

## To (or not to) intervene: social constructivist approach to US humanitarian intervention in Libya and non-intervention in Syria

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### Abstract:

The significant development in international relations after 1991 and the end of the Cold War is humanitarian intervention. It symbolizes the self-driven evolution of a state's normative structure and conducts in the global system. Theoretical framework, which educates us about the structure and actors of the international system, has been used by international relations experts to attempt to provide an explanation. As a theory of international relations, social constructivism does an excellent job of describing and explaining the phenomenon of humanitarian intervention in world politics. To comprehend humanitarian interventions, this study first grasps how nations' changing interests impact their conduct when intervening in humanitarian causes. It provides information about US engagement in the situations of Libya and Syria. Although the two situations were of a similar type, the US's reasons for intervening were very different. The same is true for the responses of the global community, which varied as a result of various identities and interests. For instance, we see Russia actively opposing US influence in Syria and responding only lukewarmly to US influence in Libya. Why do they behave differently? Constructivists hold that identity influences a state's interests and can also change perception, which results in altered behaviour.

### Article History

Received:  
March 7, 2022

Revised:  
May 7, 2022

Re-revised:  
June 15, 2022

Accepted:  
June 17, 2022

Published:  
July 10, 2022

**Keywords:** R2P, responsibility to protect, international community, non-intervention, social constructivism, institutional structures, international actors, real politic.

**How to Cite:** Hussain, M., Khan, T., & Hashmi, S. M. (2022). To (or not to) intervene: social constructivist approach to US humanitarian intervention in Libya and non-intervention in Syria. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 6(1), 201-216. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/6.1.13>

**Publisher's Note:** IDEA Publishers (IDEA Journals Group) stands neutral with regard to the jurisdictional claims in the published maps and the institutional affiliations.

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper examines how the US, Russia, and China, three major participants in world politics, have changed in terms of perception, interests, and consequently, conduct. This essay responds to queries such, what interests did major nations claim in Libya and Syria? Why do they intervene in certain states but not in others, and how? This essay seeks to shed light on the US and its allies' operations in Libya and Syria by arguing that while the circumstances of both situations were relatively similar, the US, its allies, and other members of the international community responded in very different ways. The realism school also emphasizes the fact that diverse interests influence different conduct in various situations. Along with that, the perception which itself is the result of the interests also make the interventionist or non-interventionist behaviour which in turn is justified with normative perspective. In order to explain the phenomenon of the humanitarian interventions, this research paper uses a hypothesis. As a corollary, it describes theory; Why do we need theories? An explanation of constructivism's fundamental premises, criticism of constructivism and its use in case studies as analytical frameworks.

## **2. Literature on humanitarian intervention**

The concept of humanitarian intervention is debatable. One of the most enduring international norms, state sovereignty, is being challenged by the Responsibility to Protect. "A worldwide covenant founded precisely on the pluralist ethics of state sovereignty, self-determination, and non-intervention," according to Robert Jackson, defines state sovereignty. Humanitarian intervention, which claims to defend civilians' human rights from their own government's persecution, is in clear violation of the "global covenant" framework of national-state sovereignty (Jackson, 2006, p. 14). Kofi Annan was one of the most important leaders in the movement for humanitarian intervention after Rwanda. Kofi Annan argued that state sovereignty "was never meant as a license for governments to trample on human rights and human dignity" (Annan, 1999).

The international community is deeply rooted in the non-intervention norm's influence. In the process of intervention, it is crucial. According to Fennimore & Sikkink (1998), norms shape interests and interests shape conduct. State behaviour on a global scale is heavily influenced by the Westphalian international norm of state sovereignty. Rice highlights several issues: first, intervention will be ineffective if the root of the issue is not addressed; second, intervention can have unintended consequences, such as both sides attacking the intervening power; and third, this demonstrates the influence of national interest. Another theory is that the likelihood of an intervention decreases when the cost outweighs the anticipated benefit. The United Nations and the nations are unable to respond because of it. According to this theory, nations' interventions are determined by political will rather than sovereign authority (Chesterman, 2001). A state may feel compelled to take action and to step in. According to Chesterman, there are both humanitarian and self-interested justifications for intervening. States will weigh the

costs and benefits of intervention, and if the ratio does not serve their interests as a country, they are less likely to intervene.

For the international community, circumstances like the one in Libya are a constant source of conundrum. Which is worse, participating or being a complicit bystander? When and when not should the UN Security Council approve the military intervention? According to Gregg Carlstrom, "the Libya no-fly zone is either a humanitarian mission or an excuse to intrude," This encapsulates the argument for and against military action in Libya. While the Western countries and other proponents of the no-fly zone in Libya refer to it as a humanitarian operation that avoided civilian losses, detractors (including China and Russia) predicted that it would result in a "humanitarian disaster" and advised against the use of armed troops because of this concern.

The spectacular revolution that occurred in Syria has had an impact on the world community and how countries engage with one another, sparking a discussion among academics about the use of weapons by other governments. Globally, there are three primary categories of international attitudes. The first group consists of nations that favour the transition of the regime even if it necessitates military involvement and believe it is time for Assad to leave office. Second, there are other nations that oppose the change and back the Assad regime, like Russia and Iran. The third approach consists of nations that support a regime change without resorting to a troop build-up or other forms of armed action. The likelihood of a peaceful resolution has reduced since the Arab revolt got underway in 2011, as has the level of violence there. This has led academics to reflect on how the US fits within this complicated global political scenario (Mahmood et al., 2020).

### **3. Research methodology**

This research study is qualitative in nature in which we define and utilise the concepts like military intervention, and humanitarian intervention. Though, some quantitative figures are included to authenticate the qualitative arguments. The study mostly relies on secondary data sources such as books, research journals, newspaper articles. However, to have clear understanding the authors conducted debates with various experts on the issue within Pakistan. This Study has employed descriptive, explanatory, and analytical approaches on the US interventionist strategy in the case of Syria and Libya to fulfil the tasks of description, explanation, and analysis. In addition to that it uses a case study research design for the comparative analysis that how US intervention in Syria is different from its intervention in Libya in terms of its foreign policy justification, implementation and from the perspective of International Law.

### **4. Theory and its need**

A structured web of axioms are founded on observation and makes up a theory, which is always

universal, i.e., free from time and space. It accomplishes three goals for a researcher: The problem must be described, the social or natural world must be explained, and a case prediction must be made. It can also be described as a set of concepts or constructions, along with assertions about how those concepts or constructs relate to one another, that provide a systematic, logical, and logically cohesive explanation of a phenomenon (Abbott, 1988). Theories have the ability to both describe and anticipate occurrences as well as provide an explanation for why they occur. While explanation involves a causal relation or an understanding of cause-and-effect relationships, theory prediction demands a correlation between constructs. Additionally, three requirements must be met in order to prove causation: first, there must be a correlation between concepts or constructs; second, the cause must exist before the effect does; third, an alternative hypothesis must be rejected by testing the primary hypothesis (Abbott, 1988).

The use of theory in social science research has several advantages. First, theory explains a particular phenomenon, such as its fundamental components and results, and gives us an understanding of the logic that underlies its occurrence in the social or natural world. Theory also explains how and why the underlying mechanisms contribute to the development of the target phenomenon. Second, theory enhances our ability to make sense by assisting us in combining facts and results into a theoretical framework and resolving incongruent facts or discoveries by taking into account the contingent factors that affect how these relate to one another across diverse disciplines of study. Third, theory directs our future study by assisting in the identification of concepts or constructions and their relationships that may be useful for it. Fourth, theory can help fill in gaps, create synthesis between theories, and re-evaluate them as the body of knowledge expands (Goode, 1973).

Nonetheless, a theory is composed of four main components: premises, constructs or concepts, logic, and propositions. In these building components, the concept of a theory encapsulates the "what" of theory, telling us what concepts are crucial for explaining a reality, whether it be social or natural. The set of propositions focuses on the "how" of a theory that explains the connections between the constructs. While conditions or assumptions examine the "who," "when," and "where" of a theory, which explain what circumstances these concepts or constructs and relationships will work with, the logic block of a theory presents the "why" of a theory and gives us an explanation of why these constructs are related to one another (Merton, 1968).

#### **4.1. Social constructivism**

The social constructivism hypothesis is one of the most significant applications of social ontology in international relations. In the past, international relations have focused on the military and economic factors that shape international relations. The most noteworthy examples are the balance of power, state interactions, military prowess, economic prowess, and other well-known factors that relate to tangible issues. Realism is regarded as the materialist

view of international relations in the philosophy of social constructivism. In response, the theory of social constructivism contends that international relations are a social, rather than a material, human construction that depends on human ideas to direct political leaders as they engage in global politics.

Social constructivism holds that international interactions are, in this way, socially produced. Social constructivists assert that power and interest have an impact on ideas that give them a lofty quality rather than that human ideas are more significant than interest and power or that ideas can exist independently of them (Wendt, 1999; Barnett, 2011). Social constructivism proponents emphasize that social rules, conventions, and interactions, in addition to human thoughts, determine how political leaders behave. This gives material objects meaning and purpose because these set the goals for which money and power can be used (Fennimore, 1996a, 1996b; Bozdaglioglu, 2007).

#### **4.2. Basic assumptions**

What we know about the world, according to social constructivism, is socially constructed. This interpretation of constructivism focuses on the ontology, epistemology, and nature of reality in the world's knowledge (in research). The explanation of British and North Korean nuclear weapons by social constructivist Wendt (1987) serves as a suitable illustration of how reality is created by society. He contends that 500 British nuclear weapons pose less of a threat to the United States than five nuclear bombs held by North Korea ever would. This demonstrates that while meanings give nuclear weapons organization and substance (ideational structure is the strongest predictor of impact), identifications have less to do with nuclear weapons or the material structure of weaponry.

Understanding the social ties between the US and North Korea and the UK is also important. The basis of these states' interactions is how they understand and interpret one another. Wendt (1992) further contends that without understanding the social context, nuclear weapons are meaningless in and of themselves. Constructivists think that ideas and beliefs have an impact on global politics and that reality is socially constructed and subject to change, going beyond the realm of the tangible. According to constructivists, meanings are flexible and vary throughout time based on the ideas and convictions of the actor. Constructivists discuss how structure and agency mutually constitute one other. Agency influences the structure, and structure influences agency. The power to act is known as agency, and the international system that includes both material and ideational components is known as structure.

The relationship between the US and North Korea in Wendt's (1995) example is an inter-subjective structure made up of shared ideas and beliefs, but both governments are actors with the power to alter the current social enmity structure. The two states' social ideologies and worldviews must shift for the relationship to change from one of animosity to one of friendship. Anarchy can be characterized in several ways based on the meanings that states assign to it,

according to constructivist theory, which holds that the anarchic nature of the international system is what states make of it (Guzzini & Leander, 2005).

Identity and interest issues are another key concern for social constructivism. Constructivism explains that states have various, distinct identities that are socially constructed via interactions with other players in international politics. Constructivists contend that these identities embody the motives and acts of actors and serve as representations of who they are and what they are interested in. For instance, the identities represented by tiny and large states are different since the former are more concerned with ensuring their survival, whilst the latter always seek to dominate world affairs through the employment of their economic and military might. It is important to remember that state-led acts should reflect their identity. Being inconsistent with one's identity would call into doubt the legitimacy of one's priorities and/or identity, which is prohibited. The failure of Germany to develop into a military force in the second half of the 20th century can be inferred from the case of Germany in this regard. Due to these historical events, Germany's political identity changed from militarism to pacifism following the horrors committed under Hitler's rule during the Second World War (Onuf, 2012).

Social norms are another idea shared by constructivists. They describe norms as the acceptable range of behaviour for a state with a certain identity. Actors who adopt a convincing identity are expected to adhere to the associated norms. Because states behave in particular ways and think that the behaviour is more appropriate, constructivists claim that some behaviours and acts are more acceptable than others. This approach is also known as the logic of appropriateness (Jepperson et al., 1996). Regulative norms, prescriptive norms, and constitutive norms are the three categories of norms that help us better comprehend the idea. There are three types of norms: constitutive norms, which can assist develop new interests or categories for behaviour-based character; regulative norms, which compel and direct the behaviour of the state; and prescriptive norms, which specify and establish practices. It is also important to remember that norms go through a process before becoming accepted. When states accept these norms and absorb them in their practices, norms turn into predictable behaviour. For instance, several states collaborate to address a global problem and create rules when doing so will increase the chances of human survival. advocacy and diplomacy become acceptable conduct (Shannon, 2000).

While other constructivists emphasize internal politics, Finnemore (1996) and Wendt (1999) are systemic constructivists who emphasize the role of international politics in forming the identities of states. Studying how various governments' adherence to international rules levels the playing field is crucial before speculating on internal factors that might be to blame. The duty is taken on by Thomas Risse in the area of global human rights standards. He discusses how factors such as the sort of government, the civil war's involvement, and the existence of local human rights organizations interfere with the degree to which states are prepared to adhere to global standards for human rights (Risse *et al.*, 1999).

The best way for officials to express the state's identity is through their decisions. Through textual sources like journals, newspapers, archives, and textbooks, the identities of key decision-makers with official positions are made public. Domestic identities complicate attempts to understand a state's foreign policies at various points in time. If constructivism has a disagreement regarding how important domestic and foreign policies are in comparison, the differences between them shouldn't be overemphasized because constructivists are more similar than they are different. The significance of identity and culture, which are expressed in social rules, norms, and understandings, is emphasized by all constructivists. Beliefs, not actual objects, make up the political and social universe (Katzenstein, 1996).

Wendt (1995) gave a systemic base analysis which focus on state and international system interaction, Fennimore (1996c) also proposed a variant of constructivism the systemic analysis. The opening point of her analysis is state's identity and interest but focuses on social interaction between states with more detail. Her take on social norms inherent in international society and the way they shape interests and identities of state is unique and to the point. The behaviour of state is defined by interests and identities, interests and identities are defined by international society. The norms of international society are defused to states through international organizations. They shape the policies of states by instructing them on what their interests could be (Hurd, 2008).

### **4.3. Critiques on social constructivism**

The Constructivist theory's primary theoretical foe continues to be neorealism. The constructivist allegiance to norms, especially international rules, does not convince neorealism. Such rules, according to neo-realists, do exist, but they are frequently disregarded, particularly when doing so serves the interests of strong governments. The idea that states might easily form friendships in social relations is not one that neo-realists are willing to accept. Such assertions, while appealing in theory, are unreliable in practice due to the international system's anarchic nature, which forces states to act egotistically. States have no choice but to engage in violent rivalry due to the anarchic structure, ambiguous intents, and offensive capabilities. Realists view the establishment of communitarian rules as having no useful purpose (Mearsheimer, 1995).

The main problem which states are facing in an anarchic system is uncertainty something not analysed by constructivists appropriately. States are battling for security under anarchic systems; therefore, they are unsure of the intentions of other states. The actions of other states are unpredictable, and they can be misinterpreted by states. The reality of corruption and dishonesty considerably worsens the problem of state uncertainty. The constructivist perspective on transformation is also criticized by neorealists. Constructivists offer few insights into why discourse rises and falls, but they don't say anything about why realism continues to be the dominant discourse in international relations or why its pillars are insecure.

Constructivists occasionally draw attention to particular factors that could influence how international politics is discussed (Copeland, 2001).

According to Robert Jervis, constructivism does not adequately explain how international standards are created, how state identities are produced, or how state interests are determined. Constructivists do not provide information on the political process, the predictable elements of state foreign policies, or global politics (Jervis, 1998). Although this is undoubtedly true and acceptable to constructivists, one criticism is that they tend to focus their analysis on structures like institutions, cultures, identities, and norms. The motivation for this bias is that most empirical work done by constructivism begins with a critique of rationalist explanations which focus on agency (Checkel, 1998; Price & Reus-Smitt, 1998).

## **5. Application of a theory on Libya and Syria**

Why the US and its allies intervened in Libya but not in Syria and why Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was used in Libya but not in Syria are both explained by social constructivism. Social constructivism also explains why R2P policies in the US and other states have suddenly changed. Constructivists contend that historical events have shaped foreign policy (Hopf, 1998). It is significant to note that Syria recently received the identity that the US, Russia, and other nations granted to Libya. Relations between Libya and the US and its allies were not great, but they were also not particularly excellent either. As a result, Libya is neutral toward Russia and has little influence on the US. For Italy, it's a different story. Syria, on the other hand, has its own set of influences on the US and has profited from the goodwill gestures made by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah.

Thus, the cases of Libya and Syria impact how the US and its allies view other social states that also play a role in international affairs. According to constructivists, after the Arab Spring, the civil conflict in Libya was seen as a threat to human rights, and Gaddafi was also accused of violating the rights of his own people. For instance, Hillary Clinton spoke before the congress and pushed for US intervention in Libya to free the people from the horrible dictator, while US officials described the civil war in Syria as a conflict between Assad's dictatorship and the opposition for democracy. In this way, Obama and his government officials persuaded Congress and the international community, particularly the UN, that we were attempting to support the Syrian opposition force that was fighting Assad's regime for democracy. As a result, despite the fact that the Libyan and Syrian crises were of a similar type, the US and its allies saw the Syrian conflict as a fight for democracy rather than a humanitarian crisis (Becker & Shane, 2016; Khan et al., 2020).

In addition, Russia had a negative experience with the NATO-led US intervention in Libya, which it perceived as going beyond its intended objectives and overthrowing the Gaddafi dictatorship rather than releasing the civilian people of Libya. Russia therefore views the R2P setting negatively and has been attempting to prevent any form of assistance in Syria by urging

it to be extremely cautious when dealing with humanitarian intervention at the present (Charap *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, Russia saw itself as a moderate state, which indicates that Moscow's policy decisions align with national sovereignty and the unfavourable Libyan experience. Constructivists explain why Russia behaved in a way that made it difficult for the US to intervene in the Syrian civil war. As a result of the likelihood that other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) would offer Russia a trade-off in the case of Syria, the United States and its allies did not push as hard for humanitarian assistance in Syria as they might have. The foremost responsible factor was the identities assigned to Syria by US, Russia and other powerful states and different interests of states in Syrian case, which could not allow humanitarian action to take place (Sharp & Blanchard, 2012).

Due to US's tight ties to Israel and Syria and Israel's antagonistic relations, which worked in tandem with Assad's authoritarian administration to give Syria a distinct character, the US is arguably the state with the worst perception of the Syrian conflict. Was Syria now posing a genuine threat or benefit to the US and its allies? which helped to define Syria's hostile identity. As a result, the US forced other nations to intervene in Syria for humanitarian reasons, much as it did in Iraq in 2003 (Dunne, 2013; Tayyab *et al.*, 2020). In Libyan case, the humanitarian intervention was based on UNSC mandates. As different reports on atrocities were coming, and several different interests of states were also involved. However, in Syrian case the similar intervention did not occur due to the missing of UNSC mandate, and plus the interests of involved states. Constructivists contend that common behaviour and acts are shaped at least in part by complementary interests of states. This same presumption explains why the US has changed its stance in response to her and her allies' shifting objectives in Syria and Libya. Whereas in one instance the US received support from allies for its intervention in Libya, same support was absent in the case of Syria. Additionally, the US's little interests in Syria reduced the likelihood of an intervention (Tocci, 2016).

Moreover, to social constructivists identity is the basis of interest therefore, a specific behaviour we observe in international system or society, where states interact and share collective meanings. They say international structure is a constitutive realm that creates states or actors as knowledgeable political and social agents and the structure makes them who they are (Reus-Smit, 1999). Now, in the unipolar international system that gave the US identity as a hegemonic power, guarantor, and protector of the liberal global order where democracy and human rights are of utmost importance. While Col. Gaddafi was seen as a violator of the structure's core principles and of US and ally interests, Libya was seen as a situation where intervention was likely to be necessary. However, the structure concerned the US that other emerging or at least powerful parties, such as Russia, may oppose US action and allies might not be excited about Assad; as a result, the US deemed Syria to be a less dangerous state for the current system or structure.

The Constructivists view the norms as a crucial manifestation of the social interactions and shared meanings that not only regulate but also make up the identities and interests that drive

state activity. The states' behaviour is determined by social interaction and environment, not by their own self-interest, but by norms and identities. These factors dictate how to behave as well as what identity and interests to claim (March & Olsen, 1989). These constructivist arguments explain the cases of Libya and Syria, why US and other states changed their behaviour and interests, what their identities and interests were, and how they responded to both nations, where a coalition led by the US intervened in Libya but skipped over Syria and did not intervene.

## **6. Legal, economic, and normative perspective**

The theoretical underpinning for the intervention in Libya is briefly categorised in contrast to the situation in Syria, and it underlines the fact that less humanitarian justifications than other policy justifications might explain the various events in both countries. Legally speaking, the US's non-humanitarian action in Syria without a mandate is very debatable; yet intervention in Libya with a UNSC mandate must be recognized as valid. This makes a clear separation between the two scenarios, at least until a UNSC resolution establishes a common justification and authority for an action against Syria. For most Western governments, the absence of a mandate in the case of Syria is a significant reason (and justification) for not giving the proposal serious consideration.

The UNSC's current mandate, reports of atrocities, and ultimately a variety of diverse national and geostrategic concerns of the US and its allies serve as the foundation for the intervention in the Libyan case. Differentiating within that extremely strict justification for involvement in Libya, the absence of a UNSC mandate, numerous claims of disinterest, dangers (unpredictable dangers and the threat of violence that is being eliminated), and failure might be used to justify the non-intervention in Syria. Additionally, all of the participating countries are impacted by the economic crisis and serious fiscal issues. The inability to intervene in Syria is made more difficult by the limited resources.

The only justification for a military invasion of a sovereign state is the normative claims of defending human rights and rescuing civilians. The conflict between state sovereignty and human rights, two essential criteria and values, has been exacerbated by intervention in Libya. According to a lot of the literature, the intervention in Libya represents the sovereignty's ultimate recognition of human rights. The non-intervention principle still holds strong; thus, it would be incorrect to infer from Libya's engagement that this human rights subordination continues, but the humanitarian exception is supported by Libya's events.

Norms are fundamental to any intervention justification in general. The importance of standards is demonstrated by the vast number of regulatory announcements both in favour of and against the Syrian government's engagement in Libya. They are necessary as the foundation for any military action, but as the inaction in Syria has shown, they are insufficient to justify military action. While the same grounds for the Syrian situation were less relevant

than those for the intervention in Libya, the two situations are relatively analogous from a normative standpoint.

The relevance of norms is only negligible when there are other interests or when the violation of norms does not have an impact on the individuals involved, despite the fact that norms appear to be quite important in democratic society. While norms have undoubtedly had a growing impact on politics as a whole over the past century, their importance in international politics has not increased significantly.

The circumspect Western response to the Syrian crisis shows that the frequently assumed primacy of international rules has not yet fully materialized. The norms were used to justify and explain the Libya's involvement, but not as a motivating factor. The example of not intervening in Syria serves as another illustration of this. But in the future, the gap between "realpolitik" and the theoretical applicability of norms as a sort of Western society consensus is unlikely to narrow any time soon. The importance of norms might continue. More significant than shared norms are the State's common interests. The spread of norms throughout all societies will keep putting political pressure on nations to uphold global norms. However, the more the importance of standards will be diminished the longer carnage occurs in Syria without outside intervention and the longer political and military constraints and goals continue to take precedence over norms (Mirza et al., 2021).

## **7. Conclusion**

In this article, a model for deciphering international system structure and state behaviour was presented. In the perspective of constructivism, it advocated and encapsulated the fundamental principle of humanitarian action. This essay examined how norms are created and why states sometimes act or behave in ways that are not entirely consistent with their monetary interests. Social constructivism offered the framework and made the evolving aspects of humanitarian action understandable. Social constructivism places a strong emphasis on how identity, interests, and meaning are socially constructed. Constructivists believe that states' actions may be explained in terms of ideas. In this paper constructivists also stress on shared constitution of the actors and structure of the global system. They hold that in order to pursue interests, agents build and alter their identities and interests in relation to the normative structure, both domestically and internationally. States work to persuade others to adopt new norms, but they also rely on the legal, moral, and legitimate normative context for support when establishing new laws. This essay provided a succinct explanation of how norms are developed and why states participate in humanitarian intervention, albeit occasionally with some restraint.

Due to changes in the behaviour and interests of the US and its allies, US and its allies missed intervening in the Syrian crisis but did so in the Libyan conflict to protect civilians from the mass horrors Gaddafi threatened. Additionally, Russia exercised restraint by refusing to let US intervention in Syria. In the instance of Libya, when it permitted the US to intervene, Russia

had a harsher experience; however, after some time, Russia saw that the US was overstepping its interests in Libya. Due to this, Russia blocked UNSC resolutions and prevented the US from intervening in Syria. Constructivists hold that identity affects a state's interest and can modify behaviour, which results in a change in action in the future.

#### **Declaration of conflict of interest**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest(s) with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

#### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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