REFLECTION, EVALUATION, INTEGRATION

A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate

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Recent developments in the study of international institutions have created a need and opportunity for restating the traditional realist view of the role of institutions in international relations. Advancing what he claimed was realism's perspective on this issue, John Mearsheimer (1994/95) forcefully staked out an extreme position that institutions are essentially epiphenomenal. Mearsheimer's arguments, however, derived from Waltzian neorealism, are inconsistent with traditional realism's concern for the origins and influence of international institutions. Moreover, they do not reflect the views of the newest wave of modified structural realists who adopt many of the insights of neoliberal institutionalism. In an attempt to show that pre-Waltzian realists had much to say about institutions, this essay reviews the neorealist/neoliberal debate over institutions, clarifies the basic differences between traditional realism and neorealism, and resurfaces traditional realist arguments concerning the effects of state power and interests on international institutions and global order. Combining insights from both traditional realism and neorealism, a model is constructed that considers how the characteristics of states, their interactions, and the structure of the international system facilitate understanding the ways in which power will be exercised, the type of global order that will be produced, and the level of global institutionalization that can be expected.

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No topic in international relations theory has generated more debate over the last decade than the role of international institutions—whether institutions matter, why states invest in them, and how they influence decisionmakers' choices in world politics. Institutions, defined by Robert Keohane (1989:3) as “persistent and connected sets of rules (formal and informal) that prescribe behavioral roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations” and by John Mearsheimer (1994/95:8) as “a set of rules that stipulate the ways in which states should cooperate and compete with one another,” are important to scholars and policymakers alike. Our understanding of them has implications far beyond those of many topics in international relations, as indicated both by the ongoing discussions over the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations after the Cold War (see Heisborg 1992; Glaser 1993; Hellmann and Wolf 1993; Keohane, Nye, and Hoffmann 1993; Carpenter 1994; Duffield 1994/95, 1996; Chernoff 1995; Risse-Kapp 1995, 1996; McCalla 1996; Walt 1996b; Kupchan forthcoming) and by the efforts to build new institutions to support a liberal multilateral order (Keohane, Nye, and Hoffmann 1993).

Mearsheimer’s (1994/95) recent contentious tour de force, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” has sparked a new round in the international institutions debate. Grounded in the neorealist perspective of Kenneth Waltz (1979, 1986), Mearsheimer (1994/95:7) claims that institutions “matter only on the margins” and “have minimal influence on state behavior.” His extreme position effectively puts realists of all stripes on the defensive in discussions about institutions. Using Mearsheimer as a foil, neoliberal institutionalists such as Keohane and Lisa Martin (1995) have been able to (mis)characterize realism as a theory that entirely neglects institutions, while implying that the neoliberal institutionalist school of thought has pride of place in scholarly and policy discourse on institutions. Indeed, neoliberals have thrown down the gauntlet: “We challenge realists to construct an account of institutional variation and effects” (Keohane and Martin 1995:48). Likewise, Joseph Grieco (1993:312) observes that the recent debate drives realists to “think more carefully about how their own preferred approach views the role and significance of international institutions.”

Traditional realists, however, did recognize that institutions are a vital part of the landscape of world politics. Their writings and those of a new wave of modified structural realists reflect an understanding of the roles institutions can and do play in international relations. This review uses the recent debate on international institutions as a starting point for an analysis of the differences between traditional realism and neorealism and an elucidation of a realist view of institutions that draws insights from each. Its purpose is to argue that although the neorealist movement has added much to our understanding of international affairs through its careful examination of the impact of polarity on state behavior, it has also jettisoned the concern for unit attributes and interactions that was crucial to traditional realist theory, leading to the hyperrealism on institutions that Mearsheimer espouses. By combining neorealism’s structural focus with traditional realism’s attention to unit attributes and interactions, it is possible to construct a systems theory that offers realist explanations for the creation and influence of international institutions.

This review proceeds as follows. First, it traces the recent neorealist/neoliberal debate, demonstrating the need for a realist view of institutions. Second, it analyzes the similarities and differences between traditional realism and neorealism, highlighting how the jettisoning of traditional realist concepts has led to the neorealist view that institutions are unimportant. Third, it examines realist thought on the subject of international institutions and the relation of these institutions to international structures and state interests. Fourth, bringing together insights from both
traditional realism and neorealism, it presents a realist model of the origins and influence of international institutions. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of international institutions in the post–Cold War world that is based on the model and some considerations of an agenda for future research that focuses on how to test the model.

The Neoliberal/Neorealist Institutions Debate

Robert Keohane’s 1984 book, *After Hegemony*, marks a turning point in scholarship on international institutions. In this book Keohane (1984:9) adopted several realist assumptions, including the central role of power in politics and the dominance of the nation-state in the contemporary international system. In so doing, he was able to explain why even self-interested, rational egoists often prefer multilateral cooperation to competitive unilateral policies. Thus began a new wave of international relations scholarship that has come to be known as “neoliberal institutionalism.” The central tenet of neoliberal institutionalism is that “state actions depend to a considerable degree on prevailing institutional arrangements” (Keohane 1989:2). Focusing on the demand for institutions, neoliberals argue that they are valuable because they allow states to overcome “market failures” in international relations. Specifically, institutions enable fruitful interaction by: (1) reducing the “relative costs of transactions” (Keohane 1984:89; see also Ostrom 1991); (2) lengthening the “shadow of the future” (Axelrod 1984; Axelrod and Keohane 1985); and (3) increasing the amount of information available to states about each other, which, neoliberals claim, reduces the likelihood that states will cheat (or profit by cheating) on established agreements or norms (Keohane 1984:92–96, 1989:ch.5). Many of the same ideas are expressed in the international regimes literature, which parallels the neoliberal institutionalist tradition. Many of the regime arguments have also found their way into the institutions debate (Krasner 1983; Haggard and Simmons 1987; Hansenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger 1996).

One difficulty in resolving the neorealist/neoliberal dispute is that the two schools assess the effectiveness of institutions in contradictory ways. Neorealists argue that institutions matter to the extent that they cause states to behave in ways they otherwise would not behave—for example, foregoing short-term, self-interest in favor of long-term community goals (Jervis 1983). In contrast, neoliberals claim that institutions matter because they enable states to do things they otherwise could not do, that is, achieve mutual gains from cooperation. Neorealists conceptualize institutions as constraints on state behavior; neoliberals see them as enabling states to reach mutually beneficial, cooperative outcomes. This constraint/empowerment distinction is blurred in traditional realism. Defining politics as the exercise of power and influence in the process of governing, traditional realism encompasses both of these aspects of institutional effectiveness (see the following section). As tools of empowerment, institutions enable Great Powers to rule others and to manage regional and world affairs more effectively and efficiently than would be possible in their absence. As constraints, institutions such as balance-of-power poli-

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2For a more detailed discussion of the neoliberal/neorealist debate, see Baldwin (1993).

3Keohane’s acceptance of realist assumptions contrasted with traditional perspectives drawn from liberalism. However, the continued relevance of realist concepts to international events in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the failure of such nonstate actors as multinational corporations, the United Nations, and regional international institutions to render the nation-state obsolete, as liberalism had expected, had already caused many liberal theorists to abandon their primary research programs: functionalism (Mitrany 1948, 1966; Haas 1964), regional integration (Haas 1958; Schmitter 1969; Lindberg and Scheingold 1971), and interdependence theory (Keohane and Nye 1977). For more on the realist/liberal debate that predated the modern period, see Waltz (1959) and Thompson (1994).
tics and Concert diplomacy guide and direct Great Power behavior in accordance with the established rules of the game; Great Powers either conform to the institutional rules and norms or risk suffering the consequences for noncompliance.

Other issues hindering resolution of the debate lie within neoliberal institutionalism itself. For one thing, the perspective’s assumptions are not delineated clearly from its hypotheses. For example, in *International Institutions and State Power*, Keohane (1989:2–3) posits that the neoliberal institutionalist perspective is “relevant to an international system only if two key conditions pertain. First, the actors must have some mutual interests. . . . [Second,] variations in the degree of institutionalization exert substantial effects on state behavior.” Keohane (1989:5–6) also argues that international institutions “are important for states’ actions in part because they affect the incentives facing states, . . . [and] have constitutive as well as regula-tive aspects: they help define how interests are defined and how actions are interpreted.” Although Keohane’s writings remain the clearest exposition of the perspective, it is still difficult to determine (1) if institutions matter, and the perspective will tell us how and why, or (2) if institutions sometimes matter, and the perspective will tell us when.

A second issue arises from neoliberal institutionalism’s inconsistency regarding the influence of international institutions. Although significant causal weight is attributed to “variations in the institutionalization of world politics,” the claim is also made that institutional effectiveness is “not necessarily correlated with institutionalization” (Keohane 1989:2, 6). To reconcile these statements, neoliberal institutionalists must maintain—again using Keohane’s (1989:2, 7) words—that institutions that are “of relatively modest significance in world politics” can and do “exert significant effects on the behavior of governments,” an apparent contradiction.

Despite these questions about the core of neoliberal institutionalist thought, the perspective has gained much attention from international relations scholars. In several issue-areas—including environmental treaty compliance, shipping, air transport, telecommunications and postal service regimes, NATO conventional force levels, and economic sanctions—neoliberal institutionalism appears to provide a persuasive explanation of international relations (see, for example, Duffield 1992, 1994, 1995; Martin 1992a; Mitchell 1994a, 1994b; Zacher 1996). International institutions, these writers claim, can move states toward cooperation, keep them there, and exert profound effects on state choices (see also, Young 1989, 1992; Risse-Kappen 1995, 1996; Wallander and Keohane 1995). Perhaps the optimistic spirit of the neoliberal institutionalist school is justified.

**Mearsheimer’s “False Promise” Claim**

The neoliberal challenge to the realist understanding of world politics has continued to gain momentum despite a strong realist counterattack in the late 1980s that focused on how an emphasis on relative gains could inhibit international cooperation (Waltz 1979:105; Grieco 1988a, 1988b, 1990, 1993). Attempting to stem this tide and reclaim the high ground for neorealism, Mearsheimer (1994/95:7) maintained that the neoliberal institutionalists have overstated their case and that, in fact, institutions “have no independent effect on state behavior.”

Mearsheimer waged a two-prong attack against neoleaders. First, he reiterated Grieco’s argument that neoliberal institutionalists underestimate the barriers to cooperation in the anarchic international system, in particular the inhibiting effect of relative-gains concerns. In brief, the claim is made that without a higher power, states must worry about any state gaining a relative advantage through cooperation, because “today’s friend may be tomorrow’s enemy in war” (Grieco 1990:29; for extensions of the debate, see Krasner 1991; Mastanduno 1991; Powell 1991;
Snidal 1991a, 1991b; Milner 1992; Busch and Reinhardt 1993; Grieco, Powell, and Snidal 1993; Keohane 1993; Liberman 1996; Matthews 1996). Therefore, states are less willing to cooperate than neoliberal institutionalists believe. Not only concerns about cheating but worries over the distribution of gains must be overcome for cooperation to blossom. Second, Mearsheimer (1994/95:24, fn. 78) questioned the empirical evidence that neoliberal theorists have forwarded to support their perspective: “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,” a point acknowledged by several neoliberal institutionalist writers (Young 1989:206; Martin 1992b:144). Mearsheimer went on to critique some of the leading works of institutionalist theory, including Keohane’s (1984) After Hegemony and Martin’s (1992a) Coercive Cooperation.

Mearsheimer (1994/95:24) concluded, on the basis of his analysis of neoliberal institutionalist logic and evidence, that “institutions have minimal influence on state behavior, and thus hold little promise for promoting stability in the post–Cold War world.” He did not deny that institutions exist or that states use them to their advantage. Rather, Mearsheimer (1994/95:47) argued: “What is most impressive about institutions, in fact, is how little independent effect they seem to have had on state behavior.”

The Neoliberal Institutionalist Response

Mearsheimer’s article elicited direct responses from champions of collective security (Kupchan and Kupchan 1995), constructivism (Wendt 1995), and those sympathetic to neoliberal institutionalism (Keohane and Martin 1995; see also Ruggie 1995). Keohane and Martin (1995:40) asked: “How are we to account for the willingness of major states to invest resources in expanding international institutions, if such institutions are lacking in significance?” Dismissing Mearsheimer’s answer that policymakers investing in institutions are ideologically blinded, they placed the burden of proof on neorealists to show that policymakers have suffered from such delusions. At the same time, they acknowledged that neoliberal institutionalist scholarship in the past has underemphasized the distributional concerns arising from cooperation. Keohane and Martin (1995:45–46), however, claimed that “distributional conflict may render institutions more important. . . . Far from leading to the conclusion that institutions are not significant in world politics, the relative-gains debate has led us to understand yet another pathway through which they substantially influence the course of international relations” (emphasis in original). In addition, they contested Mearsheimer’s argument that institutionalist theory suffers from a lack of empirical support by citing several key studies on its behalf. But Keohane and Martin (1995:50) did admit that “we do not adequately understand in what domains [institutions] matter most, under what conditions, and how their effects are exerted.” Similarly, much of their response was devoted to laying out strategies for future neoliberal institutionalist research rather than showcasing results of previous studies. Keohane and Martin (1995:51) concluded that the neoliberal institutionalist “research program” is “promising,” especially when compared to “the extant alternatives.”

We disagree with Keohane and Martin’s conclusion. A competitive “realist” alternative has been overlooked in this ongoing debate. Mearsheimer has made an impressive case against international institutions, but he has taken a narrow neorealist view that ignores arguments advanced by earlier, pre-Waltzian realists. Although traditional realists did not develop a full-blown theory of institutions, they had many insights on the subject. The challenge is to reassert these insights and
merge them with elements of neorealism to form a coherent whole. First, however, we must clearly distinguish traditional realism from neorealism.

**Traditional Realism and Neorealism: Similarities and Differences**

Although there are numerous divisions within the realist tradition, all realists subscribe to four assumptions that are held to be the key tenets of the paradigm (see Carr 1946; Morgenthau 1985; Gilpin 1986, 1996; Grieco 1990; Mearsheimer 1994/95; Elman 1996; Frankel 1996; Spegele 1996).

Assumption One: humans do not face one another primarily as individuals but as members of groups that command their loyalty (see especially Gilpin 1986:304-305, 1996:7).

This assumption most centrally distinguishes realism from liberalism. As Andrew Moravcsik (1993:7-8) has written, liberalism assumes that the fundamental actors in politics are “autonomous individuals and private groups differentiated by their variable interests and resource endowments.” In the contemporary world, the primary “conflict group” is the nation-state, leading many realists simply to assert that “states are the major actors in world affairs” (Grieco 1990:3; see also Waltz 1979:95; Frankel 1996:xiv–xv; Gilpin 1996:18–26; Spegele 1996:85).

Assumption Two: international affairs take place in a state of anarchy.

There is no “higher power” to enforce agreements made between, or to keep the peace among, nation-states. Thus, states ultimately must rely upon themselves to ensure their survival.

Assumption Three: the nature of international interaction is essentially conflictual.

In the words of Nicholas Spykman (1942:12), “A world without struggle would be a world in which life had ceased to exist.” For some realists, conflict is inevitable because of the imperfectibility of human nature and the constant scarcity of material resources, markets, and social goods (Niebuhr 1932, 1944; Morgenthau 1946, 1948). Other realists locate the source of international conflict in the anarchic structure of the international system, which causes constant uncertainty about others’ intentions and creates the security dilemma (Waltz 1979; Gilpin 1986:304; see also Jervis 1986; Schweller 1996). Still other realists derive the ubiquity of conflict directly from anarchy and so do not label it an assumption (Grieco 1990:4). As Helen Milner (1991, 1992; see also Wendt 1992; Mercer 1995; Schweller 1996) has pointed out, however, the conflictual nature of politics may not be as clearly derivative of anarchy as some authors have suggested; thus, it is included here as an assumption of the realist paradigm.

Assumption Four: power is the fundamental feature of international politics.

The absence of a formal international authority and world government means that when all else fails, military force is the final and legitimate arbiter of disputes among states. Because “war lurks in the background of international politics” (Carr 1946:109), “for each state its power in relation to other states is ultimately the key to its survival” (Waltz 1959:210). In the final analysis, power is the basis for securing any state aim, whether it seeks world mastery or simply to be left alone. There is, as Reinhold Niebuhr (1932:42) has put it, “no possibility of drawing a sharp line between the will-to-live and the will-to-power.” This logic also lies behind the influence-maximizing assumption adopted by Fareed Zakaria (1995).

Disagreements within the realist tradition arise from basic philosophical differences, from placing emphasis on different assumptions or, more often, from vary-

Six major differences divide traditional realists and neorealists. First, there is a philosophical disagreement over the discipline(s) in which realist theory is grounded. Traditional realism is rooted in sociology and history (with some attention to psychology, theology, and economics); neorealism borrows most heavily from microeconomics (Kapstein 1995:771; Jepperson, Wendt, andKatzenstein 1996; Katzenstein 1996; Priess 1996b). Second, traditional realists view power as an end in itself; states can seek to maximize power as well as security (Gilpin 1996:6). Neorealists believe that security is the highest end (Waltz 1979:126). Third, the basic causal variables are not the same for traditional realists and neorealists. Traditional realists posit that power and the interests of states drive behavior; neorealists examine only anarchy and the distribution of capabilities.

The fourth and fifth differences center on the meaning of "capability." Traditional realism is a theory of foreign policy, focusing on the relative distribution (balances and imbalances) of capabilities between specific states or coalitions of states, not on the systemwide distribution of capabilities or the polarity of the system. As Morgenthau (1948:137) has written, "The historically most important manifestation of the balance of power . . . is to be found . . . in the relations between one nation or alliance and another alliance." Traditional realists understand capability to be neither a unit nor a structural attribute but rather a relationship between states, for example, the potential outcome of military conflict (Snyder 1996). Seen as a product of unit interactions, capability is a process variable that describes the effects of relative dyadic or coalitional power disparities on interstate behavior and strategic interactions.

In contrast, neorealism is a theory of international politics,5 focusing on the systemwide distribution of capabilities, that is, the polarity of the system as measured by the number of Great Powers, not the relative inequalities of power among them. Neorealists conceptualize capability as a unit-level property, indicated by a state's inventory of military forces and those resources that can be transformed into military forces; this concept is then merely raised to the system level (see Waltz 1979:126; Mearsheimer 1994/95:10). Such a process yields the main explanatory variable of neorealism: system polarity—a structural property that is largely ignored by traditional realists (Snyder 1996).

Sixth, the two camps disagree over the meaning of "system." A system refers to "an arrangement of certain components so interrelated as to form a whole" (Klir 1972:1) or "sets of elements standing in interaction" (von Bertalanffy 1968:38). For traditional realists, the international system is composed of units, interactions, and structure. "Interaction is crucial to the concept of system, for without it, the term system has no meaning," as Barry Buzan and his colleagues (Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993:29) have observed. The inclusion of interaction in the definition of a system allows process variables (for instance, institutions, norms, rules) as well as structural ones to define the nature of world politics and to have an effect on its operation and dynamics (Snyder 1996). In neorealism, such process variables are

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4For a different division of realism into two schools labeled "tragedy" and "evil," see Spirtas (1996); see also the analysis of realism in Tellis (1996).
5Elman (1996) has argued that neorealism can produce theories of foreign policy; for a response to his claim, see Waltz (1996).
not considered system attributes. Although Waltz (1979:79) defines a system as “composed of structure and of interacting units,” his distinction between reductionist theories (based on unit attributes and interactions) and systemic theories (based on structural causes) and “his usage of terms such as ‘systems theory’ and ‘systems level’ makes the term system effectively a synonym for structure” (Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993:28). In Waltz’s (1979:79) words, “definitions of structure must leave aside, or abstract from, the characteristics of units, their behavior, and their interactions.”

Realists on Institutions

In this section, we will build the case for a realist perspective on institutions by reviewing the relationships posited by traditional realists between structure and institutions as well as between interests and institutions.

Structure and Institutions: Modified Structural Realism

Gilpin (1981:28) describes three basic structures in world politics:

The first structure is imperialistic or hegemonic: A single powerful state controls or dominates the lesser states in the system. . . . The second structure is bipolar structure in which two powerful states control and regulate interactions within and between their respective spheres of influence. . . . The third type of structure is a balance of power in which three or more states control one another’s actions through diplomatic maneuver, shifting alliances, and open conflict.

At its core, neorealist theory seeks to explain the effects that different international structures have on state behavior and international politics. Indeed, as Waltz (1986:329) averred, attention to international structures does “tell us a small number of big and important things.” As will be discussed below, these structures affect the development and nature of institutional arrangements: unipolar distributions of power tend toward imposed orders; bipolar structures generate spontaneous, informal orders between the two poles and more formal institutional arrangements within the attendant blocs; and multipolar systems engender both imposed and spontaneous orders.

Realists do not deny the veracity of the neoliberal claim that international regimes may be created through negotiated processes (for example, the Concert of Europe under multipolarity). In explaining these kinds of orders, however, realists of all stripes characterize them, not in terms of cooperation to promote the general welfare of states as liberals past and present tend to do, but rather as a form of collusion among powerful oligopolistic actors to serve their perceived interests at the expense of the “others,” that is, those states deemed to be outside the elite Great Power club or international “high society.” In the eyes of the included Great Powers, concert systems appear as negotiated orders. From the perspective of the excluded powers, these types of institutions are viewed as an imposed order by a few dominant and essentially satisfied actors (Jervis 1983, 1986; see also Kissinger 1994).

Building on this notion of institutions as a form of collusion, Edward Mansfield (1995:600; also 1994a) has argued that international institutions are susceptible in varying degrees to capture by specific states and/or special interests within states: “States and interest groups have an incentive to capture international institutions because they can generate power for those that control them. Actors that gain power within an institution have the ability to set its agenda and influence the distribution of benefits and costs among members.” States also use institutions to
advance their interests through the strategy of “binding,” in which a state seeks to exert some control over another state’s policies by incorporating it in a web of institutional arrangements. Historian Paul Schroeder (1976) has pointed out that alliances often are designed to restrain or control partners’ actions as well as to balance adversaries. Likewise, Grieco (1995:34; 1996:286–289) has posited his “voice opportunities” thesis, according to which “weaker but still influential partners will seek to ensure that the rules . . . will provide sufficient opportunities for them to voice their concerns and interests and thereby prevent or at least ameliorate their domination by stronger partners.” Binding, as a realist strategy, offers rising powers a “place at the table” in an attempt to meet their prestige demands, and it gives them “opportunities for an effective voice” while fostering a renewed sense of legitimacy in the established international order. Binding is consistent with, but more encompassing than, Henry Kissinger’s (1979:129) “linkage” strategy.6

Following Carr and Gilpin, traditional realists view institutions as intervening variables between the theory’s basic causal variables and related behavior and outcomes (Krasner 1983:7–8). In other words, outcomes do not always conform to what one would expect from purely power motivations in an anarchic, zero-sum situation because institutions can modify the outcomes and behaviors of actors. How much variation, if any, is attributable to institutions depends on how far removed the action or outcome to be explained is from the creation of the existing order and its associated institutions. According to these theorists, institutions reflect the power relationships that existed at their creation; they are representations of the past that endure beyond the situations and interests that created them.

Recently, a new school, which can be called “modified structural realism” following Stephen Krasner (1983:7–8), has emerged in response to the increased complexity and massive economic and social changes wrought by the end of the Cold War. These new complexities and changes have so overwhelmed neorealism’s ultra-parsimonious, structural formulation that it now appears more as a theoretical straightjacket than a progressive research paradigm. This current wave of realist theory, exemplified by the writings of Jack Snyder (1991), Stephen Van Evera (1991), Steve Fetter (1992), Ted Hopf (1992), Daniel Deudney (1993), Grieco (1993, 1996), and Scott Sagan (1994), borrows heavily from Samuel Huntington’s (1968:5) Political Order in Changing Societies, particularly its basic premise that the “primary problem of politics is the lag in the development of political institutions behind social and economic change.” Modified structural realists agree with the neoliberal view that a demand exists (now more than ever) for international regimes and institutions, even in the realm of international security. Indeed, Jack Snyder (1991:137, 139) has concluded that the solution to the problem of “security in the changing European order” is “a middle road between the Hobbesian instinct for insulation and the neo-liberal instinct for institutionalized activism.”

Mindful of the pernicious effects of international anarchy and of the emerging multipolarity in East Asia and Europe that can make cooperation in the form of institution-building difficult to achieve, modified structural realists posit that international institutions serve four vital functions. First, they help create stability and order by filling “the gap between rising political participation and weak governing institutions” and thereby prevent the spread of praetorian regimes (J. Snyder 1991:136–137). Second, participation, particularly in Western economic institutions, can be offered as a “carrot” in exchange for a strong effort on the part of the

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6 For a view of binding (or “co-binding”) from a liberal perspective, see Deudney (1995, 1996), Deudney and Ikenberry (1996), and Ikenberry (1996).

Because traditional and modified structural realists acknowledge that outcomes do not always correspond to the actual power distribution among the actors in the system but are instead modified by institutional arrangements, they believe that institutions do indeed matter. Their view contradicts Mearsheimer’s (1994/95:49) assertion that institutions “have mattered rather little” in international politics. Moreover, they argue that it is important to examine the disjunction between the actual power distribution and the existing institutional order—the system’s prestige and hierarchy. As this disjunction grows with time, it eventually leads to systemic disequilibrium and war, which, in turn, restores some semblance of stability by creating institutions and outcomes that once again reflect the actual power relationships among the major actors (Carr 1946; Gilpin 1981).

At a more fundamental level, traditional and modified structural realists believe that institutions matter because even the most rudimentary interactions among states require agreement on, and some shared understanding of, the basic rules of the game. For this reason, order of almost any kind is preferable to chaos; it is the indispensable cement of all social systems (Niebuhr 1932). As Gilpin (1981:35–36) has observed:

In addition to the distribution of power and the hierarchy of prestige, the third component of the governance of the international system is a set of rights and rules that govern or at least influence the interactions among states. . . . Every system of human interaction requires a minimum set of rules and the mutual recognition of rights. The need for rules and rights arises from the basic human condition of scarcity of material resources and the need for order and predictability in human affairs. In order to minimize conflict over the distribution of scarce goods and to facilitate fruitful cooperation among individuals, every social system creates rules and laws for governing behavior. This is as true for international systems as for domestic systems. . . . Although the rights and rules governing interstate behavior are to varying degrees based on consensus and mutual interest, the primary foundation of rights and rules is in the power and interests of the dominant groups or states in a social system. . . . In every social system the dominant actors assert their rights and impose rules on lesser members in order to advance their particular interests.

**Interests and Institutions**

Less explicit than the distribution of capabilities, but no less important for the traditional realist’s view of institutions, is the role of state interests. Power tells us how much influence a state will have over others; interests tell us when and for what purposes that influence will be used. Power and interests are integrally related; that is, the interests of states are also largely a function of their position in the international system. For instance, an economic hegemon has an overriding interest in an open international trading structure precisely because—given its larger size and more advanced economic development vis-à-vis other states—it stands to gain the most from free trade (Gilpin 1987:ch. 3). Similarly, rapid change in the distribution of relative

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7The logic of this section follows Schweller (1996).
capabilities tends to promote revisionist aims among the rising powers. Stable bipolar configurations are likely to lead to the adoption of a status quo orientation by the two poles, resulting in a superpower “condominium” of sorts.

Even though state interests have been a traditional concern of realists, these unit-level variations were excised from the theory by neorealists for the sake of greater parsimony. Neorealism assumes that all states seek to maximize their security and not necessarily their power. As Waltz (1979:126) has observed, “In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek other goals such as tranquility, profit, and power.” The notion, however, on which this assertion is based—that prior realist theory erringly posited power-maximizing behavior—is incorrect. Not unlike Wilsonian liberalism, which divided the world into good and bad (democratic and nondemocratic states, respectively), traditional realism distinguishes two types of states: Morgenthau (1948:156) called them imperialistic and status quo states; Frederick Schuman (1948:377–380) employed the terms satiated and unsatiated powers; Kissinger (1957) saw revolutionary and status quo powers; Carr (1946) distinguished satisfied from dissatisfied states; Johannes Mattern (1942) divided the world into “haves” and “have-nots”; Wolfers (1962:125–126) referred to status quo and revisionist states; and Raymond Aron (1966:ch.3) posited an eternal struggle between the forces of revision and conservation.

Traditional realists viewed this international struggle not in Manichean terms, as a morality play between the forces of light and dark or between good and evil as Wilsonian liberals did, but rather as a natural power struggle between the established, satisfied powers and the rising, dissatisfied ones—often the victors and vanquished in the last major-power war. From the perspective of traditional realists, the concept of power politics should be applied equally to both “haves” and “have-nots,” status quo and revisionist states. In Carr’s (1946:105) words: “It is profoundly misleading to represent the struggle between satisfied and dissatisfied Powers as a struggle between morality on one side and power on the other. It is a clash in which, whatever the moral issue, power politics are equally predominant on both sides” (see also, Bull 1969; Smith 1986:ch.4; Kaufman 1996). Similarly, Aron (1966:584) has maintained:

> Idealistic diplomacy slips too often into fanaticism; it divides states into good and evil, into peace-loving and bellicose. It envisions a permanent peace by the punishment of the latter and the triumph of the former. The idealist, believing he has broken with power politics, exaggerates its crimes. . . . States, engaged in incessant competition . . . are not divided, once and for all, into good and evil. It is rare that all the wrongs are committed by one side, that one camp is faultless.

At issue in the enduring conflict between satisfied and dissatisfied states is the legitimacy of the institutional arrangements or governance structures that define the established international order. In this regard, it is important to recall that “legitimacy,” as realists use the term, does not imply justice. As Kissinger (1957:1) writes, legitimacy

> . . . means no more than an international agreement about the nature of workable arrangements and about the permissible aims and methods of foreign policy. It implies the acceptance of the framework of the international order by all major powers, at least to the extent that no state is so dissatisfied that, like Germany after the Treaty of Versailles, it expresses its dissatisfaction in a revolutionary foreign policy. A legitimate order does not make conflicts impossible, but it limits their scope.

In a legitimate order, even the most dissatisfied states desire only changes within the system, not a change of the system. Adjustments to the status quo are acceptable as long as they are made within the framework of existing institutional arrangements, not at their expense.
A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate

For realists, following Carr (1946), international institutions reflect the interests of the dominant, established powers and the distribution of capabilities that existed at the time of their creation after the last hegemonic war. Accordingly, international institutions and law are associated with policies of the status quo—the legitimate right of the dominant powers to set the "rules of the game" and to seek to perpetuate their relative power and interests against those of the vanquished and late-developing states. The distribution of power that exists at a particular moment in history finds its legal expression in the peace treaties as well as the international organizations and norms supporting them that have been formulated by the victors of the preceding hegemonic or major-power war (Morgenthau 1985:53–54). Regarding international law, Morgenthau (1985:105–106) has remarked:

Any legal order tends to be primarily a static social force. It defines a certain distribution of power and offers standards and processes to ascertain and maintain it in concrete situations. Domestic law, through a highly developed system of legislation, judicial decisions, and law enforcement, allows for adaptions and sometimes even considerable changes within the general distribution of power. International law, in the absence of such a system making for lawful change, is . . . not only primarily but essentially, by dint of its very nature, a static force.

In addition to international organizations and law, the balance of power itself was seen by classical realists as an elaborate system of rules and rights designed to protect and legitimize the existing order. In stark contrast with the neorealist conception of the balance of power as a self-regulating, unintended consequence of the system's structure, traditional realists view the balance of power as an institution—a deliberate and voluntary cooperative agreement among the dominant powers—resting on common values, common interests, and consensual understandings of the rules of behavior required for its proper functioning (Gulick 1955; Bull 1977:32). As Morgenthau (1985:239) has noted:

Before the balance of power could impose its restraints upon the power aspirations of nations through the mechanical interplay of opposing forces, the competing nations had first to restrain themselves by accepting the system of the balance of power as the common framework of their endeavors. . . . It is this consensus—both child and father, as it were, of common moral standards and a common civilization as well as of common interests—that kept in check the limitless desire for power, potentially inherent, as we know, in all imperialisms, and prevented it from becoming a political actuality. Where such a consensus no longer exists or has become weak and is no longer sure of itself, as in the period starting with the partitions of Poland and ending with the Napoleonic Wars, the balance of power is incapable of fulfilling its function for international stability and national independence.

Although international institutions are inherently tools of conservation and management, they may also facilitate limited change by providing a general framework of rules and rights within which adjustments can be made that leave the status quo essentially intact. The British conceptualized the League of Nations in this way—as a concert-like forum for the inclusive purposes of consultation, conciliation, and compromise between the satisfied and dissatisfied powers (Kissinger 1994:ch. 9). Similarly, but in a less formal institutional setting, the rules of compensations and indemnities are modes of operation of the balance of power for the purpose of making territorial changes and payments for services or losses without disturbing the relative distribution of power in the system (Wight 1978:ch. 17; Schroeder 1994:6–7).

Because international institutions, according to traditional realists, tend to promote the interests of the powerful at the expense of the weak, they ultimately
derive their authority less from shared views of justice and morality than from the superior power of the ruling, status quo state or states. Traditional realists are not, however, suggesting that international order depends at all times on the exercise of brute force or coercive power by the hegemon. Although imposed at its creation, the existing order and its associated institutional arrangements can, nonetheless, assume—or come to assume—a significant measure of legitimacy among the subordinate states. Acceptance by the ruled can arise as a result of either (1) the state as a whole deriving tangible benefits from the hegemon’s rule, or (2) elites within the secondary state benefiting materially from the hegemonic order or becoming socialized into the hegemon’s value system (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990).

Despite the hegemon’s efforts (benign or otherwise), powerful revisionist states eventually emerge; and, as Gilpin (1981: ch. 3) has argued, uneven power growth among states drives hegemonic wars by altering the costs and benefits of territorial, political, and economic expansion to rising, dissatisfied powers. At a minimum, the rising power will issue demands for, inter alia, a “place at the table”—a commitment from the established powers to reshape what it perceives as adverse global norms. The revisionist power, by seeking this new level of prestige, is acting out its desire to voice its concerns in international institutions commensurate with its growth in relative power. Far from being unimportant or epiphenomenal, then, as neorealists like Mearsheimer have claimed, international institutions are the “brass ring,” so to speak; the right to create and control them is precisely what the most powerful states have fought for in history’s most destructive wars.

The reader should note that not all rising powers are dissatisfied with the status quo order. “Whether a state is revisionist or status quo is not an endogenous function of the distribution of capabilities” (Schweller 1993:86); a state’s type is not determined simply by its power position within the system. Indeed, that a rising power would ever be dissatisfied with the existing order is rather puzzling, given that, by definition, it is doing better than the established powers under their rules and institutional arrangements. One might say that the rising power is beating the established powers at their own game. This apparent discrepancy between actual performance and satisfaction can be reconciled, however, by simply positing that the dissatisfied power believes it is outperforming its competitors despite the shackles that the established powers have placed on it; the assumption is made that it would rise even faster under its own rules.

Traditional realists view system stability as a function of the relative strengths of revisionist and status quo forces. When the forces defending the status quo are stronger than the dissatisfied state(s), the system is stable. This situation is most likely in the immediate aftermath of a major-power war that ends in decisive victory for one party. In contrast, when the revisionist state or coalition is stronger than the forces defending the status quo, the system eventually undergoes transformation. Institutions serve to widen the web of the established order as created by the most powerful, status quo state or coalition.

A Model of International Politics Based on Traditional Realism

Recently, Buzan and Glenn Snyder have proposed that considerations of state-to-state interactions be added to Waltz’s systems theory as a third level of analysis, residing between neorealism’s unit and structural levels. Buzan’s (Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993: ch. 4) “interactions level” captures a systemwide set of variables that are neither structural nor unit level in character and that affect the “interaction capacity”—the absolute quality of technological and societal capabilities—of the system as a whole. Concurring with, but slightly amending, Buzan’s idea, Snyder (1996:172) has added a “relationship” level that consists of static situational ele-
ments (such as alignments and alliances, common and conflicting interests, and capabilities and interdependence) and establishes the context of interaction rather than the action itself. This section builds on this pathbreaking work and advances a model that combines the theoretical insights of neorealism with those of traditional realism. The model includes traditional realism's concern for state attributes and state-to-state interactions as separate causal levels of analysis that reciprocally affect each other. These subsystemic levels of analysis are, in turn, conditioned by the structure of the system, which constrains and enables state behavior and interstate relationships but, as Waltz has suggested, does not determine outcomes. By incorporating state-level attributes and interactions, the model generates more precise explanations and can offer more determinate predictions than are possible from a purely structural form of realism.

**Independent Variables**

At the unit—or nation-state—level, the model focuses on traditional realism's distinction between status quo and revisionist states. Variation in unit interest/motivation is a function of the state's valuation of the established order and whether it seeks greater power or more security. Other state attributes may be substituted for, or added to, interest/motivation (for example, whether the state is liberal/nonliberal, democratic/nondemocratic, or has a homogeneous/heterogeneous culture), depending on what is being explained.

At the interactions level of the model are the patterns of interstate relations and behavior (see Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993; Snyder 1996) that can be characterized as either cooperative or conflictual. A variety of strategic interactions that have been the focus of traditional realism but excluded from neorealist models of international politics can be considered—for instance, high versus low security dilemmas, protectionism/free trade, degree of polarization, containment/engagement strategies, alliance behavior (balancing, bandwagoning, chain-ganging, buck-passing), arms racing/arms control, interdependent/dependent economic relations, and coercive diplomacy/crisis bargaining and management. The length of this partial list supports Gilpin's (1981:46) assertion that "changes at the level of interstate interactions constitute the bulk of international relations."

Interstate interactions are not only conditioned by the characteristics of the states but also help shape and reinforce state-level attributes. For example, a liberal hegemon fosters interdependence and free trade with its trading partners that, in turn, promote the evolution of more liberal states within the system and reinforce the liberal policies already adopted. In effect, the model posits a reciprocal causal relationship between the unit and interactions levels.

The structural level of analysis includes neorealism's concept of polarity as well as two other dimensions: disparities in capabilities among the poles (see Schweller 1993, forthcoming; Mansfield 1994b) and whether the system's relative capability growth rates are static or dynamic. The two additional variables address the concerns that power transition theory (Organski 1958; Gilpin 1981), power cycle theory (Doran 1971, 1991; Copeland 1996), and lateral pressure theory (Choucri and North 1975) have raised about the importance of power inequalities and the relative power trajectories (growth or decline) among the Great Powers for how the system is structured.

**Dependent Variable**

Like neorealism, this model also seeks to explain international politics, defining politics as the process of acquiring, shaping, distributing, and exercising power...
and influence—or more simply, who governs and by what processes. Borrowing from R. H. Tawney (quoted in Lasswell and Kaplan 1950:75), power is "the capacity of an individual, or group of individuals, to modify the conduct of other individuals or groups in the manner which he desires." It is a relational concept that rests on various bases and is limited by a specific scope and domain (see Baldwin 1985:ch. 2).

Governing involves at least three interrelated processes: (1) the way power is exercised, (2) the type of order that is produced, and (3) the degree of institutionalization that prevails. With respect to the first process, power appears to be exercised in three generic ways: as naked power, as influence, and as management. These three ways of governing are distinguished, inter alia, their core values. Specifically, naked power relies on brute force or coercion, that is, the threat of severe sanctions for noncompliance; influence rests on legitimacy, authority, and socialization; management is centered around administrative capacity, skill, and directorship (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950:ch. 5).

The second process focuses on the type of order produced. Oran Young (1986:110) identifies three generic mechanisms through which social order can arise: negotiation; imposition; and spontaneous, uncoordinated action. Negotiated orders are the deliberately intended product of voluntary bargaining among roughly equal, rational egoists (self-interested utility maximizers). Imposed orders are also deliberately designed, but they are intended to advance the interests of one or a few dominant actors and, as such, typically do not require the explicit consent of subordinate actors. Spontaneous orders arise without conscious coordination or deliberate purpose and do not involve explicit consent on the part of the subjects; they are the unintended, although often useful, consequences of the coaction of actors seeking their own selfish interests. (For a more extensive discussion, see Young 1982).

The third process, and the one most important to our present concerns, revolves around the degree of institutionalization (low, moderate, or high) that characterizes the system. Institutions can be formal or informal; they are the sets of rights and rules governing interstate behavior and world politics. A highly institutionalized system is one in which formal organizations have the capacity, skill, and authority to play a major role in managing the system; the rules and rights governing the system are formal, explicit, and based on shared understandings among the major actors.

Although all combinations of these three processes are possible, certain permutations seem more logical and more probable than others. The exercise of naked power is likely to create an imposed order characterized by low institutionalization, as in malevolent hegemony and imperialism. Influence as a means of governing often combines aspects of negotiated and spontaneously generated orders and tends to require a moderate to high level of institutionalization, as in benevolent hegemony, bipolar condominium, Great Power spheres of influence, and balance-of-power politics. Management is the product of negotiated orders and, as a result, usually entails a high level of formal or informal institutionalization, as illustrated by collective security and the Concert system.

Institutions under Unipolarity

What happens to international institutions when the international system is dominated by one power? Using the variety of levels and variables just outlined and material from the literature on unipolarity, what would the model lead us to expect? When the international system is ruled by a hegemon, governance is probably accomplished through naked power and the imposition of rules or by means
of a negotiated order. Which order arises and how it is maintained will depend primarily on whether the hegemon assumes the role of a liberal leader or a nonliberal despot.

Whether the hegemon imposes or negotiates the institutional arrangements governing the international system, it will attempt to establish its dominance in several issue-areas and to set up a world order based on global rules and rights conducive to its interests. Such institutions, although associated with the hegemon’s order and backed by its power, may, even so, exhibit a dramatic independent effect on state behavior. As the hegemon declines—which naturally occurs given the law of uneven growth and environmental, international, and domestic changes (Gilpin 1981:ch. 2)—it comes to rely increasingly on these institutions to maintain its position and delay its fall from dominant status. Institutions under unipolarity, therefore, are most effective at the beginning of a hegemon’s reign but continue to exert influence on international politics during hegemonic decline until a revisionist challenger gains the strength and motivation to overthrow the established order (Gilpin 1981; Keohane 1984).

When the hegemon is not liberal, it creates regimes “by possessing the effective capacity or power to impose institutional arrangements on the group regardless of the preferences of the other members” (Young 1986:110). As imposed orders, such hegemonic institutional arrangements are often underdeveloped, given that they do not involve cooperation but rather submission and adaptation to the stronger power’s will. Imposed hegemonic orders based on coercion and brute force are generally perceived as illegitimate by the subordinate states. Consequently, they tend to be costly and inefficient.

Hegemons are more successful in implanting institutions of their choice and profiting by them when other states benefit from and accept their leadership as well as fear their wrath (Gilpin 1981:144). Such an order is described by the benevolent version of hegemonic stability theory (Kindleberger 1973, 1981; also Gilpin 1975, 1981). According to this theory, a liberal hegemon assumes the start-up costs of providing the collective goods (security and various international institutions) required for an open trading system. The hegemon provides leadership because it has an overriding interest in the creation of such a system and because it is the only state with enough power to do so. To create an open structure, the hegemonic state mixes both carrots and sticks. As Krasner (1976:322–323) has suggested:

In terms of positive incentives, it can offer access to its large domestic market and to its relatively cheap exports. In terms of negative ones, it can withhold foreign grants and engage in competition, potentially ruinous for the weaker state, in third-country markets. The size and robustness of the hegemonic state also enable it to provide the confidence necessary for a stable international monetary system, and its currency can offer the liquidity needed for an increasingly open system.

In contrast, the malevolent version of hegemonic stability theory posits a more devious method of making hegemonic rule pay for lesser states: by fostering asymmetric interdependence. Such a relationship can be formed through what Albert Hirschman (1980 [1945]:30–32) has called “the influence effect” of trade: country A, seeking to increase its influence over country B, alters its terms of trade in B’s favor (for example, by paying above world prices for B’s exports), changing the structure of B’s economy such that it becomes highly, and artificially, complementary to A’s economy. In effect, the more dependent state (B) benefits more from the relationship than the less dependent state (A). Country A accepts losses in national income in exchange for gains in national power. Consider Nazi Germany’s economic relations with its East Central European neighbors; they typified the
deliberate creation of asymmetrical interdependence for the purpose of increasing one’s political influence (Hirschman 1980 [1945]). Likewise, Japan’s so-called new East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere contains aspects of an imposed hegemonic order within a regional context with the intent of gaining influence (Samuels 1994; see also Lincoln 1990; Ravenhill 1993:ch. 5).

Still another way that a hegemonic order can gain legitimacy or acceptance among the ruled is through a process of socialization in which the hegemon, by manipulating material incentives, successfully transmits its values to secondary states. This “third face of power,” or “power of socialization” view, is consistent with the Weberian concept of “legitimate domination”: “Experience shows that in no instance does domination voluntarily limit itself to the appeal to material or affectual or ideal motives as a basis for its continuance. In addition every such system attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy” (Weber as quoted in Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990:289; see also Smith 1986:ch. 2).

Building on Weber’s insight and the traditional realist view that material power is the source of international authority, John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan (1990:284) find that “when socialization does occur, it comes about primarily in the wake of the coercive exercise of power. That is, socialization is distinct from, but does not occur independently of, power manifest as the manipulation of material incentives.” Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990:315) conclude, however, that hegemonic coercion and material inducements are necessary but not sufficient catalysts for socialization to occur:

. . . the process of socialization can lead to outcomes that are not explicable simply in terms of the exercise of coercive power. Socialization affects the nature, the costs, and the longevity of the interactions that shape hegemonic systems. In particular, socialization leads to the legitimation of hegemonic power in a way that allows international order to be manipulated without the constant threat of coercion.

Whichever method is chosen, the hegemon can take full advantage of its exalted position only by solving the paradox presented by its own strength: a hegemon must exert its superior power to influence the behavior of others in a way that achieves its desired ends without, in the process, forcing into existence a counterbalancing coalition. If threat inheres in the hegemon’s power regardless of its declared intentions, as some neorealists have suggested (see Layne 1993), then the hegemon’s fate is sealed: challengers seeking greater security and autonomy will emerge to balance against it. History tells us, however, that threat is not a necessary derivative of power and that the emergence of powerful states has not always been accompanied by the rise of a challenger or countercoalition. Consider the cases of nineteenth-century Britain, which controlled three-quarters of the world and yet remained in “splendid isolation,” as well as the emergence of the United States as a Great Power before World War I without the formation of a balancing alliance (Walt 1985, 1987, 1988).

The hegemons that have most successfully navigated their rise to power and established an order consistent with their objectives have been those that most clearly recognized the limits of power as a basis of rule. Of course, power is an important force behind institutional effectiveness. Niebuhr (1946:93) expressed this idea when he observed that one must not fail to recognize “the necessity of coercion for the sake of securing social co-operation.” When relied upon and used unwisely, however, naked power will prove ineffective as a means of achieving international organization. Thus, Metternich has been called the “supreme realist” (Kissinger 1957:10). Unlike Napoleon, who believed he could impose universal principles on unwilling subjects simply by the assertion of superior power, Metternich based his diplomacy on the sanctity of treaty relations among states. He
worked to restore the disintegrated structure of the eighteenth-century international system, the stability of which rested on limited goals and the claim of legitimacy. In other words, the diplomacy of the realist statesman is dictated by prudence and expediency—knowing what is possible and acting in accordance with the particular situation (Kissinger 1957:ch. 2; see also Kissinger 1994). “We must be gardeners,” George Kennan (1954:92) declared, in support of political expediency and against the establishment of rigid legal norms, “and not mechanics in our approach to world affairs.”

A realist foreign policy emphasizes persuasion and consensus on legitimate principles rather than on coercion and universalism. Of the realist statesman, Kissinger (1957:326) has written:

His instrument is diplomacy, the art of relating states to each other by agreement rather than by the exercise of force, by the representation of a ground of action which reconciles particular aspirations with a general consensus. Because diplomacy depends on persuasion and not imposition, it presupposes a determinate framework, either through an agreement on a legitimizing principle or, theoretically, through an identical interpretation of power-relationships, although the latter is in practice the most difficult to attain.

Contrary to the popular conception, the “ideal” realist state is not the power-maximizing, malevolent hegemon that attempts to impose its values on others through naked power and eternal crusades. Rather, the ideal is the prudent, benevolent hegemon that understands the limits of coercive power and so promotes legitimacy and emulation of its values while tolerating pluralism and diversity.

Institutions under Bipolarity

When the international system contains two superpowers, the model described here would lead us to expect several different institutional patterns, depending on state interests. Specifically, cooperative, although largely informal, institutional practices are likely to develop spontaneously as unintended by-products of the distribution of power. Let us explicate these propositions in more detail.

Borrowing from Mancur Olson (1965), Waltz (1979:208) has observed that in a bipolar system

... the interest of preeminent powers in the consumption of collective goods is strong enough to cause them to undertake the provision of those goods without being properly paid. They have incentives to act in the interest of the general peace and wider security of nations even though they will be working for the benefit of others as much as for themselves and even though others pay disproportionately small amounts of the costs. ... Leading states play leading roles in managing world affairs, and they do this even more so as their number shrinks to two.

Thus, a bipolar structure generates tacit and spontaneous cooperation between the rival poles for the purpose of managing crises and avoiding inadvertent wars (Lipson 1995:17–21; Miller 1995). For example, during the Cold War, Moscow and Washington implicitly recognized each other's spheres of influence, tacitly regulated their use of force during crises, and cooperated to control and end wars in sensitive areas. As a result, despite forty years of keen ideological antagonism, global competition, a costly arms race, and frequent crises, the U.S.-Soviet bipolar rivalry produced not a single bona fide shooting incident between the two superpowers (Keal 1983; Miller 1995:36; see also Gaddis 1987:ch. 8). These largely informal institutional arrangements are more likely and more effective to the degree that the two poles share affinity for the status quo; if one of the poles is revisionist, such institutions, although likely to still exist, will be much weaker.
Under bipolarity, the identity of the poles as either revisionist or status quo powers is partially an endogenous function of the relative distribution of capabilities between them. Bipolar systems, more than multipolar ones, highlight "the coexistence of hegemonic rivalry with the balancing of military potentials" (Wohlforth 1993:304–305). To understand how this behavior affects the poles' level of satisfaction with the status quo order, we must incorporate the possibility of both capability inequalities (see Schweller 1993, forthcoming) and dynamic changes in the differentials of power (see Copeland 1996) among the poles.

When one pole in a bipolar system is significantly stronger than the other or believes that dynamic change in the relative balance of power between them is possible, it (or both poles) will seek to achieve hegemonic status. Unlimited revisionist aims of this type exacerbate bipolar conflict and competition, as one pole tries to impose a global order on the other pole, which, in turn and for reasons of self-preservation, resists at all costs. Such an unbalanced, dynamic bipolar system characterized the "pre–mutual assured destruction," post–World War II period and led to intense bipolar competition and periodic crises.

Conversely, when (1) the two poles are roughly equal in military power, (2) this condition of parity is relatively stable, or (3) both poles perceive the situation as such, the drive for hegemony subsides. Under conditions of static and balanced bipolarity, both poles are likely to become satisfied, status quo powers (unable and unwilling to change the established order), and bipolar accommodation and condominium will replace superpower rivalry. Thus, somewhat counterintuitive to the neorealist perspective, the growth in Soviet power during the 1960s and 1970s led not to increased superpower competition and greater cohesion among the Western allies but rather to superpower détente and greater intra-alliance conflict (for example, Brandt's Ostpolitik, and the Sino-Soviet split). This reaction occurred because the Soviets achieved nuclear parity with the United States during this period, which not only satisfied Soviet prestige and security demands but, more important, enhanced system stability and balance—both of which were reinforced by second-strike nuclear weapons.

At the state-to-state interactions level, when a stable bipolar balance exists, the intensity of the security dilemma decreases; both poles are "concerned less with scoring relative gains and more with making absolute ones" (Waltz 1979:195). Arms racing gives way to arms control, and crisis management replaces coercive diplomacy. The two poles cooperate to manage the system through the creation of a moderate level of institutionalization and negotiated or tacit "rules of the game" (see, for example, Benjamin Frankel's (1993) analysis of Soviet-U.S. management of nuclear proliferation). At the same time, however, the nonpolar states often view bipolar condominium as an imposed order that carries with it the threat of losing their political autonomy.

In contrast with polar relations, intrabloc relations under bipolarity are governed by formal and explicit institutional arrangements, whether negotiated (as in NATO) or imposed (as in the Warsaw Pact). The most commonly discussed form of institutional cooperation in the realist literature is the military alliance.8 Realists see alliances primarily as responses to threats: the greater the threat, the greater the likelihood of alliance formation and, implicitly, the more cohesive the alliance

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8The discussion of alliances is included in this section on bipolarity, rather than in the previous section, because alliances are less prominent in unipolar systems, even though they exist. It should be noted that alliances (at least offensive ones) are qualitatively different from most other international institutions in that they are formed, not to reap the benefits of peaceful cooperation, but rather to reap the benefits of cooperation in making and jointly executing war (see Levy 1981:611; Schweller 1994).
A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate

(Walt 1987; see also Walt 1985, 1988; Snyder 1990, 1991; Barnett and Levy 1991; David 1991, 1992; Garnham 1991; Kaufman 1992; Labs 1992; Levy and Barnett 1992; Resende-Santos 1992; Brand 1994a, 1994b; Reiter 1994, 1996; Schroeder 1994; Schweller 1994; Priess 1996a). As George Liska (1962:12) has commented, "alliances are against, and only derivatively for, someone or something." Consider the extraordinary level of cooperation within the Western bloc in the post–World War II period that resulted from the combination of bipolarity, the perceived threat from the Soviet Union, and U.S. hegemony among the advanced capitalist countries. The common perception of a long-term Soviet threat and the virtual disappearance of the possibility of war among the Western allies promoted an absolute gains orientation within the alliance (Grieco 1990:40–47). In such situations even Waltz (1971:467) has claimed that integration is possible:

Politics—negotiation, log-rolling, compromise—becomes the means of achieving preferred arrangements. To manage conflict, a closer integration is sought. The organization by which integration is to be promoted then becomes the object of struggle. How shall it be constructed, and what shall its purposes be? Once these become the most important questions, international relations begin to look like domestic politics.

At the height of the Cold War, U.S. policymakers, seeking to provide for the common defense and to balance Soviet-bloc power, paid little attention to relative shifts in power capabilities vis-à-vis America's less powerful allies (Pollins 1989a, 1989b; Gowa and Mansfield 1993; Gowa 1994). "The exceptional postwar power capabilities of the United States," Krasner (1986:805) has noted, "elevated them [sic] above such considerations, except with regard to the Soviet Union." As realism predicts, the United States viewed absolute gains by its alliance partners as relative gains for the alliance as a whole with respect to the rival Soviet-bloc coalition. "When a state believes that another not only is not likely to be an adversary, but has sufficient interests in common with it to be an ally, then it will actually welcome an increase in the other's power" (Jervis 1978:175; see also Grieco 1990). Based on the principles of multilateralism and diffuse reciprocity, U.S. foreign economic policy encouraged European unification and tolerated explicit Japanese discrimination against U.S. exports and direct foreign investment. To balance Soviet-bloc power, the United States indulged the free-riding strategies of its European and Japanese friends.

These extraordinary measures were dictated by a unique security threat induced by the bipolar world structure. In the absence of bipolarity and the Soviet threat, structural realists (including Waltz, Layne, and Mearsheimer) expect relations between the United States and its erstwhile allies to return to a more normal state of affairs, that is, economic, political, and military competition; a concern for relative shifts in power capabilities; and a struggle for supremacy. As Waltz (1993:76) has observed, "Without the shared perception of a severe Soviet threat, NATO would never have been born"; with the disappearance of that threat, "NATO's days are not numbered, but its years are" (also see Mearsheimer 1990:52, 1994/95:14). In theory, a properly functioning balance-of-power system requires rapid and abrupt switches from amity to enmity among nations. In practice, decisive victories have often converted wartime allies into peacetime adversaries. Why should the end of the Cold War be any different from past history?9

9For a creative, but not entirely convincing, argument (incorporating functionalist, cybernetic, neoliberal institutionalist, and realist elements) that NATO will survive and continue to be important in the post–Cold War era, see Chernoff (1995).
Perhaps forty-plus years of transatlantic cooperation have forever changed relations among the advanced industrialized democracies. Positing a variant of this view, adherents of the "Clash of Civilizations/West Against the Rest" school predict that a united "West" will persist because of natural affinity, consciousness of their own civilization, and, consistent with realism, a shared common threat from other non-Western civilizations (Huntington 1993, 1996a, 1996b; Mahbubani 1993; Connelly and Kennedy 1994). Similarly, but arising from a liberal foundation, Deudney and Ikenberry (1993/94; Ikenberry 1996) have argued that the West is a unique "industrial liberal" order, likely to persist regardless of recent structural changes. In the eyes of neorealists, however, the idea of the "West" is a mere myth brought into existence by an extremely dangerous, overtly hostile threat from the East; a myth that has outlived its usefulness (see Harries 1993).

In contrast to neorealism, traditional realism suggests an answer for the persistence of an institution beyond the time when its raison d'etre vanishes, such as NATO's endurance into the 1990s. States enter into cooperative arrangements, such as alliances, for reasons of expediency. When the reasons that led to a coalition no longer exist, the alliance begins to disintegrate (Morgenthau 1959; Kennan 1984:238; Hellmann and Wolf 1993:10–13).10 Traditional realists, however, do not assert, as neorealists do, that all alliances will disintegrate sooner rather than later. Given traditional realism's assumptions that politics are inherently group-based and that group identities on the world stage are not forever fixed (Gilpin 1981:18; see also Niebuhr 1932, 1944; Carr 1946; Morgenthau 1946, 1985), this theory predicts that some institutions will endure longer than the structural factors or threats that brought them into existence because of a shared sense of "in-group" identity induced by prolonged, intense, and focused threats (Priess 1996b). The idea of the "West" forged by decades of Cold War competition may, therefore, enable NATO to endure longer than a similar institution without such a sense of shared identity. Even though structural changes and shifts in state interests make the disintegration of alliances and attendant institutions inevitable in the long run (a belief distinguishing this realist account from much of the "West Against the Rest" literature), some institutions will endure longer than neorealism predicts because of the development of shared identities, especially if "in-groups" are maintained by the perception of new "others" (Mercer 1995; Barnett 1996).

Institutions under Multipolarity

What if the system has many poles? What kind of international institutions result in a multipolar system, and do the characteristics of the units or their interactions influence the nature of these institutional arrangements? Under multipolarity, the model described here predicts that international institutions could take a variety of forms—most, but not all, of which will be ad hoc and shallow with little or no influence on state behavior. The variance in the degree of institutionalization in the international system will depend on the character of the units, the particular type of multipolar structure in which they are embedded, and several interaction-level variables—in particular, the degree of inequality and of differential growth rates among the poles as well as the offense-defense balance in military technology (see Christensen and Snyder 1990).

When there is an even distribution of power among the multiple poles (each holds an approximately equal percentage share of systemic capabilities) and their growth rates are not widely uneven, the system is unlikely to experience polariza-

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10 For a good literature review and spirited liberal critique of this proposition, see Kegley and Raymond (1994).
tion into rival camps for the purpose of managing dangerous imbalances of power. As long as no alliance handicaps exist, such a balanced and stable multipolar system is fertile ground for the development of systemwide international regimes that define the norms and codes governing interstate relations and offer membership to all the Great Powers (Schroeder 1994). Conversely, when there are large imbalances of power among the poles or vastly uneven growth rates, the system will be characterized by a high level of polarization and concern over relative gains and losses, both of which exacerbate the security dilemma and rule out any attempt to construct systemwide institutional orders.

Institutions are most likely to develop and to be effective in a multipolar setting when all the Great Powers are satisfied with the established order. Under this condition, a negotiated order based on management and influence with a moderate to high level of institutionalization would be likely. By definition, status quo states do not require expansion for their security (if they did, they would not be satisfied with the status quo) and, for them, the benefits of peace far outweigh the costs of not engaging in expansion. If each is confident that all the others feel the same way, institutionalized cooperation taking the form of a “Great Power Concert” may develop (Jervis 1983). In such a situation, every pole is willing to forego short-term gains for the long-term benefits of domestic and systemic peace and stability.

Other unit-level factors, such as ideological convergence and cultural similarity, also promote the establishment of security regimes among the Great Powers for the purpose of cooperation in conflict resolution (Miller 1995:ch. 2). The post-Napoleonic concert, for example, was made possible by the extreme war-weariness of the combatants, which ruled out any thought of nonpeaceful revision, and the common conservative ideology of almost all the great Continental powers after 1815 (Kissinger 1957:31, 1994:98).

At the interaction level, a shared perception among all poles that defense has the advantage over offense—that “it is easier to protect and to hold than it is to move forward, destroy, and take” (Jervis 1978:187)—and that defensive weapons and policies are distinct from offensive ones will decrease the security dilemma among major powers and thereby increase the likelihood that security institutions will develop (Glaser 1994/95). Yet, although it is relatively easy to create security regimes under such circumstances, there will be little need for them. Thus, states may opt to forgo cooperative arrangements in favor of individualistic policies. For this reason, the most favorable conditions for the formation of security regimes are cases in which offense has the advantage, and offensive military postures differ from defensive ones, or cases in which offensive measures are indistinguishable from defensive ones, but it is easier to defend than attack. “In either of these worlds the costs or risks of individualistic security policies are great enough to provide status quo powers with incentives to seek security through cooperative means, but the dangers of being taken by surprise by an aggressor are not so great as to discourage the states from placing reliance on joint measures” (Jervis 1983:178).

When some of the Great Powers are perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be revisionist and thus dissatisfied with the established international order, security regimes and institutions will either break down or be less effective, as in the Concert system after 1848 and the League of Nations during the interwar period (Jervis 1986). This logic also applies to regional balances of power. In a multipolar region with powerful revisionist states, institutions will be both sparse and ineffective. Consider the modern Middle East, where there have been a number of revisionist states over the last forty years, and where international institutions (apart from the increasingly powerful institution of statism) have been largely impotent (Ajami 1981; Barnett 1993, 1995, 1996).
One form of institution in particular, the military alliance, tends to vary widely in effectiveness under multipolarity. Unlike bipolarity, multipolarity allows for myriad alliance patterns among the poles as a result of the greater uncertainty inherent in such a distribution of power and the number of exit choices that states have. Specifically, multipolar alliances are plagued by states’ abilities to manipulate partners vis-à-vis other poles—for instance, by chain-ganging and buck-passing. Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder (1990) have observed that attention to system structure alone does not allow one to make determinate predictions about which of these strategies will be chosen in any given situation; for these types of predictions, interaction-level variables such as the nature of the offense-defense balance must be included. Multipolar alliances also vary widely in their explicitness. Alliance members must make a trade-off between implicit bonds—which increase states’ anxieties concerning abandonment but may lead their partners to honor the alliance (to maintain their reputations)—and explicit bonds—which grant them confidence that the commitments explicated in the agreement will be honored but may entrap them in their allies’ adventures (Snyder 1984:473–474). Ironically, then, alliances and institutions in general are likely to be least effective when the international system has multiple poles—precisely the distribution of power under which uncertainty and risk make cooperation most necessary.

In summary, multipolar periods historically have been characterized by both minimal and extensive Great Power institutionalization. Because this variation cannot be explained by the neorealist constant of structural polarity, unit- and interaction-level factors must determine the degree of institutionalization that does or does not develop in such systems. Moreover, given the greater number of actors, and thus complexity, in a multipolar system, any significant cooperation that occurs between the Great Powers will require formal and explicit institutionalized arrangements (Lipson 1991). The Great Powers in a multipolar system cannot engage in effective conflict management and resolution strategies by the tacit rules of spontaneous cooperation; deliberate, conscious negotiation among the poles will be needed for such cooperation to result (Miller 1995:242–243).

Trends and Further Research

Neorealism’s parsimony has led to excesses such as Mearsheimer’s stance on institutions that have left realism without a well-developed model of institutional origins and effectiveness. Most realists, however, understand that institutions can, and sometimes do, matter. The model presented in this article is merely a sketch derived from earlier realists’ insights on institutions; far more work remains to be done. This final section briefly describes how this more traditional realist model of international institutions fits into an emerging wave of realist scholarship and suggests some fruitful avenues for future research on international institutions.

Back to Realism’s Roots

This essay is part of a current intellectual movement away from the starker, more rigorous, neorealist model of international politics toward the richer analytic framework of traditional realism. Recent scholarship, in addition to the research already cited in our discussion of modified structural realism, further highlights this trend. One of the authors (Schweller 1996:92; see also Schweller forthcoming) has observed elsewhere that “differences in state goals—whether states seek the minimum power required for security or additional power for goals other than security—have to be accorded equal consideration with anarchy and the distribution of capabilities.” Likewise, Stephen Walt’s (1985, 1987, 1988, 1992, 1996a)
balance-of-threat theory incorporates the traditional realist concern for state interests and intentions. Even Grieco’s (1990:45) well-known argument on relative gains, a neorealist cause célèbre, relies on the “k-factor” that represents a state’s “sensitivity to gaps in payoffs,” a function of the amity or enmity between states. Although neorealism has been of immense value, the complexity of contemporary world politics requires a systems theory that can incorporate the characteristics of states, their interactions, and a more comprehensive view of system structure than is captured by the concept of polarity. This need for a more elaborate theory does not mean, as many liberals and constructivists have suggested, that realist theory is dead and should be buried (see, for example, Kegley 1993; Lebow 1994). To the contrary, realism contains all the elements necessary to construct a theory of world politics applicable to the twenty-first century; it is a theory, as William Wohlforth (1994/95:92) has noted, that is “rich and varied, and cannot be limited just to structural realism.”

An Agenda for Realists

Our discussion and the model we have described suggest that there should be three important goals in any further development of a realist theory of institutions: (1) to elaborate the causal links among the three levels of analysis and the various dimensions of the dependent variable; (2) to deduce falsifiable hypotheses that posit precisely how the variables are causally related; and (3) to operationalize, test, and refine these propositions by means of case-study and process-tracing methods or standard quantitative/statistical techniques. The most important lines of inquiry for future research center on the following questions: How do the characteristics of states affect their interactions and vice versa? How do state-level interactions, such as alliance behavior or the degree of economic/military interdependence among states, affect the degree of institutionalization and the type of governance in the system as a whole or in a particular subsystem? Does the structure of the system affect the characteristics of its component units and, if so, in what ways? Do changes in the structure of the international system affect the type of order (imposed, negotiated, or spontaneously generated) that results? Or, conversely, does the type of order and the ways in which power is exercised (either through naked force, influence, or management) cause predictable changes in system structure and the nature of state interactions?

Along these lines, Layne (1993) has argued that, because overwhelming power is inherently threatening, unipolarity impels eligible states to balance against the hegemon, regardless of whether it adopts a benevolent or coercive strategy or has a recent history of friendship and alliance with the candidates for future polar status. In other words, Layne, a self-described neorealist, is proposing that system structure (unipolarity) affects both unit-level interactions (states become more competitive and go from amity to enmity) and the attributes of the units (satisfied states become dissatisfied with the status quo and seek to revise it). The model we have described offers a competing prediction: If the hegemon adopts a benevolent strategy and creates a negotiated order based on legitimate influence and management, lesser states will bandwagon with, rather than balance against, it. Thus, the United States may be able to prolong and strengthen its present hegemonic rule (Pax Americana) through what Josef Joffe (1995:113) has called a “Bismarckian strategy of hubs and spokes,” whereby it maintains “better relations with all possible contenders than they do among each other.” To determine which scenario is most likely to unfold (Layne’s or this essay’s) as well as the answers to many other equally important puzzles, we must address the questions raised above.
In addition to insights concerning why international institutions are formed and maintained, we also need to explore why and by what processes institutions decay. Even though we have unresolved questions, we know far more about how institutions arise than we do about their decay and disintegration. Neoliberal institutionalism has not been of much assistance in this regard, because authors in this tradition go to the opposite extreme of neorealists and accord great staying power to institutions (Keohane and Nye 1977; Keohane 1984; Young 1992). Just what are the external and internal sources of international regime failure? Is institutional change most often a product of external shock or internal decay? Is institutional failure at the international level a product of the widespread breakdown of domestic and political social structures? Moreover, why do some institutions endure severe shocks and persist whereas others disintegrate when faced with similar perturbations? Scholars have long recognized that states’ investments in international institutions are influenced by domestic political and social structures as well as by the demands of the international system, but the precise nature of these ties and their comparative impact have not received much attention.

To be sure, tackling this research agenda is a daunting task but one we believe is necessary if realists are to meet the intellectual challenges of the post–Cold War world. We urge scholars to develop a new body of literature devoted to uncovering and investigating the causal links, interaction effects, and feedback loops among variables at three levels of analysis—not just two—and between these variables and the type of order in international politics that they produce. This article was intended to show the relevance of such an endeavor for understanding the nature of international institutions.

References


A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate


