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THE LIMITS OF RATIONALIST EXPLANATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY INSTITUTIONS

ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that rationalist explanations which aspire to demonstrate why international security institutions develop, do not qualify as fully satisfactory arguments. Their limits become apparent particularly if one attempts to account on their basis for the diversity of types of institutions such as balance of power, collective security, hegemony, etc.

The initial step in my analysis was to address the limitations of the three arguments which I referred to as materialist, functionalist, and evolutionist that individually make up either whole rationalist conceptions on the development of international security institutions or parts of them. Having done so, I also examined the possibilities to combine these arguments to explore whether the effort yields any extra explanatory power.

The main reasons for why these explanations and their combinations fail to convincingly account for the diversity of international security institutions are threefold. First, the functionalist, evolutionist, and the functionalist-evolutionist arguments do not attempt to address the issue directly and provide only a general assertion on the factors influencing the formation of institutions instead of tackling the problem with respect to their particular types. Second, the materialist argument advances a logic of state action that justifies the creation of certain types of institutions and, at the same time, rules out the development of others. Third, it proves also incompatible with the other two arguments. The implication of this is that states would have to choose between mutually exclusive logics of action and, thus, behave in a way for which none of the arguments provides any explanation.

Key words

rationalism, international security, international institutions

1. Introduction

Matters of international security are, and have always been, a key focus of international relations scholars. Particularly since Kenneth N. Waltz's seminal work, *Theory of International Politics*, where – among other things – he rebooted his earlier argument that the framework in which state action occurs, i.e. anarchy, is the underlining cause for war and insecurity in general¹, a large portion of the literature on the subject has been dedicated to the study of international security institutions, established to alter system-level conditions stemming from the lack of a world government, in order to restrain the self-help strategies of states. Above all, in subsequent years arguments regarding institutions became central to the critique of Waltz's assertion on the “root of all evil” and during what was later to be called the inter-paradigm debate in international relations, conducted throughout the 1980s and 1990s, gave birth to a strand of theory named either neoliberal institutionalism or institutional theory². Scholars who took part in it, however, were not the only ones interested in the workings of institutions and hence the dispute over their role by far exceeded the boundaries of the inter-paradigm debate.

Not surprisingly then, the literature on international relations abounds with both theoretical and empirical efforts concerned with various aspects of international security institutions (and institutions in general) such as: their development, mutual interaction; influence upon states' interests and behaviour, and adaptive processes that lead to institutional change. Nonetheless, among arguments dealing with the first issue, which is also the focus of this study, a certain pride is given to rationalist explanations, associated mostly with neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. These arguments take a myriad of different forms, yet they all share two basic assumptions: first, international security institutions are real-world phenomena, and their distinctive types represent distinctive macro-level conditions in which states operate; second, these institutions develop as a result of objective circumstances present in a given time and place which influence the interests of states.

¹ K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading 1979. The argument has been originally developed by Waltz in his 1954 *Man, the State and War*. See: idem, *Man, the State and War. A Theoretical Analysis*, New York 1954.

² Concerning the debate see: O. Wæver, *The Rise and Fall of the Inter-Paradigm Debate* [in:] *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, S. Smith, K. Booth, M. Zalewski (eds.), Cambridge–New York, pp. 149–185.

In this article I will argue that claims of this sort, while providing valuable insight into the development of international security institutions, also have their limits. These become apparent particularly if, on the basis of rationalist explanations, one attempts to account for the existing diversity of types of institutions, which – to list just a few – include balance of power, collective security, hegemony, and spheres of influence. The main reason for this failure is that rationalist arguments offer constitutive explanations rather than those regarding causality³ – they illustrate merely what factors influence the shape a given institution takes and not what directly causes its development. Hence, they do not tackle the problem of why existing circumstances give rise to a particular type of institution rather than some other.

To develop my argument I will first explain what I consider to be security institutions, what types of them I will deal with, and what are the differences between those types. Second, I will reconstruct three most common rationalist arguments for the development of security institutions and demonstrate why they fail to convincingly explain the diversity of the types I chose to deal with. Throughout the article I shall call them materialist, functionalist, and evolutionist explanations respectively. I should also make it clear that at this stage I will try to keep these arguments in their “pure” forms (purely materialist, purely functionalist etc.). In the literature, however, they often tend to be merged (and sometimes include some non-rationalist components). To address this issue and third, I will attempt to combine all three explanations and investigate the shortcomings associated with this integrated approach.

2. International security institutions and their types

Pursuant to a definition of international institutions offered by Robert O. Keohane, probably the most widely accepted in the field of international relations⁴, I shall use the term to designate “persistent and connected sets of rules (formal or informal) that prescribe behavioral roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations”⁵. Given this, an international security institution is to be regarded

³ Regarding the distinction between the two see: A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge–New York–Melbourne 1999, pp. 77–88.

⁴ D.A. Lake, *Beyond Anarchy: The Importance of Security Institutions*, “International Security” 2001, No. 1, Vol. 26, p. 131.

⁵ R.O. Keohane, *Neoliberal Institutionalism: A Perspective on World Politics* [in:] *International Institutions and State Power. Essays in International Relations Theory*, R.O. Keohane (ed.), Boulder 1989, p. 3.

as a set of rules that ultimately “set a standard of conduct and states follow on a regular, repetitive basis” in order to guarantee or increase their own security⁶. One point needs to be taken here: the wording of this definition allows also for the inclusion of anarchy (or self-help), as described by Waltz, into the set of international security institutions⁷. Scholars representing rational strands of international relations theory, however, commonly acknowledge the ever-present nature of anarchy and its constitutive role for all international relations. According to this standpoint, it is therefore impossible to oppose anarchy with an equal counterpart (such as hierarchy) and, thus, deal with the divergence of institutions on this basic level of international relations. Hence, the problem of diversity that I am tackling applies to institutions which exist under the condition of anarchy and represent a certain degree of variety of it or – in other words – different strategies employed by states while they follow the self-help principle.

In my analysis I will take into account a total of six types of international security institutions whose existence either in contemporary or historical times is widely recognized by scholars representing rationalist strands of international relations theory. Four of them – great power concert, hegemony, collective security, and balance of power – constitute the main types, which I will sometimes refer to as second order institutions (with anarchy being the only first order institution).

The first of these institutions – a great power concert – designates an effort made by the great powers to jointly manage international affairs⁸. Historical cases commonly regarded as examples of this type of institution comprise only one incident, i.e. the Concert of Europe, which emerged in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna of 1815 and collapsed in the mid-1850s, at the time of the Crimean War. Some scholars, however, also list other cases – Robert Jervis for example considers cooperation between the great powers immediately after the two world wars (1919–1920 and 1945–1946) to be such concerts⁹.

Hegemony may be understood in one of two different ways. According to the first, it represents merely a hierarchy in which one state surpasses all others

⁶ M. Drgas, *The Role of State Identity in the Development of International Security Structures: the Case of Post-Cold War Latin America* [in:] *Polityczne problemy Ameryki Łacińskiej [Political Problems of Latin America]*, J. Knopek (ed.), Toruń 2012, p. 71.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 71–72.

⁸ See for example: H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*, New York–Chichester 2002, p. 218.

⁹ R. Jervis, *From Balance to Concert: A Study of International Security Cooperation*, “World Politics” 1985, No. 1, Vol. 38, p. 58.

in terms of power. This sort of hegemony is, however, nothing more than an exceptional instance of anarchy since the “persistent and connected sets of rules” on which it rests upon are exactly the same as in any other case of anarchy. The other approach, which I will adhere to, labelled as hegemonic stability theory, requires the unique position of the hegemonic power to take its source also from a certain degree of legitimacy stemming from the fact that it provides public goods (such as security) to itself as well as to other, non-hegemonic states. Therefore, this type of institution also needs to encompass a certain amount of cooperation between all sides involved¹⁰. The most prominent example of such a case is the one on the basis of which the whole hegemonic stability theory has been developed – the role played by the United States in the post-World War II international political economy¹¹.

The notion of collective security has been defined for the first time in the Covenant of the League of Nations, particularly in article 10, in which all states – signatories to the Covenant – pledged to protect one another against any aggression¹². Yet, what is also crucial to the understanding of collective security, is that since it was assumed that the League of Nations would one day become a universal organization, the collective effort in response to aggression on the basis of article 10 would have to be directed towards one of the organization’s members. This is a defining quality of collective security that distinguishes it from any other type of institution involving joint retaliation, such as for example an alliance¹³.

Balance of power is one the most frequently used terms in the study of international relations and, thus, can be understood in a variety of different ways.

¹⁰ Concerning the distinction see for example: I. Clark, *Towards an English School Theory of Hegemony*, “European Journal of International Relations” 2009, No. 2, Vol. 15, pp. 205–213.

¹¹ Hedley Bull gives also two other examples to draw attention to his similar concept of primacy. They include the role played by Great Britain in the Commonwealth prior to World War II and the position of the United States in NATO. H. Bull, *op.cit.*, p. 208.

¹² J.S. Nye Jr., *Understanding International Conflicts. An Introduction to Theory and History*, New York–San Francisco–Boston–London–Toronto–Sydney–Tokyo–Singapore–Madrid–Mexico City–Munich–Paris–Cape Town–Hong Kong–Montreal 2007, p. 89.

¹³ C.A. Wallander, R.O. Keohane, *Risk, Threat, and Security Institutions* [in:] *International Institutions...*, *op.cit.*, p. 92. Some scholars opt for a wider definition of collective security and include for example concerts as one of its forms. See for example: Ch.A. Kupchan, C.A. Kupchan, *The Promise of Collective Security*, “International Security” 1995, No. 1, Vol. 20, p. 53. It is not however clear what, according to these authors, separates collective security from any other cooperative (and for that matter collective) institutions.

Usually, however, it designates one of two things¹⁴. In the first sense it illustrates a distribution of power within any given system or between any two states¹⁵. Scholars nonetheless tend to limit this use of the concept only to specific types of distributions. First and foremost, they consistently apply it only to distributions between or among the great powers. Furthermore, many of them agree that a case in which a single state, given its power, dominates all others (unipolarity) cannot be considered to represent a balance of power¹⁶. This stems from a widely held belief that only a condition in which various opposing sides (whoever they may be) are roughly equal in terms of power constitutes a balance¹⁷. Hence, scholars of international relations restrict the usage of the term either to multipolar systems (preferably involving at least five great powers)¹⁸ or to multipolar (regardless of the number of poles) and bipolar systems¹⁹. In the second sense, the notion of balance of power means a particular kind of policy by which states strive to balance one another's capabilities to prevent the emergence of a single preponderant actor among themselves²⁰, something that Adam Watson called a "systematic practice of anti-hegemonialism"²¹. The latter definition is therefore more suitable if one is to regard balance of power as a security institution. Nevertheless, the functioning of the sort of policy it involves is also often considered to be correlated to the distribution of power among states.

Finally this leads us to the last two types of international security institutions, i.e. opposing alliances and spheres of influence. As both types represent distinctive and more sophisticated forms of balance of power they are third order institutions. Typically it is assumed that in multipolar systems states balance disparities by producing precisely two roughly equally powerful opposing alliances while under bipolar conditions they do so mainly by developing their

¹⁴ For a more elaborate classification of various uses of the term, both by politicians and scholars, see: E. B. Haas, *The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda*, "World Politics" 1953, No. 4, Vol. 5, pp. 442–477.

¹⁵ J.S. Nye Jr., op.cit., p. 64.

¹⁶ See for example: I. Clark, op.cit., p. 203; H. Bull, op.cit., p. 97; A. Watson, *European International Society and its Expansion* [in:] *The Expansion of International Society*, H. Bull, A. Watson (eds.), Oxford 1984, p. 24.

¹⁷ J.S. Nye Jr., op.cit., p. 64.

¹⁸ See for example: K. Mingst, *Essentials of International Relations*, New York–London 2003, pp. 88–89.

¹⁹ See for example: K.N. Waltz, *Theory...*, op.cit., pp. 168–169; D.A. Lake, op.cit., p. 158.

²⁰ J.S. Nye Jr., op.cit., p. 65.

²¹ A. Watson, op.cit., p. 24.

own capabilities, however, in this case, they also gather a group of weaker states around them to form spheres of their influence. I shall address these issues in some greater detail in the next section.

3. Rationalist explanations for the development of international security institutions

All rationalist explanations concerning any type of state action base their claims on an assumption that international actors choose strategies which will prove most beneficial given their interests. Hence, if we set aside arguments which involve the possibility of an error in judgment coming into play, the diversity of international security institutions can be justified only as a result of variation related to interests. Therefore, since states can always “choose” from a set of different institutions, to produce a complete argument one needs to provide an understanding of the linkages between their interests and preferences as regards to particular types of institutions.

3.1. The materialist explanation

The materialist explanation for the development of international security institutions is one of the key features defining realist and neorealist approaches in the study of international relations. Nonetheless, it constitutes also a part of several more “liberal” strands of theory. The principal argument here is that institutions are products of the system’s polarity, i.e. the number of great powers as well as the scale of inequality as regards to the distribution of power among them.

“Materialists” accept that the great powers, as any states, aspire to dominance over all others since only then – given the anarchic nature of their environment – they can ultimately guarantee their own survival. In other words, their actions are driven first and foremost by what Hans J. Morgenthau called “the lust for power”²². At the same time these states prefer to develop their capabilities through “internal” rather than “external” policies. This strategy, however, if it is to bring any success at all, requires time necessary for them to gain enough power to overcome all their rivals. Yet, during that period, they also need to deter other, more powerful actors which might try to make use of their temporary preponderance. Since states cannot gain power instantly by developing their capabilities “internally”, they have to resort to “external” actions and, thus, ally

²² H.J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, London 1947, p. 167.

themselves with other actors that are also under threat. Only then, by joining capabilities, they can deter a common foe²³. This is how, according to this sort of logic, a balance of power works and alliances form in multipolar systems. As Waltz argues – following Alan Dowty’s observations – this type of policy is never a goal for states but a product of their desire to dominate²⁴. Balance of power therefore becomes a self-contained mechanism, “not so much imposed by statesmen on events as it is imposed by events on statesmen”²⁵. Given this, one would expect alliances not to form in multipolar systems only when capabilities are equally distributed among all of the great powers.

On the other hand, in bipolar systems setting up alliances that involve the great powers becomes impossible; here there are only two of them and they are the ones who pose the greatest threat to one another’s security. In this case a more difficult question to answer is why the great powers would establish spheres of influence around them. One plausible explanation is that, due to the lack of suitable allies for them, the non-great-power states somehow do matter and increase the ability to deter. Then, balancing takes place not only between the two great powers but also between the two spheres, which become alliance-like constructs. Some prominent “materialists”, such as Waltz, while offering nothing in return, dismiss this argument and hold that in bipolar systems only “internal” means are used for balancing²⁶. This would imply, however, that establishing spheres becomes utterly pointless and contradicts the rationalist assumption that states do only what is best for them. Nevertheless, the “all-states-do-matter” explanation also has its limits. First, it does not demonstrate why the great powers would want to constrain their “lust for power” and not try to completely subordinate other states that are parts of their respective spheres. Second, it fails to offer a logic on the basis of which both the great powers and other states would choose their particular allies.

Finally, according to “materialists”, since non-great-power states are not considered by the great powers to be fully-fledged alliance candidates, one would expect the latter always to prefer cooperation only among themselves and, hence, spheres of influence never to form in multipolar systems.

²³ Ibidem, p. 169.

²⁴ K.N. Waltz, *Theory...*, op.cit., pp. 119–120. See also: A. Dowty, *Conflict in War Potential Politics: An Approach to Historical Macroanalysis*, “Peace Research Society (International) Papers” 1969, Vol. 13, p. 95.

²⁵ K.N. Waltz, *Man...*, op.cit., p. 209.

²⁶ See for example: idem, *Theory...*, op.cit., p. 168.

As far as the materialist explanation can account for most of the features of balance of power as well as its specific forms, it has little to offer with respect to the other types of second order institutions. Regarding hegemony, it fails to demonstrate what mechanisms could persuade the hegemonic state and the other states to cooperate with each other when no common threats exists and, thus, on the one side, force the former to constrain its appetite for power to prevent it from “devouring” weaker states while simultaneously restraining any attempts to strip it of its privileged status on the other. With reference to great power concerts, the materialist explanation proves incapable of justifying the willingness of the great powers to cooperate, particularly if this strategy is to be a means employed in order to safeguard the *status quo* against attempts undertaken by weaker states, i.e. actors which – as “materialists” claim – do not matter polarity-wise. Finally, concerning collective security, the argument offered by “materialists” cannot account for cooperation taking place among states, since this type of institution requires them to act regardless of any premises related to the distribution of capabilities as well as the existence or non-existence of a common foe.

3.2. The functionalist explanation

As we have seen, materialist explanations for the development of international security institutions are centered around two basic arguments, according to which: security-oriented strategies employed by states are determined entirely by their fear for their own survival; and security institutions are imposed on states rather than chosen by them. Functionalist explanations, developed mainly by neoliberal institutionalists, utilize the potential stemming from the possibility of “loosening” the former of those assumptions as well as hold that institutions are deliberately designed by states on the basis of their “rational anticipation (...) in order to maximize the net benefits that they receive”²⁷, as Robert O. Keohane, probably the most prominent representative of this approach, once wrote. Given this, “functionalists” argue that the development of specific types of security institutions is driven by the demand for solving specific security-related problems.

In spite of offering a theoretically consistent general explanation that potentially could account for the diversity of international security institutions, scholars representing this standpoint fail, however, to comprehensively demonstrate the ties between particular types of institutions and particular issues with

²⁷ R.O. Keohane, *Governance in a Partially Globalized World* [in:] *International Institutions...*, op.cit., p. 251. See also: D.A. Lake, op.cit., p. 136.

which they are meant to deal. Usually, the main reason for this is that they use functional claims only to determine differences between a limited number of institutions (most often two)²⁸ and, thus, leave a large part of the whole spectrum, both in terms of institutions as well their functions, untouched.

An attempt to link institutions with their specific functions using a different approach has been made by Celeste A. Wallander and Keohane, who proposed a distinction between two categories of security problems – threats and risks. They claimed that: “Threats pertain when there are actors that have the capabilities to harm the security of others and that are perceived by their potential targets as having intentions to do so. When no such threat exists, either because states do not have the intention or the capability to harm the security of others, states may nevertheless face a security risk”²⁹. Next, they also identified two types of “security arrangements” corresponding with those two types of security problems. Threats – as they argued – are dealt with better by alliances and alignments (a less institutionalized form of alliances), i.e. institutions which “have rules, norms, and procedures to enable the members to identify threats and retaliate effectively against them”³⁰. On the other hand, when it comes to risks, Wallander and Keohane suggested that diplomatic conferences, what they called “security management institutions”, and out-of-area coalitions tend to be more effective as they “have rules, norms, and procedures to enable the members to provide and obtain information and to manage disputes in order to avoid generating security dilemmas”³¹.

An important limitation of this argument as a complete explanation for the diversity of international security institution is that the typology of institutions it contains includes only two functionally distinct types – threat- and risk-oriented institutions – and fails to account, on the basis of functional claims, for the variety of their particular forms (alliances, diplomatic conferences, etc.). Therefore, it is not entirely clear how these could relate to institutions such as hegemony, great power concert and other. Wallander and Keohane attempt to demonstrate only certain such relationships. Their effort leads, however, to conclusions that are not always consistent with their argument on the links between

²⁸ See for example: H. Bull, *op.cit.*, pp. 102–107, 199–220; D.A. Lake, *op.cit.*, pp. 129–160.

²⁹ C.A. Wallander, R.O. Keohane, *op.cit.*, p. 91.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 92. For a similar method of distinguishing between types of institutions see: M. Drgas, *op.cit.*, p. 72–73.

security-related problems and types of institutions. For instance, they regard collective security as an example of an alliance³². This is because it involves rules, norms, and procedures to enable states to identify threats (or whatever they might be called) and retaliate. Yet, one of its key features – as it had been already noted – is that it is not intended to deter a specific actor that has the capabilities to harm others and is perceived by them as having also the will to do so. Thus, given the definitions constructed by Wallander and Keohane, collective security may be viewed as an example of an alliance, but only an alliance meant not to address threats but risks.

3.3. The evolutionist explanation

In the study of international relations, “rationalist” scholars often tend to adhere to a static model of world politics based on a presumption that the ever-present condition of anarchy prohibits any significant transformation of national interests and, thus, the behaviour of states. Within this approach, evolutionary theorizing in general and evolutionary conceptions of international security in particular are rather unpopular and highly underdeveloped³³. As a result, there is no comprehensive evolutionary theory of the development of international security institutions. There is, however, some indication of evolutionary thinking among “rationalists”, especially those using the game-theoretic approach to the study of cooperation³⁴.

As opposed to the materialist and functionalist explanations, the evolutionist argument is based on a claim that institutionalization of cooperation is dynamic and should be viewed as a process in which institutions do not develop out of nothing or fall apart into nothing. As Keohane once wrote on a similar concept of international regimes, they: “rarely emerge from chaos; on the contrary, they are built on one another”³⁵. Hence, according to this approach, distinct types of institutions should represent different stages or phases of a single process of institutionalization that is driven by evolutionary learning, i.e. the ability of actors to gather new information about other actors and use it to change their own behaviour in order to maximize their gains.

³² See: C.A. Wallander, R.O. Keohane, op.cit., p. 93.

³³ G. Modelski, *Is World Politics Evolutionary Learning?*, “International Organization” 1990, No. 1, Vol. 44, pp. 1–2.

³⁴ George Modelski also regards Immanuel Kant’s perpetual peace as an example of an evolutionary process. See for example: Ibidem, pp. 2–6.

³⁵ R.O. Keohane, *After Hegemony. Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton 1984, p. 79.

Using game theory scholars usually represent security interactions among states as a case of the Prisoners' Dilemma³⁶. In this game, if both sides cooperate, they both receive a reward; if they both defect, they both get punished; if one side defects and the other chooses to cooperate, the former receives the largest payoff possible in the game while the latter is left only with a benefit that is much smaller than the one it would get if both of them decided to cooperate (sometimes called the "sucker payoff"³⁷). Since both players lack information about the other's intentions and fear the other side always might decide to defect, they face commitment problems and – it is argued – are reluctant to cooperate. However, if iterated games are played, the players will learn each other's strategies and modify their behaviour. An experiment conducted by Robert Axelrod has shown that in the long run the most successful strategy when playing the Prisoners' Dilemma is to follow the tit-for-tat rule³⁸. Hence, if both sides of the game have the ability to learn, they will sooner or later overcome their commitment problems and, after a number of games have been played, adhere to this rule.

The evolutionist approach implies that two somewhat related factors that stem from the amount of information that states have influence the mechanism by which international security institutions (and institutions in general) develop. The first is associated with commitment to cooperate – as actors become more and more confident about the intentions of one another, they may decide to establish institutions that, in order to exist, require from them ever greater commitment; on the other hand, if this confidence is undermined, they will deinstitutionalize their cooperation, i.e. turn an institution that demands for more commitment into a one that requires less of it. Scholars, however, have not yet attempted to comprehensively rank institutions on the basis of their commitment requirements, which is a serious shortfall if the evolutionist argument is to convincingly explain the diversity of security institutions on the basis of this factor having any significance. Robert Jervis, for example, does this with only two types of institutions and claims that a great power concert to develop

³⁶ See for example: Ibidem, pp. 67–104; C.A. Wallander, R.O. Keohane, op.cit., pp. 91, 127; A. Stein, *Coordination and Collaboration: Regimes in an Anarchic World* [in:] *International Regimes*, S.D. Krasner (ed.), Ithaca–London 1983, pp. 115–140; R. Jervis, *Security Regimes* [in:] *International Regimes...*, op.cit., pp. 174–176; D. Snidal, *The Game Theory of International Politics*, "World Politics" 1985, No. 1, Vol. 38, pp. 25–57; G.H. Snyder, P. Diesing, *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises*, Princeton 1977.

³⁷ See: R.O. Keohane, op.cit., p. 68.

³⁸ R. Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, New York 1984, pp. 27–54.

demands more incentives to cooperate being present than a balance of power involving opposing alliances³⁹. One might also argue that two important elements that are connected with commitment requirements and, thus, play a role in the evolution of institutions are – to use Wallander’s and Keohane’s terms⁴⁰ – their commonality (the number of actors involved) and specificity (the degree to which specific rules that constitute the institution exist). Given this, more common institutions as well as those whose rules are more specific should be more difficult to establish. These issues, however, are not directly linked to the kind of rules which particular types of institutions entail. More importantly though, there is no reason why states would set up institutions that have greater requirements as regards to this factor provided that no other circumstances change. This is because if an ongoing cooperation is rewarding enough, the sole possibility to deepen commitment does not pose a sufficient incentive to do so. The commitment factor alone might therefore influence states only to deinstitutionalize their cooperation.

By contrast, the role of commitment might prove crucial regardless of the direction of its change in conjunction with the second factor whose importance stems from the evolutionist explanation, i.e. the performance of various strategies (institutions) chosen by states. As it already had been noted, while actors cooperate, they not only alter their confidence in the willingness of others to cooperate as well, but they also strive to find a strategy that suits best their interests, which in the case of Axelrod’s experiment was the tit-for-tat rule. However, before they can accomplish this, they need to test different strategies in order to assess their value in terms of the benefits they yield. The “better” ones might nevertheless demand also an adequate level of commitment to develop. Unfortunately, since according to the evolutionist explanation actors can only gain more information, the process of institutionalization ought to be a one-way linear sequence of changes, which it is not if one examines the development of security institutions in international relations. This is because their types tend to recur rather than alter their forms and never go back to the previous ones.

In addition, the evolutionist explanation also does not directly demonstrate the relationships existing between commitment requirements as well as benefits on the one hand and institutions such as for instance balance of power or collective security on the other.

³⁹ R. Jervis, *From...*, op.cit., pp. 60–62.

⁴⁰ See: C.A. Wallander, R.O. Keohane, op.cit., p. 90.

3.4. The integrated rationalist approach

As I have argued, none of the three “pure” rationalist explanations constitutes a complete account of the development of international security institutions as neither of them fully justifies the existence of their various types. An integrated rationalist argument, in order to “do better” and compensate for all the deficiencies of those explanations, should make use of arguments related with one or two of them to patch up all the holes in the third. Some of these explanations, however, are not compatible with each other. This is the case if an attempt is made to supplement the materialist explanation with arguments taken from either of the other two (or vice-versa). The reason for this is that while the former is based on a claim that power-related considerations are the only significant factor, the latter hold precisely that they are not. Thus, they offer two completely different logics of action, and whilst both of them might prove to be equally important to the development of institutions, none of the three explanations offers an argument that would illustrate why and how states choose between these contradictory logics; for instance, neither of them shows why states might decide to set all their power-related considerations aside and engage themselves in collective security, an institution in which all parties are treated on an equal footing in spite of the disparities in terms of their capabilities⁴¹.

In contrast, the functionalist and evolutionist explanations are perfectly compatible with each other and, thus, no obstacles to their merger seem to occur. This is because both of these arguments hold that institutions are chosen on the basis of the same criterion, i.e. their relative efficiency. What distinguishes one from the other is their view of security – either as one- or multi-dimensional – as well as the attitude towards information available to states, since the latter is a bounded rationality explanation⁴², whilst the former a full rationality one. The combination of the two therefore allows for an explanation that would see institutions as issue-specific constructs that might be established also on the basis of limited information. On the one hand, this might account for the divergence regarding institutions intended to solve the same security-related problems, such as for instance the threat- and risk-oriented institutions distinguished by

⁴¹ A non-rationalist explanation for this has been given particularly by Alexander Wendt. See: A. Wendt, *Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics*, “International Organization” 1992, No. 2, Vol. 46, pp. 391–425; Idem, *Social...*, pp. 246–312.

⁴² On the notion of bounded rationality see: H.A. Simon, *A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice*, “Quarterly Journal of Economics” 1955, No. 1, Vol. 69, pp. 99–118.

Wallander and Keohane, which would now represent the most effective strategies achievable given a particular amount of information being available to states. On the other hand, a combined functionalist-evolutionist argument might also justify the recurrence of certain institutions, a phenomenon that would be associated with the appearance and disappearance of distinct security issues.

Nonetheless, the merger of the two explanations fails to compensate for other limitations that apply to both its component arguments. The reason for this is that – similarly to the functionalist and evolutionist accounts – it offers merely a general idea as regards to the factors that matter to the development of international security institutions and allow to differentiate between their types. Thus, it does not show in what way particular types of institutions – balance of power, spheres of influence etc. – differ in terms of commitment requirements, their efficiency, and issue-specificity. The only insight the combined argument yields regarding the development of these institutions is therefore that conditions by which it is influenced are somehow unique in terms of some or all of the three factors just listed.

4. Conclusion

In this study I argued that rationalist explanations which aspire to demonstrate why international security institutions develop, do not qualify as fully satisfactory arguments. To display their limits, I attempted to show on their basis why in given circumstances a particular type of security institution would form instead of some other and, by doing so, justify the existence of a variety of such types. Differences between institutions might be related to a multitude of their features and, thus, institutions may be distinguished by scholars according to various criteria. To prove my point, I used only a few of such types that have a firm place in the literature on international relations and the study of which is considered to be vital to the whole discipline. These, among others, included balance of power, collective security, or hegemony.

The initial step in my analysis was to address the limitations of the three rationalist arguments which I referred to as materialist, functionalist, and evolutionist explanations respectively that individually make up either whole rationalist conceptions on the development of international security institutions or at least parts of them. Having done so, I also examined the possibilities to combine these arguments to explore whether the effort yields any extra explanatory power with respect to the issue in question.

Albeit all of the three individual explanations illustrate the diversity of international security institutions in terms of the interests of states, they also highlight different mechanisms that give rise to these interest. The materialist explanation stresses the importance of fear for survival as the driving force and the distribution of power as the boundary condition which limits options to select from. The functionalist explanation points to the fact that institutions are specialized constructs and get chosen by states on the basis of the utility they yield with respect to particular security-related problems. Finally, according to the evolutionist explanation, a key role in selecting the best option is played by the amount of information that is available to states. This is because institutions differ in their complexity and, thus, their existence is conditioned upon certain requirements related to the will of states to cooperate being met. At the same time, institutions vary in terms of their effectiveness, in this case, however – as opposed to the functionalist explanation – it is maintained that these benefits are not-issue specific.

The main reasons for why these three explanations as well as their combinations fail to convincingly account for the diversity of international security institutions are threefold. First, the functionalist, evolutionist, and the combined functionalist-evolutionist arguments do not attempt to address the issue directly and provide only a general assertion on the factors influencing the formation of institutions instead of tackling the problem with respect to their particular types. Second, the materialist argument advances a logic of state action that justifies the creation of certain types of institutions and, at the same time, rules out the development of others. Third, it proves also incompatible with the other two arguments. The implication of this is that states would have to choose between mutually exclusive logics of action and, thus, behave in a way for which none of the arguments provides any explanation. This is not to say, however, that rationalist explanations are inherently flawed and ought to be utterly discarded. Perhaps, to eradicate the problems and limitations they experience, simply some additional rationalist theorizing is required. On the other hand, the combination of these arguments with non-rationalist ones might bring even more extra value to the “theory” of the development of international security institutions.