

# The False Promise of International Institutions Summary

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by John Mearsheimer

- The post cold war world rejects balance of power politics via international institutions based on the belief that institutions are a key means of promoting world peace

- The aim is to create a framework of complementary, mutually reinforcing institutions
- Institutionalists consider institutions a powerful force of stability
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# Realists

- Realists maintain that institutions are basically:
  - 1) a reflection of the distribution of power in the world
  - 2) are based on self-interested calculations of great powers and have no independent effect on state power
  - 3) not an important cause of peace

# Institutionalists

- Institutionalists maintain that institutions:
  - 1) can alter state preferences and therefore alter state behavior
  - 2) can discourage states from calculating self-interest on the basis of how every move affects their relative power positions
  - 3) are independent variables, and they have the capability to move states away from war

## Institutionalists

- The central conclusion is that institutions have minimal influence on state behavior and hold little promise for promoting state peace; there is little support in the historical record that they do

## What are institutions?

- Institutions are a set of rules that stipulate the ways in which states would cooperate and compete with each other that are formulized in international agreements

# What are institutions?

- Institutions call for the decentralized cooperation of individual sovereign states without any effective mechanism of command



# Realism

- For realists, daily life is a struggle for power where each state strives to be the most powerful actor in the system and ensure that no other state achieves that position; the possibility for war is always in the background

# Realism

- Genuine peace or a world where states do not compete for power is not likely

# Five assumptions of realism

- The international system is anarchic
- States possess offensive military capabilities; war is always possible
- States can never be certain of the intentions of another state
- Survival is the primary concern of states
- States think strategically about how to survive in the international system

## Five assumptions of realism

- These five assumptions can create incentives for states to think and sometimes behave more aggressively
- Three patterns of behavior result

## Three patterns of behavior

- States in the international system fear each other. Why?
  - Suspicious
  - No central authority
  - No mechanism of punishment

## Three patterns of behavior

- Each state in the international system aims to guarantee its own survival; states operate in a “self-help” system because when danger arises, states cannot depend on others for their security

## Three patterns of behavior

- States in the international system aim to maximize their relative power positions over other states because the greater the military advantage one state has over the other, the more secure it is. The aim is to acquire more military power at the expense of potential rivals. The ideal outcome would be to end up the hegemon in the system

## Two factors inhibit cooperation

- Two factors inhibit cooperation: relative-gains considerations and concern about cheating



## Absolute gains

- Absolute gains: each side focuses on maximizing its own profit and cares little about how much the other side gains or loses

## Relative gains

- Relative gains: each side considers its individual gain and how well it does compared to the other side

## Balance of power

- States in a realist world are concerned about the balance of power, therefore they must be motivated primarily by relative gains when considering cooperation
- States are often reluctant to enter into cooperative agreements for fear that the other side will cheat on the agreement and gain a relative advantage
- Rivals as well as allies cooperate

## Balance of power

- The most powerful states in the international system create and shape institutions so that they can maintain their share of world power or even increase it
- The balance of power is the independent variable that explains war; institutions are merely an *intervening* variable in the process

# Liberal institutionalism

- Least ambitious
- Does not directly address the question of how to prevent war but focuses on economic and environmental cooperation among states
- Based on the belief that cheating is the main inhibitor of international cooperation and that institutions provide the key to overcoming that problem
- Creates rules that constrains states but not to challenge the fundamental realist claim that states are self-interested actors

# Collective security

- Directly confronts the issue of how to prevent war
- Starts with the assumption that force will continue to matter in world politics and that states will have to guard against political aggressors

## Three anti-realist norms that challenge realist theory about state behavior

- States should reject the idea of using force to change the status quo
- To deal with states that threaten to violate the norm and threaten to start a war, states must not act on behalf of their own narrow self-interest; they must suppress the temptation to respond in whatever way would maximize their individual gains and instead automatically join together to threaten the aggressor with overwhelming force

Three anti-realist norms that challenge realist theory about state behavior

- States must trust each other to renounce aggression and to mean that renunciation; they must be confident other states will come to their rescue should they become the target of aggression



# Collective security

- Does not satisfactorily explain how states overcome their fears and learn to trust one another; says little about anarchy or offensive capability
- The historical record provides little support for the theory: the League of Nations was a spectacular failure
- Peacekeeping and concerts are of marginal value in promoting peace and work in different logic than collective security.

# Critical theory

- Ultimate aim is to create a world where there is increased cooperation among states and the possibility of genuine peace
- Based on the assumption that how we think and talk about international politics are the driving forces of state behavior
- Rejects realism's claim that state behavior is largely a function of the given structure of the external world

# Critical theory

- Ideas shape the material world in important ways; the way to change international politics is to change the way people think about world politics
- Because of the dominance of realism in international politics, the intent is to challenge and undermine realism in order to be open to a more peaceful world

# Critical theory

- Critical theory is a top-down theory whereby elites play the key role in transforming language and discourse about international relations. Experts, especially scholars, determine the flow of ideas about world politics.
- These transnational elites, sometime known as epistemic communities, are well-suited for formulating and spreading the communitarian ideals that critical theorists hope will replace realism

## Critical theory

- Their explanation of how change occurs is incomplete and internally contradictory; they say little about why realism has been the dominant discourse and why its foundations are so shaky
- There is little empirical evidence to support the claims of critical theorists and much to contradict them

## Conclusion

- Policymakers who rely on institutionalist theories will make policies that are bound to fail because these theories do not accurately describe the world