

**International Political System – Essay 1**



**Can states cooperate in an anarchic environment?**

This essay examines the possibility state cooperation in an anarchic environment through two schools of political thought; neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. Both of these schools assume anarchy as a foundation of the international system, and see states as actors operating within its constraint. They accordingly provide an excellent theoretical basis for the reader to understand instances of cooperation – or lack thereof – in International Relations. Because of space limitations this paper does not attempt to examine Cosmopolitan theory or Marxist critiques of state action, and must therefore be regarded as introductory rather than comprehensive. By the conclusion of this essay the reader will have sufficient knowledge of both neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism to allow some critical thought regarding state cooperation, and to begin examining further theories of state interaction and cooperation.

The underlying base of this essay – the actions of states in anarchy – is also the foundation of **neorealism**. Neorealists see states as actors in anarchy, and anarchy as a constant. They define anarchy as the absence of any authority above states, and consequently the absence of any authority to mediate conflicts on an international level. For a neorealist anarchy – or the uncertainty of the actions of others – means that a state is necessarily “the guardian of its own security and independence” (Spanier, 1978. pp11). There is simply no higher power than the state to ensure rules or stability in the international system, and thus there is no guarantee of security or safety for any state in the system. This both limits the options a state has in determining its foreign policy actions and means that states can be regarded as “identical to all other states in interest, motivation, and behaviour” (Spanier, 1978. pp18). Every state is in a self-help situation, and exists in a world similar to that described by Thomas Hobbes (Viotti and Kauppi,

1987, pp48-49); every actor is ultimately pitted against every other actor in pursuit of its own interests.

If states must rely solely on themselves for their security and independence then cooperation with other states would appear to be intrinsically limited. By necessity, states will be self-interested, and because of this self-interest other states will have difficulty in trusting them. The degree to which any state can cooperate with any other state is limited by the pursuit of a state's core interest. In a world of anarchy the core interest of the state is not trade or general well being, but "*survival*" itself (Grieco in Baldwin, 1993, pp127). This quest for survival and self-interest suggests that there is an inherent reluctance for any state to be put in the position whereby it must rely on other states, for this reliance ensures vulnerability, and such vulnerability is a grave risk when there is no definite assurance of contract. Cooperation, therefore, has limited appeal in the neorealist approach to understanding the international system.

This is not to say that cooperation between states cannot occur. It is more accurate to describe the neorealist position as favouring a limited form of cooperation rather than a complete or trusting one. One reason for this is what might be called relative gains. Relative gains are the measurement of the gains of two or more states in relation to each other. This is different from the gains of the enterprise that the two states cooperated to achieve. It is a measure of which state gained *the most* from the venture. For neorealists this is extremely important, for "today's friend may be tomorrow's enemy in war", and an individual state's survival is its paramount concern (Grieco in Baldwin, 1993, pp118). Consequently, the advances of any other state are a cause for concern. For neorealists cooperation is usually something temporary that two or more states might agree to solve a

problem – such as the cooperation between the USA, UK and USSR during World War 2 – but it is not something that states would normally choose to sustain because of the high risk of dangerous dependence.

One form of state cooperation that neorealists envisage is that of hegemonic cooperation. This occurs when there is a leading state in the world system with a “preponderance of economic and military power” (Hobson, 2000, pp.39), and when this leading state acts to create a coalition of allies. The hegemonic state assumes the position of power to arbitrate between the coalition, and it usually incurs some costs in the form of providing security or stability for the states it has collected in its alliance. These costs of providing security in the coalition eventually undermine the hegemonic power, and it gradually suffers from a reduced ability to maintain the cooperation. Rival states emerge and challenge the hegemon, and realists like John Mearsheimer would suggest that they may even use the hegemonic cooperative policy costs to undermine the hegemonic state (see Lamy in Baylis and Smith, 2001, pp187).

For neorealists then cooperation is both limited and dangerous. Cooperation may be needed to obtain certain goals, but it is fundamentally hazardous to rely on any state other than one’s own. To do so invites risks of betrayal, and introduces the possibility of a state facing attack or even total destruction from another state it once trusted as an ally.

**Neoliberal institutionalists** such as Robert Keohane see the state as a self-interested actor in a similar fashion to neorealists. This position is in direct contrast to traditional liberal institutionalism, which sees the state as being “self-abnegat[ing] and ‘other-regarding’” (Hobson, 2000, pp.95). Indeed, for Keohane the state is a “*rational egoist*” who will seek maximum personal utility in any action or interaction in which it is

involved (Hobson, 2000, pp.95). This is a theoretical position that correlates perfectly with neorealist conceptions of the state.

One primary difference between neorealism and neoliberalism occurs in their view of the way states will pursue their self-interest with regards gains. In contrast to the neorealist preference for understanding cooperation in terms of relative gains in what might be a zero-sum game, neoliberals view the interactions of states as a “positive-sum game” (Viotti and Kauppi, 1987, pp207) in which all the potential players could stand to benefit from absolute gains. The positive-sum game is one whereby the international system can be viewed as having resources or room for states to gain or change their nature without infringing on the ability of other states to gain in turn. Absolute gains – or gains without reference to other state benefit – as a result become the concern of the self-interested state. This was clearly articulated by Joseph Grieco when he stated that “States seek to maximize their individual *absolute* gains and are indifferent to the gains achieved by others” (Baldwin, 1993, pp117). The single biggest problem with sustaining cooperation is not therefore the relative position of a state in the international system, but the danger of another state cheating in a cooperative effort. States themselves are actually motivated to cooperate in the quest for absolute gains.

Where neorealists propose that self-interest and lack of any world authority to oversee state cooperation will lead to a lack of any genuine long-term cooperative efforts, neoliberal institutionalists see just the opposite occurring. Rather than pursuing short-term relative gains, states will wish to pursue long-term absolute gains, and to do this they will seek long-term cooperative interactions. The key to these long-term cooperative interactions are institutions, which neoliberal institutionalists see as the “mediator and the

means” to prevent cheating in the international system (Lamy in Baylis and Smith, 2001, pp191). Institutions take some authority from states to mediate conflict, and thus act as a limit on anarchy, or what Keohane called the “asymmetrical distribution of information” (Hobson, 2000, pp99). Keohane and Nye further suggest that states “have to expect that their relationships will continue over an indefinite period of time” (Baldwin, 1993, pp92) unless a pre-emptive war terminates one of the states in a relationship. It follows that some degree of state “sovereignty may be willingly surrendered if [...] lasting benefit can be obtained” in the international system (Webber in White, Little and Smith, 2001, pp21). States consequently relinquish some sovereign power to institutions, which in turn reduce the risk of other states cheating in the international system, and thereby increased interstate cooperation is accomplished.

The key to long-term cooperation is the proposition that states have the ability and the desire to interact on a level beyond the immediate. They learn rules of cooperation and interaction, and obey them for mutual benefit. One possible explanation for state behaviour assuming this pattern comes from Robert Axelrod’s use of Game Theory. The Prisoner’s Dilemma of Game Theory can work in one of two ways. Either it can be played once, with the prisoner’s choosing to betray each other for immediate benefit, or it can be played repetitively, with the greatest benefit coming from prisoner cooperation. Because neoliberal institutionalism focuses on the long-term, and the assumed need of a state to do the same, international cooperation can be regarded as a Prisoner’s Dilemma game played repeatedly. States will logically forgo the temptation to betray their ally for any immediate benefit, not least because “the other side is likely to retaliate tomorrow” (Axelrod in Baldwin, 1993, pp91).

This means that there is strong motivation for states to cooperate, and indeed to increase cooperation over time. By the very act of working together states reduce the uncertainty or anarchy that lies between them, and increase both their security and their potential for long-term benefits. Conflict or war between states is not inevitable, but rather can be caused by “bad structural and institutional arrangements” (Papp, 1988, pp8). Anarchy does exist between states, but it can be reduced or removed through the effective use of institutions and the seeking of long-term absolute gains.

In conclusion, we can see that there are strong arguments both for and against cooperation in an environment of anarchy. If, on one hand, it is believed that the anarchic environment is constant and unchangeable then state cooperation has limited utility. Sustained cooperative effort leads to dependency on other states or the relative gains of potential rivals, and undermine the security of the state. More explicitly, cooperation undermines the ability of the state to secure itself, and forces reliance on others to provide security. If, on the other hand, it is believed that the anarchic environment that states find themselves in is non-permanent, or changeable, the long-term absolute gains of cooperative effort become attractive. The creation of international institutions of authority – to act as a mediator for state cooperation – becomes the solution to the problem of trust and transparent actions. Anarchy is reduced in absolute terms, state power is increased in absolute terms, and the benefits are felt by all.

In the real world – outside of theory and academic speculation – some combination of the two understandings of cooperation is probably preferable. NATO, the UN and the EU support neoliberal institutionalism readings of interactions, and World War 2, the

Cold War and the current actions of the USA tend to lend support to the neorealist interpretation.

Neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism are two of the most influential theories in international relations study today, but they are by no means the only theories. There are many different conceptions of how the state works, how it acts in anarchy, and how it may cooperate with other states. This paper could not hope to review them all in even the most transitory terms. It cannot even hope to examine neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism in any depth. It is instead intended to provide the reader with a concise and pertinent overview of some of the key themes that both theories would bring to the debate of state cooperation. It is hoped that it has done so, and that the reader is well prepared for further study in this area.

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