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The False Premise of Realism

John Gerard Ruggie

John J. Mearsheimer's latest missive in defense of the neorealist homeland targets *tous les azimuts* in the camp of institutionalism.¹ The other contributors to this symposium take up Mearsheimer's treatment of the institutionalist literature. I am concerned here with the policy dimensions of his anti-institutionalist posture.

The brevity of this note permits me only to sketch out three counterpoints to Mearsheimer's analysis. First, U.S. policymakers after World War II went out of their way to ignore the anti-institutionalism that Mearsheimer would have us adopt today. Second, had postwar U.S. policymakers accepted Mearsheimer's views about the irrelevance of international institutions, the international security environment today would not only be different but would pose far greater challenges than it does. Third, the unfavorable view of realism which some U.S. policymakers historically have held is not a product of mushy thinking, as Mearsheimer suggests, but of their grasp of a distinctive feature of America's geopolitical situation which continues to prevail today. These facts register poorly, if at all, on Mearsheimer's neorealist radar screen. As a result, the analytical basis of his *force de frappe* against institutionalism entails serious and potentially dangerous limits as a guide for U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War world.

Realism and Institutions after World War II

Postwar America pursued its interests and sought to manage the changing international balance of power; that no one questions. But in doing so, U.S. policymakers also had certain institutional objectives in mind, as evidenced by their stance toward the United Nations, the creation of NATO, and European unification. And at every turn, they faced opposition for this stance from realist anti-institutionalists. I enumerate some of the highlights.

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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.

Franklin Roosevelt's initial concept for the organization of the postwar security order was regional: his "four policemen" scheme. But he realized that "the only appeal which would be likely to carry weight with the United States public . . . would be one based upon a world-wide conception."² Hence, Roosevelt adopted a hybrid design for the United Nations: a collective security organization based in a concert of power, to be used by, but not against, the permanent members of the Security Council.³ To be credible, this concert-based system required an enforcement capability. "We are not thinking of a superstate with its own police force and other paraphernalia of coercive power," Roosevelt noted not long before the Dumbarton Oaks conference, at which the major powers agreed upon the enforcement provisions of the UN charter. Instead, he said, they planned to devise a mechanism for "joint action" by national forces.⁴ George Kennan, soon to become celebrated as a realist practitioner and then serving in the Moscow embassy, urged "burying" the Dumbarton Oaks proposals. "We are badly enmeshed in our own unsound slogans," he admonished Washington in an unsolicited cable.⁵ His advice was ignored. Once Congress approved the charter in December 1945, the major powers proceeded to negotiate hefty UN standby forces.⁶ Gradually, these talks fell victim to the emerging cold war.

The Eisenhower administration in 1956 facilitated the invention of the more modest UN collective security mechanism known as peacekeeping. The Suez crisis provided the occasion. When Israel, Britain, and France launched their coordinated attacks against Egypt, Eisenhower was furious. "All right," he instructed his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, "Foster, you tell 'em, goddamn it, we're going to apply sanctions, we're going to the United Nations, we're going to do everything that there is so we can stop this thing."⁷ Eisenhower did all of that, beginning with U.S.-sponsored UN resolutions calling for an immediate cease-fire and the withdrawal of foreign forces. Under intense U.S. pressure, Britain, France, and Israel claimed that theirs had been a police

2. Cited in Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 96.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 103–105.

4. Robert C. Hilderbrand, *Dumbarton Oaks: The Origins of the United Nations and the Search for Postwar Security* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 65.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

6. The final U.S. proposal in mid-1947—by then probably designed to be rejected by the Soviet Union—advocated a total of 20 ground divisions; 1,250 bombers; 2,250 fighters; 3 battleships; 6 carriers; 15 cruisers; 84 destroyers; and 90 submarines. See D.W. Bowett, *United Nations Forces: A Legal Study* (New York: Praeger, 1964), pp. 12–18.

7. Cited in Donald Neff, *Warriors at Suez* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 365.

action, designed to safeguard the Suez Canal, and that they would be willing to turn over their policing functions to a UN force if one were constituted. The UN obliged. With U.S. prodding, Canadian Foreign Minister Lester Pearson proposed a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), comprising troops from ten middle-sized and smaller countries.⁸ A cease-fire and withdrawal of the invading forces was arranged. Egypt (but not Israel) agreed to accept UNEF on its territory. UNEF, which reached a strength of 6,000, supervised the cease-fire and foreign troop withdrawals, arranged to clear the Suez Canal of war-related blockage, and monitored the Israeli-Egyptian border.

Leading realists of the day objected vigorously to Eisenhower's actions. George Kennan, by then a private citizen, charged that the administration, by opposing its allies at the UN, had allowed "the very foundations of American policy [to be] swept away, the victim of an empty legalism,"⁹ by which he meant the concept of collective security Eisenhower invoked on occasion.¹⁰ Hans Morgenthau, the *paterfamilias* of American postwar academic realists, was appalled. "Regardless of the intrinsic merits of [the allies'] military operation," he opined, "once it was started we had a vital interest in its quick and complete success."¹¹ Arnold Wolfers supported these views.¹² By rejecting realist precepts, however, Eisenhower enabled the UN to devise a limited but nontrivial mode of conflict containment.

International nuclear nonproliferation arrangements, also initiated by the Eisenhower administration, tell a similar story. From the outset, realists have belittled these arrangements, with some going so far as to claim that they induce a false sense of security, thereby making the world worse off.¹³ Yet, Secretary Dulles—not known as a liberal internationalist—had it right when

8. See Lester B. Pearson, *Mike: The Memoirs of the Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson*, Vol. 2, 1948–1957 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 244–278.

9. George F. Kennan, letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, November 3, 1956, p. A8.

10. Eisenhower exhibited little awareness of the textbook model of collective security that drove the realists to despair, meaning by his occasional use of the term more generically cooperative, institutionalized approaches to dealing with security problems. See Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace, 1956–61* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965).

11. Hans J. Morgenthau, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, November 13, 1956, p. 36.

12. He felt that all had ended well, however, because "the three 'aggressors' did the exceptional thing of restoring the *status quo ante* despite the absence of collective military sanctions." Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), p. 187. Wolfers' logic is tortuous, and it also ignores the extensive economic sanctions the United States imposed on Britain. See Diane B. Kunz, *The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

13. For a recent rendition of this refrain, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "A New Proliferation Policy," *The National Interest*, No. 28 (Summer 1992), pp. 63–72.

he appealed for Senate approval of the International Atomic Energy Agency statute: "We realize that atomic energy materials and know-how will spread, Agency or no Agency. . . . But a rapid and unsupervised development of nuclear power around the world raises the specter of nuclear weapons ultimately becoming quite general, the byproduct of nuclear power plants."¹⁴ The actual and potential members of the nuclear club today total less than half the number that experts and government officials predicted in the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁵ Indeed, in recent years more countries have left the list of problem cases—including Argentina, Brazil, and South Africa—than have joined it. "Virtually every nonproliferation initiative has turned out to be much more effective than expected when it was proposed or designed, and non-proliferation success has been cheaper than expected."¹⁶

In creating NATO, of all the means available to President Truman for defending Europe from the Soviet threat—unilateral U.S. security guarantees to one, several, or an organization of European states; one or more U.S. bilateral alliances with European states; or a "dumbbell" model linking North American and European alliances—Truman chose the institutional form that most closely approximated collective security commitments. "The signing of the NATO Alliance," Michael Howard has written, "provided a sense that now at last all were for one and one was for all," which is what the concept of collective security has traditionally meant.¹⁷ NATO promised its members equal and unqualified protection under a common security umbrella. At the same time, all members pledged to undertake those measures, including the use of armed force, that they deemed necessary to maintain or restore the security of the collectivity. After the Korean War, an integrated command structure was established within NATO to help execute these pledges.

14. Cited in Robert Endicott Osgood, *NATO: The Entangling Alliance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 220.

15. Mitchell Reiss, *Without the Bomb: The Politics of Nonproliferation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), chap. 1.

16. Thomas W. Graham and A.F. Mullins, "Arms Control, Military Strategy, and Nuclear Proliferation," paper presented at the conference on "Nuclear Deterrence and Global Security in Transition," University of California, Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, La Jolla, Calif., February 21–23, 1991.

17. Michael Howard, "Introduction," in Olav Riste, ed., *Western Security: The Formative Years* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1985), p. 16. In an influential essay published a generation ago, Wolfers pointed out the difference between collective self-defense and fully-fledged collective security systems. Arnold Wolfers, "Collective Defense versus Collective Security," in Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, pp. 181–204. NATO, to be sure, is an instance of the former, not the latter. It does not follow, however, as realists typically assume, that there is no principled difference between the NATO form of collective self-defense and an old-fashioned alliance.

Leading realists opposed outright this very feature of NATO, which arguably accounts for its continued efficacy and attraction today. Kennan, as Director of Policy Planning in the State Department, initially felt that no U.S. military commitments to Europe were necessary. But if they had to be made, Kennan preferred what he called a “particularized” rather than a “legalistic-moralistic” form: such commitments should be specific in nature, limited in time, and contingent on discrete exigencies.¹⁸ For Kennan, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty exhibited anything but those attributes. Even though Kennan eventually acquiesced in the creation of NATO, he viewed its “legalistic-moralistic” commitments as barely better than the UN in this regard. In the political arena, Republican Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, considered to be “the most powerful single legislator of his day,”¹⁹ lobbied and voted against the North Atlantic Treaty despite being an ardent anticommunist because, as Taft explained: “I do not like the obligation written into the pact which binds us for twenty years to come to the defense of any country, no matter by whom it is attacked and even though the aggressor may be another member of the pact.”²⁰

Finally, in its posture toward European unification the United States deviated sharply from the core realist maxim that, because today’s ally could be tomorrow’s adversary, one’s ally should not benefit from an alliance relationship so much that it could become a serious competitor another day. In stark contrast, the United States strongly supported European unification. “It was the first time a major power fostered unity rather than discord among nations in a part of the world where it had significant interests.”²¹ Clearly, as with NATO, this “first” would not have occurred in the absence of the Soviet threat. But equally clear, to all but realists it seems, is that the United States promoted European unification through institutional means that promised to transform the traditional conduct of European international politics, not merely in economic, but also in security affairs.

18. See Anders Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 140; David Mayers, *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 152–155; and Geir Lundestad, *America, Scandinavia, and the Cold War, 1945–1949* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 172–173, 188–189. Kennan later recalled favoring a “dumbbell” arrangement, with the European countries cooperating on one side, the United States and Canada on the other, but in which they would have been linked, *not* by treaty and a permanent U.S. troop presence in Europe, but merely by a U.S.-Canadian guarantee of assistance in case of Soviet attack. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), pp. 406–407.

19. Lawrence S. Kaplan, *NATO and the United States: The Enduring Alliance* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), p. 37.

20. Robert A. Taft, *A Foreign Policy for Americans* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1951), pp. 88–89.

21. Armin Rappaport, “The United States and European Integration: The First Phase,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring 1981), p. 121.

General Eisenhower was an early and ardent advocate of a European Defense Community (EDC), and he helped persuade President Truman of its desirability. As president, Eisenhower pushed actively for its establishment: "Only in collective security," he wrote to his friend General Alfred Gruenther during discussions of the EDC, is there "any future for the free world."²² The Joint Chiefs of Staff came to accept EDC, as did Congress, which proposed to make military aid to EDC countries conditional on the adoption of the treaty.²³ Secretary Dulles told the North Atlantic Council in 1953 that if Europe failed to ratify EDC, "grave doubts" would arise in the United States concerning the future of European security, and America would be obliged to undertake an "agonizing reappraisal" of its role in Europe. The respected realist analyst Robert Osgood was still disturbed by this affair a decade later: "Both sides of the argument displayed almost total indifference to the strategic military considerations," he noted sternly. "Indeed, in the eyes of its principal architects, EDC became as important as an instrument of Franco-German reconciliation as of military security."²⁴ But that, of course, was the point of U.S. support for EDC, as Franco-German reconciliation was the key to European unification.

After the EDC's failure, the Eisenhower administration turned its attention to nuclear energy as a vehicle for European security integration. It facilitated the creation of EURATOM.²⁵ It planned ways of sharing nuclear weapons with its NATO allies. And it even explored endowing them with an independent nuclear deterrent.²⁶ Realists undoubtedly can devise rationalizations of these moves after the fact, but I know of no realist argument that anticipated or recommended them prior to their occurrence.

Roads Not Taken

The preceding discussion suggests that the world today would be significantly different had postwar U.S. policymakers adopted the realists' anti-institutionalist views. NATO almost certainly would not have embodied indivisible

22. Cited in Brian R. Duchin, "The 'Agonizing Reappraisal': Eisenhower, Dulles, and the European Defense Community," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring 1992), p. 202.

23. Osgood, *NATO: The Entangling Alliance*, p. 95; and Duchin, "Agonizing Reappraisal," p. 207.

24. Osgood, *NATO: The Entangling Alliance*, pp. 86, 92.

25. Jonathan E. Helmreich, "The United States and the Formation of EURATOM," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Summer 1991), p. 409.

26. Based on recently opened archives, Steve Weber argues that Eisenhower "intended that [a NATO nuclear] consortium evolve into an integrated and independent nuclear force for the European NATO allies." Steve Weber, "Shaping the Postwar Balance of Power: Multilateralism in NATO," in John Gerard Ruggie, ed., *Multilateralism Matters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 258.

security guarantees, but would instead have taken the form of specific and contingent alliance commitments.²⁷ As such, it might not have lasted as long as the Cold War did and, if it had, in all likelihood it then would have gone the way of the Warsaw Treaty Organization.²⁸ Attempts to achieve European unification might well have succumbed to the collective action problems realists and rationalists repeatedly stress, leaving us today with far more competitive European policies in places like ex-Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union, quite probably considerable instability in the heart of Europe itself, and no 35,000-strong Eurocorps becoming operational in the autumn of 1995. Finally, however weak the UN may be today, even marginal contributions in peacekeeping and nonproliferation usually are better, and in the long run often less costly, than none.

Realism and U.S. Policymakers

Mearsheimer states that “American elites, as well as the American public, tend to regard realism with hostility” (p. 48). The reason, he believes, has to do with values or idealism. This assessment misses the mark. It may accurately characterize Woodrow Wilson, who claimed to find power politics abhorrent, though he exhibited no problem practicing it.²⁹ But it does not capture the views of Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, or Dulles. Their attitudes toward the institutional dimensions of security policy had less to do with mushy thinking than with geopolitical realities. Curiously, realism’s blinders on this issue have caused it to overlook its own explanatory terrain.

America is not now and has never been a relative equal on a continent densely populated by potential adversaries, the European context for which balance-of-power theory and *raison d’état* were first invented. The traditional

27. Steve Weber tries carefully to generate “predictions” from today’s realist and rationalist theories about NATO’s form, based on how these theories calculate states’ interests and strategies, and taking into account the facts as they were known to policymakers in 1949. He finds it difficult if not impossible to conjure up NATO’s indivisible security guarantees within either theoretical model. See Weber, “Shaping the Postwar Balance of Power,” pp. 235–238.

28. For numerous reasons, ranging from differential changes in external threat perception to shifts in domestic politics or simple transaction costs, country-by-country alliance commitments among a large number of states are intrinsically harder to sustain over time than is one single set of generalized commitments; see John Gerard Ruggie, “Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution,” in Ruggie, *Multilateralism Matters*, esp. pp. 31–35. In addition to having been imposed by Moscow, the Warsaw Pact was, of course, based on dyadic ties to Moscow.

29. No American president before or since used force more often than Wilson. See Frederick Calhoun, *Power and Principle: Armed Intervention in Wilsonian Foreign Policy* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986), p. 2.

American aversion to “entangling alliances” is easily understood as a by-product of that geopolitical situation. But it has complicated the task of achieving sustained U.S. involvement for the sake of a stable international security order. Narrowly defined interest calculations would, more often than not, indicate that a crisis in some faraway place was not a vital U.S. concern, until it was too late to avoid the worst of outcomes, including two world wars. And yet the United States could hardly involve itself everywhere all the time.

This foreign policy dilemma has existed for as long as America has been a world power. Teddy Roosevelt employed a mixture of piety, patriotism, and jingoism on behalf of a campaign by “civilized and orderly powers to insist on the proper policing of the world.”³⁰ Wilson hoped to build on America’s aversion to entangling alliances a U.S. commitment to what he described as “a universal alliance.”³¹ Franklin Roosevelt sought to “make Wilsonianism practical” by establishing a universal institutional tripwire but embedding it in a major power concert.³² Thereafter, the problem was attenuated by the Soviet military threat and communist ideological challenge. But even then, and true to form, Truman and Eisenhower agreed to involve the United States militarily in the defense of Europe *only* within institutional frameworks that promised to transform the organization of European security relations in the direction of a security community, in which the likelihood of future wars (and the necessity for U.S. involvement) would be reduced. *Ideas*, reflecting a fundamental geopolitical fact, not *idealism*, were at play in these endeavors.³³

Ironically, Henry Kissinger, the canonical figure in the American pantheon of practical realists, has now discovered this dilemma.³⁴ Without the driving force of the Cold War, Kissinger asks, what will ensure the American involvement that is necessary to create and sustain a stable international security order? *A la carte* interest calculations, he concedes, are unlikely to suffice. “In traveling along the road to world order for the third time in the modern era,” Kissinger concludes, U.S. power will need to be coupled with an affirmative vision that rises above mere necessity: “a vision of a future that cannot be

30. In a 1902 speech to Congress, cited by Robert Dallek, *The American Style of Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 35.

31. See, in particular, Wilson’s 1917 “Peace Without Victory” speech to the U.S. Senate. Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 112–115.

32. Kimball, *The Juggler*, p. 103.

33. For an elaboration, see John Gerard Ruggie, “Third Try at World Order? America and Multilateralism after the Cold War,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 109, No. 4 (Fall 1994), pp. 553–570.

34. Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), esp. chap. 31.

demonstrated when it is put forward and judgments about the relationship between hope and possibility that are, in their essence, conjectural.³⁵

Realism and the Future

Realism got a great many things right about the postwar world, but it has failed to grasp the subtle yet integral role of institutionalist objectives in U.S. foreign policy, including security policy. As a result, realism—especially the hyper-realist variant represented by Mearsheimer—is not only wanting but potentially dangerous as a guide to the post-Cold War world. That realism missed the mark on core elements of institutionalism in the structurally far simpler postwar era is *prima facie* grounds for doubting that it will do better—and strong reason to believe that it will do worse—in the more complex and ambiguous international security environment ahead.

Moreover, as the other contributors to this symposium demonstrate, neo-realism also misconstrues key theoretical aspects of institutionalism. And yet, in the policy arena its flawed rationale is invoked routinely to legitimate such serious anti-institutionalist assaults as the national security provisions of the new Republican majority's "Contract With America" (H.R. 7 and the Senate's "Peace Powers Act"), which would virtually foreclose timely and effective U.S. participation in UN peacekeeping operations, and constrain the constitutional prerogatives of the president as commander-in-chief if these were to be exercised through UN means. The echoes of 1919, when unilateralists riding on realist rhetoric joined with a rump of ever-present irreconcilables to defeat Wilson's quest to take the United States into the League of Nations, and thus ushered in an era of costly isolationism, are ominous.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 833–834.