

John J. Mearscheimer: “The False Promise of International Institutions”

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The short story:

The article examines the claim, made by three institutionalist IR theories (liberal institutionalism, collective security and critical theory) that institutions push states away from war and promote peace. It concludes that institutions have minimal influence on state behavior, and thus hold little promise for promoting stability in the post-Cold War world. All institutionalist theories examined are flawed, because each has a problem in its causal logic, and they all find little support in the historical record.

The longer story

Definition of institutions: a set of rules, typically formalized in international agreements and embodied in organizations, that stipulate the ways in which states should cooperate and compete with each other. They prescribe acceptable forms of state behavior, and proscribe unacceptable kinds of behavior.

Realism

The realist paradigm (which he neatly summarizes), predicts that cooperation between occurs but is fundamentally hindered by two factors: relative-gains considerations and concerns about cheating. Moreover, the causes of war and peace are mainly a function of the balance of power, which is the true independent variable which explains war while institutions largely mirror the distribution of power in the system and thus are merely an intervening variable in the process.

Liberal institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism does not directly address the important question of how to prevent war, but focuses instead on explaining why economic and environmental cooperation among states is more likely than realists recognize. The theory is predicated on the belief that cheating is the main inhibitor of international cooperation, and that institutions provide the key to overcoming that problem (prisoners dilemma). The idea is to create rules that constrain states (cheaters will be caught, will be punished immediately and will jeopardize future cooperative efforts), but not to challenge the fundamental realist claim that states are self-interested actors.

Rules can ideally be employed in four ways to change the “contractual environment”: institutionalized iteration, issue-linkage, information transparency and reduction of transaction costs.

Among the proponents of liberal institutionalism, Mearscheimer cites Keohane, Oran Young, Charles Lipson, Kenneth Oye, Helen Milner, Lisa Martin, Robert Axelrod, Robert Powell, Duncan Snidal.

Mearscheimer criticizes liberal institutionalism for

- largely ignoring security issues (where the fear of cheating is much harder to overcome and where thus this theory does not really hold) and concentrating instead solely in economic issues

- ignoring the other major obstacle to cooperation: relative-gain concerns. And if states are concerned with relative gains, the neat division between economic and security issues cannot hold. As a matter of fact, there is no evidence, says Mearsheimer, that liberal institutionalists believe that institutions facilitate cooperation when states care deeply about relative gains.
- failing to prove, from an empirical perspective, that existing cooperation would not have occurred in the absence of institutions

Collective security

The theory of collective security deals with the issue of how to cause peace. The key to enhancing stability in this world of armed states is the proper *management* of military power, which is best achieved through institutions.

Collective security starts with the assumption that states behave according to the dictates of realism. The aim however is to move beyond the self-help world of realism where states fear each other and are motivated by balance-of-power considerations. Institutions are meant to convince states to base their behavior on three profoundly anti-realist norms:

- States should reject the idea of using force to change the status quo
- To deal with states that violate that norm and threaten a war, responsible states must not act on the basis of their own narrow self-interest
- States must trust each other to renounce aggression and to mean that renunciation. Trust is the most important of the three elements because it underpins the first two.

Mearsheimer criticizes collective security for:

- Being an incomplete theory because it does not provide a satisfactory explanation for how states overcome their fears and learn to trust one another¹. In other words, it is too normative.
- Assuming too easily the satisfaction of an extraordinarily complex network of requirements (Mearsheimer lists 9 of them, like the ability of states to clearly distinguish between aggressor and victim, the idea that all aggression is wrong, etc.) Mearsheimer argues on the contrary that states have abundant reasons to doubt that collective security will work as advertised when the chips are down and aggression seems likely. States which ignore the logic of balance of power will perform worse than others.
- Getting little support from the historical record

Two “fallback positions” are proposed by some proponents of the collective security theory: peacekeeping (which entails third party intervention in minor-power civil wars or disputes between minor powers, with their agreement, for the purpose of either preventing war from breaking out or stopping it once it has begun) and concerts (great power condominium based on a set of rules to coordinate the great powers’ actions and their spheres of influence), both considered as a potentially powerful force for international stability.

Mearsheimer rejects both fallback positions: peacekeeping has no role to play in disputes between great powers, and since it cannot use coercion, is powerless. Concerts often emerge

¹ Realists maintain that states fear one another because they operate in an anarchic world, have offensive military capabilities and can never be certain about other states’ intentions.

in the aftermath of great wars and are merely of matter of classical balance of power (which is why they only last as long as the balance of power does not change).

Among the proponents of collective security, Mearscheimer cites Woodrow Wilson, Inis Claude, Kupchan & Kupchan, George Downs, Charles Glaser, Joffe, William Durch

Critical theory

Critical theorists address the question of how to bring about peace, and they make bold claims about the prospects for changing state behavior. The main goal of critical theorists is to change state behavior in fundamental ways, to move beyond a world of security competition and war and establish a pluralistic security community, a “world society” where states are guided by “norms of trust and sharing”.

“In essence (says Fisher), critical theory holds that social reality is constituted by intersubjective consciousness based on language and that human beings are free to change their world by a collective act of will”. Critical theorists view ideas as the driving force of history and think that discourse (in its broadest sense) largely shapes practice. State behavior changes when discourse changes. In this context, institutions are particularly important since can be a powerful tool to alter the constitutive and regulative norms of the international system so that states stop thinking and acting according to realism. Institutions contribute to alter state identity and to transform how states think about themselves and their relationship with other states. States for instance should have a powerful sense of responsibility to the broader international community.

Mearscheimer criticizes critical theory for:

- Being, basically, a hopeless cause...
- Being incomplete by failing to explain why are the determinants of discourses (why some discourses become dominant, what is the mechanism that governs the rise and fall of discourses
- Being self-contradictory: if discourse is not determinative but mainly a reflection of developments on the objective world, then it is, as the realists claim, the objective world which is the ultimate driver of the international system, not ideas.
- Being unable to offer empirical support for their theory (history is characterized in the first place by continuity, Fischer proved that the feudal era offered scant support for the claims of critical theorists, and the end of the Cold War does not basically change the rules of the game)

Among the proponents of critical theory, Mearscheimer cites Richard Ashley, Robert Cox, Rey Koslowski, Friedrich Kratochwil, John Ruggie, Alexander Wendt,

Conclusion: The optimistic assessment of the promise of international institutions, underpinned by the three institutionalist theories, is not warranted. There are serious problems with the causal logic of each theory, and little empirical evidence for any of them. Misplaced reliance on institutional solutions is likely to lead to more failures in the future.