Liberalism in IR Theory

Liberalism is based on the moral argument that ensuring the right of an individual person to life, liberty and property is the highest goal of government. Consequently, liberals emphasise the well being of the individual as the fundamental building block of a just political system. A political system characterised by unchecked power, such as a monarchy or a dictatorship, cannot protect the life and liberty of its citizens. Therefore, the main concern of liberalism is to construct institutions that protect individual freedom by limiting and checking political power. While these are issues of domestic politics, the realm of IR is also important to liberals because a state's activities abroad can have a strong influence on liberty at home. Liberals are particularly troubled by militaristic foreign policies. The primary concern is that war requires states to build up military power. This power can be used for fighting foreign states, but it can also be used to oppress its own citizens. For this reason, political systems rooted in liberalism often limit military power by such means as ensuring civilian control over the military.

Wars of territorial expansion, or imperialism – when states seek to build empires by taking territory overseas – are especially disturbing for liberals. Not only do expansionist wars strengthen the state at the expense of the people, these wars also require long-term commitments to the military occupation and political control of foreign territory and peoples. Occupation and control require large bureaucracies that have an interest in maintaining or expanding the occupation of foreign territory. For liberals, therefore, the core problem is how to develop a political system that can allow states to protect themselves from foreign threats without subverting the individual liberty of its citizenry. The primary institutional check on power in liberal states is free and fair elections via which the people can remove their rulers from power, providing a fundamental check on the behaviour of the government. A second important limitation on political power is the division of political power among different branches and levels of government – such as a parliament/congress, an executive and a legal system. This allows for checks and balances in the use of power.

Democratic peace theory is perhaps the strongest contribution liberalism makes to IR theory. It asserts that democratic states are highly unlikely to go to war with one another. There is a two-part explanation for this phenomenon. First, democratic states are characterised by internal restraints on power, as described above. Second, democracies tend to see each other as legitimate and unthreatening and therefore have a higher capacity for cooperation with each other than they do with non-democracies. Statistical analysis and historical case studies provide strong support for democratic peace theory, but several issues continue to be debated. First, democracy is a relatively recent development in human history. This means there are few cases of democracies having the opportunity to fight one another. Second, we cannot be sure whether it is truly a 'democratic' peace or whether some other factors

correlated with democracy are the source of peace – such as power, alliances, culture, economics and so on. A third point is that while democracies are unlikely to go to war with one another, some scholarship suggests that they are likely to be aggressive toward non-democracies – such as when the United States went to war with Iraq in 2003. Despite the debate, the possibility of a democratic peace gradually replacing a world of constant war – as described by realists – is an enduring and important facet of liberalism.

We currently live in an international system structured by the liberal world order built after the Second World War (1939–1945). The international institutions, organisations and norms (expected behaviours) of this world order are built on the same foundations as domestic liberal institutions and norms; the desire to restrain the violent power of states. Yet, power is more diluted and dispersed internationally than it is within states. For example, under international law, wars of aggression are prohibited. There is no international police force to enforce this law, but an aggressor knows that when breaking this law it risks considerable international backlash. For example, states – either individually or as part of a collective body like the United Nations – can impose economic sanctions or intervene militarily against the offending state. Furthermore, an aggressive state also risks missing out on the benefits of peace, such as the gains from international trade, foreign aid and diplomatic recognition.