A Realist Reply | *John J. Mearsheimer*

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the rejoinders to my article on "The False Promise of International Institutions."[1] I begin with a brief restatement of what is at issue between my critics and me. Then I deal in turn with each response.

The Core Issue

The central question raised in "False Promise" is straightforward and widely recognized in the international relations literature: can international institutions prevent war by changing state behavior? Specifically, can institutions push states away from war by getting them to eschew balance-of-power logic, and to refrain from calculating each important move according to how it affects their relative power position?

Realists answer no. They believe that institutions cannot get states to stop behaving as short-term power maximizers. For realists, institutions reflect state calculations of self-interest based primarily on concerns about relative power; as a result, institutional outcomes invariably reflect the balance of power. Institutions, realists maintain, do not have significant independent effects on state behavior. However, realists recognize that great powers sometimes find institutions—especially alliances—useful for maintaining or even increasing their share of world power. For example, it was more efficient for the United States and its allies to balance against the Soviets through NATO than through a less formal and more *ad hoc* alliance. But NATO did not force its member states to behave contrary to balance-of-power logic.

Institutionalists answer yes. They believe that institutions can independently change state behavior. Institutions can cause peace, so the argument goes, by convincing states to reject power-maximizing behavior, and to accept outcomes that might weaken their relative power position. In short, the debate between the institutionalists and me is about whether institutions can have an independent effect on state behavior, or whether instead institutional outcomes

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1. John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 5–49.

reflect great power interests, and are essentially tools that great powers employ for their own selfish purposes.

The responses to "False Promise" prompt me to make a brief but important point about the role of alliances in institutional theory. Institutionalists traditionally have focused on what might be called "inner-directed" institutions, i.e., those designed to manage and resolve conflicts among the member states, and to facilitate cooperation among them. Inner-directed institutions seek to cause peace by influencing the behavior of the member states. Thus, the larger the membership, the better the prospects for peace. A collective security system is a good example of an inner-directed institution. At the same time, institutionalists have paid little attention to alliances, which are "outer-directed" institutions. Alliances are not primarily concerned with keeping peace among the member states, much less with coaxing them to violate balance-of-power logic in their behavior. Instead, the target of an alliance's attention is an outside state, or coalition of states, which the alliance aims to deter, coerce, or defeat in war. To the extent that alliances cause peace, they do so by deterrence, which is straightforward realist behavior. Not surprisingly, institutionalists have largely ignored NATO in their writings, and have focused instead on inner-directed institutions such as the European Community (EC) and the International Energy Agency.

I raise this point because the responses by Ruggie and by Keohane and Martin suggest that a crucial change may be occurring in their thinking about institutions. They make frequent reference to NATO in their responses, which implies that alliances are now a central element in institutionalist theory. Thus, the fact that NATO helped deter the Soviet threat is invoked as evidence that institutions cause peace. However, NATO's success in the Cold War cannot be cited as support for institutionalist theory, because deterrence has virtually nothing to do with the long-standing claims of institutionalists. In essence, both Ruggie and Keohane and Martin are shifting the terms of debate, and making realist claims under the guise of institutionalism. This point's significance will become apparent in the following discussion of their responses.

John Ruggie: A Ship Passing in the Night

Ruggie's response does not provide a strong defense of institutionalist theory, because it simply does not address the core issue about institutions raised in "False Promise." Furthermore, his four main arguments about institutions are consistent with realism. He argues that during the early Cold War some realists

like George Kennan sometimes gave bad advice about such matters as "the creation of NATO and European unification," and that policymakers wisely ignored that advice. This argument is correct but irrelevant, as it says nothing about whether institutions cause peace by independently affecting state behavior.

Ruggie also makes the realist claim that "postwar America pursued its interests and sought to manage the changing international balance of power," but he adds that "U.S. policymakers also had certain institutional objectives in mind (p. 62)," such as the establishment of NATO. This may be true, but this argument too has little to do with whether institutions cause peace by independently affecting state behavior. Ruggie then argues that the United States fared better waging the Cold War with institutions like NATO than it would have without them. I agree. I believe great powers sometimes use institutions to further their interests. Yet once again, this point does not address the central issue raised in "False Promise": can institutions cause peace by independently affecting state behavior?

Finally, Ruggie occasionally hints that American policymakers proposed ideas that contradict realist logic. But he does not push these arguments very far, and ultimately concedes that those policymakers were motivated by "geopolitical fact, not *idealism*." For example, he argues that, "In creating NATO . . . Truman chose the institutional form that most closely approximated collective security commitments." Ruggie makes it sound like Truman was behaving according to the dictates of Charles and Clifford Kupchan. However, he quickly reverses himself in the subsequent footnote (p. 65), where he writes: "[Arnold] Wolfers pointed out the difference between collective self-defense and fully-fledged collective security systems. . . . NATO, to be sure, is an instance of the former, not the latter."

He also claims that the Eisenhower administration's support of European unification "deviated sharply" from realism. This claim is incorrect. Eisenhower believed that the United States had a security interest in seeing the Soviet Union contained, but he also believed that America's military presence in Europe would be temporary, and that the Europeans would eventually have to fend for themselves against the Soviet threat. He felt that a united Western Europe would achieve this containment better than a divided Western Europe; this policy perspective is consistent with realism. These cases aside, Ruggie gives away the store when he concludes that "the views of Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, or Dulles . . . toward the institutional dimensions of security policy had less to do with mushy thinking than with geopolitical realities."

This conclusion corresponds to a realist view of institutions: U.S. policymakers used NATO and other institutions to improve their relative power position *vis-à-vis* their main adversary, the Soviet Union.

Robert Keohane and Lisa Martin: Realists by Any Other Name . . .

When liberal institutionalism was first articulated in the mid-1980s by Keohane and others, it was a rather straightforward theory that presented a clear alternative to realism. The original theory argued that institutions could independently ease cooperation among states by helping states overcome certain collective action dilemmas. In 1988, however, Joseph Grieco (a realist) published an article in *International Organization* that called into question the original theory's causal logic.[2] Empirical work then began appearing that supported Grieco's claims. Stephen Krasner (another realist) published an article on global communications in *World Politics* (1991) that was an especially damning indictment of liberal institutionalism.[3]

Liberal institutionalists scrambled to repair their theory in the wake of this realist challenge. Keohane and Martin's response is an attempt to describe post-Grieco liberal institutionalism and contrast it with realism. Their bottom line is that realism is a deeply flawed theory, and that modified liberal institutionalism is a superior theory of international politics. However, a careful look at Keohane and Martin's response reveals that liberal institutionalism in its latest form is no longer a clear alternative to realism, but has, in fact, been swallowed up by it. The most recent variant of liberal institutionalism is realism by another name.

There are three principal dimensions to Keohane and Martin's response. First, they build much of their case around the nebulous claim that "institutions matter," a phrase they invoke at least four times. At the same time, they imply that I think institutions are simply irrelevant. This line of argument allows them to ask why states would devote "resources to structures that will make no difference." They claim that my answer must be that it is the result of some "collective delusion." It is fruitless to argue about whether institutions "matter," since the claim is so vague that it has no real meaning. In the end,

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2. Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 485–507.
3. Stephen D. Krasner, "Global Communications and National Power: Life on the Pareto Frontier," *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (April 1991), pp. 336–366. Also see Baldev Raj Nayar, "Regimes, Power, and International Aviation," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Winter 1995), pp. 139–170.

everything matters. The real question, as described in "False Promise," is how, and how much, do institutions affect state behavior? For what it is worth, I believe institutions sometimes matter. After all, great powers use institutions to further their interests. Thus, I find it neither surprising nor inconsistent with realism to discover that states invest modest resources in institutions. But that point hardly addresses the main issue: can institutions get states to eschew short-term gains for long-term benefits?

The second dimension of Keohane and Martin's response is an unsparing criticism of realism, followed by the claim that institutions affect state behavior in ways that contradict realism. They begin their response by going on the offense against realism, suggesting that this "purportedly scientific theory" may not even deserve to be called social science. Nevertheless, their subsequent discussion of institutions is replete with realist arguments. For example, they write, "liberal institutionalists, who see institutions as rooted in the realities of power and interest, do not argue that NATO could have maintained stability under any imaginable conditions. What we argue is that institutions make a significant difference in conjunction with power realities (p. 42)." Later (p. 47) they write, "institutionalist theory . . . after all, posits that international institutions are created in response to state interests, and that their character is structured by the prevailing distribution of capabilities." Both of these quotations could have been taken straight from a Realism 101 lecture. Furthermore, Keohane and Martin hardly mention the argument that institutions can have an independent effect on state behavior. Indeed they write (p. 48) that "the difference between realism and liberal institutionalism does not lie in whether institutions are independent or dependent variables." If that is the case, then it is difficult to see how this latest version of liberal institutionalism presents much of a challenge to realism.

Keohane and Martin make some arguments that might appear to contradict realism, but on close inspection, do not. Regarding the issue of relative gains, for example, they emphasize that "institutions can facilitate cooperation by helping to settle distributional conflicts." There is no question that institutions might help two states divide the gains of cooperation in a way that satisfies both parties. But that task is compatible with realism, because it does not require states to violate balance-of-power logic. In fact, institutions are working in such cases to ensure that agreements reflect the balance of power. Grieco made precisely this point in his 1988 article.[4] Nevertheless, as I emphasized in "False Promise," cooperation and peace are not the same thing. After all, the

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4. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation," pp. 506–507.

Ribbentrop-Molotov pact was a case of international cooperation, but hardly a source of peace.

Finally, virtually all of the tasks that Keohane and Martin assign to institutions can be accomplished without them. For example, there is no reason why two states cannot bargain with each other and use side payments to help alleviate the relative-gains problem. Institutions are not necessary to accomplish this task, although they may sometimes help distribute gains so that the final outcome reflects the balance of power. Keohane and Martin also make much of the fact that institutions facilitate "issue linkage," which sometimes enhances the prospects of cooperation. Martin argues in her study of EC sanctions against Argentina during the Falklands War that Britain was able to secure the cooperation of other European states by linking issues in the context of the EC. This is true, but issue linkage was a commonplace practice in world politics well before institutions came on the scene; moreover, Britain and the other European states could have used other diplomatic tactics to solve the problem. After all, Britain and America managed to cooperate on sanctions even though the United States was not a member of the EC.

The third dimension of Keohane and Martin's response is to offer evidence that institutions can cause peace. However, the evidence they provide to support their claim is especially weak. Studies of oil pollution at sea and the European Court of Justice simply do not tell us much about war and peace. John Duffield's work on NATO is insightful, but it is largely consistent with a realist understanding of that alliance. Duffield certainly does not argue that NATO was formed for non-realist reasons or that it forced member states to violate balance-of-power logic. Keohane and Martin try to excuse the dearth of empirical support for liberal institutionalism by claiming that it is a "new theory." This defense is not persuasive. Liberal institutionalism has been at the center of international relations debates for well over a decade, a lengthy period by academic standards. If there were strong empirical support for liberal institutionalism, some of it should have surfaced by now. In fact, considerable empirical research has been done on the theory. However, most of it undermines liberal institutionalism and supports realism. Thus, it is not surprising that the liberal institutionalists are now converting to realism, but it would clarify matters if they would admit it.

Charles Kupchan and Clifford Kupchan: Mixing Oil and Water

In "False Promise" I examined the standard theory of collective security, which has been in the international relations literature for decades. That theory pre-

sents a stark alternative and direct challenge to realism. States behave according to different logics in each theory, and therefore the predictions of each for life in the international system vary greatly as well. I argued in "False Promise" that there are flaws in the logic of collective security, and that there is much historical evidence that it is unworkable in practice. I also argued that concerts, in contrast, are institutions that are compatible with realism, and therefore they work according to a different logic than collective security. Thus, collective security systems and concerts should be regarded as distinct institutional forms.

The Kupchans, for the most part, do not challenge the assessment of the standard version of collective security laid out in "False Promise." They argue instead that I employ a very narrow definition of collective security. The claim is that I set up a straw man by focusing on what they label "ideal collective security." This charge is incorrect. I described and analyzed the standard version of the theory, which has long served as the basis of discussion when scholars debate the merits of collective security. In fact, I considered the same theory that Inis Claude examined in his pathbreaking works on collective security, and not surprisingly, I came to many of the same conclusions that he did.[5]

The Kupchans' response focuses on defending a new version of collective security, which they invented and first articulated in a Summer 1991 *International Security* article, and which incorporates balance-of-power logic.[6] In essence, they attempted to devise a theory of collective security that marries realism with the standard version of collective security. I did not pay much attention to the Kupchans' new theory in "False Promises" because it has a fatal flaw: realism and collective security are incompatible theories which cannot be mixed together to produce a coherent theory of state behavior, because these two theories argue that states behave in fundamentally different and contradictory ways.

The Kupchans have claimed that collective security can take "many different institutional forms along a continuum ranging from ideal collective security to concerts,"[7] and that their goal in their current article is to defend concerts and

5. See Inis L. Claude, Jr., *Swords Into Plowshares: The Problems and Progress of International Organization*, 4th ed. (New York: Random House, 1971); and Claude, *Power And International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1966).
6. Charles A. Kupchan and Clifford A. Kupchan, "Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1991), pp. 114–161.
7. Ibid., p. 119.

everything between the two ends of the continuum. It is not clear, however, what institutional forms lie between standard collective security and concerts. The Kupchans provide no description of these other institutional forms, and do not distinguish them from concerts. I will simply refer to them as nameless institutional forms (NIFs). Thus, when the Kupchans defend collective security, they are specifically not defending standard collective security, but are instead defending NIFs and concerts. The distinguishing feature of NIFs and concerts, according to the Kupchans, is that they contain elements of both standard collective security and realism. In essence, the Kupchans mix those polar opposite theories together and claim that the result is a theory that provides the best of both worlds. Not only do "states agree to abide by certain norms and rules to maintain stability and, when necessary, band together to stop aggression," but the world of NIFs and concerts is also one where "the behavior of major states is heavily influenced by balance-of-power considerations."

The Kupchans' efforts notwithstanding, realism and standard collective security cannot be married to each other because the two theories are mutually exclusive. States that are "heavily influenced by balance-of-power considerations" are, by definition, going to be mainly concerned about the balance of power, not about maintaining peace. Some of those states will pursue both offensive and defensive strategies aimed at improving their relative power position. Some states will initiate wars for security reasons. Other times they will be content—for balance-of-power reasons— to remain on the sidelines and let two or more rivals fight a war. There is not going to be a lot of trust in such a world, and states operating in it will often form alliances. Yet the Kupchans also claim that states can act in the spirit of standard collective security, and "abide by certain norms and rules to maintain stability," and that when an aggressor appears on the scene, all of the other states are supposed to "band together to stop aggression." This kind of behavior, however desirable, directly contradicts realism. Contrary to what the Kupchans argue, balancing in a realist world cannot be equated with their notion of balancing under collective security. These two different kinds of balancing behavior are contradictory and incompatible.

There are other problems with the Kupchans' argument. Consider their claim that concerts and NIFs are likely to fail in stages, giving threatened states ample warning time. There is no reason to assume that a collective security system will fail long before a state is attacked, rather than at the moment of attack. And if it fails in stages, the state attacked at the first stage still gets clobbered. The Kupchans, of course, allow states to hedge against this danger, by behaving

like realists. But that concession leaves one wondering if maybe they too are realists in disguise.

Alexander Wendt: Missing the Critical Issues

Critical theory, unlike Keohane and Martin's latest version of liberal institutionalism and the Kupchans' version of collective security, offers a distinct and bold challenge to realism. Critical theorists like Wendt make no concessions to realism, and they make no bones about their desire to replace it with a more communitarian and peaceful discourse. That clarity of purpose is all for the good, as it makes it easier to assess the relative merits of the competing theories. Nevertheless, Wendt's response is disappointing, not so much for what it says, as for what it does not say. Specifically, he does not answer the criticisms leveled against critical theory in "False Promise." Instead, he concentrates on describing critical theory, and showing how it differs from realism. This task is necessary, he argues, because I misrepresented critical theory in "False Promise." But, as I discuss below, that charge is false. The key differences between the two theories are not in dispute; rather the debate is over which theory provides the best guide to understanding state behavior.

Wendt begins his response with the charge that my discussion of critical theory in "False Promise" is "full of conflations, half-truths, and misunderstandings." Thus, his response is an opportunity to set the record straight by accurately describing critical theory and showing how it differs from realism. However, there are no important differences between us regarding the essentials of critical theory and realism. Consider two of his examples about how I supposedly distort critical theory.

Wendt maintains that I was wrong to treat critical theory as a "single theory," because "it is a family of theories that includes postmodernists, constructivists, neo-Marxists, feminists, and others." I recognize that there are differences among critical theorists (as there are among realists), and I pointed out this fact in "False Promise" (p. 37). When comparing critical theory with realism, I focused on the common elements within the critical theory literature, because it was neither practical nor necessary to take into account every difference in this large body of scholarship. The question is whether smoothing over the differences resulted in a caricature of critical theory. It does not because, as Wendt acknowledges, critical theorists are united on the key issue at stake between themselves and realists: whether "world politics is socially constructed."

Wendt next argues that I "obscure" the fact that critical theorists, like realists, are structuralists. In fact, he argues that the problem with realism is that "it is not structural enough." Confusion arises, however, out of different uses of the term "structure." There is no question that in "False Promise" I described realism, but not critical theory, as a structural theory. Wendt, however, prefers to call them both structural theories, although it is clear from his discussion of realism and critical theory that "structure" has a completely different meaning for each, and that labeling both theories "structural" does not challenge my description of critical theory in any meaningful way. A brief description of the two theories—using his language about structure—shows that there is no significant disagreement between Wendt and me regarding the essentials of critical theory and realism.

Realists believe that state behavior is largely shaped by the *material structure* of the international system. The distribution of material capabilities among states is the key factor for understanding world politics. For realists, some level of security competition among great powers is inevitable because of the material structure of the international system. Individuals are free to adopt non-realist discourses, but in the final analysis, the system forces states to behave according to the dictates of realism, or risk destruction. Critical theorists, on the other hand, focus on the *social structure* of the international system. They believe that "world politics is socially constructed," which is another way of saying that shared discourse, or how communities of individuals think and talk about the world, largely shapes the world. Wendt recognizes that "material resources like gold and tanks exist," but he argues that "such capabilities . . . only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded." Significantly for critical theorists, discourse can change, which means that realism is not forever, and that therefore it might be possible to move beyond realism to a world where institutionalized norms cause states to behave in more communitarian and peaceful ways.

The most revealing aspect of Wendt's discussion is that he did not respond to the two main charges leveled against critical theory in "False Promise." The first problem with critical theory is that although the theory is deeply concerned with radically changing state behavior, it says little about how change comes about. The theory does not tell us why particular discourses become dominant, and others fall by the wayside. Specifically, Wendt does not explain why realism has been the dominant discourse in world politics for well over a thousand years, although I explicitly raised this question in "False Promise" (p. 42). Moreover, he sheds no light on why the time is ripe for unseating

realism, nor on why realism is likely to be replaced by a more peaceful, communitarian discourse, although I explicitly raised both questions.

Wendt's failure to answer these questions has important ramifications for his own arguments. For example, he maintains that if it is possible to change international political discourse and alter state behavior, "then it is irresponsible to pursue policies that perpetuate destructive old orders [i.e., realism], especially if we care about the well-being of future generations." The clear implication here is that realists like me are irresponsible and do not care much about the welfare of future generations. However, even if we change discourses and move beyond realism, a fundamental problem with Wendt's argument remains: because his theory cannot predict the future, he cannot know whether the discourse that ultimately replaces realism will be more benign than realism. He has no way of knowing whether a fascistic discourse more violent than realism will emerge as the hegemonic discourse. For example, he obviously would like another Gorbachev to come to power in Russia, but he cannot be sure we will not get a Zhirinovsky instead. So even from a critical theory perspective, defending realism might very well be the more responsible policy choice.

The second major problem with critical theory is that its proponents have offered little empirical support for their theory. For example, I noted in "False Promise" that critical theorists concede that realism has been the dominant discourse in international politics from about 1300 to 1989, a remarkably long period of time. Wendt does not challenge this description of the historical record by pointing to alternative discourses that influenced state behavior during this period. In fact, Wendt's discussion of history is obscure. I also noted in "False Promise" that although critical theorists largely concede the past to realism, many believe that the end of the Cold War presents an excellent opportunity to replace realism as the hegemonic discourse, and thus fundamentally change state behavior. I directly challenged this assertion in my article, but Wendt responds with only a few vague words about this issue.

Wendt writes in his response that "if critical theories fail, this will be because they do not explain how the world works, not because of their values." I agree completely, but critical theorists have yet to provide evidence that their theory can explain very much. In fact, the distinguishing feature of the critical theory literature, Wendt's work included, is its lack of empirical content. Possibly that situation will change over time, but until it does, critical theory will not topple realism from its commanding position in the international relations literature.

Conclusion

The discussion of institutions up to now has a distinct academic flavor. However, the debate over whether institutions cause peace is not just a dispute about international relations theory; it also has significant real-world consequences. For example, the Clinton administration and many European policymakers publicly maintain that states should not worry about the balance of power—that is "old thinking," they say—but should instead rely on institutions to protect them. This perspective makes sense only if there is evidence that institutions can get the job done. But so far, the evidence indicates that institutions do not provide a sound basis for building a stable post–Cold War world. Institutions failed to prevent or shut down the recent wars in Bosnia and Transcaucasia, and failed to stop the carnage in Rwanda; there is little reason to think that those same institutions would do better in the next trouble spot. The bottom line on institutions seems clear: despite all the rhetoric about their virtues, there is little evidence that they can alter state behavior and cause peace.

States temporarily led astray by the false promise of institutionalist rhetoric eventually come to their senses and start worrying about the balance of power. Surely Bosnian policymakers now recognize their mistake in trusting institutions like the UN and the EC to pull their chestnuts out of the fire. In the meantime, however, a state that ignores the balance of power can suffer enormous damage. Thus, it would seem to make sense, from both a moral and a strategic perspective, for institutionalists to tone down their claims about the peace-causing effects of institutions until they have solid evidence to support their position.