but a duty to control sovereign territory. Statelessness arises when the state fails to exercise its control over the territory, thereby failing to serve the people. This, in turn, poses a long-term threat not only to the people residing in the territory, but also to the state itself.

Under 'cooperative sovereignty', external actors become interested in and responsible for restoring control over sovereign territory. State-building in this sense is precisely about establishing control and capacity. Despite the uncertainty and constant change in the various tasks involved in state-building, we can identify common features that characterise the process in general. There is a general recognition that alternative solutions, such as redrawing state boundaries or preserving ungoverned territories, are not viable in the current LWO.

The state, an inherently territorial entity, grants sovereignty and legitimacy to the institutional framework that governs it, typically the government, enabling it to influence any event or process occurring within its territory or the activities of its inhabitants. The literature primarily refers to state-building in the strict sense, focusing on this capability rather than on the establishment of psychological-cognitive linkages within society. It is a different question that a certain loyalty to the central institutions, i.e., the state, is essential for its sustainability. Thus, state-building encompasses the strengthening of social connections in a broader sense, as the sustainability of state-building hinges on a unified background, even if we cannot refer to it as a nation. Even 'failed states' prove/have proven to be inadequate in creating adequate institutions and practices to maintain the security of their citizens—and thus the relationship between state and society has had to endure severe breaks (Dannreauther, 2016: 92 and 102), obviating the Hobbesian sub-principle *protego ergo obligo*.

Furthermore, a crucial aspect of state-building involves creating an environment that facilitates the establishment of suitable institutions, as well as constructing or modifying

the institutional framework that forms the state itself. As previously discussed, the complex, multi-stage process of state-building builds upon military, political, economic, and social measures, with the ultimate goal of this 'project' being the emergence of a stable political, economic, and social structure (Bordás, 2015: 213).

Regarding the political aspects, however, democracy is clearly a 'Western' concept. Even if we want to define it, it is still difficult to break away from the civilisational and cultural prejudices rooted in the liberal histories of Europe and North America. Despite the populist spirit that occasionally haunts the realm of realism and the growing body of literature in political science that emphasises 'illiberal' tendencies, the concept of democracy has become synonymous with liberal ideas that are 'haunting modern societies' (Rosenvallon, 2007: 108). This is because, when discussing the propagation of democracy, it becomes evident that the goal is not merely to establish democracy, but to establish liberal democracy. However, the democratic conception is not solely compatible with pure liberalism, particularly when viewed through the lens of state theory. To bolster this argument, we urge the reader to consider the assertion that in the heyday of the welfare state, specifically in Western Europe between 1945 and 1975, Christian democracy and social democracy provided a cohesive and interconnected framework for social life (Ormos, 2009: 355). It also follows from the above statement about the establishment of liberal democracy: not all countries that claim to be democratic can be considered democratic.

The search for a connection between democracy and state-building in the literature has already been an attempt to describe preconditions and favourable conditions (see, Fukuyama, 2004). In the process of state-building, however, it is important to take into account Huntington's (1996: 311) caution that Western leaders should not aim to shape other civilisations—in the Ukrainian context and using the basic Frobenian terminology (Frobenius, 1897: 225–236)—in the image of the West but rather preserve, protect, and revitalise the unique values of Western civilisation. The success of any mission related to state-building, particularly the 're-imported state' as a 21st century attempt to export the Western-style system (Csicsmann, 2009: 15), is contingent upon the prior thorough examination of the economic, political, social, and cultural conditions and traditions of the region—in this case, Ukraine. The 'win the population strategy' (Bordás, 2015: 213), which involves gaining the support of the population, is crucial for successful state-building. This is at least a necessary, but obviously not a sufficient, condition for the Ukrainian state to potentially escape the ambiguous status of a 'buffer state'. However, even in an optimistic reading, the question of untangling the great power thread lurking in the background remains highly doubtful.

Overall, we can assert that there are no infallible formulas that promise flawless success in stabilising the war-torn Ukrainian state and guiding it towards development and growth. Moreover, given the eternal maxim that 'practice is the death of theory', unforeseeable and unpredictable factors may arise at any time from the 'ground', requiring relatively rapid adaptation to the situation and circumstances that arise. Therefore, the method of state-building, as shared by Cohen, Horvath, and Nagl (Cohen

et al., 2006: 49–53), cannot be precisely defined. However, as we have stated, this was not and could not be our goal. In the context of the events in Ukraine, however—according to the way we look at it—we have succeeded in demonstrating that state-building is still of fundamental importance in today's turbulent world.

The enduring significance of state-building within the framework of the LWO underscores its relevance in contemporary international relations. Rooted in liberal ideology, the core premise of state-building asserts that sovereign states can best achieve global stability and security by adhering to universally accepted norms and regulations. 'Offensive liberalism' encapsulates this concept, advocating for stable states to intervene to enforce these norms in regions where state capacity is lacking.

The African context presents a compelling case for examining the efficacy and challenges of state-building. Post-colonial Africa has grappled with the complex legacies of arbitrary borders, ethnic divisions, and socio-economic disparities. Despite these challenges, there have been varied outcomes in state-building efforts across the continent. The successes in Rwanda and the struggles in South Sudan illustrate the diverse trajectories of state-building initiatives. The African cases collectively highlight the importance of context-specific, inclusive, and locally informed approaches to state-building in Africa. The involvement of regional organisations, such as the AU, and the emphasis on indigenous governance models and local knowledge systems are critical for the legitimacy and sustainability of state institutions.

The study reiterates the necessity of state-building in maintaining the LWO, particularly in regions facing instability. The African context provides valuable insights into the complexities and varied outcomes of state-building initiatives. Moving forward, it is important to adopt flexible, context-aware strategies that prioritise local engagement and regional cooperation to address unique challenges and leverage the opportunities inherent in Africa's diverse sociopolitical landscape.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to the authors' knowledge.

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