

## International Humility: Rebooting an Age-old Virtue

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### Abstract

Humility has been widely valued in philosophical and religious traditions for centuries, and more recently by psychologists. However, its application to international relations and foreign policy has evidently not been considered at length either by scholars or practitioners. Geopolitical thinking and great power politics of our time seem to leave no place for humility in international politics. But given the severity of international challenges and conflicts, it would be wise to re-consider our ways of thinking about the world and adopt attitudes that can help us better understand friends, rivals and adversaries, but also ourselves. Such an attitude resides within the age-old virtue of humility. Arguing for humility is not to make a case for relativism or to condone transgressions and bad governance around the world. If cultivated properly, humility at the international level could contribute to smart statecraft even in the realist sense. Lack of humility has been one of the consequential shortcomings of the liberal international order. With certitude widespread, humility can serve east and west, north and south, helping us to overcome the polarizing narrative of “the West and the Rest.”.

### Policy Recommendations

- At the most general level, consider the (re)introduction of humility in the curricula of national education as a way to improve one’s understanding of others and oneself. Humility can be valorised, as part of critical thinking, through education, much like creativity has been.
- Cultivate humility as an epistemic virtue in professional training programs (and, where needed, in academic institutions) covering international relations, foreign policy and global governance.
- Promote humility as a rule of thumb, a heuristic, in the working methodology of intergovernmental organisations (and preferably in INGOs), as well as in schools of journalism.
- Avoid interpretations of humility which associate it with low self-esteem and submissiveness; on the contrary, cultivate humility to build a sense of being grounded through a realistic evaluation of the self and modesty in one’s capacity to understand others fully.

"He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that."

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859.

"Human beings have an evident propensity, and certainly a remarkable capacity, for conceiving things otherwise than as factually they are."

C.A.W Manning, *The Nature of International Society*, 1962.

Is there place for virtue in international politics? Most people would be hard-pressed to say yes. After all, geopolitical thinking and great power politics seem to have made a global comeback. But as we feel a growing need to fix or rebuild the present international order, it is useful to try to think outside the box. What states do and what instruments they use are not the only problems to focus on. We should also invoke some wise attitudes toward ourselves and others to improve our ways of thinking about the world. I argue that one such attitude resides within a long-discarded virtue: humility. The concept of humility has been a subject of philosophy and religious traditions for at least more than two millennia, and more recently of psychology. But its possible application to how we conduct foreign policy and international relations is under-considered at best.

In the Q&A session of a panel discussion on international conflicts held in 2024 at SIPRI, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, I brought up the desirability of humility in the conduct of international affairs. By that I meant being modest about how sufficiently we know and understand other societies as we formulate our policies towards them. I wanted to see how this idealist-sounding suggestion would be received by an international panel of seasoned practitioners and scholars who think seriously about the state of the world.

The panellists mostly reacted favourably but also made some important points. A supportive panellist suggested that humility should be institutionalized at the international level. Another panellist was cautious, expressing a preference for compassion and tolerance over humility. It was also suggested that humility should not lead to relativism.

After hearing these reactions, I could have left it at that: Humility at the international level is a nice idea but it will probably remain as wishful thinking. However, having pondered on the idea occasionally in the past, this brief discussion encouraged me to think further about what international humility could really mean, the consequences of its scarcity, what it could offer and the prospects of its applicability. Hence this essay, which reflects personal observations and thoughts while also hoping to incite further discussion of the idea by others, including those who can speak more authoritatively about some of the themes below.

## Remembering Humility

Humility has generally been contemplated as a character virtue in Eastern philosophical/religious traditions, most philosophical approaches of ancient Greece, and in all three Abrahamic religious teachings, as well as others. But there have also been cases where humility was understood as an inclination to low-esteem, a failure to appreciate one's own merits. This is probably why humility was not included among the "cardinal virtues" by some Greek philosophers of antiquity. But even then, avoiding hubris was considered an important virtue (Chappell 2020). Later, certain religious understandings of humility that seemed to espouse unquestioning obedience and submissiveness drew criticism from the thinkers of Enlightenment. Still, the generally positive valorisation of humility, be it based on religious

or secular teachings, has existed for more than two thousand years. In this sense, humility reflects a piece of near-universal wisdom generated by numerous cultures in their search for the good life.

Although humility survived as a virtue, it has faded over time. Virtues are apparently affected by the social context of their time. The last several generations, roughly since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, experienced, with varying speed around the world, significant improvements in the quality of life thanks to material and scientific advances, growing practices of good-governance including democracy and also human creativity. This strengthened our self-confidence and belief in a better future as well as our capacity to overcome problems.

But in the same period, we also experienced negative accelerations of sorts – world wars, socio-cultural and technological disruptions, rampant globalization and economic crises, ever rising expectations followed by disappointments and, eventually, a sense of precarity. More recently, we also began to feel ecological anxiety, accentuated by a pandemic, as well as social disinhibition facilitated by social media. Having to cope with these individually and collectively while carrying the memory of being (over)confident nationally, culturally – and maybe as a species – was not, it seems, conducive to humility.

It is, therefore, promising that in recent decades psychologists have begun to study humility. Considering it mostly as a trait rather than a virtue, they have recognised humility's benefits for mental health, performance, and inter-personal relations, including in the world of business management. Its potential to strengthen cultural tolerance and lessen political polarization is also drawing increased attention, even leading to guideline manuals to foster humility (Suttie, 2020).

As generally understood today, a person exercising humility would seek a realistic assessment of the self, including weaknesses and strengths. Recognition of one's limitations, including in cognitive capacity, would be key. This disposition would also include modesty in self-portrayal and a general attitude of openness to learn from others (Schaffner 2020). In this sense, humility does not mean lack of confidence or submissive meekness. Although it involves being aware of one's fallibility, this is compensated by the openness to self-correction. If properly exercised, it can generate a sense of being grounded and a reasonable amount of confidence for the self and for others.

However, individuals manifesting varying levels of modesty or narcissism – though very influential and even extremely consequential in some cases – are often not the most pertinent agents in world politics. Instead, the multifarious nation-states call most of the shots. It is possible to argue that as we can talk about international society, so too should we be able to consider the possibility of international virtues. Still, humility in the basic sense of a character virtue is difficult to confer on states due to their complex structure.

Nevertheless, I believe that what is known as *intellectual humility*, that is, humility as an epistemic virtue, may lend itself aptly to the international level as practicable by states. In this sense, humility would mean recognition especially by decision makers and the professionals supporting them, as well as opinion leaders, of their limitations in comprehending the rest of the world objectively and sufficiently. It would involve being modest about how accurate their knowledge and assumptions about other societies are; that they may at times be wrong and would benefit from expanding and, if necessary, correcting their understandings. It would be about realizing that other societies

have their own complexities and layers of truth. Even the clearly truthful knowledge about others could be only part of the broader truth about them.

In this sense, what might seem to us as faulty and unbecoming in other societies may in reality be our insufficient knowledge or simple biases facilitating our sense of high-mindedness, only to be perceived as condescension by the receiving party. Indeed, there is a need across different cultures and regions for developing a sensibility for better understanding other societies, especially those we disagree with.

Arguing for humility in international affairs is not to ignore or condone the transgressions that occur around the world, but to aim at more reliable analyses and avoid biases that we are prone to individually and collectively. Humility has a natural affinity with critical thinking. This epistemically informed sort of humility is what is broadly meant by international humility as proposed in this essay.

A good example of where humility in this sense is needed is the case of liberally-minded, cosmopolitan, meritocratic elites who have been in positions of influence in politics, business and the media especially in many Western societies. (Such elite qualities are not intrinsically negative; that is not the point here.) These elites have in recent years been surprised at how some “objectionable” politicians and political parties have been receiving electoral support from their fellow citizens. In good intellectual fashion, some of these elites have questioned their own role in bringing this about. Even the practice of meritocratic ethic, more precisely the hubris it produces, is seriously questioned, as argued by the US political philosopher Michael J. Sandal (Sandal 2020).

Many of these elites earnestly concede that they have overlooked the needs and grievances of large swaths of their fellow citizens who have been facing political and socio-economic problems, including those related to global economic dynamics. In other words, seeing the political backlash caused by the disruptions ordinary people face, these elites came to admit that they have failed to properly understand their own societies in some important ways.

Paradoxically, however, the same elites continue to believe they know what is best for other societies in other parts of the world. Some of the foreign policies they espouse have for years been causing negative reactions abroad. Yet, unlike what has happened in domestic politics, there has not been much self-criticism or correction in approaches to foreign policy. It is here, in matters of international affairs, that humility is also needed. It is a need for both the traditional and new elites, for those on the left and the right, for the interested laypeople and for the media.

### **Qualifying Humility to Function Internationally**

At least three important qualifications are in order to make the case for international humility as proposed here. First, while the above example of elite attitudes implicates much of the Western world, humility at the international level has to be a two-way street for all parties involved. The West does not have a monopoly over biased approaches, double standards, and failures in properly understanding others. Reducing complex problems to simple black and white depictions to fit self-serving narratives is not exclusive to any part of the world.

The fact that both the West and others have shortcomings in this respect is no justification for any side to continue as it is. Morally though, in the international efforts to improve things, states which have had greater influence, through their actions abroad in the last few centuries, over how power and wealth distribution across the world ended up as it did may now be expected to at least act more considerately and even charitably. (The negative impact of European colonialism with its extractive institutions on many of today's poorer countries has been convincingly demonstrated in the studies, extending over two decades, by the 2024 Nobel laureates in economic sciences, Daron Acemoğlu, Simon Johnson and James A. Robinson.) Yet this does not free the less fortunate from the criticism their own misdeeds may warrant. The point is that, with certitude and self-content widespread, humility would serve east and west, north and south.

Second, for those who might be suspicious, advocating humility is not intended to lead to a confusing relativism. If we are to avoid the pitfalls of the post-truth era and whataboutism, we need a sense of common reality, a minimum factual basis, to deliberate about so that we recognize what qualifies as universally good and bad. In this sense, the call for international humility is not a veiled attempt to obfuscate and devalue democratic governance or the rule of law as universally worthy pursuits. Nor is it an argument for challenging the importance of human dignity, the protection of which forms the rationale for human rights and freedoms. As one SIPRI panellist suggested, we still need the North Star when we practice humility. Such a reference point would help us navigate towards a better future for organised societies and individuals.

The problem arises, however, when it comes to the specifics of how generally-agreed values are to be put into practice in different

cultural settings. A well-defined universal consensus on the specifics is not realistic in the near future. But reciprocal exercise of humility could facilitate the formation of broadly shared codes of conduct even if there will be outlier countries refusing to join in. The North Star will have to be not only sustained but also updated, requiring an effort that is open to receiving input from around the world. The North Star should not be construed as some sort of a skewed political correctness at the global level privileging one group's preferences over others.

In this respect, it would be wise to avoid the intolerance that can be generated even by well-meaning progressivism when it turns self-referential and schoolmasterly. If the English political philosopher John Gray is right in quipping that *wokeism* is liberalism without tolerance, then we would do better without international versions of that (Gray, 2022). In fact, we could benefit from a healthy dose of heterodoxy without losing sight of the North Star. More inclusivity, though not mediocrity or unruliness, should be the objective. For example, while individualist cultural traditions have been quite influential in forming what are taken to be the current international norms and values, collectivist cultural traditions can also offer valuable insight in updating the North Star without upending it. The need to firmly protect individual autonomy does not negate the importance of collectivist sources of human dignity. The idea is to have a bright North Star, not a diluted one to be preferred by those, on any side, who would wish to discard it as much as possible.

Third, humility towards the self and the other should also be directed towards human nature itself. Basic virtues can be and often are trumped by local, parochial priorities. A study by the Canadian scholar Michael Ignatieff and his collaborators revealed how kinship and other immediate affiliations tend to prevail over universal virtues (Ignatieff 2017). This could

mean that ordinary people exercising ordinary virtues in their everyday lives may innocently be lacking readily available categories to conceptualize and implement these virtues in universal terms. We positively discriminate toward our own group and those we hold close to us. International reflection of such tribalism reveals itself as group solidarity among bands of states, a behaviour which at times compromises positions of principle and sense of justice.

Natural though it is, tribalism renders compassion selective and, thereby, ethically problematic. This has become patently obvious internationally as we observe the inconsistency of reactions from around the world to various conflicts of our day. When the indefensible is defended, rationalized or acquiesced too easily, acclaimed moral compasses lose credibility. Indeed, we are in a period where the moral high ground traditionally claimed by Western polities is being questioned convincingly from within and without, if also too vehemently at times. It is telling that much of the incisive critique articulated, for example, by the Indian essayist Pankaj Mishra remains hard to refute intellectually (Mishra 2017 and 2024). Again, the West is not alone in deserving criticism. But the bigger the claim, the more rigorous scrutiny it invites.

### **International Order Lacking Humility: The Liberal Version**

The scarcity of humility in the international political domain is more consequential than one would assume. It has, for example, been a contributing factor in the failures of the liberal international order. That order proved liberal, beneficial and orderly for a select group only. The problem was not so much in most of its declared principles, save for its positions like the excessive reliance on the amelioratory powers of economic liberalism when let loose,

often derided as neo-liberalism. Nor is the problem merely about the lack of domestic support given to this Western project which tended to overreach.

The real problem has been the effort to impose the order on some others particularly in pseudo-liberal or illiberal fashion. As Professor Joseph S. Nye put it diplomatically, the United States overrode sovereignty in pursuit of liberal values (Nye, 2020), triggering, similar to what the Lebanese-American scholar Fawas Gerges argues (Gerges 2024), counter-democratic dynamics in the Middle East. The West deserves credit for generating practices of good governance at home and supporting them abroad. Yet, in some cases, it also bears responsibility for hindering the development of the very idea it has championed.

Nations wanting to lead tend to interpret their contexts of experience as worthy of emulation universally. Working to introduce or change values in one's own country is justifiable through democratic politics. But in the absence of a corresponding democratic mandate toward other societies, the presiding actors of the liberal international project developed a sense of entitlement to act as change initiators instead. Efforts to instil values and practices in other nations from afar – let alone cases of direct interference – inevitably amount to foreign socio-political engineering regardless of how useful some of those ideas might be. Such attempts are often rationalized intellectually as well. For example, well-meaning scholars of modernization theory after the Second World War were over-confident in the veracity of how they understood other countries and what those societies needed. In similar fashion, the benefit of hindsight helps us see that the *zeitgeist* prevailing in the West at the end of the Cold War was more conducive to triumphalism than humility.

Meanwhile, some of the countries at the receiving end of the liberal international project

tended to be too content with their generalizing accusations towards outsiders and too receptive to conspiracy theories enjoying unwarranted public credulity. Focusing excessively on perceived foreign culprits weakens the capacity to see one's own shortcomings. Making oneself feel good by stroking national pride works against making realistic analyses. We cannot discard the impact of past and recent foreign interventions in these societies. Self-regarding projects introduced as a result of such interventions played a role in the formation of the current disadvantages faced by many non-Western societies. Oversight of these dynamics would lead to ahistorical explanations and be unjust. But history must not be (ab)used to explain away the more recent homemade shortcomings. Demonisation of foreign countries should not be instrumentalized to obscure the inconvenient truths that need to be addressed.

The common challenge now is to construct an international order more efficacious and more just than before. In this context, despite the defects of the liberal international order in practice, one need not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Whether referred to as an order or system, the present state of affairs at the international level needs improvements. A more inclusive, fairer and yet still "liberally functioning" order based on rules and norms – with international law at its centre – is a very decent objective. When properly observed by the powerful actors too, a rules-based-international-order is highly desirable.

The liberally functioning order advocated here should not be conflated with the current political debates about liberalism and its renewed tensions with conservatism and authoritarianism. The liberal label connotes different political platforms in different countries. At the international level, a liberally functioning order can be understood as one which favours a common understanding, or a

workable framework, that facilitates a better management of the diversity that exists globally. That would require, among others, tolerance, fairness, accountability and, indeed, humility, which can be associated with but are not exclusive to liberalism. These principles have more to do with the process of how foreign policies can be formulated and conducted but they are not as ideologically engaged with specific political agendas as domestic politics is.

A liberally functioning order would be focused on maintaining peaceful and fair relations between states without ignoring international norms and universal values. But it would not be about imposing specific understandings and practices of liberalism, or conservatism, on others. This is so not because all those understandings and practices are *a priori* wrong but because imposition, which is usually attempted without sufficient appreciation of the particularities, let alone the blessing, of the targeted society, lacks democratic legitimacy and is prone to other problems. When mutual understandings are weak, advocacy of even agreeable principles risks being seen as a smokescreen for attempts to maximize influence, which sometimes are indeed the underlying motivation as the historical record shows. Those wanting to lead can still do so by example, starting with their own conduct of foreign affairs. Persuasion is always more preferable. International humility is about that too.

All of this would be more within reach if international actors and commentators would avoid talking past each other. Not every criticism levelled against the outcomes of the liberal international order is a push back against calls for democratic governance, though some may be. Proponents of the liberal international order should be epistemically liberal enough to take seriously the resentments and the critique generated due to

some of the things done in its name. Conversely, not every criticism against authoritarianism and the lack of democracy reflects a neo-imperialist or neo-orientalist attitude, though some really seem to. Not every Western initiative has been ill-intended or harmful, but quite a few of them have a lot to answer for. The point is that practicing reciprocal humility can decrease miscalculations of intent and increase mutual respect when warranted.

If conceptualized and implemented as above, a liberally functioning order – perhaps without even the liberal label — might not be overrun by history after all. Had an attitude of humility been observed in the earlier attempts to construct the international liberal order, its outcomes would most likely have been more palatable to a larger part of the world today. Had a more inclusive version of global governance been rendered possible with humility as one of its building principles, it would be encountering fewer and weaker disruptive reactions today.

### **Prospects for Developing Humility Internationally Now**

Given its idealist undertones, the case for international humility might foremost draw criticism from adherents of *realism* in international relations. But the idea of international humility need not contradict the realist approach entirely. Realism, with its pertinent emphasis on national interest and balance of power, is informed by a long history of empirical observations and is possibly the most widely utilised theoretical approach among practitioners, often without them realizing it. However, the realist school, owing mostly to its over-deterministic premises, can become too elegant a theory to account for the contingency and irregularity present in relations among states. Context and human consciousness render social reality, including

its international dimension, a combined outcome of chance and choice. Purposive and self-conscious, though not always rational, states are not necessarily straitjacketed by predetermined geopolitical “realities” at all times. An attitude of humility does not deny that dynamics of power competition exist; on the contrary, it can help us moderate them.

In other words, states can choose to strengthen their analytic faculties by benefitting from humility. This can help them arrive at more reliable understandings about friends, rivals and adversaries to serve the national interest in the realist sense. By so doing, they can better manage, avoid, or resolve conflicts. This would in fact be smart statecraft. For that matter, any theoretical or practical approach applied reasonably to foreign affairs would benefit from the reality check humility has to offer.

While we feel we are living in the age of uncertainty, at another level, there is an excessive sense, or pretence, of certainty on the part of many actors. In their effort to make the world legible and manageable for themselves and their publics, they claim certitude in the way they believe they understand other societies. In the process, knowing is often conflated with understanding.

The importance of understanding others properly cannot be overstated under the present conditions of *polycrisis*. In his posthumously published autobiography, Israeli leader Shimon Peres shares a revealing conclusion that Israel’s chief-negotiator with the Palestinians during the Oslo Accords in the early 1990s had drawn from those negotiations: “While we know everything about the Palestinians, it seems we have understood nothing” (Peres, 2017.) This seems tragically true also for parties involved in many other conflicts around the world. With more humility, we can increase our capacity to understand friend and foe better and avoid

policies that unnecessarily harm ourselves and others.

Regardless of how properly they understand others, states operate within an international system. Cognizant of the consequences of both bipolarity and unipolarity, most states today are likely to be antipathetic towards overreaching hegemon. They will expect respect for their sovereignty and agency more than before. And frankly, the world does not need new totalizing narratives of implied hierarchy vying to replace their Euro-centric precedents.

The emergent international system seems to be some kind of “asymmetrical multipolarity,” one that is likely to be averse to absolute hegemon, but would possibly include quasi-hegemon and aspiring hegemon. Meanwhile, it is questionable that exclusivist political blocks – likely to be tribalist despite their sophisticated appearance – would be, in the eyes of many non-members, much more agreeable interlocutors than traditional hegemon. Overall, one can expect a louder and more effective demand for justice from around the world, the recognition of which will require greater humility.

Unfortunately, increased polarization in domestic politics of many countries make international humility a harder sell. Moreover, human ingenuity and wisdom do not come naturally at the international level. Collective intelligence can be produced when individual members of a group are allowed to contribute more directly to the common effort rather than being commanded by recognised superior members. By extension, one would expect the UN to be the natural reservoir for internationally shared intelligence. Occasionally, rules-based multilateralism premised on sovereign equality still produces good international agreements. But too often geopolitics gets in the way, as also evident from the lack of progress in reforming the UN system.

It is still possible to move beyond just hoping for humility by, for example, suggesting some paths forward, wishful though they may be. One way to promote international humility could be to argue for it as a norm rather than a virtue, not the least because the former would run a lower risk of being seen as naïve or too abstract. But widely respected norms do not arise and spread quickly either. Humility could perhaps be gradually introduced as a rule of thumb, an acquired heuristic, into the institutions of foreign affairs. Certain traits and practices have traditionally been the preserve of foreign policy and diplomacy. Humility could become one of those, hopefully without the world first having to go through existential threats like a planetary crisis or a world war. Intergovernmental organizations could privilege an attitude of humility as they produce the informational background and recommendations for international action to be decided by their member states.

Yes, there is considerable wishfulness in the above. Expecting humility from states sounds counterintuitive. Humility and its corollaries will probably never dominate the international stage or be considered a matter of high politics. Nor is humility a panacea; human nature and the world is too complex for that. Nevertheless, practicing humility is a worthwhile goal given the potential it carries. Experts studying humility suggest that it is like a master virtue that breeds, for example, compassion, empathy, respect and tolerance. (Lavelock et al. 2017.)

Despite armed conflicts, ongoing violations of basic international norms and insufficiency of binding legal arrangements, we are not (yet) in a state of absolute anarchy. Key norms such as territorial integrity and peaceful resolution of conflicts are established at least in principle and broadly observed, though with deeply troubling exceptions in practice. It would also be unfair to dismiss the expertise present in the foreign policy institutions of many

countries. Unfortunately, the need for quick and popular decisions often hinders the exercise of humility. Sensibility to particularities of different societies and respect for local knowledge are trumped by politics of spectacle. But given the need to make better sense of the messy international landscape and to fix or rebuild the international order, it remains in our enlightened interest to cultivate and include humility in our arsenal of approaches to deal with the present and the future. This can help us withstand the current global mood of pessimism.

Based on the arguments above, humility can hold up to ourselves that mirror we all seem to need in the second quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The case for international humility also offers a way for moderating the reductive choice of having to pick a side in the ongoing polarizing debate that seems to reproduce the misleading “the West and the Rest” narrative.

A perceptive panellist in the SIPRI discussion I mentioned earlier stated that he had hope in Artificial Intelligence helping humanity to better manage the different values that exist across the world. (By the way, it would be a good idea to program humility into AI’s own learning algorithms; AI seems to need epistemic modesty too.) Coincidentally, while trying to complete this essay, I was distracted by my AI affected smart phone which had decided to offer me, without my demanding so, a popular quote from Rumi, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi mystic and theologian: “Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.” For the broadest effect possible, humility in the general sense could ideally be re-introduced and valorised, like creativity has been, in public education and professional training programmes. But for many of us involved with the here and now of international politics, Rumi’s advice is a good place to start for making humility work internationally.

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*The views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

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