Normative Biases in Peace Studies: A Critical Examination of the Liberal/Illiberal Peace Concepts[1]

Cavit Emre AYTEKİN[2]

Abstract

This study examines the liberal/illiberal dichotomy in peace studies, highlighting how normative biases embedded within this framework marginalizes alternative approaches to peacebuilding. The liberal peace model has shaped both academic discourse and policy paradigms in peace processes. However, its intellectual and practical hegemony often reduces non-liberal or hybrid frameworks to "illiberal" approaches, portraying them as deficient or unstable. This normative bias simplifies the diversity of conflict resolution efforts and neglects context-specific strategies. The study addresses the question: How does the liberal/illiberal dichotomy limit our understanding of international peace processes, and what conceptual alternatives can foster a more inclusive framework? Using critical analysis and conceptual inquiry, the study proposes a multi-normative approach, informed by distinctions between process- and content-related norms, to better account for the complexity of peace efforts. The discussion underscore the need to move beyond binary framings and embrace inclusive frameworks that reflect the diversity of peacebuilding strategies in varying geopolitical and cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Normative Bias, Illiberal Peace, Liberal Peace, Authoritarian Conflict Management*

Jel Codes: *F50, F51, F52, F55*

Barış Çalışmalarında Normatif Önyargılar: Liberal/İlliberal Barış Konseptlerinin Eleştirel Bir İncelemesi

Öz

Bu çalışma, barış çalışmalarındaki liberal/illiberal ikilemini inceleyerek, bu çerçeveye yerleşmiş normatif önyargıların barışın inşasına yönelik alternatif yaklaşımları ne şekilde marjinalleştirdiğini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Liberal barış modeli, barış süreçlerinde hem akademik söylemi hem de politika paradigmalarını şekillendirmiştir. Ancak bu modelin entelektüel ve pratik hegemonyası, liberal olmayan ya da melez çerçeveleri genellikle "liberal olmayan" yaklaşımlara indirgeyerek eksik ya da istikrarsız olarak tasvir etmektedir. Bu normatif önyargı, çatışma çözümü çabalarının çok çeşitliliğini basitleştirmekte ve bağlama özgü stratejileri ihmal etmektedir. Bu çalışma şu soruyu ele almaktadır: Liberal/illiberal ikilemi uluslararası barış süreçlerine ilişkin anlayışımızı nasıl sınırlandırmaktadır ve hangi kavramsal alternatifler daha kapsayıcı bir çerçeveyi teşvik edebilir? Eleştirel analiz ve kavramsal sorgulamayı kullanan çalışma, barış anlayışlarının çeşitliliğini daha iyi açıklamak için süreç ve içerikle ilgili normlar arasındaki farklılıklarla şekillenen çoklu normatif bir yaklaşım önermektedir. Tartışma, ikili çerçevelerin ötesine geçme ve farklı jeopolitik ve kültürel bağlamlarda barış inşası stratejilerinin çeşitliliğini yansıtan kapsayıcı çerçeveleri benimseme ihtiyacının altını çizmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Normatif Önyargı, İlliberal Barış, Liberal Barış, Otoriter Çatışma Yönetimi*

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[1] **Sorumlu Yazar/Corresponding Author:** Doç. Dr., Manisa Celal Bayar Üniversitesi, Kula Meslek Yüksekokulu, Yönetim ve Organizasyon Bölümü, Manisa, Türkiye.
E-posta: ahmetyavuz.camli@cbu.edu.tr **Orcid no:** 0000-0002-0746-9755

INTRODUCTION

In peace studies, the role of norms and values framework has emerged as a critical lens for understanding international peace processes (Bayerlein et al., 2024; Diehl, 2024; Federer, 2023; Gill-Tiney, 2022; Raymond, 2000). Among the various normative frameworks, the liberal peace model dominates as both a theoretical background with intellectual, normative, and ideological aspects and a policy paradigm (Joshi et al., 2014; Richmond, 2006b). Defined by its emphasis on democratic governance, human rights, market-driven economies, and the rule of law (Özerdem & Lee, 2015:44; Richmond, 2006a:75), this model has often guided Western governments and international organizations as a legitimate and effective pathway for conflict resolution and peace policies in the post-Cold War era (Wallis, 2018:83). Consequently, liberal peace has attained a hegemonic status, shaping both the design of peacebuilding interventions and the metrics by which their outcome is judged. This dominance, however, has led to a tendency to lump together alternative or non-liberal approaches, framing them with reference to liberal peace under the label "illiberal peace" (Cheung, 2019; Lewis, 2024; Lewis et al., 2018). Thus, the discourse of liberal peace not only sets the standard for what constitutes a *successful* peace process but also serves as a benchmark against which other models are evaluated and critiqued. In this context, liberal peace functions as the *normative ideal*.

As the liberal peace model has fostered an intellectual and practical hegemony in peace studies, a binary framing surfaces between liberal and illiberal peace models, with liberal approaches frequently portrayed as inherently superior, conversely; non-liberal or hybrid approaches are often dismissed as deficient or inherently unstable. That binary framing oversimplifies the diversity of political, cultural, and social contexts that shape conflict resolution efforts, privileging liberal norms while delegitimizing non-liberal or alternative models. Such reductionism limits both academic analysis and practical approaches to peacebuilding by perpetuating a normative hierarchy that obscures the legitimacy and effectiveness of alternative frameworks.

Despite the growing literature on norms and their influence on peace processes, critical analyses of the biases embedded within dominant normative frameworks remain underexplored. While many studies examine how liberal norms shape peacebuilding efforts (Kostic & Eriksson, 2013; Walton, 2012), few interrogate the ways in which these norms marginalize alternative or context-specific approaches. This study addresses this gap by critically examining the liberal/illiberal dichotomy and its associated biases, challenging the assumption that liberal norms inherently represent the most legitimate pathway to peace. To address these limitations, the concept of normative bias is examined, along with its implications for the discourse of the liberal peace model.

This study seeks to address this issue by asking: *How does the liberal/illiberal dichotomy in peace studies limit our understanding of international peace processes, and what alternative conceptualizations can provide a more context-sensitive approach?* Through a critical examination of the normative bias embedded in this binary framework, the study argues that peace processes often transcend simplistic classifications revealing that labeling them as strictly liberal or non-liberal oversimplifies their true complexity.

The methodology of this study is rooted in critical analysis and conceptual inquiry. The analysis focuses on a comprehensive review of the discourse in peace studies to uncover and critique the normative biases inherent in the liberal/illiberal

dichotomy. By systematically examining existing frameworks, particularly the dominance of liberal norms, the study deconstructs how these norms marginalize alternative approaches to peacebuilding. The study integrates theoretical insights from normative theory and peace studies, utilizing the concept of "normative bias" to explore how liberal norms shape academic discourse and policymaking. This methodology allows the inquiry to critically assess dominant paradigms while introducing new conceptual tools to better understand diverse peacebuilding efforts.

In the sections that follow, this paper begins by examining the role of norms in peace studies, which forms the foundation of its theoretical framework. It then introduces the concept of normative bias within its conceptual framework, highlighting how this phenomenon shapes and constrains peacebuilding discourse. Building on this, the paper presents a new analytical approach designed to address and overcome normative bias, focusing on a critical examination of liberal peace, the concept of multi-normativity, and alternative peace frameworks. By challenging this dominant framework, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing debates in peace studies and to promote more pluralistic and contextually grounded approaches that better reflect the diverse realities of international peace processes.

1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: NORMS IN PEACE STUDIES

The theoretical foundation of this study draws from the literature on the role and significance of norms in peace studies. Norms, broadly defined as socially enforced rules or expectations, serve as ideational factors that influence actors in International Relations (Wiener, 2009:179). They are often viewed as shared values and principles that guide international behavior (Checkel, 1999:88; Krasner, 1982:2), framing the processes of international politics. Within peace studies, norms are predominantly shaped by the liberal peace framework, emphasizing democratic governance, human rights, the rule of law, and market-oriented economies—all framed as universal ideals.

As IR theory has evolved, particularly with the rise of social constructivist approaches, substantial theoretical and empirical work has emerged on the formation (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), evolution (Yan, 2011), acceptance (Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990), strength (Ben-Josef Hirsch & Dixon, 2021), violation, and erosion (McKeown, 2009; Panke & Petersohn, 2012) of norms. Research has predominantly focused on how norms affect behavior, the challenges of implementing them (Prytz, 2017), and the dynamics that sustain or weaken their influence (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2020; Wiener, 2004). However, there has been less attention to the biases embedded in dominant normative frameworks in peace studies, especially the liberal peace model, which often marginalizes alternative approaches to peacebuilding.

Some critical scholars argue that the framing of norms in IR and peace studies is often teleological (Epstein, 2012b:121; McKeown, 2009) and neoliberal, assuming that norms naturally facilitate cooperation (Cortell & Davis Jr, 2000:65-66), lead actors to beneficial outcomes (Sandholtz, 2008:102), and reduce uncertainties (Park, 2005). Underpinning this analysis is the assumption that *norms are inherently good* (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001:404; McKeown, 2009:7). As transformations in the international order increasingly influence norm acceptance, violation, and contestation, it is recognized that norms are inherently ambiguous and contextually shaped (Linsenmaier et al., 2021). When viewed through a non-pluralist framework, this ambiguity enables dominant actors to frame certain norms as universally valid, thereby marginalizing alternative interpretations. Norms associated with the liberal international order are often prioritized, while alternative or non-liberal approaches are frequently marginalized as challenges to the established framework. This perspective not only

limits the analysis of norms but also perpetuates a hierarchical view that frames liberal norms as the most legitimate.

In traditional IR theory, norms are seen as shared expectations of appropriate behavior among international actors (Winston, 2018:639). They are often presented as universal, guiding principles that shape the conduct of states, institutions, and individuals, maintaining order and cooperation within the international system (Epstein, 2012a). This universalism, however, is problematic, as it overlooks the contextual diversity of peace processes and marginalizes non-liberal approaches (Jütersonke et al., 2021:945). In light of these considerations, it is essential to critically interrogate how normative frameworks in IR and Peace Studies perpetuate hierarchies and marginalize alternative perspectives on peacebuilding. The following section explores the normative bias in depth through the lens of this theoretical framework, shedding light on how it influences the interpretation and application of norms in IR.

1. 1. Conceptualizing Normative Bias

Normative bias refers to the implicit assumption that certain norms—particularly liberal norms—are inherently superior and more legitimate than others. This assumption elevates the liberal normative framework while devaluing or oversimplifying alternative approaches to peacebuilding. Such bias limits both the analytical and practical understanding of peace processes, as it privileges certain norms (especially liberal ones) while neglecting the diversity of conflict resolution and peace efforts. This reductionist view, rooted in Western-centric perspectives (Acharya, 2013:468), excludes non-liberal or hybrid models from being fully recognized or explored in peace studies and policy debates.

Normative bias is most evident in the liberal/illiberal peace dichotomy, where the liberal model is considered the "ideal" or "correct" approach to peacebuilding, and other models are viewed as incomplete or less stable. This hierarchy restricts the intellectual space for alternative, context-sensitive approaches that may be more effective in particular regions or conflicts. As a result, non-liberal or hybrid peacebuilding policies are marginalized, further reinforcing the intellectual and practical dominance of the liberal peace framework.

By examining normative bias within normative frameworks, this article argues for a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding of peacebuilding. It calls for a shift away from the binary liberal/illiberal categorization, advocating instead for a more nuanced approach that recognizes the complexity and diversity of peace processes across different contexts. Such an approach would expand the scope of legitimate peace models, allowing for the recognition of alternative frameworks that may be more suited to specific cultural, political, or social environments.

2. LIBERAL PEACE: CRITICISM AND BEYOND IN A MULTI-NORMATIVE ENVIRONMENT

The discourse on peacebuilding in IR has been predominantly shaped by the liberal peace model. This model emphasizes the reconstruction of post-conflict state architecture through democratic governance, market-oriented reforms, and institutional frameworks that align with liberal oriented norms (Richmond, 2006b). It conceptualizes the post-conflict peace process not merely as the cessation of hostilities but as the institutionalization of liberal values, including liberal democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and norms of good governance (Jarstad & Sisk, 2008; Jütersonke et al., 2021:945).

Despite its prominence, the liberal peace model has faced various criticisms, particularly for its neglect of local contexts and dynamics (Nadarajah & Rampton, 2015; Tom, 2018). Critics argue that the model's top-down (Newman et al., 2009:49), exclusionary approach imposes liberal values as a universal standard (Pereira, 2019:430), often disregarding the

specific cultural and societal needs of post-conflict communities. This critique has underscored the inadequacy of the liberal framework in offering universally applicable solutions and its failure to engage meaningfully with the diverse realities of post-conflict societies (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013:778). As a result, an alternative trend emphasizing realist pragmatism (De Coning, 2018) has emerged in international peacebuilding which advocates for more adaptive and context-sensitive interventions that prioritize state security and political stability over the promotion of democracy and human rights.

Liberal peacebuilding's hegemonic and interventionist inclinations have received considerable criticism Subedi (2022:274) often characterizes it by a top-down approach that prioritizes international agency at the expense of sensitivity to local contexts. In response, the concept of post-liberal peace (Richmond, 2012; Wolff, 2015) has emerged as a refinement, seeking to address these limitations. Advocates of post-liberal peace emphasize the role of local actors—especially political elites—in adopting and adapting internationally driven liberal norms to create hybrid forms of peace tailored to specific socio-political contexts. However, despite its promise of reconciling local traditions with liberal frameworks, post-liberal peacebuilding offers only a partial remedy to the interventionist shortcomings of its liberal predecessor. Its pragmatic blending of these elements remains insufficient to fully address the deeper structural issues inherent in the liberal peace paradigm.

The challenges facing liberal peacebuilding are further compounded by the broader decline of the liberal international order (Acharya, 2017) and the concurrent rise of a multipolar international system (Lewis, 2012; Owen et al., 2018:3). This shift has introduced *multi-normativity*, wherein diverse actors and agendas challenge the hegemonic assumptions of liberal peacebuilding by proposing alternative frameworks for international intervention (Ambrosio, 2008). The increasing influence of regional and local actors underscores this trend, as their approaches often diverge from Western-centric liberal models (Lewis et al., 2018). Emerging alternatives to liberal peace doctrines are gaining attention among rising powers and non-Western actors, reflecting diverse values and priorities that challenge the dominance of liberal frameworks.

These alternative approaches include the African Union's principle of *non-indifference*, which has been proposed as a replacement for the traditional principle of non-intervention (Abdenur, 2019). Islamic conflict resolution methods (Huda, 2010), grounded in religious and cultural traditions, also offer a distinct approach to peacebuilding. Brazilian scholarship has introduced the concept of *responsibility while protecting*, a reformulation of the responsibility to protect doctrine that prioritizes caution and respect for sovereignty (Tourinho et al., 2016). Similarly, Chinese academics promote the idea of *developmental peace*, which emphasizes economic development as the foundation for international stability, rather than democratization (Wong, 2021). In addition, the South African philosophy of *Ubuntu* (Eminoğlu & Köse, 2022), which underscores community and interdependence, provides a culturally rooted perspective on peacebuilding (Akinola & Uzodike, 2018). Together, these approaches illustrate the increasing diversity, or *multinormativity*, in international peace practices, driven by the unique philosophies of non-Western actors.

As the space for non-Western powers in global governance expands, these actors frequently advocate for conflict resolution processes grounded in different perspective than the liberal ideals (Höglund & Orjuela, 2012:94). This evolving multipolar landscape has also transformed the dynamics of intra-state conflict resolution. In many post-conflict societies, local elites are assuming leadership roles in peacebuilding processes, institutionalizing non-liberal or hybrid peace models that reflect

indigenous priorities rather than externally imposed liberal frameworks. Scholars such as Smith et al. (2020) highlight that these strategies often rely on practices like patronage and authoritarian governance, privileging stability and order over liberal democratic ideals. Consequently, the normative foundations of liberal peace, which traditionally sought to shape post-war governance, are increasingly marginalized in transitional environments.

The decline of Western hegemony and the rise of multipolarity have created fertile ground for the articulation and implementation of alternative peacebuilding paradigms. These frameworks, shaped by the priorities and ideologies of non-Western powers, signal a significant departure from the liberal peace paradigm, underscoring the diversification of approaches in global conflict resolution and governance.

3. LIBERAL FRAMING FOR COUNTER MODELS: ILLIBERAL PEACE

The way in which the liberal peace perspective has addressed alternative perspectives following that criticisms has been particularly noteworthy. Alternative perspectives that challenge or deviate from liberal norms are frequently framed within a totalizing discourse. Approaches that prioritize stability or conflict avoidance, even when they prove effective in mitigating conflict, are systematically labeled as "authoritarian"or "illiberal." This categorization does more than highlight normative differences; it often delegitimizes these alternative frameworks, portraying them as inherently deficient.

The conceptualization of illiberal peace is a remarkable illustration of the point. The approaches included in the scope of illiberal peace emerged as a reaction to the critiques of the liberal peace model. Approaches to conflict resolution that diverge from liberal strategies—such as those defined by democratic governance and market-driven reforms—are often excluded from the dominant discourse on peacebuilding. This exclusion becomes particularly evident in practices that prioritize stability or conflict avoidance over liberal norms. The resulting discursive framing marginalizes non-liberal approaches and limits the recognition of alternative forms of peace as legitimate. This dynamic is especially apparent in the literature on illiberal peace and authoritarian conflict management, where critics highlight the liberal model's inability to accommodate local contexts and its dismissal of diverse peacebuilding strategies as valid or effective.

Illiberal peace has gained traction, challenging the foundational assumptions of liberal peacebuilding. Illiberal peace prioritizes order and stability over liberal ideals such as equality and freedom (Diprose & Azca, 2020:195) often adopting authoritarian mechanisms that centralize power and emphasize control. These approaches reflect a broader ideological critique of liberalism. By emphasizing pragmatic governance structures that eschew liberal values, illiberal peacebuilding is presented as a viable counter-model to the liberal paradigm, responding directly to the shortcomings of liberal interventions in conflict-affected regions.

Alternative approaches to peacebuilding, often dismissed or undervalued within liberal discourse, have been criticized through a pejorative lens. That is evident in the literature on norm diffusion, which predominantly examines how "good" global norms—primarily championed by Western norm entrepreneurs—seek to replace "bad" local ideas and practices, typically associated with the non-Western world (Acharya, 2013:468). The conduct of non-Western powers is primarily attributed to ideological motivations, and the engagement of liberal and illiberal actors in conflict and post-conflict settings is framed as a contest between democratic and authoritarian models of governance (Peter & Rice, 2022:27).

One prominent example is *Authoritarian Conflict Management* (ACM), a framework that diverges significantly from liberal peacebuilding by prioritizing stability over democracy, human rights, and consensus (Cheung, 2019; Keen, 2021). While these frameworks remain conceptually underdeveloped in mainstream academic discourse, they represent distinct priorities and methodologies for achieving peace. Critics from within the liberal tradition frequently argue that rising powers, such as the BRICS nations, lack a coherent ideological foundation or unified state and peacebuilding model. Richmond et al. (2011:8) contend that these actors fail to provide "a clear alternative model, ideology, or state or peace model," reinforcing the perception that liberal peacebuilding remains the dominant normative framework. However, such critiques often overlook the substantive practices employed by alternative peacebuilders, which are rooted in distinct approaches to managing conflict and fostering stability (Lewis et al., 2018) outside the liberal paradigm.

Illiberal peace, often exemplified by ACM, represents a departure from liberal practices such as negotiated settlements, third-party mediation, and power-sharing. ACM relies on coercive instruments of state power and hierarchical governance structures to prevent, de-escalate, or terminate armed insurgencies and communal violence. Its primary objective is the restoration of political order and stability, often at the expense of addressing the root causes of conflict or fostering reconciliation among warring factions (Lewis et al., 2018). Unlike liberal frameworks, the consequences of military victories in post-conflict contexts through non-liberal means such as ACM are conceptualized through the victor's peace perspective (Ohanyan, 2024).

ACM operates through three primary mechanisms: discourse, spatial control, and economic domination (Keen, 2021). Illiberal conflict intervention strategies are characterized by manipulating public discourse by suppressing dissent and producing hegemonic narratives that delegitimize oppositional movements. Spatially, they neutralize opposition strongholds and extend influence into extra-territorial domains, including diasporic and digital communities. Economically, these regimes consolidate resources and implement exclusionary systems that ensure political loyalty by creating dependency on state-controlled wealth. This comprehensive approach structurally weakens opposition movements, curbing their capacity to challenge the regime's authority.

While liberal critiques often portray ACM and similar illiberal approaches as morally and politically inferior due to their divergence from principles like democratic accountability and human rights, these criticisms are rooted in normative assumptions about legitimate governance and effective peacebuilding. Emerging actors in peacebuilding realm, including China, Japan, and Russia, offer alternative approaches that prioritize state sovereignty and centralized authority (Jütersonke et al., 2021:945). For instance Japan's investments in Cambodia and Sri Lanka focus on rebuilding robust state institutions. These practices challenge the universal applicability of liberal norms, highlighting the pragmatic and context-sensitive dimensions of non-liberal peacebuilding.

4. ILLIBERAL PEACEBUILDING IN CONTEXT

The rise of illiberal peace as an analytical framework reflects the need to reconceptualize peacebuilding beyond the liberal paradigm. Defined as the prevention, de-escalation, or resolution of conflict through coercive and hierarchical methods, illiberal peacebuilding fundamentally contrasts with liberal models that emphasize compromise, negotiation, and inclusivity. Despite its utility as a conceptual lens, discussions of illiberal peace are often shaped by a normative bias that

treats liberal peacebuilding as the implicit benchmark. This framing diminishes the strategic intent and coherence of illiberal practices, reducing them to reactive or second-tier approaches rather than acknowledging their legitimacy as alternative models.

The field of peace and conflict studies has historically privileged cases aligned with liberal interventions, such as Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo, while underexamining non-liberal approaches. Post-conflict reconstruction efforts in Central Asia, including Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, are similarly marginalized in theoretical and empirical scholarship, despite offering valuable insights into alternative methods of peacebuilding. This oversight stems in part from the absence of doctrinal or policy frameworks for ACM akin to those that underpin liberal peace, reinforcing the perception of non-liberal approaches as incoherent or illegitimate. As Chetail and Jütersonke (2014) observe, the existing literature often fails to bridge the gap between Anglophone narratives and the realities of illiberal state practices. For instance, China's economic integration in conflict-affected regions is frequently framed as resistance to international intervention or mere byproducts of military victories. Such reductive interpretations obscure the strategic intent of illiberal practices and their ability to achieve stability in ways that liberal peacebuilding often cannot.

By framing these approaches as "illiberal," discourse establishes a dichotomy that privileges liberal values while casting alternatives as deviations from the norm (Subedi, 2022:274). This normative bias not only limits the conceptual scope of peace studies but also hinders a more nuanced understanding of how illiberal practices contribute to sustainable stability in diverse political and cultural contexts.

5. NORMATIVE BIAS AND CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES IN ILLIBERAL PEACE DISCOURSE

The concepts of *illiberal peace* and *authoritarian conflict management* (ACM) are frequently deployed in academic and political discourse not as neutral descriptors, but as heuristic tools that juxtapose ideologies and practices deviating from liberal norms. This usage perpetuates a liberal-centric perspective, clustering diverse approaches to peace and conflict management under a singular, homogenizing framework. By combining distinct phenomena into a single conceptual category, such terms reinforce the primacy of liberalism as the benchmark for normative and analytical evaluation.

Illiberalism, as a concept, is inherently relational and situational, defined primarily *ex negativo*—that is, in opposition to liberalism. Its substantive content is thus contingent upon the evolving and context-specific definitions of liberalism itself. Consequently, illiberalism lacks the coherence of a unified ideological framework, instead functioning as a polysemic and contextually fluid label that encompasses a wide array of ideologies and practices resisting or diverging from liberal norms. Furthermore, the term is often conflated with related constructs such as populism, conservatism, and authoritarianism (Laruelle, 2022:303), further diminishing its conceptual clarity and analytical precision.

More critically, illiberalism frequently operates as a normative rather than an analytical category (Laruelle, 2022:304). Both scholars and political actors leverage the term to either valorize or delegitimize specific political movements, ideologies, or policies. This dual functionality embeds a normative bias within the discourse, implicitly framing illiberal actors and practices as deviations from what are assumed to be the self-evident norms of liberal societies and the international community. This framing tends to delegitimize non-liberal approaches, portraying them as inherently regressive or as existential threats to liberal values. In doing so, it oversimplifies the motivations, strategies, and contextual realities

underpinning non-Western actors' approaches to peace and conflict management.

The portrayal of illiberal peacebuilding as intrinsically repressive or counterproductive further compounds these biases, obscuring the complexity of such practices and the socio-political realities they aim to address. This reductive narrative disregards the potential of non-liberal approaches to function as pragmatic responses to specific historical, cultural, and geopolitical contexts, rather than as mere antitheses to liberal norms.

To advance the discourse, it is essential to transcend the pejorative framing of terms like *illiberal peace* and *authoritarian conflict management* and establish a more nuanced analytical framework. Such a framework must acknowledge the relational and interactive nature of illiberalism, its intersections with overlapping concepts, and the multiplicity of motivations driving illiberal approaches to peace. By situating illiberalism within its specific historical and cultural contexts, scholars can offer a more balanced understanding of its role in political transformation and conflict resolution. This approach avoids reducing illiberalism to an antithetical "other" to liberalism and instead recognizes its potential to offer alternative pathways for addressing complex socio-political realities.

6. TOWARD A MULTI-NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK: BRIDGING CONTENT-ORIENTED AND PROCESS-ORIENTED NORMS

The oversimplified binary classifications of normative peace frameworks risk posing significant limitations that foster the normative bias. These include the reduction of diverse perspectives to a singular term, the neglect of the tension between universal and local contexts, and the overemphasis on monopolistic methods in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. A more accurate understanding of the normative underpinnings of peace models requires disaggregating the broad category of "norms" into more analytically useful components.

As peace studies have predominantly focused on norms within post-war peacebuilding processes, often sidelining the role of norms in peacemaking efforts. Therefore, while norms in peacebuilding are widely discussed, considerably less attention is given to norms in peacemaking. This tendency may result in the marginalization of the material conditions that underpin many conflicts. Although the intellectual and social dimensions of post-conflict transitions are frequently recognized, insufficient emphasis is placed on addressing foundational issues such as economic inequality, unequal access to resources, and structural disparities—each of which necessitates sustained, process-oriented interventions.

Building on this need, this section proposes a framework that distinguishes between process-oriented and content-oriented norms in peacebuilding, drawing on insights from the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF). (Hellmüller et al., 2015). While initially developed to assist mediators, this framework can offer a broader conceptual lens for peace studies. In this framework, content-related norms refer to what is negotiable in mediation and what appears in peace agreements—such as power-sharing, governance, or security arrangements (Hellmüller et al., 2015:5).. Process-related norms, on the other hand, concern how peace processes are conducted—emphasizing principles such as inclusivity, consent, and impartiality among participants (Pscherer, 2021:10)

These norms ensure that peace processes are participatory and equitable, reducing the likelihood of exclusion or dominance by specific actors. Content-related norms, on the other hand, pertain to the substantive issues negotiated during mediation,

such as power-sharing, security arrangements, economic equity, and governance reforms. Process-oriented norms, such as power-balancing negotiations and inclusive dialogue, align closely with emergent paradigms like relational peace, contextual peace, and developmental peace. These paradigms emphasize the relational and contextual dynamics of peace processes, moving away from rigid, value-laden frameworks toward more flexible and adaptive approaches.

Content-related norms are primarily concerned within the liberal peace framework, as liberal peacebuilding has traditionally emphasized post-conflict arrangements of democracy, rule of law, and human rights. The liberal peace perspective, operating on the basis of content-related normative approaches, therefore implicitly recognizes democracy as a prerequisite for peace rather than vice versa. Practical challenges encountered by UN mediators in South Sudan and Syria (Federer, 2019:29-33) illustrate the pressures exerted to conform to this assumption, even in contexts where such an approach may not be suitable.

This categorization opens up new possibilities for analyzing and understanding diverse peace models. Through categorizing—one that accounts for both material and intellectual factors—peace studies can move beyond the limitations of binary classifications. Rethinking the normative dimensions of peace processes invites a critical engagement with the tensions between global and local dynamics, as well as the evolving challenges inherent in contemporary conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. Such a re-examination opens the possibility for a pluralistic understanding of peace—one that is attentive to diverse cultural, social, and political contexts. Rather than adhering strictly to predefined models, this approach encourages scholars and practitioners to consider how varying normative frameworks shape the trajectories and outcomes of peace processes. In this context, the conventional liberal versus illiberal dichotomy may be seen as overly reductive, potentially obscuring the complexities and specificities of local peacebuilding practices. A more context-sensitive lens, therefore, allows for a deeper and more differentiated analysis of how peace is conceived, negotiated, and implemented in practice.

Non-liberal approaches, frequently characterized as reactive or merely oppositional to liberal paradigms, need reconsideration as ideologically distinct and systematically articulated projects. This reconceptualization allows us to understand that approaches, not simply as a negation of liberal norms but as a set of alternative responses shaped by distinct philosophical premises and political objectives. Thus, a more rigorous examination of the internal heterogeneity of illiberal approaches, with diverse formulations and their embeddedness within broader global political and cultural shifts could be achieved. Engaging with illiberalism on these terms contributes to grasping the plurality of ideologies and practices shaped by specific historical trajectories and geopolitical conditions.

A norms-based analytical lens offers critical insight into the role and behavior of third-party actors in peace processes by foregrounding the normative content that informs both their strategies and goals. Within the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, external actors typically operate with an underlying normative assumption that peace is best sustained through the expansion of liberal institutions and participatory politics. However, this normative commitment is not universally shared. Alternative models, often labeled as "non-liberal" or "illiberal" peace frameworks, foreground a different constellation of priorities— such as sovereignty, stability, and state-led development (Mac Ginty, 2010; Pugh et al., 2008). These divergent orientations raise important questions about the values embedded in peacebuilding models and the processes by which they are

advanced.

When we decouple peacebuilding processes from outcomes, an instructive conceptual distinction emerges (Mitchell, 2024). Liberal peacebuilders, while normatively committed to inclusivity and participation, may rely on mechanisms—such as conditional aid, technocratic governance models, or external interventions—that reproduce dependency or undercut local agency (Duffield, 2007). This creates a normative dissonance between the ends and the means of liberal peace. In contrast, non-liberal actors often prioritize methods and objectives for creating a more internally consistent but ideologically distinct peacebuilding model.

Recognizing the layered nature of normative commitments in peacebuilding helps uncover ideological asymmetries in how Western and non-Western models are analyzed. Western strategies are typically studied through their normative goals (e.g., democracy, participation), while non-Western approaches are often reduced to implementation strategies. This obscures the ideological logics behind non-Western peace efforts. For example, China's developmental peace model exemplifies this divergence. Eschewing liberal norms of political reform and participatory governance, China's approach positions state-led development as the cornerstone of peace. This model frames peace as a mutually beneficial partnership, grounded in principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and economic cooperation—appealing particularly to conflict-affected states that prioritize these principles. Similarly, Russia's approach to peacebuilding underscores stability and hierarchical governance, utilizing military interventions and strategic alliances selectively to advance these priorities. These examples highlight the need to analyze not only the norms underpinning peacebuilding models but also the processes through which they are operationalized.

This conceptual approach also addresses a critical methodological flaw, as Western, or liberal in the context of our discussion, approaches are often examined through the lens of doctrinal frameworks and policy prescriptions, whereas non-Western practices are primarily evaluated in terms of their practice.

This discussion aligns with recent critiques of the liberal/illiberal peace binary, which argue that peace norms should be understood as fluid, contested, and embedded in specific political contexts. This framework does not seek to replace existing models but to broaden the analytical vocabulary available for peace scholars. It encourages a shift toward multi-normativity, where the coexistence of competing normative visions is acknowledged and explored rather than hierarchized or dismissed.

CONCLUSION

This study critically interrogated the liberal/illiberal peace dichotomy, exposing the normative biases that shape both academic discourse and practical peacebuilding efforts. The liberal/illiberal dichotomy in peace studies highlights its limitations and proposes pathways for a more context-sensitive and inclusive framework for analyzing peace processes. The study argued that the dominance of the liberal peace model perpetuates a normative hierarchy that delegitimizes non-liberal or hybrid approaches, undermining their potential as viable alternatives in diverse geopolitical contexts. The liberal peace framework, while heralded as a universal model, is neither neutral nor universally effective. It privileges specific content-oriented norms—democratic governance, human rights, and market-oriented reforms—while marginalizing alternative approaches that prioritize stability, context-specific solutions, or locally informed practices. Such a reductionist framing oversimplifies the complexities of peace processes and perpetuates a normative hierarchy that stifles the diversity

of conflict resolution strategies in an increasingly multipolar world.

A key discussion from this research is the identification of normative bias as a central issue in peace studies. By situating normative bias as central to the debate, this paper highlights the ways in which the liberal-centric paradigm delegitimizes alternative models, portraying them as reactive, inferior, or incoherent. These critiques underscore the urgency of moving beyond binary categorizations that confine peace studies within a singular normative lens. Instead, the analysis calls for a broader, more inclusive conceptual framework—one that bridges content-oriented and process-oriented norms to better address the multifaceted realities of peacebuilding.

The paper advocates for a paradigm shift that values multi-normativity and context-sensitive approaches, emphasizing the need to recognize peace models not merely as deviations from liberal standards but as legitimate, pragmatic responses to complex socio-political and historical contexts. By integrating material factors, such as economic disparities and structural inequalities, with normative considerations, peace studies can evolve to better account for the underlying drivers of conflict.

The proposed distinction between content- and process-oriented norms provides a promising way for bridging the polarized discourse. Such a framework reframes peacebuilding as an intersection of diverse normative approaches rather than a competition between liberal and illiberal paradigms. This perspective underscores the need for peace studies to transcend the liberal/illiberal dichotomy by embracing a multi-normative environment that accommodates alternative frameworks and fosters equitable and locally driven peace processes.

Future research should focus on expanding the conceptual toolkit for analyzing peace beyond the liberal paradigm. This includes deepening the exploration of multi-normative environments and integrating the perspectives of rising non-Western actors in peace and conflict studies. Additionally, empirical studies of underexamined cases, particularly those reflecting illiberal or hybrid approaches, are essential for challenging entrenched biases and broadening the field's analytical horizons. Through such efforts, peace studies can evolve into a more equitable and context-sensitive discipline, better equipped to address the complexities of contemporary international conflicts. Ultimately, this study urges scholars and practitioners to embrace a pluralistic vision of peace that transcends the liberal/illiberal binary. Such an approach would not only enrich theoretical discourse but also enhance the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts in diverse and dynamic global contexts. In doing so, peace studies can reclaim its relevance as a field that fosters genuinely inclusive and sustainable peace processes.

ETİK BEYAN VE AÇIKLAMALAR

Etik Kurul Onay Bilgileri Beyanı

Çalışma, etik kurul izni gerektirmeyen bir çalışmadır.

Yazar Katkı Oranı Beyanı

Yazarın katkısı %100'dür.

Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı

Çalışmada, çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

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