Since the Cold War ended, Western policymakers have sought to create security arrangements in Europe, as well as in other regions of the globe, that are based on international institutions. In doing so, they explicitly reject balance-of-power politics as an organizing concept for the post–Cold War world. During the 1992 presidential campaign, for example, President Clinton declared that, “in a world where freedom, not tyranny, is on the march, the cynical calculus of pure power politics simply does not compute. It is ill-suited to a new era.” Before taking office, Anthony Lake, the president’s national security adviser, criticized the Bush administration for viewing the world through a “classic balance of power prism,” whereas he and Mr. Clinton took a “more ‘neo-Wilsonian’ view.”

This approach to international politics rests on the belief that institutions are a key means of promoting world peace. In particular, Western policymakers claim that the institutions that “served the West well” before the Soviet Union collapsed must be reshaped to encompass Eastern Europe as well. “There is no reason,” according to Secretary of State Warren Christopher, “why our institutions or our aspirations should

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2. The other prominent theme in Western policymaking circles is the importance of spreading democracy and capitalism across the globe. Prosperous democracies, so the argument goes, do not fight each other. Thus, the aim is to increase the number of stable democracies in the international system. This line of argument is not examined here. For conciseness, international institutions are henceforth referred to simply as institutions.
3. Douglas Hurd, “A New System of Security in Europe,” Speech to the Diplomatic and Commonwealth Writers’ Association, London, June 2, 1992. Hurd, the British Foreign Secretary, said in this speech: “We have in Western Europe, in the West as a whole, a set of international institutions which have proved their worth for one set of problems—the problems for which they were set up, and now have to be adapted for another. That is the key; the necessary changes in all these institutions are the key to getting the right help, the right reassurance to the countries of central and Eastern Europe.” Even Margaret Thatcher, with all her reservations about European institutions, has adopted this theme. She argued days after Iraq invaded Kuwait that, “We must bring the new democracies of Eastern Europe into closer association with the institutions of Western Europe. . . . The European Community has reconciled antagonisms within Western Europe; it
stop at [the] old frontiers of the Cold War." The institutions he has in mind include the European Community (EC), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), and the Western European Union (WEU). No single institution is expected to play a dominating role in Europe, however; instead, the aim is to create "a framework of complementary, mutually reinforcing" institutions. "We can promote more durable European security," Christopher claims, "through interlocking structures, each with complementary roles and strengths."

No other region of the world has institutions as extensive and as well-developed as those in Europe. Consequently, Western policymakers trumpet the importance of creating webs of overlapping institutions outside of Europe. Special emphasis is placed on Asia, where there are only a few weak institutions, and where fear of Japan, coupled with the rise of China and the prospect of a further reduction in the American presence, has observers worried about future stability in the region.

There has also been a recent wave of academic interest in institutions. Academic institutionalists, not surprisingly, consider institutions to be a powerful force for stability. Robert Keohane, for example, declares that, "avoiding military conflict in Europe after the Cold War depends greatly on whether the next decade is characterized by a continuous pattern of institutionalized cooperation." Commenting on the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and the end of the Cold War, John Ruggie maintains that "there seems little doubt that multilateral norms and institutions have helped stabilize their international consequences. Indeed, such norms and institutions appear to be playing should now help to overcome divisions between East and West in Europe." Margaret Thatcher, "Shaping A New Global Community," Speech to the Aspen Institute, Aspen, Colorado, August 5, 1990.

4. Warren Christopher, "Toward a More Integrated World," Statement at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Ministerial Meeting, Paris, June 8, 1994. President Clinton and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl share the same view, as Clinton made clear when describing his private talks with Kohl in July 1994: "We know from our experience how half of Europe was integrated through NATO and other institutions that built stability after World War II. At the heart of our discussion today was what we have to do to integrate Europe's other half, the new independent nations." Thomas L. Friedman, "Clinton Sees Germany as Main Partner of the U.S. in Europe," New York Times, July 12, 1994.


8. Stability is simply the absence of wars and major crises.

a significant role in the management of a broad array of regional and global changes in the world system today.”

This article examines the claim that institutions push states away from war and promote peace. I concentrate on assessing the major international relations theories that employ institutions as a core concept: liberal institutionalism, collective security, and critical theory. I begin, however, with a brief review of realism, because of the “institutionalist” theories is largely a response to realism, and each directly challenges realism’s underlying logic. Realists and institutionalists particularly disagree about whether institutions markedly affect the prospects for international stability. Realists say no; institutionalists say yes. Realists maintain that institutions are basically a reflection of the distribution of power in the world. They are based on the self-interested calculations of the great powers, and they have no independent effect on state behavior. Realists therefore believe that institutions are not an important cause of peace. They matter only on the margins. Institutionalists directly challenge this view of institutions, arguing instead that institutions can alter state preferences and therefore change state behavior. Institutions can discourage states from calculating self-interest on the basis of how every move affects their relative power positions. Institutions are independent variables, and they have the capability to move states away from war.

Although institutionalists are united in their opposition to realist claims about institutions, each institutionalist theory makes a different argument about how institutions work to alter state behavior. My goal is to evaluate these three theories to determine whether the claim that institutions cause peace is persuasive. That task involves answering four questions: 1) What are institutions? 2) How do they work to cause peace? Specifically, what is the causal logic that underpins each theory? 3) Are these different logics that explain how institutions work compelling? 4) Does the evidence support these theories?

My central conclusion is that institutions have minimal influence on state behavior, and thus hold little promise for promoting stability in the post-Cold War world. The three theories on which the case for institutions is based are all flawed. Each has problems in its causal logic, and all three institutionalist theories find little support in the historical record.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. I begin with a brief definition of institutions and a discussion of realism, because each of the institutionalist theories takes its bearings from realism. In the main body of the article, I describe and evaluate...
liberal institutionalism, collective security, and critical theory. The concluding section considers why institutions are so highly regarded by policymakers and academics, when there is so little evidence that they are an important cause of peace.

What Are Institutions?

There is no widely-agreed upon definition of institutions in the international relations literature. The concept is sometimes defined so broadly as to encompass all of international relations, which gives it little analytical bite. For example, defining institutions as “recognized patterns of behavior or practice around which expectations converge” allows the concept to cover almost every regularized pattern of activity between states, from war to tariff bindings negotiated under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), thus rendering it largely meaningless. Still, it is possible to devise a useful definition that is consistent with how most institutionalist scholars employ the concept.

I define institutions as a set of rules 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. These rules are negotiated by states, and according to many prominent theorists, they entail the mutual acceptance of higher norms, which are “standards of behavior defined in terms of rights and obligations.” These rules are typically formalized in international agreements, and are

13. Regimes and institutions are treated as synonymous concepts in this article. They are also used interchangeably in the institutionalist literature. See Robert O. Keohane, “International Institutions: Two Approaches,” International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 32, No. 4 (December 1988), p. 384; Robert O. Keohane, International Institutions and State Power: Essays in International Relations Theory (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989), pp. 3–4; and Oran R. Young, International Cooperation: Building Regimes for Natural Resources and the Environment (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), chaps. 1 and 8. The term “multilateralism” is also virtually synonymous with institutions. To quote John Ruggie, “the term ‘multilateral’ is an adjective that modifies the noun ‘institution.’ Thus, multilateralism depicts a generic institutional form in international relations. . . . [Specifically,] multilateralism is an institutional form which coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of ‘generalized’ principles of conduct.” Ruggie, “Multilateralism,” pp. 570–571.


17. Krasner, International Regimes, p. 186. Non-realist institutions are often based on higher norms, while few, if any, realist institutions are based on norms. The dividing line between norms and rules is not sharply defined in the institutionalist literature. See Robert O. Keohane, After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 57–58. For example, one might argue that rules, not just norms, are concerned with rights and obligations. The key point, however, is that for many institutionalists, norms, which are core beliefs about standards of appropriate state behavior, are the foundation on which more specific rules are constructed. This distinction between norms and rules applies in a rather straightforward
usually embodied in organizations with their own personnel and budgets. Although rules are usually incorporated into a formal international organization, it is not the organization per se that compels states to obey the rules. Institutions are not a form of world government. States themselves must choose to obey the rules they created. Institutions, in short, call for the “decentralized cooperation of individual sovereign states, without any effective mechanism of command.”

To answer the three remaining questions about how institutions do or do not work, we must examine the different institutionalist theories separately. However, a brief discussion of realism is in order first.

**Realism**

Realism paints a rather grim picture of world politics. The international system is portrayed as a brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other, and therefore have little reason to trust each other. Daily life is essentially a struggle for power, where each state strives not only to be the most powerful actor in the system, but also to ensure that no other state achieves that lofty position.

International relations is not a constant state of war, but it is a state of relentless security competition, with the possibility of war always in the background. The intensity of that competition varies from case to case. Although it might seem counterintuitive, states do frequently cooperate in this competitive world. Nevertheless, cooperation among states has its limits, mainly because it is constrained by the dominating logic of security competition, which no amount of cooperation can eliminate. Genuine peace, or a world where states do not compete for power, is not likely, according to realism.

18. International organizations are public agencies established through the cooperative efforts of two or more states. These administrative structures have their own budget, personnel, and buildings. John Ruggie defines them as “palpable entities with headquarters and letterheads, voting procedures, and generous pension plans.” Ruggie, “Multilateralism,” p. 573. Once rules are incorporated into an international organization, “they may seem almost coterminous,” even though they are “distinguishable analytically.” Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power*, p. 5.


20. Although realist scholars agree about many aspects of international politics, there are important intellectual disagreements among them. Consider Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, probably the two most influential realists over the past fifty years. Morgenthau maintains that states have a will to power, while Waltz begins his theory with the assumption that states merely want to survive and are therefore driven to maximize security. See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1973); and Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979). The discussion in this section is based on my own thinking about realism, which is closer to Waltz than to Morgenthau.

This pessimistic view of how the world works can be derived from realism’s five assumptions about the international system. The first is that the international system is anarchic. This does not mean that it is chaotic or riven by disorder. It is easy to draw that conclusion, since realism depicts a world characterized by security competition and war. However, “anarchy” as employed by realists has nothing to do with conflict; rather it is an ordering principle, which says that the system comprises independent political units (states) that have no central authority above them. Sovereignty, in other words, inheres in states, because there is no higher ruling body in the international system. There is no “government over governments.”

The second assumption is that states inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly to destroy each other. States are potentially dangerous to each other. A state’s military power is usually identified with the particular weaponry at its disposal, although even if there were no weapons, the individuals of a state could still use their feet and hands to attack the population of another state.

The third assumption is that states can never be certain about the intentions of other states. Specifically, no state can be certain another state will not use its offensive military capability against the first. This is not to say that states necessarily have malign intentions. Another state may be reliably benign, but it is impossible to be certain of that judgment because intentions are impossible to divine with 100 percent certainty. There are many possible causes of aggression, and no state can be sure that another state is not motivated by one of them. Furthermore, intentions can change quickly, so a state’s intentions can be benign one day and malign the next. Uncertainty is unavoidable when assessing intentions, which simply means that states can never be sure that other states do not have offensive intentions to go with their offensive military capability.

The fourth assumption is that the most basic motive driving states is survival. States want to maintain their sovereignty. The fifth assumption is that states think strategically about how to survive in the international system. States are instrumentally rational. Nevertheless, they may miscalculate from time to time because they operate in a world of imperfect information, where potential adversaries have incentives to misrepresent their own strength or weakness and to conceal their true aims.

None of these assumptions alone mandates that states will behave competitively. In fact, the fundamental assumption dealing with motives says that states merely aim to survive, which is a defensive goal. When taken together, however, these five assump-

24. Morgenthau, as emphasized, maintains that states have an innate will to power, and are therefore inherently offensive in their outlook. The argument here is that states begin with a defensive motive, but are forced to think and sometimes act offensively because of the structure of the international system.
tions can create incentives for states to think and sometimes to behave aggressively. Specifically, three main patterns of behavior result.

First, states in the international system fear each other. They regard each other with suspicion, and they worry that war might be in the offing. They anticipate danger. There is little room for trust among states. Although the level of fear varies across time and space, it can never be reduced to a trivial level. The basis of this fear is that in a world where states have the capability to offend against each other, and might have the motive to do so, any state bent on survival must be at least suspicious of other states and reluctant to trust them. Add to this the assumption that there is no central authority that a threatened state can turn to for help, and states have even greater incentive to fear each other. Moreover, there is no mechanism—other than the possible self-interest of third parties—for punishing an aggressor. Because it is often difficult to deter potential aggressors, states have ample reason to take steps to be prepared for war.

The possible consequences of falling victim to aggression further illustrate why fear is a potent force in world politics. States do not compete with each other as if international politics were simply an economic marketplace. Political competition among states is a much more dangerous business than economic intercourse; it can lead to war, and war often means mass killing on the battlefield and even mass murder of civilians. In extreme cases, war can even lead to the total destruction of a state. The horrible consequences of war sometimes cause states to view each other not just as competitors, but as potentially deadly enemies.

Second, each state in the international system aims to guarantee its own survival. Because other states are potential threats, and because there is no higher authority to rescue them when danger arises, states cannot depend on others for their security. Each state tends to see itself as vulnerable and alone, and therefore it aims to provide for its own survival. As Kenneth Waltz puts it, states operate in a “self-help” system. This emphasis on self-help does not preclude states from forming alliances. But alliances are only temporary marriages of convenience, where today’s alliance partner might be tomorrow’s enemy, and today’s enemy might be tomorrow’s alliance partner. States operating in a self-help world should always act according to their own self-interest, because it pays to be selfish in a self-help world. This is true in the short term as well as the long term, because if a state loses in the short run, it may not be around for the long haul.

Third, states in the international system aim to maximize their relative power positions over other states. The reason is simple: the greater the military advantage one
state has over other states, the more secure it is. Every state would like to be the most formidable military power in the system because this is the best way to guarantee survival in a world that can be very dangerous. This logic creates strong incentives for states to take advantage of one another, including going to war if the circumstances are right and victory seems likely. The aim is to acquire more military power at the expense of potential rivals. The ideal outcome would be to end up as the hegemon in the system. Survival would then be almost guaranteed.

All states are influenced by this logic, which means not only that they look for opportunities to take advantage of one another, but also that they work to insure that other states do not take advantage of them.28 States are, in other words, both offensively-oriented and defensively-oriented. They think about conquest themselves, and they balance against aggressors; this inexorably leads to a world of constant security competition, with the possibility of war always in the background. Peace, if one defines that concept as a state of tranquility or mutual concord, is not likely to break out in this world.

COOPERATION IN A REALIST WORLD

Although realism envisions a world that is fundamentally competitive, cooperation between states does occur. It is sometimes difficult to achieve, however, and always difficult to sustain. Two factors inhibit cooperation: relative-gains considerations, and concern about cheating.29

States contemplating cooperation must consider how the profits or gains will be distributed among them. They can think about the division in two different ways. They can think in terms of absolute gains, which means each side focuses on maximizing its own profit, and cares little about how much the other side gains or loses in the deal. Each side cares about the other only to the extent that the other side’s behavior affects its own prospects for achieving maximum profits. Alternately, states can think in terms of relative gains, which means each side not only considers its individual gain, but also how well it does compared to the other side.

Because states in a realist world are concerned about the balance of power, they must be motivated primarily by relative gains concerns when considering cooperation. While each state wants to maximize its absolute gains, it is more important to make sure that it does better, or at least no worse, than the other state in any agreement. However, cooperation is more difficult to achieve when states are attuned to relative-gains logic, rather than absolute-gains logic. This is because states concerned about absolute gains
need only make sure that the pie is expanding and that they are getting at least some portion of the increase, while states that worry about relative gains must care also about how the pie is divided, which complicates cooperative efforts.

Concerns about cheating also hinder cooperation. States are often reluctant to enter into cooperative agreements for fear that the other side will cheat on the agreement and gain a relative advantage. There is a “special peril of defection” in the military realm, because the nature of military weaponry allows for rapid shifts in the balance of power. Such a development could create a window of opportunity for the cheating state to inflict a decisive defeat on the victim state.30

These barriers to cooperation notwithstanding, states do cooperate in a realist world. For example, balance-of-power logic often causes states to form alliances and cooperate against common enemies. States sometimes cooperate to gang up on a third state, as the Germans and the Soviets did against Poland in 1939.31 Rivals as well as allies cooperate. After all, deals can be struck that roughly reflect the distribution of power, and satisfy concerns about cheating. The various arms control agreements signed by the superpowers during the Cold War illustrate this point.

The bottom line, however, is that cooperation takes place in a world that is competitive at its core—one where states have powerful incentives to take advantage of other states. This point is graphically highlighted by European politics in the forty years before World War I. There was much cooperation among the great powers during this period, but that did not stop them from going to war in 1914.32

INSTITUTIONS IN A REALIST WORLD

Realists also recognize that states sometimes operate through institutions. However, they believe that those rules reflect state calculations of self-interest based primarily on the international distribution of power. The most powerful states in the system create and shape institutions so that they can maintain their share of world power, or even increase it. In this view, institutions are essentially “arenas for acting out power relationships.”33 For realists, the causes of war and peace are mainly a function of the balance of power, and institutions largely mirror the distribution of power in the system. In short, the balance of power is the independent variable that explains war; institutions are merely an intervening variable in the process.

NATO provides a good example of realist thinking about institutions. NATO is an institution, and it certainly played a role in preventing World War III and helping the

32. See John Maynard Keynes, The Economic Consequences of the Peace (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), chap. 2; and J.M. Roberts, Europe, 1880–1945 (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 239–241. There was also significant cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union during World War II, but that cooperation did not prevent the outbreak of the Cold War shortly after Germany and Japan were defeated.
West win the Cold War. Nevertheless, NATO was basically a manifestation of the bipolar distribution of power in Europe during the Cold War, and it was that balance of power, not NATO per se, that provided the key to maintaining stability on the continent. NATO was essentially an American tool for managing power in the face of the Soviet threat. Now, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, realists argue that NATO must either disappear or reconstitute itself on the basis of the new distribution of power in Europe.\(^3\) NATO cannot remain as it was during the Cold War.

**Varieties of Institutionalist Theories**

There are three institutionalist theories, and each offers a different argument about how institutions push states away from war and help foster stability.\(^3\) Liberal institutionalism is the least ambitious of the three theories. It 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. Increased cooperation in those realms is presumed to reduce the likelihood of war, although liberal institutionalists do not explain how. 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. The aim is to create rules that constrain states, but not to challenge the fundamental realist claim that states are self-interested actors.

Collective security directly confronts the issue of how to prevent war. The theory starts with the assumption that force will continue to matter in world politics, and that states will have to guard against potential aggressors. However, the threat of war can be greatly reduced, according to the theory, by challenging realist thinking about state behavior, and substituting in its place three anti-realist norms. First, states should reject the idea of using force to change the status quo. Second, to deal with states that violate that norm and threaten (or start) a war, responsible states must not act on the basis of their own narrow self-interest. Rather, they must suppress the temptation to respond in whatever way would maximize their individual gains, and instead automatically join together to present the aggressor with the threat of overwhelming force. Third, states must trust each other to renounce aggression and to mean that renunciation. They must also be confident that other states will come to their rescue, should they become the target of aggression.

Critical theory is the most ambitious of the theories, as its ultimate aim is to transform the fundamental nature of international politics and to create a world where there is not just increased cooperation among states, but the possibility of genuine peace. Like collective security, but unlike liberal institutionalism, critical theory directly challenges


\(^3\) Despite these differences among institutionalist theories, proponents of each theory occasionally make favorable reference to the other theories, and thus seem to recognize that all three theories are part of an institutionalist body of literature that takes anti-realism as its main point of reference. See, for example: Charles A. Kupchan and Clifford A. Kupchan, “Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe,” *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1991), pp. 114–161; and Ruggie, “Multilateralism,” pp. 561–598.
realist thinking about the self-interested behavior of states. The theory is predicated on
the assumption that ideas and discourse—how we think and talk about international
politics—are the driving forces behind state behavior. It utterly rejects realism’s claim
that state behavior is largely a function of the given structure of the external world. For
critical theorists, ideas shape the material world in important ways, and thus the way
to revolutionize international politics is to change drastically the way individuals think
and talk about world politics. Intellectuals, especially the critical theorists themselves,
are believed to play a key role in that process.

LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM

Liberal institutionalism does not directly address the question of whether institutions
cause peace, but instead focuses on the less ambitious goal of explaining cooperation
in cases where state interests are not fundamentally opposed. Specifically, the theory
looks at cases where states are having difficulty cooperating because they have “mixed”
interests; in other words, each side has incentives both to cooperate and not to coopera-
te. Each side can benefit from cooperation, however, which liberal institutionalists
define as “goal-directed behavior that entails mutual policy adjustments so that all sides
end up better off than they would otherwise be.” The theory is of little relevance in
situations where states’ interests are fundamentally conflictual and neither side thinks
it has much to gain from cooperation. In these circumstances, states aim to gain
advantage over each other. They think in terms of winning and losing, and this
invariably leads to intense security competition, and sometimes war. But liberal institu-
tionalism does not deal directly with these situations, and thus says little about how
to resolve or even ameliorate them.

Therefore, the theory largely ignores security issues and concentrates instead on
economic and, to a lesser extent, environmental issues. In fact, the theory is built on
the assumption that international politics can be divided into two realms—security and

36. Among the key liberal institutionalist works are: Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane,
Approaches,” pp. 379–396; Keohane, International Institutions and State Power, chap. 1; Charles
Lipson, “International Cooperation in Economic and Security Affairs,” World Politics, Vol. 37, No. 1
(October 1984), pp. 1–23; Lisa L. Martin, “Institutions and Cooperation: Sanctions During the
and Strategies,” World Politics, Vol. 38, No. 1 (October 1985), pp. 1–24; and Stein, Why Nations
Cooperate.
39. For examples of the theory at work in the environmental realm, see Peter M. Haas, Robert O.
Keohane, and Marc A. Levy, eds., Institutions for the Earth: Sources of Effective International Environ-
mental Protection (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), especially chaps. 1 and 9. Some of the most
important work on institutions and the environment has been done by Oran Young. See, for
example, Young, International Cooperation. The rest of my discussion concentrates on economic, not
environmental issues, for conciseness, and also because the key theoretical works in the liberal
institutionalist literature focus on economic rather than environmental matters.
political economy—and that liberal institutionalism mainly applies to the latter, but not
the former. This theme is clearly articulated by Charles Lipson, who writes that “sig-
nificantly different institutional arrangements are associated with international eco-
nomic and security issues.” Moreover, the likelihood of cooperation is markedly
different within these two realms: when economic relations are at stake, “cooperation
can be sustained among several self-interested states,” whereas the prospects for coop-
eration are “more impoverished . . . in security affairs.” Thus, the theory’s proponents
pay little attention to the security realm, where questions about war and peace are of
central importance.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to examine liberal institutionalism closely.
Liberal institutionalists sometimes assert that institutions are an important cause of
international stability. Moreover, one might argue that if the theory shows a strong
causal connection between institutions and economic cooperation, it would be relatively
easy to take the next step and link cooperation with peace. Some proponents of the
theory maintain that institutions contribute to international stability; this suggests that
they believe it is easy to connect cooperation and stability. I doubt this claim, mainly
because proponents of the theory define cooperation so narrowly as to avoid military
issues. Let us assume, however, that liberal institutionalists are attempting to take a
giant step toward developing a theory that explains how institutions push states away
from war.

CAUSAL LOGIC. Liberal institutionalists claim to accept realism’s root assumptions
while arguing that cooperation is nevertheless easier to achieve than realists recognize.
Robert Keohane, for example, writes in After Hegemony that he is “adopting the realist
model of rational egoism.” He continues: “I propose to show, on the basis of their own
assumptions, that the characteristic pessimism of realism does not necessarily follow. I
seek to demonstrate that realist assumptions about world politics are consistent with
the formation of institutionalized arrangements . . . which promote cooperation.” In
particular, liberal institutionalists emphasize that states “dwell in perpetual anarchy,”
and must therefore act as rational egoists in what is a self-help world.

42. I have suggested a possible line of argument in John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future:
Instability in Europe After the Cold War,” International Security, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990),
pp. 42–44. Also, Charles Glaser makes the connection between cooperation and peace in “Realists
50–56.
43. Liberal institutionalists assume that cooperation is a positive goal, although they recognize it
has a downside as well. See Keohane, After Hegemony, pp. 10–11, 247–257; and Keohane, “International
Institutions: Two Approaches,” p. 393. The virtues and vices of cooperation are not explored
in any detail in the liberal institutionalist literature.
44. Keohane, After Hegemony, p. 67; also see p. 29. Similarly, Arthur Stein claims that, “Despite the
different conclusions that they draw about the cooperative or conflictual nature of international
According to liberal institutionalists, the principal obstacle to cooperation among states with mutual interests is the threat of cheating.\textsuperscript{46} The famous “prisoners’ dilemma,” which is the analytical centerpiece of most of the liberal institutionalist literature, captures the essence of the problem that states must solve to achieve cooperation.\textsuperscript{47} Each of two states can either cheat or cooperate with the other. Each side wants to maximize its own gain, but does not care about the size of the other side’s gain; each side cares about the other side only so far as the other side’s chosen strategy affects its own prospects for maximizing gain. The most attractive strategy for each state is to cheat and hope the other state pursues a cooperative strategy. In other words, a state’s ideal outcome is to “sucker” the other side into thinking it is going to cooperate, and then cheat. But both sides understand this logic, and therefore both sides will try to cheat the other. Consequently, both sides will end up worse off than if they had cooperated, since mutual cheating leads to the worst possible outcome. Even though mutual cooperation is not as attractive as suckering the other side, it is certainly better than the outcome when both sides cheat.

The key to solving this dilemma is for each side to convince the other that they have a collective interest in making what appear to be short-term sacrifices (the gain that might result from successful cheating) for the sake of long-term benefits (the substantial payoff from mutual long-term cooperation). This means convincing states to accept the second-best outcome, which is mutual collaboration. The principal obstacle to reaching this cooperative outcome will be fear of getting suckered, should the other side cheat. This, in a nutshell, is the problem that institutions must solve.

To deal with this problem of “political market failure,” institutions must deter cheaters and protect victims.\textsuperscript{48} Three messages must be sent to potential cheaters: you will be caught, you will be punished immediately, and you will jeopardize future cooperative efforts. Potential victims, on the other hand, need early warning of cheating to avoid serious injury, and need the means to punish cheaters.

Liberal institutionalists do not aim to deal with cheaters and victims by changing fundamental norms of state behavior. Nor do they suggest transforming the anarchical nature of the international system. They accept the assumption that states operate in an anarchic environment and behave in a self-interested manner.\textsuperscript{49} In this regard, their approach is less ambitious than collective security and critical theory, which aim to alter

\textsuperscript{46} Cheating is basically a “breach of promise.” Oye, “Explaining Cooperation Under Anarchy,” p. 1. It usually implies unobserved non-compliance, although there can be observed cheating as well. Defection is a synonym for cheating in the institutionalist literature.

\textsuperscript{47} The centrality of the prisoners’ dilemma and cheating to the liberal institutionalist literature is clearly reflected in virtually all the works cited in footnote 36. As Helen Milner notes in her review essay on this literature: “The focus is primarily on the role of regimes [institutions] in solving the defection [cheating] problem.” Milner, “International Theories of Cooperation.” p. 475.

\textsuperscript{48} The phrase is from Keohane, After Hegemony, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{49} Kenneth Oye, for example, writes in the introduction to an issue of World Politics containing a number of liberal institutionalist essays: “Our focus is on non-altruistic cooperation among states dwelling in international anarchy.” Oye, “Explaining Cooperation Under Anarchy,” p. 2. Also see Keohane, “International Institutions: Two Approaches,” pp. 380-381; and Keohane, International Institutions and State Power, p. 3.
important international norms. Liberal institutionalists instead concentrate on showing how rules can work to counter the cheating problem, even while states seek to maximize their own welfare. They argue that institutions can change a state's calculations about how to maximize gains. Specifically, rules can get states to make the short-term sacrifices needed to resolve the prisoners' dilemma and thus to realize long-term gains. Institutions, in short, can produce cooperation.

Rules can ideally be employed to make four major changes in "the contractual environment."50 First, rules can increase the number of transactions between particular states over time.51 This institutionalized iteration discourages cheating in three ways. It raises the costs of cheating by creating the prospect of future gains through cooperation, thereby invoking "the shadow of the future" to deter cheating today. A state caught cheating would jeopardize its prospects of benefiting from future cooperation, since the victim would probably retaliate. In addition, iteration gives the victim the opportunity to pay back the cheater: it allows for reciprocation, the tit-for-tat strategy, which works to punish cheaters and not allow them to get away with their transgression. Finally, it rewards states that develop a reputation for faithful adherence to agreements, and punishes states that acquire a reputation for cheating.52

Second, rules can tie together interactions between states in different issue areas. Issue-linkage aims to create greater interdependence between states, who will then be reluctant to cheat in one issue area for fear that the victim—and perhaps other states as well—will retaliate in another issue area. It discourages cheating in much the same way as iteration: it raises the costs of cheating and provides a way for the victim to retaliate against the cheater.

Third, a structure of rules can increase the amount of information available to participants in cooperative agreements so that close monitoring is possible. Raising the level of information discourages cheating in two ways: it increases the likelihood that cheaters will be caught, and more importantly, it provides victims with early warning of cheating, thereby enabling them to take protective measures before they are badly hurt.

Fourth, rules can reduce the transaction costs of individual agreements.53 When institutions perform the tasks described above, states can devote less effort to negotiating and monitoring cooperative agreements, and to hedging against possible defections. By increasing the efficiency of international cooperation, institutions make it more profitable and thus more attractive for self-interested states.

Liberal institutionalism is generally thought to be of limited utility in the security realm, because fear of cheating is considered a much greater obstacle to cooperation.

53. See Keohane, After Hegemony, pp. 89-92.
when military issues are at stake. There is the constant threat that betrayal will result in a devastating military defeat. This threat of “swift, decisive defection” is simply not present when dealing with international economics. Given that “the costs of betrayal” are potentially much graver in the military than the economic sphere, states will be very reluctant to accept the “one step backward, two steps forward” logic which underpins the tit-for-tat strategy of conditional cooperation. One step backward in the security realm might mean destruction, in which case there will be no next step—backward or forward.

FLAWS IN THE CAUSAL LOGIC. There is an important theoretical failing in the liberal institutionalist logic, even as it applies to economic issues. The theory is correct as far as it goes: cheating can be a serious barrier to cooperation. It ignores, however, the other major obstacle to cooperation: relative-gains concerns. As Joseph Grieco has shown, liberal institutionalists assume that states are not concerned about relative gains, but focus exclusively on absolute gains. Keohane acknowledged this problem in 1993: “Grieco has made a significant contribution by focusing attention on the issue of relative gains, a subject that has been underemphasized, especially by liberal or neoliberal commentators on the world economy.”

This oversight is revealed by the assumed order of preference in the prisoners’ dilemma game: each state cares about how its opponent’s strategy will affect its own (absolute) gains, but not about how much one side gains relative to the other. In other words, each side simply wants to get the best deal for itself, and does not pay attention to how well the other side fares in the process. Nevertheless, liberal institutionalists

57. Robert 0. Keohane, “Institutional Theory and the Realist Challenge,” in Baldwin, Neorealism and Neoliberalism, p. 283. When liberal institutionalists developed their theory in the mid-1980s, they did not explicitly assume that states pursue absolute gains. There is actually little evidence that they thought much about the distinction between relative gains and absolute gains. However, the assumption that states pursue absolute but not relative gains is implicit in their writings.
58. Lipson writes: “The Prisoner’s Dilemma, in its simplest form, involves two players. Each is assumed to be a self-interested, self-reliant maximizer of his own utility, an assumption that clearly parallels the Realist conception of sovereign states in international politics.” Lipson, “International
cannot ignore relative-gains considerations, because they assume that states are self-interested actors in an anarchic system, and they recognize that military power matters to states. A theory that explicitly accepts realism’s core assumptions—and liberal institutionalism does that—must confront the issue of relative gains if it hopes to develop a sound explanation for why states cooperate.

One might expect liberal institutionalists to offer the counterargument that relative-gains logic applies only to the security realm, while absolute-gains logic applies to the economic realm. Given that they are mainly concerned with explaining economic and environmental cooperation, leaving relative-gains concerns out of the theory does not matter.

There are two problems with this argument. First, if cheating were the only significant obstacle to cooperation, liberal institutionalists could argue that their theory applies to the economic, but not the military realm. In fact, they do make that argument. However, once relative-gains considerations are factored into the equation, it becomes impossible to maintain the neat dividing line between economic and military issues, mainly because military might is significantly dependent on economic might. The relative size of a state’s economy has profound consequences for its standing in the international balance of military power. Therefore, relative-gains concerns must be taken into account for security reasons when looking at the economic as well as military domain. The neat dividing line that liberal institutionalists employ to specify when their theory applies has little utility when one accepts that states worry about relative gains.59

Second, there are non-realist (i.e., non-security) logics that might explain why states worry about relative gains. Strategic trade theory, for example, provides a straightforward economic logic for why states should care about relative gains.60 It argues that states should help their own firms gain comparative advantage over the firms of rival states, because that is the best way to insure national economic prosperity. There is also a psychological logic, which portrays individuals as caring about how well they do (or their state does) in a cooperative agreement, not for material reasons, but because it is human nature to compare one’s progress with that of others.61

Another possible liberal institutionalist counterargument is that solving the cheating problem renders the relative-gains problem irrelevant. If states cannot cheat each other, they need not fear each other, and therefore, states would not have to worry about relative power. The problem with this argument, however, is that even if the cheating problem were solved, states would still have to worry about relative gains because gaps

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59. My thinking on this matter has been markedly influenced by Sean Lynn-Jones, in his June 19, 1994, correspondence with me.
in gains can be translated into military advantage that can be used for coercion or aggression. And in the international system, states sometimes have conflicting interests that lead to aggression.

There is also empirical evidence that relative-gains considerations mattered during the Cold War even in economic relations among the advanced industrialized democracies in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). One would not expect realist logic about relative gains to be influential in this case: the United States was a superpower with little to fear militarily from the other OECD states, and those states were unlikely to use a relative-gains advantage to threaten the United States. Furthermore, the OECD states were important American allies during the Cold War, and thus the United States benefited strategically when they gained substantially in size and strength.

Nonetheless, relative gains appear to have mattered in economic relations among the advanced industrial states. Consider three prominent studies. Stephen Krasner considered efforts at cooperation in different sectors of the international communications industry. He found that states were remarkably unconcerned about cheating but deeply worried about relative gains, which led him to conclude that liberal institutionalism “is not relevant for global communications.” Grieco examined American and EC efforts to implement, under the auspices of GATT, a number of agreements relating to non-tariff barriers to trade. He found that the level of success was not a function of concerns about cheating but was influenced primarily by concern about the distribution of gains. Similarly, Michael Mastanduno found that concern about relative gains, not about cheating, was an important factor in shaping American policy towards Japan in three cases: the F5X fighter aircraft, satellites, and high-definition television.

I am not suggesting that relative-gains considerations make cooperation impossible; my point is simply that they can pose a serious impediment to cooperation and must therefore be taken into account when developing a theory of cooperation among states. This point is apparently now recognized by liberal institutionalists. Keohane, for example, acknowledges that he “did make a major mistake by underemphasizing distributive issues and the complexities they create for international cooperation.”

**CAN LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM BE REPAIRED?** Liberal institutionalists must address two questions if they are to repair their theory. First, can institutions facilitate

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cooperation when states seriously care about relative gains, or do institutions only matter when states can ignore relative-gains considerations and focus instead on absolute gains? I find no evidence that liberal institutionalists believe that institutions facilitate cooperation when states care deeply about relative gains. They apparently concede that their theory only applies when relative-gains considerations matter little or hardly at all. Thus the second question: when do states not worry about relative gains? The answer to this question would ultimately define the realm in which liberal institutionalism applies.

Liberal institutionalists have not addressed this important question in a systematic fashion, so any assessment of their efforts to repair the theory must be preliminary. What exists are a lengthy response by Keohane to Grieco’s original work on relative gains, and two studies responding to Grieco’s writings by Robert Powell and Duncan Snidal, which Keohane and other liberal institutionalists point to as exemplars of how to think about the relative-gains problem.

Powell and Snidal offer different arguments about when relative-gains considerations are slight. Nevertheless, both are essentially realist arguments. Neither study discusses how institutions might facilitate cooperation, and both explanations are built around familiar realist concepts.

At the root of Powell’s argument is the well-known offense-defense balance made famous by Robert Jervis, George Quester, Jack Snyder, and Stephen Van Evera. Powell maintains that relative-gains considerations matter little, and that states act in accordance with liberal institutionalism when the threat of aggressive war is low and “the use of force is no longer at issue.” That situation obtains when the cost of aggression is high, which is, in turn, a function of the “constraints imposed by the underlying technology of war.” In other words, when the prevailing military weaponry favors

65. For example, Keohane wrote after becoming aware of Grieco’s argument about relative gains: “Under specified conditions—where mutual interests are low and relative gains are therefore particularly important to states—neoliberal theory expects neorealism to explain elements of state behavior.” Keohane, International Institutions and State Power, pp. 15–16.


69. Powell, “Absolute and Relative Gains,” p. 1314; also see p. 1311.

70. Ibid., p. 1312. Powell does not use the term “offense-defense” balance in his article.
the offense, then the cost of war is low, and relative-gains considerations will be intense. Institutions can do little to facilitate cooperation in such circumstances. However, when defensive technology dominates, the cost of initiating aggression is high and the relative-gains problem is subdued, which allows institutions to cause cooperation.

Snidal maintains that relative-gains concerns might not matter much to states even if they face a serious threat of war. The root concept in his argument is the distribution of power in the international system. Specifically, he maintains that in a multipolar system where more than a small number of states have roughly equal power, states will not worry much about relative gains. Increasing the number of states in the system decreases concern for relative gains. “The reason is that more actors enhance the possibilities of protecting oneself through forming coalitions; and, generally, the less well united one’s potential enemies, the safer one is.” However, he concedes that “the relative gains hypothesis . . . has important consequences for two-actor situations and, where there are small numbers or important asymmetries among larger numbers, it may modify conclusions obtained from the absolute gains model.”

I draw three conclusions from this discussion of the liberal institutionalists’ efforts to deal with the relative-gains problem. First, even if one accepts Powell and Snidal’s arguments about when states largely ignore relative-gains concerns, those conditions are rather uncommon in the real world. Powell would look for a world where defensive military technologies dominate. However, it is very difficult to distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons, and Powell provides no help on this point. Nuclear weapons are an exception; they are defensive weapons in situations of mutual assured destruction. Still, the presence of massive numbers of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the superpowers during the Cold War did not stop them from engaging in an intense security competition where relative-gains considerations mattered greatly. Very importantly, Powell provides no historical examples to illustrate his central argument. Snidal’s basic arguments about distribution of power fit squarely in the realist tradition (in fact, Grieco made them in abbreviated form in “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation,” p. 506), the formal model he develops rests on the non-realist assumption that “gains from cooperation are proportional to the size of the involved states and are shared equally between them.” Snidal, “Relative Gains,” p. 715. This assumption essentially eliminates the possibility of gaps in gains and thus erases the relative-gains problem. For discussion of this matter, see Grieco’s contribution to “The Relative-Gains Problem for International Cooperation,” pp. 729–733.

71. Although Snidal’s basic arguments about distribution of power fit squarely in the realist tradition (in fact, Grieco made them in abbreviated form in “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation,” p. 506), the formal model he develops rests on the non-realist assumption that “gains from cooperation are proportional to the size of the involved states and are shared equally between them.” Snidal, “Relative Gains,” p. 715. This assumption essentially eliminates the possibility of gaps in gains and thus erases the relative-gains problem. For discussion of this matter, see Grieco’s contribution to “The Relative-Gains Problem for International Cooperation,” pp. 729–733.


73. Ibid., p. 702.


would look for a multipolar world with large numbers of roughly equal-sized great powers. However, historically we find multipolar systems with small numbers of great powers—usually five or six—and very often significant power asymmetries within them. Snidal offers no historical examples of multipolar systems in which the great powers largely ignored relative-gains considerations.76

Second, liberal institutionalism itself has little new to say about when states worry about relative gains. Proponents of the theory have instead chosen to rely on two realist explanations to answer that question: the offense-defense balance and the distribution of power in the system. Thus, liberal institutionalism can hardly be called a theoretical alternative to realism, but instead should be seen as subordinate to it.77

Third, even in circumstances where realist logic about relative gains does not apply, non-military logics like strategic trade theory might cause states to think in terms of relative gains. Liberal institutionalist theory should directly confront those logics.

Problems with the Empirical Record. Although there is much evidence of cooperation among states, this alone does not constitute support for liberal institutionalism. What is needed is evidence of cooperation that would not have occurred in the absence of institutions because of fear of cheating, or its actual presence. But scholars have provided little evidence of cooperation of that sort, nor of cooperation failing because of cheating. Moreover, as discussed above, there is considerable evidence that states worry much about relative gains not only in security matters, but in the economic realm as well.

This dearth of empirical support for liberal institutionalism is acknowledged by proponents of that theory.78 The empirical record is not completely blank, however, but the few historical cases that liberal institutionalists have studied provide scant support for the theory. Consider two prominent examples.

76. Keohane actually discusses the prospects for stability in post–Cold War Europe in his response to Grieco; see Keohane, “Institutional Theory and the Realist Challenge,” pp. 284–291. Surprisingly, his optimistic assessment pays no attention to either Powell or Snidal’s arguments, although earlier in that response, he relies on their arguments to “delimit the scope of both realist and institutionalist arguments.” See ibid., p. 276.

77. Liberal institutionalists have not always been clear about the relationship between their theory and realism. For example, Keohane makes the modest claim in After Hegemony (p. 14) that his theory is a “modification of Realism. Realist theories. . . . need to be supplemented, though not replaced.” He made a somewhat bolder claim a few years later, writing that, “despite [certain] affinities with neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism should be regarded as a distinct school of thought.” Keohane, International Institutions and State Power, p. 8. In that same piece, however, he makes the very bold argument that “we must understand that neoliberal institutionalism is not simply an alternative to neorealism, but, in fact, claims to subsume it.” Ibid., p. 15.

78. For example, Lisa Martin writes that “scholars working in the realist tradition maintain a well-founded skepticism about the empirical impact of institutional factors on state behavior. This skepticism is grounded in a lack of studies that show precisely how and when institutions have constrained state decision-making.” According to Oran Young, “One of the more surprising features of the emerging literature on regimes [institutions] is the relative absence of sustained discussions of the significance of . . . institutions, as determinants of collective outcomes at the international level.” Martin, “Institutions and Cooperation,” p. 144; Young, International Cooperation, p. 206.
Keohane looked at the performance of the International Energy Agency (IEA) in 1974–81, a period that included the 1979 oil crisis. This case does not appear to lend the theory much support. First, Keohane concedes that the IEA failed outright when put to the test in 1979: “regime-oriented efforts at cooperation do not always succeed, as the fiasco of IEA actions in 1979 illustrates.” He claims, however, that in 1980 the IEA had a minor success “under relatively favorable conditions” in responding to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War. Although he admits it is difficult to specify how much the IEA mattered in the 1980 case, he notes that “it seems clear that ‘it [the IEA] leaned in the right direction,’” a claim that hardly constitutes strong support for the theory. Second, it does not appear from Keohane’s analysis that either fear of cheating or actual cheating hindered cooperation in the 1979 case, as the theory would predict. Third, Keohane chose the IEA case precisely because it involved relations among advanced Western democracies with market economies, where the prospects for cooperation were excellent. The modest impact of institutions in this case is thus all the more damning to the theory.

Lisa Martin examined the role that the European Community (EC) played during the Falklands War in helping Britain coax its reluctant allies to continue economic sanctions against Argentina after military action started. She concludes that the EC helped Britain win its allies’ cooperation by lowering transaction costs and facilitating issue linkage. Specifically, Britain made concessions on the EC budget and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); Britain’s allies agreed in return to keep sanctions on Argentina.

This case, too, is less than a ringing endorsement for liberal institutionalism. First, British efforts to maintain EC sanctions against Argentina were not impeded by fears of possible cheating, which the theory identifies as the central impediment to cooperation. So this case does not present an important test of liberal institutionalism, and thus the cooperative outcome does not tell us much about the theory’s explanatory power. Second, it was relatively easy for Britain and her allies to strike a deal in this case. Neither side’s core interests were threatened, and neither side had to make significant sacrifices to reach an agreement. Forging an accord to continue sanctions was not a difficult undertaking. A stronger test for liberal institutionalism would require states to cooperate when doing so entailed significant costs and risks. Third, the EC was not essential to an agreement. Issues could have been linked without the EC, and although the EC may have lowered transaction costs somewhat, there is no reason to think these

79. Keohane, After Hegemony, chap. 10.
80. Ibid., p. 16.
82. Keohane, After Hegemony, p. 7.
83. Martin, “Institutions and Cooperation.” Martin looks closely at three other cases in Coercive Cooperation to determine the effect of institutions on cooperation. I have concentrated on the Falklands War case, however, because it is, by her own admission, her strongest case. See ibid., p. 96.
costs were a serious impediment to striking a deal.\footnote{84. Martin does not claim that agreement would not have been possible without the EC. Indeed, she appears to concede that even without the EC, Britain still could have fashioned “separate bilateral agreements with each EEC member in order to gain its cooperation, [although] this would have involved much higher transaction costs.” Martin, “Institutions and Cooperation,” pp. 174–175. However, transaction costs among the advanced industrial democracies are not very high in an era of rapid communications and permanent diplomatic establishments.} It is noteworthy that Britain and America were able to cooperate during the Falklands War, even though the United States did not belong to the EC.

There is also evidence that directly challenges liberal institutionalism in issue areas where one would expect the theory to operate successfully. The studies discussed above by Grieco, Krasner, and Mastanduno test the institutionalist argument in a number of different political economy cases, and each finds the theory has little explanatory power. More empirical work is needed before a final judgment is rendered on the explanatory power of liberal institutionalism. Nevertheless, the evidence gathered so far is unpromising at best.

In summary, liberal institutionalism does not provide a sound basis for understanding international relations and promoting stability in the post–Cold War world. It makes modest claims about the impact of institutions, and steers clear of war and peace issues, focusing instead on the less ambitious task of explaining economic cooperation. Furthermore, the theory’s causal logic is flawed, as proponents of the theory now admit. Having overlooked the relative-gains problem, they are now attempting to repair the theory, but their initial efforts are not promising. Finally, the available empirical evidence provides little support for the theory.

### COLLECTIVE SECURITY

eliminated but a problem to be managed."86 For advocates of collective security, institutions are the key to managing power successfully.

Although the theory emphasizes the continuing importance of military force, it is explicitly anti-realist. Its proponents express a distaste for balance-of-power logic and traditional alliances, as well as a desire to create a world where those realist concepts have no role to play.87

In the early twentieth century, Woodrow Wilson and others developed the theory of collective security, which formed the basis for the League of Nations. Despite the well-known failings of that particular institution, the theory’s popularity remains high. In fact, there has been much interest in collective security in the aftermath of the Cold War.88 Claude notes, “Whatever their failures, the Wilsonians clearly succeeded in establishing the conviction that collective security represents a brand of international morality vastly superior to that incorporated in the balance of power system.”89

Curiously, however, it is difficult to find scholarly work that makes the case for collective security without simultaneously expressing major reservations about the theory, and without expressing grave doubts that collective security could ever be realized in practice. Consider the writings of Claude, who is sympathetic to collective security, and has produced some of the most important work on the subject. He wrote in Power and International Relations, “I would regard the epithet unrealistic as fairly applicable to the theory of collective security.” In Swords into Plowshares, he maintained that for “men involved in . . . establishing a collective security system . . . their devotion to the ideal has been more a manifestation of their yearning for peace and order as an end than as an expression of conviction that the theory of collective security provides a workable and acceptable means to that end.” Finally, Claude wrote in 1992, “I reached the conclusion some thirty years ago that . . . the implementation of collective security theory is not a possibility to be taken seriously.”90

86. Claude, Power And International Relations, p. 6.
87. Consider, for example, how Woodrow Wilson describes pre–World War I Europe: “The day we left behind us was a day of alliances. It was a day of balances of power. It was a day of ‘every nation take care of itself or make a partnership with some other nation or group of nations to hold the peace of the world steady or to dominate the weaker portions of the world’.” Quoted in Claude, Power and International Relations, p. 81.
89. Claude, Power And International Relations, p. 116. Also see Wolfers, Discord And Collaboration, p. 197.
90. Claude, Power And International Relations, pp. 203–204; Claude, Swords Into Plowshares, p. 283; and Claude, “Collective Security After the Cold War,” p. 9. The Kuchans, who are also sympa-
CAUSAL LOGIC. 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, even though the theory assumes that military power will remain a fact of life in the international system. For advocates of collective security, institutions are the key to accomplishing this ambitious task. Specifically, the goal is to convince states to base their behavior on three profoundly anti-realist norms.

First, states must renounce the use of military force to alter the status quo. They must not launch wars of aggression, but instead must agree to settle all disputes peaceably. Collective security allows for changes in the status quo, but those changes must come via negotiation, not at the end of a rifle barrel. The theory, as Claude notes, “depends upon a positive commitment to the value of world peace by the great mass of states.”

The theory nevertheless recognizes that some states may not accept this norm: if there were universal subscription to the norm, there would be no need for a collective security system to deal with troublemakers, since there would be none. However, the overwhelming majority of states must renounce wars of conquest, or else the system would collapse.

It is difficult to stipulate how many aggressors a collective security system can handle at once before it comes undone. The answer depends on the particular circumstances facing the system, such as: the number of great powers, the distribution of power among them, geography, and whether the aggressors are minor or major powers. The upper limit for aggressive major powers is probably two at any one time, but even then, the system is likely to have difficulty dealing with them. Some collective security systems might even have trouble fighting two minor powers at the same time, since minor powers today are often well-armed. Fighting simultaneous wars against Iraq and North Korea, for example, would be a very demanding task, although the great powers would win them. Ideally, a collective security system would confront only one aggressor at a time, and not too often at that. Claude sums up the matter nicely: “Collective security...
assumes the _lonely_ aggressor; the violator of the world’s peace may be allowed an accomplice or two, but in principle the evil-doer is supposed to find himself virtually isolated in confrontation with the massive forces of the international _posse comitatus_."94

Second, “responsible” states must not think in terms of narrow self-interest when they act against lonely aggressors, but must instead choose to equate their national interest with the broader interests of the international community. Specifically, states must believe that their national interest is inextricably bound up with the national interest of other states, so that an attack on any state is considered an attack on every state.95 Thus, when a troublemaker appears in the system, all of the responsible states must automatically and collectively confront the aggressor with overwhelming military power. The aim is “to create automatic obligations of a collective character.”96

States in a self-help world calculate each move on the basis of how it will affect the balance of power. This narrow sense of self-interest means that states are likely to remain on the sidelines if vital interests are not threatened.97 This kind of behavior is unacceptable in a collective security world, where there must instead be “a legally binding and codified commitment on the part of all members to respond to aggression whenever and wherever it might occur.”98 A collective security system allows states little freedom of action. The practical effect of this comprehensive system of mutual assistance is that lonely aggressors are quickly confronted with a coalition of overwhelming military strength. For both deterrence and warfighting purposes, this “preponderant power” is far superior to the “minimum winning coalitions” that a troublemaker faces in a balance-of-power world.99 Once it becomes clear that aggression does not pay, even states reluctant to accept the first norm (the renunciation of aggression) will be more inclined to accept it.

Third, states must trust each other. States must not only act in accordance with the first two norms, but they must trust that other states will do likewise. If states fear each other, they do not in a realist world, collective security cannot work. States, Claude

95. Woodrow Wilson said in 1916, “We are participants, whether we would or not, in the life of the world. The interests of all nations are our own also. We are partners with the rest. What affects mankind is inevitably our affair as well as the affair of the nations of Europe and of Asia.” Quoted in August Heckscher, ed., _The Politics of Woodrow Wilson: Selections from His Speeches and Writings_ (New York: Harper, 1956), p. 258.
97. A state not at risk might fail to come to the aid of a threatened state because the risks and costs of going to war are too high, or because it has an interest in letting the combatants wear each other down, thus improving its own strategic position. A state not directly at risk might even join forces with the aggressor against the threatened state, so as to gain some of the spoils of victory.
99. Traditional alliances have no place in a collective security system. Woodrow Wilson is particularly eloquent on this point: “I am proposing that all nations henceforth avoid entangling alliances which would draw them into a competition of power, catch them in a net of intrigue and selfish rivalry, and disturb their own affairs with influences intruded from without. There is no entangling alliance in a concert of power. When all unite to act in the same sense and with the same purpose, all act in the common interest and are free to live their own lives under a common protection.” Quoted in Frederick L. Schuman, _International Politics: An Introduction to the Western State System_ (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), p. 254.
emphasizes, must “be willing to entrust their destinies to collective security. Confidence is the quintessential condition of the success of the system; states must be prepared to rely upon its effectiveness and impartiality.”

Trust is actually the most important of the three norms because it underpins the first two. Specifically, states must be very confident that almost all the other states in the system will sincerely renounce aggression, and will not change their minds at a later date. States also have to be confident that when an aggressor targets them, none of the other responsible states will get cold feet and fail to confront the troublemaker. This element of certainty is of great importance in a collective security system because if it fails to work, at least some of those states that have ignored the balance of power and eschewed alliances are going to be vulnerable to attack.

This discussion of trust raises an additional point about the problems a collective security system faces when it confronts multiple aggressors. The previous discussion focused mainly on the logistical difficulties of dealing with more than one troublemaker. However, the presence of multiple aggressors also raises the question of whether most states in the system are deeply committed to peace, and therefore, whether it makes sense to trust collective security. The more troublemakers there are in the system, the more doubts responsible states are likely to have about their investment in collective security. This same logic applies to suggestions that collective security can get by without requiring that all states join the system. Some argue that one or more states can remain on the sidelines, provided the member states can still confront any troublemakers with overwhelming military force. Although these free-riders are assumed to be non-aggressors, there is no guarantee that they will not later turn to conquest, in which case their free ride might have allowed them to improve significantly their relative power position. This free-rider problem, like the multiple-aggressor problem, is likely to undermine the responsible states’ trust in collective security and thus to cause its failure.

FLAWS IN THE CAUSAL LOGIC. There are two major flaws in collective security theory, and both concern the all-important component of trust. Collective security is an incomplete theory because it does not provide a satisfactory explanation for how states overcome their fears and learn to trust one another. 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. Collective security is largely silent about the first two realist assumptions, as the theory says little about either anarchy or offensive capability. However, it has something to say about intentions,

100. Claude, Swords Into Plowshares, p. 255. Also see Claude, Power And International Relations, p. 197.
102. Advocates of collective security usually favor widespread arms reductions, but they also recognize that states must maintain a significant offensive capability so that they can challenge an aggressor. For this reason, some scholars suggest that collective security might undermine stability. See Glaser, “Why NATO is Still Best,” pp. 30–33.
because the theory’s first two norms call for states not to aggress, but only to defend. States, in other words, should only have benign intentions when contemplating the use of military force.

However, the theory recognizes that one or more states might reject the norms that underpin collective security and behave aggressively. The very purpose of a collective security system, after all, is to deal with states that have aggressive intentions. In effect, collective security admits that no state can ever be completely certain about another state’s intentions, which brings us back to a realist world where states have little choice but to fear each other.

There is a second reason why states are not likely to place their trust in a collective security system: it has a set of demanding requirements—I count nine—that are likely to thwart efforts to confront an aggressor with preponderant power. Collective security, as Claude notes, “assumes the satisfaction of an extraordinarily complex network of requirements.”

First, for collective security to work, states must be able to distinguish clearly between aggressor and victim, and then move against the aggressor. However, it is sometimes difficult in a crisis to determine who is the troublemaker and who is the victim.

Debates still rage about which European great power, if any, bears responsibility for starting World War I. Similar disputes have followed most other wars.

Second, the theory assumes that all aggression is wrong. But there are occasionally cases where conquest is probably warranted. For example, there are good reasons to applaud the 1979 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, since it drove the murderous Pol Pot from power.

Third, some states are especially friendly for historical or ideological reasons. Should a state with close friends be labeled an aggressor in a collective security system, its friends are probably going to be reluctant to join the coalition against it. For example, it is difficult to imagine the United States using military force against Britain or Israel, even if they were branded aggressors by the international community.

Fourth, historical enmity between states can also complicate collective security efforts. Consider that a European collective security system would have to depend heavily on Germany and Russia, the two most powerful states on the continent, to maintain order. However, the idea of Germany, which wrought murder and destruction across Europe in 1939–45, and Russia, which was the core of the Soviet empire, maintaining order in Europe is sure to meet significant resistance from other European states.

Fifth, even if states agree to act automatically and collectively to meet aggression, there would surely be difficulty determining how to distribute the burden. States will have strong incentives to pass the buck and get other states to pay the heavy price of confronting an aggressor. During World War I, for example, Britain, France, and

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Russia each tried to get its allies to pay the blood price of defeating Germany on the battlefield.\footnote{David French, \textit{British Strategy and War Aims, 1914–1916} (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986).} Rampant buck-passing might undermine efforts to produce the preponderant military power necessary to make collective security work.

Sixth, it is difficult to guarantee a rapid response to aggression in a collective security system. Planning beforehand is problematic because “it is impossible to know what the alignment of states will be if there is an armed conflict.”\footnote{G.F. Hudson, “Collective Security and Military Alliances,” in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., \textit{Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 177.} There are also significant coordination problems associated with assembling a large coalition of states to fight a war. Rapid response becomes even more problematic if the responsible states must deal with more than one aggressor. It took more than six months for the United States to put together a coalition to liberate Kuwait from Saddam Hussein. As impressive as the American effort was, threatened states are not likely to have much faith in a security system that tells them help is likely to come, but will only arrive months after they have been conquered.

Seventh, states are likely to be reluctant to join a collective security effort because the system effectively transforms every local conflict into an international conflict. States that see conflict around the globe will surely be tempted to cordon off the troubled area and prevent further escalation, as the West has done in the former Yugoslavia.\footnote{For an example of this line of thinking, see Stephen M. Walt, “Collective Security and Revolutionary Change: Promoting Peace in the Former Soviet Union,” in Downs, \textit{Collective Security beyond the Cold War}, pp. 169–195.} Collective security, however, calls for escalation, even though it is intended for peaceful purposes.

Eighth, the notion that states must automatically respond to aggression impinges in fundamental ways on state sovereignty, and will therefore be difficult to sell. States, especially democracies, are likely to guard jealously their freedom to debate whether or not to fight an aggressor. War is a deadly business, especially if great powers are involved, and few countries want to commit themselves in advance to paying a huge blood price when their own self-interests are not directly involved.

Ninth, there is some contradiction concerning attitudes towards force that raises doubts about whether responsible states would actually come to the rescue of a threatened state. Collective security theory is predicated on the belief that war is a truly horrible enterprise, and therefore states should renounce aggression. At the same time, the theory mandates that states must be ready and willing to use force to thwart troublemakers. However, responsible states find war so repellent that they would renounce it; this raises doubts about their willingness to go to war to stop aggression. Indeed, most advocates of collective security prefer “creative diplomacy and economic sanctions” to military force when dealing with an aggressor state.\footnote{Robert C. Johansen, “Lessons For Collective Security,” \textit{World Policy Journal}, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Summer 1991), p. 562.}

In sum, states have abundant reasons to doubt that collective security will work as advertised when the chips are down and aggression seems likely. Should it fail, potential

victims are likely to be in deep trouble if they have ignored balance-of-power considerations and placed their faith in collective security. Recognizing this, states are not likely to place their fate in the hands of other states, but will prefer instead the realist logic of self-help.

PROBLEMS WITH THE EMPIRICAL RECORD. The historical record provides little support for collective security, a point acknowledged by the theory’s proponents. The great powers have seriously considered implementing collective security three times in this century: after both World Wars, and after the Cold War. The League of Nations, which was established after World War I, was a serious attempt to make collective security work.\(^{110}\) It had some minor successes during the 1920s. For example, League mediation resolved the Aaland Islands dispute between Finland and Sweden in 1920, and pressure from the League forced Greek, Italian, and Yugoslav troops out of Albania one year later. The League was much less successful in handling several other conflicts during the 1920s, however: it did not prevent or stop the Greco-Turkish War of 1920-22, or the Russo-Polish War of 1920, and France refused to allow the League to consider its occupation of the Ruhr in January 1923, going so far as to threaten withdrawal from the League if it intervened in the crisis. The League had a mixed record during the 1920s, even though that decade was relatively pacific, and no great power was then bent on aggression.

The international system became increasingly unstable during the 1930s, and the League was seriously tested on six occasions: 1) the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931; 2) the Chaco War of 1932-35; 3) Japan’s 1937 invasion of China; 4) Italy’s aggression against Ethiopia in 1935; 5) the German occupation of the Rhineland in March 1936; and 6) the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939. The League failed each test, and was effectively useless by the late 1930s, when the great powers were making the critical decisions that led to World War II.

The United Nations was established in the waning days of World War II to provide collective security around the globe. However, the Soviet-American competition followed on the heels of that war, and the United Nations was therefore never seriously tested as a collective security apparatus during the Cold War.\(^{111}\)

Since the Cold War ended, there has been much talk in the West about building a collective security system.\(^{112}\) The success of the American-led coalition that pushed Iraq out of Kuwait led some experts to conclude that the UN might finally be ready to operate as a collective security institution. In Europe, experts have discussed the possibility of turning NATO, or possibly the CSCE, into a collective security system for the continent. It is too early for conclusive judgments as to whether any of these ideas about collective security will be realized. However, almost all the evidence to date

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112. See the sources cited in footnote 88.
FALLBACK POSITIONS. Given the limits of collective security, some of its proponents argue that two less ambitious forms of the theory might be realizable: peacekeeping and concerts. Although they are portrayed as the “budget” version of collective security, some experts think that peacekeeping and concerts might still be a powerful force for international stability.

Peacekeeping, as William Durch notes, “evolved as an alternative to the collective security that the UN was designed to provide but could not.” However, peacekeeping is not a watered-down version of collective security. It is, instead, a much less ambitious alternative strategy for promoting stability. Peacekeeping entails third party intervention in minor-power civil wars or disputes between minor powers, for the purpose of either preventing war from breaking out or stopping it once it has begun. This intervention can only be accomplished with the consent of the disputants, and third parties cannot use force to affect the behavior of the parties in dispute. Peacekeeping operations must be “expressly non-threatening and impartial.” In essence, peacekeeping is mainly useful for helping implement cease-fires in wars involving minor powers. However, the UN’s record in performing even that quite limited task is at best mixed.

Peacekeeping has no role to play in disputes between great powers. Moreover, it forbids the use of coercion, which is essential to a collective security system. Its mission is a far cry from the ambitious goals of collective security. Peacekeeping by the UN or


114. There is still discussion about extending NATO eastward to include Poland, Hungary, and the two Czechoslovakian remnant states. Russia is deeply opposed to such a move, however, and therefore NATO is not likely to expand eastward in any meaningful way. Regardless, even if those four states joined NATO, the remnant states of the former Soviet Union would still be excluded, and their inclusion would be necessary to transform NATO into an effective collective security system for Europe. For an argument that NATO should not be transformed into a collective security system, see Glaser, “Why NATO is Still Best,” pp. 26–33.


by regional organizations like the Organization of African Unity (OAU) can enhance the prospects for world peace only on the margins.\textsuperscript{118}

Concerts are sometimes described as an “attenuated form of collective security,” or a “reasonable hybrid version of collective security.”\textsuperscript{119} Charles and Clifford Kupchan maintain that “collective security organizations can take many different institutional forms along a continuum ranging from ideal collective security to concerts.”\textsuperscript{120} However, the claim that concerts are a less ambitious version of collective security is incorrect.\textsuperscript{121} Concerts essentially reflect the balance of power, and are thus largely consistent with realism, whereas collective security, as explained above, is a fundamentally anti-realist theory. Concerts and collective security systems, therefore, reflect different and ultimately incompatible logics. As Quincy Wright reminds us, “The fundamental assumptions of the two systems are different. A government cannot at the same time behave according to the Machiavellian assumptions of the balance of power and the Wilsonian assumptions of international organization.”\textsuperscript{122}

A concert is an arrangement in which great powers that have no incentive to challenge each other militarily agree on a set of rules to coordinate their actions with each other, as well as with the minor powers in the system, often in the establishment of spheres of influence. A concert is a great power condominium that reflects the underlying balance of power among its members. The coordinated balancing that takes place inside a concert does not violate great power self-interest. In fact, when those great powers have a dispute, self-interest determines each side’s policy and the concert may collapse as a result.

Concerts are most likely to emerge in the wake of great power wars in which a potential hegemon has been defeated, and power is distributed roughly equally among the victors.\textsuperscript{123} Four factors account for this phenomenon. First, the great powers would not have much to gain militarily by attacking each other, given the rough balance of power.


\textsuperscript{119} Kupchan and Kupchan, “Concerts and Collective Security,” p. 120; Betts, “Systems for Peace or Causes of War?” p. 27. Also see Downs, Collective Security beyond the Cold War.

\textsuperscript{120} Kupchan and Kupchan, “Concerts and Collective Security,” p. 119.

\textsuperscript{121} I cannot find evidence that Woodrow Wilson, Inis Claude, or Arnold Wolfers considered concerts to be a limited form of collective security. It appears that the first serious efforts to link collective security with concerts were made in post–Cold War writings on collective security, especially Kupchan and Kupchan, “Concerts and Collective Security.”

\textsuperscript{122} Quincy Wright, A Study Of War, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), p. 781. Charles Lipson provides an example of how institutionalists try to combine these two incompatible theories. He writes: “Thus, the [post-1815] Concert is a kind of beacon to advocates of collective security . . . not only because it succeeded but because it did so . . . without transforming the self-interested behavior of states.” Lipson, “Future of Collective Security,” p. 119. However, a system based on the self-interested behavior of states is antithetical to collective security, and therefore, it is difficult to understand how such a system could be considered a “kind of beacon to advocates of collective security.” For another example of this problem, see Kupchan and Kupchan, “Concerts and Collective Security,” p. 116.

power among them. Second, the victorious powers are likely to have a significant interest in maintaining the status quo, mainly because they are in control and the potential hegemon has been subdued. Third, hegemonic wars are very costly, so the great powers are likely to be war-weary, and deeply interested in avoiding another costly war. Fourth, the victorious great powers worked together to win the war, so the notion of collective action is likely to appeal to them, and carry over into the early postwar years.

Concerts usually last only a few years. The balance of power changes. Defeated powers rise from the ashes. Victorious powers squabble among themselves, especially about how to deal with minor powers. States become less sensitive to the costs of war as time passes.

The Concert of Europe, which was established after Napoleonic France had finally been subdued, is the only case of a successful concert. Not surprisingly, it is sometimes held up as a model for the post–Cold War world. The Concert worked fairly well from 1815 to 1823, although the great powers did occasionally clash over their dealings with minor powers. After 1823, however, the Concert was unable to function effectively as a coordinating device for the great powers. “The concert existed in an abortive form” until its final collapse as the Crimean War began in 1854. During its heyday, the Concert of Europe reflected the balance of power; states were not compelled to behave in ways that weakened their relative power position. “Maintaining a balance of power,” as Richard Betts notes, “remained an important object of the nineteenth-century Concert regime.”

In sum, the theory of collective security directly addresses the issue of how to push states away from war and promote peace, and it recognizes that military power plays a central role in international politics. But the theory has several important flaws. It is built on the foundational norm that states should trust each other, but it does not satisfactorily explain how this is possible in an anarchic world where states have military power and uncertain intentions. Furthermore, the historical record provides little support for the theory. The single case of an operative collective security system was the League of Nations, and it was a spectacular failure. Although peacekeeping and concerts are sometimes described as limited but promising versions of collective security, they are of marginal value in promoting peace. Moreover, both peacekeeping


125. The phrase is from Gulick, Europe’s Classical Balance of Power, p. 22.

and concerts work according to different logics than collective security. In fact, concerts, like alliances, basically reflect the balance of power, and are thus consistent with a realist view of institutions.

CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theorists directly address the question of how to bring about peace, and they make bold claims about the prospects for changing state behavior. Specifically, they aim to transform the international system into a “world society,” where states are guided by “norms of trust and sharing.” Their goal is to relegate security competition and war to the scrap heap of history, and create instead a genuine “peace system.”

Critical theorists take ideas very seriously. In fact, they believe that discourse, or how we think and talk about the world, largely shapes practice. Roughly put, ideas are the

127. Critical theory is an approach to studying the human condition that is not tied to a particular discipline. In fact, critical theory was well-developed and employed widely in other disciplines before it began to penetrate the international relations field in the early 1980s. This article does not focus on critical theory per se, but examines the scholarly literature where critical theory is applied to international relations. I treat those works as a coherent whole, although there are differences, especially of emphasis, among them. For a general discussion of critical theory, see David Held, Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); and Pauline M. Rosenau, Post-Modernism And The Social Sciences: Insights, Intrusions, and Intrusions (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992). Also see Pauline Rosenau, “Once Again Into the Fray: International Relations Confronts the Humanities,” Millennium: Journal of International Studies, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 1990), pp. 83–110.


129. The quotations in this paragraph are from Ashley, “Poverty of Neorealism,” p. 285; and Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It,” p. 431.
driving force of history. Furthermore, they recognize that realism has long been the dominant theory of international politics, and therefore, according to their account of reality, has had substantial influence on state behavior. But critical theorists intend to change that situation by challenging realism and undermining it. Richard Ashley graphically describes their intentions: “Let us then play havoc with neorealist concepts and claims. Let us neither admire nor ignore the orrery of errors, but let us instead fracture the orbs, crack them open, crack them and see what possibilities they have enclosed. And then, when we are done, let us not cast away the residue. Let us instead sweep it into a jar, shine up the glass, and place it high on the bookshelf with other specimens of past mistakes.”

With realism shattered, the way would presumably be open to a more peaceful world.

Critical theory is well-suited for challenging realism because critical theory is, by its very nature, concerned with criticizing “hegemonic” ideas like realism, not laying out alternative futures. The central aim is “to seek out the contradictions within the existing order, since it is from these contradictions that change could emerge.” It is called “critical” theory for good reason. Very significantly, however, critical theory per se has little to say about the future shape of international politics. In fact, critical theory emphasizes that, “It is impossible to predict the future.”

Nevertheless, international relations scholars who use critical theory to challenge and subvert realism certainly expect to create a more harmonious and peaceful international system. But the theory itself says little about either the desirability or feasibility of achieving that particular end.

CAUSAL LOGIC. Institutions are at the core of critical theory, as its central aim is to alter the constitutive and regulative norms of the international system so that states stop thinking and acting according to realism. Specifically, critical theorists hope to create “pluralistic security communities,” where states behave according to the same norms or institutions that underpin collective security.

133. Cox, Production, Power, and World Order, p. 393. The young Karl Marx summed up this approach in 1844: “the advantage of the new trend [is] that we do not attempt dogmatically to prefigure the future, but want to find the new world only through criticism of the old.” Karl Marx, “For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing,” in Robert C. Tucker, ed., The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 13. Marx’s early writings have markedly influenced critical theory. See, for example, Ashley, “Poverty of Neorealism,” pp. 226–230; and Cox, “Social Forces,” p. 133. Critical theorists, however, disparage Marx’s later writings, which lay out a structural theory of politics that has much in common with realism.
of military force, and there would instead be “a generally shared expectation of peaceful change.” 135 Furthermore, states would “identify positively with one another so that the security of each is perceived as the responsibility of all.” 136 States would not think in terms of self-help or self-interest, but would instead define their interests in terms of the international community. In this new world, “national interests are international interests.” 137

Critical theorists have a more ambitious agenda than proponents of collective security. Critical theorists aim to create a world in which all states consider war an unacceptable practice, and are not likely to change their minds about the matter. There do not appear to be any troublemaker states in a pluralistic security community, as there might be in a collective security system. In fact, military power seems to be largely irrelevant in the critical theorists’ post-realist world, which has the earmarks of a true “peace system.” 138

For critical theorists, the key to achieving a “postmodern international system” is to alter state identity radically, or more specifically, to transform how states think about themselves and their relationship with other states. 139 In the jargon of the theory, “intersubjective understandings and expectations” matter greatly. 140 In practice, this means that states must stop thinking of themselves as solitary egoists, and instead develop a powerful communitarian ethos. 141 Critical theorists aim to create an international system characterized not by anarchy, but by community. States must stop thinking of themselves as separate and exclusive—i.e., sovereign—actors, and instead see themselves as mutually conditioned parts of a larger whole. 142 States, or more precisely, their inhabitants and leaders, should be made to care about concepts like “rectitude,” “rights,” and “obligations.” In short, they should have a powerful sense of responsibility to the broader international community.

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137. Ibid.

138. This outcome is fully consistent with Deutsch’s definition of a pluralistic security community: “there is real assurance that the members of that community will not fight each other physically, but will settle their disputes in some other way. If the entire world were integrated as a security community, wars would be automatically eliminated.” Deutsch, Political Community, p. 5.


142. In a recent article, Alexander Wendt discusses the “emergence of ‘international states,’ which would constitute a structural transformation of the Westphalian states system.” Wendt, “Collective Identity Formation,” p. 385.
A realist might argue that this goal is desirable in principle, but not realizable in practice, because the structure of the international system forces states to behave as egoists. Anarchy, offensive capabilities, and uncertain intentions combine to leave states with little choice but to compete aggressively with each other. For realists, trying to infuse states with communitarian norms is a hopeless cause.

Critical theory, however, directly challenges the realist claim that structural factors are the main determinants of state behavior. In contrast to realism, critical theory assumes that ideas and discourse are the driving forces that shape the world, although it recognizes that structural factors have some, albeit minor, influence.143 How individuals think about and talk about the world matters greatly for determining how states act in the international system. Ideas matter so much, according to critical theorists, because the world is socially constructed by individual human beings whose behavior is mediated by their thoughts; these thoughts, in turn, are shared by the members of a larger culture. Individuals bear responsibility for shaping the world they inhabit. The world around them is not a given that forces itself upon them. On the contrary, critical theorists argue that ideational forces or “institutions often can change environments.”144 Markus Fischer sums up this crucial point: “In essence, 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.”145

Robert Cox’s description of the state illustrates how this process of thinking about the world determines how it is structured. “The state,” he writes, “has no physical existence, like a building or a lamp-post; but it is nevertheless a real entity. It is a real entity because everyone acts as though it were.”146 Alexander Wendt’s discussion of anarchy provides another good example: “Structure,” he writes, “has no existence or causal powers apart from process.”147 States, in fact, can think about anarchy in a number of different ways. “Anarchy is what states make of it.” Moreover, “self-help and power politics are institutions . . . not essential features of anarchy.”

This discussion of how critical theorists think about the state and anarchy points up the fact that realism and critical theory have fundamentally different epistemologies.

143. It is important to emphasize that critical theorists do not make a case for pure idealism, where realist structure has little bearing on state behavior. Their argument is much more sophisticated, as they maintain that structure and discourse are inextricably linked together and constantly interact in a dialectical fashion. Structure, they emphasize, both enables and constrains individual behavior. Nevertheless, the key point for critical theorists is that structure is ultimately shaped and reshaped by discourse. In other words, structure may shape our thinking about the world, but structure is ultimately shaped by our discourse. Structure is not an independent material force that shapes how we think and talk about the world. Social reality, in the end, is ultimately a construction of our minds.

and ontologies, which are the most basic levels at which theories can be compared. Realists maintain that there is an objective and knowable world, which is separate from the observing individual. Critical theorists, on the other hand, “see subject and object in the historical world as a reciprocally interrelated whole,” and they deny the possibility of objective knowledge. Where realists see a fixed and knowable world, critical theorists see the possibility of endless interpretations of the world before them. For critical theorists, “there are no constants, no fixed meanings, no secure grounds, no profound secrets, no final structures or limits of history . . . there is only interpretation . . . . History itself is grasped as a series of interpretations imposed upon interpretation—none primary, all arbitrary.”

Nevertheless, critical theorists readily acknowledge that realism has been the dominant interpretation of international politics for almost seven hundred years. “Realism is a name for a discourse of power and rule in modern global life.” Still, critical theory allows for change, and there is no reason, according to the theory anyway, why a communitarian discourse of peace and harmony cannot supplant the realist discourse of security competition and war. In fact, change is always possible with critical theory because it allows for an unlimited number of discourses, and it makes no judgment about the merit or staying power of any particular one. Also, critical theory makes no judgment about whether human beings are “hard-wired” to be good or bad, but instead treats people as infinitely changeable. The key to how they think and behave is the particular “software program” that individuals carry around in their heads, and those can be changed. In essence, critical theorists hope to replace the widely used realist software package with new software that emphasizes communitarian norms. Once that switch has been made, states will cooperate with each other and world politics will be more peaceful.

Most critical theorists do not see ideas and discourses forming at the grass roots and then percolating up to the elites of society. Rather, theirs is a top-down theory, whereby elites play the key role in transforming language and discourse about international relations. Experts, especially scholars, determine the flow of ideas about world politics. It is especially useful, however, if this intellectual vanguard consists of individuals from different states. These transnational elites, which are sometimes referred to as “epistemic communities,” are well-suited for formulating and spreading the communitarian ideals that critical theorists hope will replace realism.

Finally, it is worth noting that critical theorists are likely to be quite intolerant of other discourses about international politics, especially realism. Four factors combine

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151. Ibid., p. 422.
153. For example, see Ashley, “Poverty of Neorealism,” passim.
to account for this situation. The theory is based on the belief that ideas matter greatly for shaping international politics. Also, it recognizes that particular theories triumph in the marketplace of ideas, and the result is hegemonic discourse. Moreover, although the theory itself does not distinguish between good and bad ideas, critical theorists themselves certainly make that distinction. Furthermore, critical theorists have no historical guarantee that hegemonic discourse will move toward ideas about world politics that they consider sound. Realism, for example, has been the dominant discourse in the international arena for many centuries. Therefore, it makes sense for critical theorists to try to eliminate ideas they do not like, thus maximizing the prospects that their favorite discourse will triumph. Realist thinking, in this view, is not only dangerous, but is the main obstacle critical theorists face in their effort to establish a new and more peaceful hegemonic discourse.

FLAWS IN THE CAUSAL LOGIC. 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. However, their explanation of how change occurs is at best incomplete, and at worst, internally contradictory.

Critical theory maintains that state behavior changes when discourse changes. But that argument leaves open the obvious and crucially important question: what determines why some discourses become dominant and others lose out in the marketplace of ideas? What is the mechanism that governs the rise and fall of discourses? This general question, in turn, leads to three more specific questions: 1) Why has realism been the hegemonic discourse in world politics for so long? 2) Why is the time ripe for its unseating? 3) Why is realism likely to be replaced by a more peaceful communitarian discourse?

Critical theory provides few insights on why discourses rise and fall. Thomas Risse-Kappen writes, “Research on . . . ‘epistemic communities’ of knowledge-based transnational networks has failed so far to specify the conditions under which specific ideas are selected and influence policies while others fall by the wayside.” Not surprisingly, critical theorists say little about why realism has been the dominant discourse, and why its foundations are now so shaky. They certainly do not offer a well-defined argument that deals with this important issue. Therefore, it is difficult to judge the fate of realism through the lens of critical theory.

Nevertheless, critical theorists occasionally point to particular factors that might lead to changes in international relations discourse. In such cases, however, they usually end up arguing that changes in the material world drive changes in discourse. For example, when Ashley makes surmises about the future of realism, he claims that “a crucial issue is whether or not changing historical conditions have disabled longstanding realist

154. Lebow, for example, writes that “Contemporary realists’ . . . theories and some of the policy recommendations based on them may now stand in the way of the better world we all seek.” Lebow, “The Long Peace,” p. 277.
155. My thinking on this matter has been markedly influenced by Hein Goemans.
rituals of power." Specifically, he asks whether “developments in late capitalist society,” like the “fiscal crisis of the state,” and the “internationalization of capital,” coupled with “the presence of vastly destructive and highly automated nuclear arsenals [has] de-
prived statesmen of the latitude for competent performance of realist rituals of
power?” 157 Similarly, Cox argues that fundamental change occurs when there is a "disjuncture" between “the stock of ideas people have about the nature of the world and the practical problems that challenge them.” He then writes, “Some of us think the erstwhile dominant mental construct of neorealism is inadequate to confront the chal-
lenges of global politics today.” 158

It would be understandable if realists made such arguments, since they believe there is an objective reality that largely determines which discourse will be dominant. Critical theorists, however, emphasize that the world is socially constructed, and not shaped in fundamental ways by objective factors. Anarchy, after all, is what we make of it. Yet when critical theorists attempt to explain why realism may be losing its hegemonic position, they too point to objective factors as the ultimate cause of change. Discourse, so it appears, turns out not to be determinative, but mainly a reflection of developments in the objective world. In short, it seems that when critical theorists who study inter-
national politics offer glimpses of their thinking about the causes of change in the real world, they make arguments that directly contradict their own theory, but which appear to be compatible with the theory they are challenging. 159

There is another problem with the application of critical theory to international
relations. Although critical theorists hope to replace realism with a discourse that emphasizes harmony and peace, critical theory per se emphasizes that it is impossible to know the future. Critical theory, according to its own logic, can be used to undermine realism and produce change, but it cannot serve as the basis for predicting which discourse will replace realism, because the theory says little about the direction change takes. In fact, Cox argues that although “utopian expectations may be an element in stimulating people to act . . . such expectations are almost never realized in practice.” 160

159. Cox is apparently aware of this problem. After spending eleven pages outlining various objective factors that might shape a new world order, he notes, “It would, of course, be logically inadmissible, as well as imprudent, to base predictions of future world order upon the foregoing considerations.” Cox, “Social Forces,” p. 149, emphasis added. Nevertheless, he then emphasizes in the next few sentences how important those objective considerations are for understanding future world order prospects. He writes: “Their utility is rather in drawing attention to factors which could incline an emerging world order in one direction or another. The social forces generated by changing production processes are the starting point for thinking about possible futures. These forces may combine in different configurations, and as an exercise one could consider the hypothetical configurations most likely to lead to three different outcomes as to the future of the state system. The focus on these three outcomes is not, of course, to imply that no other outcomes or configurations of social forces are possible.” In other words, Cox does rely heavily on objective factors to explain possible future world orders.
160. Cox, Production, Power, And World Order, p. 393.
Thus, in a sense, the communitarian discourse championed by critical theorists is wishful thinking, not an outcome linked to the theory itself. Indeed, critical theory cannot guarantee that the new discourse will not be more malignant than the discourse it replaces. Nothing in the theory guarantees, for example, that a fascist discourse far more violent than realism will not emerge as the new hegemonic discourse.

**Problems with the Empirical Record.** Critical theorists have offered little empirical support for their theory.\(^{161}\) It is still possible to sketch the broad outlines of their account of the past. They appear to concede that realism was the dominant discourse from about the start of the late medieval period in 1300 to at least 1989, and that states and other political entities behaved according to realist dictates during these seven centuries. However, some critical theorists suggest that both the discourse and practice of international politics during the preceding five centuries of the feudal era or central medieval period (800–1300) was not dominated by realism and, therefore, cannot be explained by it.\(^{162}\) They believe that European political units of the feudal era did not think and therefore did not act in the exclusive and selfish manner assumed by realism, but instead adopted a more communitarian discourse, which guided their actions. Power politics, so the argument goes, had little relevance in these five hundred years.

Furthermore, most critical theorists see the end of the Cold War as an important watershed in world politics. A few go so far as to argue that “the revolutions of 1989 transformed the international system by changing the rules governing superpower conflict and, thereby, the norms underpinning the international system.”\(^{163}\) Realism, they claim, is no longer the hegemonic discourse. “The end of the Cold War . . . undermined neorealist theory.”\(^{164}\) Other critical theorists are more tentative in their judgment about whether the end of the Cold War has led to a fundamental transformation of international politics.\(^{165}\) For these more cautious critical theorists, the revolutions of 1989 have created opportunities for change, but that change has not yet been realized.

Three points are in order regarding the critical theorists’ interpretation of history. First, one cannot help but be struck by the sheer continuity of realist behavior in the critical theorists’ own account of the past. Seven centuries of security competition and war represents an impressive span of time, especially when you consider the tremen-

161. Wendt, for example, acknowledges that, “Relatively little empirical research has been explicitly informed by structuration [critical] theory, which might illustrate its implications for the explanation of state action.” Wendt, “The Agent-Structure Problem,” p. 362.
dous political and economic changes that have taken place across the world during that lengthy period. Realism is obviously a human software package with deep-seated appeal, although critical theorists do not explain its attraction.

Second, a close look at the international politics of the feudal era reveals scant support for the claims of critical theorists. Markus Fischer has done a detailed study of that period, and he finds “that feudal discourse was indeed distinct, prescribing unity, functional cooperation, sharing, and lawfulness.” More importantly, however, he also finds “that while feudal actors observed these norms for the most part on the level of form, they in essence behaved like modern states.” Specifically, they “strove for exclusive territorial control, protected themselves by military means, subjugated each other, balanced against power, formed alliances and spheres of influence, and resolved their conflicts by the use and threat of force.” Realism, not critical theory, appears best to explain international politics in the five centuries of the feudal era.

Third, there are good reasons to doubt that the demise of the Cold War means that the millennium is here. It is true that the great powers have been rather tame in their behavior towards each other over the past five years. But that is usually the case after great-power wars. Moreover, although the Cold War ended in 1989, the Cold War order that it spawned is taking much longer to collapse, which makes it difficult to determine what kind of order or disorder will replace it. For example, Russian troops remained in Germany until mid-1994, seriously impinging on German sovereignty, and the United States still maintains a substantial military presence in Germany. Five years is much too short a period to determine whether international relations has been fundamentally transformed by the end of the Cold War, especially given that the “old” order of realist discourse has been in place for at least twelve centuries.

A close look at the sources of this purported revolutionary change in world politics provides further cause for skepticism. For critical theorists, “the Cold War was fundamentally a discursive, not a material, structure.” Thus, if the United States and the Soviet Union had decided earlier in the Cold War that they were no longer enemies, it would have been over sooner. Mikhail Gorbachev, critical theorists argue, played the central role in ending the Cold War. He challenged traditional Soviet thinking about national security, and championed ideas about international security that sounded like they had been scripted by critical theorists. In fact, critical theorists argue that Gorbachev’s “new thinking” was shaped by a “transnational liberal internationalist community [epistemic community] comprising the U.S. arms control community, Western European scholars and center-left policy makers, as well as Soviet institutchiks.”

These new ideas led Gorbachev to end the Soviet Union’s “imperial relationship with

169. This sentence is a paraphrase of Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It,” p. 397.
Eastern Europe,” which led to a fundamental change in “the norms of bloc politics and thereby the rules governing superpower relations.” In essence, “the changed practices of one of the major actors . . . [had] system-wide repercussions.” Both superpowers “repudiated the notion of international relations as a self-help system and . . . transcended the consequences of anarchy as depicted by realism.”

Gorbachev surely played the key role in ending the Cold War, but there are good reasons to doubt that his actions fundamentally transformed international politics. His decision to shut down the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe can very well be explained by realism. By the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union was suffering an economic and political crisis at home that made the costs of empire prohibitive, especially since nuclear weapons provided the Soviets with a cheap and effective means of defense. Many empires collapsed and many states broke apart before 1989, and many of them sought to give to dire necessity the appearance of virtue. But the basic nature of international politics remained unchanged. It is not clear why the collapse of the Soviet Union is a special case.

Furthermore, now that Gorbachev is out of office and has little political influence in Russia, the Russians have abandoned his “new thinking.” In fact, they now have an offensively-oriented military doctrine that emphasizes first use of nuclear weapons. More importantly, since the end of 1992, the Russians have been acting like a traditional great power toward their neighbors. The former Soviet Union seems to be an arena for power politics, and Boris Yeltsin’s Russia appears to be fully engaged in that enterprise.

Regarding the more modest claim that the end of the Cold War presents an opportunity to move to a world where states are guided by norms of trust and sharing, perhaps this is true. But since critical theorists acknowledge that their theory cannot predict the future, why should we believe their claim, especially when it means choosing against realism, a theory that has at least 1200 years of staying power?

Critical theorists have ambitious aims. However, critical theory also has important flaws, and therefore it will likely remain in realism’s shadow. Specifically, critical theory is concerned with affecting fundamental change in state behavior, but it says little about

173. Ibid., p. 227.
how it comes about. Critical theorists do occasionally point to particular causes of change, but when they do, they make arguments that are inconsistent with the theory itself. Finally, there is little empirical evidence to support the claims of critical theorists, and much to contradict them.

Conclusion

Many policymakers as well as academics believe that institutions hold great promise for promoting international peace. This optimistic assessment of institutions is not warranted, however, mainly because the three institutionalist theories which underpin it are flawed. There are serious problems with the causal logic of each theory, and little empirical evidence for any of them. What is most impressive about institutions, in fact, is how little independent effect they seem to have had on state behavior.

We have an important paradox here: although the world does not work the way institutionalist theories say it does or should, those theories remain highly influential in both the academic and policy worlds. Given the limited impact of institutions on state behavior, one would expect considerable skepticism, even cynicism, when institutions are described as a major force for peace. Instead, they are still routinely described in promising terms by scholars and governing elites.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt a detailed explanation of this paradox. Nevertheless, I would like to close with some speculative comments about this puzzle, focusing on the American context.

The attraction of institutionalist theories for both policymakers and scholars is explained, I believe, not by their intrinsic value, but by their relationship to realism, and especially to core elements of American political ideology. Realism has long been and continues to be an influential theory in the United States. Leading realist thinkers such as George Kennan and Henry Kissinger, for example, occupied key policymaking positions during the Cold War. The impact of realism in the academic world is amply demonstrated in the institutionalist literature, where discussions of realism are pervasive. Yet despite its influence, Americans who think seriously about foreign policy issues tend to dislike realism intensely, mainly because it clashes with their basic values. The theory stands opposed to how most Americans prefer to think about themselves and the wider world.

178. Summing up the autobiographical essays of 34 international relations scholars, Joseph Kruzel notes that "Hans Morgenthau is more frequently cited than any other name in these memoirs." Joseph Kruzel, "Reflections on the Journeys," in Joseph Kruzel and James N. Rosenau, eds., Journeys through World Politics: Autobiographical Reflections of Thirty-four Academic Travelers (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), p. 505. Although "Morgenthau is often cited, many of the references in these pages are negative in tone. He seems to have inspired his critics even more than his supporters." Ibid.
There are four principal reasons why American elites, as well as the American public, tend to regard realism with hostility. First, realism is a pessimistic theory. It depicts a world of stark and harsh competition, and it holds out little promise of making that world more benign. Realists, as Hans Morgenthau wrote, are resigned to the fact that “there is no escape from the evil of power, regardless of what one does.” Such pessimism, of course, runs up against the deep-seated American belief that with time and effort, reasonable individuals can solve important social problems. Americans regard progress as both desirable and possible in politics, and they are therefore uncomfortable with realism’s claim that security competition and war will persist despite our best efforts to eliminate them.

Second, realism treats war as an inevitable, and indeed sometimes necessary, form of state activity. For realists, war is an extension of politics by other means. Realists are very cautious in their prescriptions about the use of force: wars should not be fought for idealistic purposes, but instead for balance-of-power reasons. Most Americans, however, tend to think of war as a hideous enterprise that should ultimately be abolished. For the time being, however, it can only justifiably be used for lofty moral goals, like “making the world safe for democracy”; it is morally incorrect to fight wars to change or preserve the balance of power. This makes the realist conception of warfare anathema to many Americans.

Third, as an analytical matter, realism does not distinguish between “good” states and “bad” states, but essentially treats them like billiard balls of varying size. In realist theory, all states are forced to seek the same goal: maximum relative power. A purely realist interpretation of the Cold War, for example, allows for no meaningful difference in the motives behind American and Soviet behavior during that conflict. According to the theory, both sides must have been driven by concerns about the balance of power, and must have done what was necessary to try to achieve a favorable balance.

180. Hans J. Morgenthau, Scientific Man vs. Power Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 201. Nevertheless, Keith Shimko convincingly argues that the shift within realism, away from Morgenthau’s belief that states are motivated by an unalterable will to power, and toward Waltz’s view that states are motivated by the desire for security, provides “a residual, though subdued optimism, or at least a possible basis for optimism [about international politics]. The extent to which this optimism is stressed or suppressed varies, but it is there if one wants it to be.” Shimko, “Realism, Neorealism, and American Liberalism,” p. 297. Realists like Stephen Van Evera, for example, point out that although states operate in a dangerous world, they can take steps to dampen security competition and minimize the danger of war. See Van Evera, Causes of War.


182. It should be emphasized that many realists have strong moral preferences and are driven by deep moral convictions. Realism is not a normative theory, however, and it provides no criteria for moral judgment. Instead, realism merely seeks to explain how the world works. Virtually all realists would prefer a world without security competition and war, but they believe that goal is unrealistic given the structure of the international system. See, for example, Robert G. Gilpin, “The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism,” in Keohane, Neorealism and Its Critics, p. 321.
Americans would recoil at such a description of the Cold War, because they believe the United States was motivated by good intentions while the Soviet Union was not.  

Fourth, America has a rich history of thumbing its nose at realism. For its first 140 years of existence, geography and the British navy allowed the United States to avoid serious involvement in the power politics of Europe. America had an isolationist foreign policy for most of this period, and its rhetoric explicitly emphasized the evils of entangling alliances and balancing behavior. Even as the United States finally entered its first European war in 1917, Woodrow Wilson railed against realist thinking. America has a long tradition of anti-realist rhetoric, which continues to influence us today.  

Given that realism is largely alien to American culture, there is a powerful demand in the United States for alternative ways of looking at the world, and especially for theories that square with basic American values. Institutionalist theories nicely meet these requirements, and that is the main source of their appeal to policymakers and scholars. Whatever else one might say about these theories, they have one undeniable advantage in the eyes of their supporters: they are not realism. Not only do institutionalist theories offer an alternative to realism, but they explicitly seek to undermine it. Moreover, institutionalists offer arguments that reflect basic American values. For example, they are optimistic about the possibility of greatly reducing, if not eliminating, security competition among states and creating a more peaceful world. They certainly do not accept the realist stricture that war is politics by other means. Institutionals, in short, purvey a message that Americans long to hear.  

There is, however, a downside for policymakers who rely on institutionalist theories: these theories do not accurately describe the world, hence policies based on them are bound to fail. The international system strongly shapes the behavior of states, limiting the amount of damage that false faith in institutional theories can cause. The constraints of the system notwithstanding, however, states still have considerable freedom of action, and their policy choices can succeed or fail in protecting American national interests and the interests of vulnerable people around the globe. The failure of the League of Nations to address German and Japanese aggression in the 1930s is a case in point. The failure of institutions to prevent or stop the war in Bosnia offers a more recent example. These cases illustrate that institutions have mattered rather little in the past; they also suggest that the false belief that institutions matter has mattered more, and has had pernicious effects. Unfortunately, misplaced reliance on institutional solutions is likely to lead to more failures in the future.”