**Lesson**

**WEEK 2: Do International Institutions Matter?**

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| One of the striking features of the post-WW II era has been the explosive growth in the number of international organizations in the world. These include international intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), such as the United Nations and the International Telegraph Office (established in the 1860s), but also non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have grown in number ever since the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (which was established in the 1860s as well). International organizations cover a gamut of issues, including the regulation of trade (the World Trade Organization, and the International Bureau of Weights and Measures come to mind), to issues of war and peace, and maintaining international order (the League of Nations and the United Nations come to mind). International organizations, moreover, range in size and importance. For instance, there is the World Organization of the Scout Movement (a federation of various scout movements from different countries), which has a lot of members, but does not necessarily wield much influence (in all fairness, it doesn’t seem to aspire to wield political influence). Then, there are the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), which not only have global membership, but that also (aspire to) wield significant political and/or economic clout. The UN, after all, is charged with maintaining peace among its members, while the WTO was created to reduce global trade imbalances and obstacles.        While scholars of international relations of all theoretical backgrounds have acknowledged the increased numbers of international organization in the world, they are deeply divided about the importance of this phenomenon. This is mostly due to deep disagreements about the roles and impact that international organizations have on the international system. While some see the growth of international organization as a fundamental shift in the nature of international relations, others see international organizations merely as a complement to international politics as usual. This week we will examine these divisions, by taking a closer look at the question of *whether* international organization matter in the international system, and *how* they (can) matter.        The traditional view of international organizations comes from the**Realist** perspective. As we mentioned last week, Realists have several fundamental beliefs about the nature of international politics. Namely, they believe the international system has several **enduring features**. It is anarchical in nature, and dominated by states. Due to the anarchical nature of the system, moreover, long-term cooperation between states is difficult to obtain, and no state will feel comfortable ceding its autonomy (freedom of action) in perpetuity to an external force, whether it is another state or an international organization. In “The False Promise of International Institutions,” John Mearsheimer clearly outlines the Realist arguments about international institutions and their role in the international system. While he doesn’t dispute the fact that states, even powerful ones, “operate through institutions,” he argues that institutions, and especially formal organizations, serve the interests of the states that create them and that they therefore reflect the interests of the more powerful states. States, therefore, either heed the rules laid down by international organizations because they serve their interests, or because they have no choice. They do not follow the rules and regulations of international organizations because they feel that these rules are necessarily **appropriate** or morally binding. When international institutions run counter to the interests of powerful states, the latter feel free to ignore them (Alexander Thompson’s account of the 2003 invasion of Iraq is a case in point).        This Realist view of the importance and role of international institutions has been challenged from multiple directions. The earliest challenge came from the **Liberal** tradition in international relations. For classical Liberals theorists, the creation of appropriate governing institutions/organizations is simply the response of rational human beings to the problems of governance created by anarchy. Liberals acknowledge that life under anarchy can be rough. In contrast to Realists, however, they also argue, however, that anarchy does not have to be an enduring situation in political life. They point out that human beings are rational, and that most human beings are good natured, and that over time their rationality has led them to produce governing organizations and institutions that produced the rule of law. Not only that, Liberals argue, governing institutions themselves have evolved to include concepts of justice and equality, and that this progress has produced liberal democracies that are stable and just, where law governs, and not the rule of the strong.Liberals argue, moreover, that this process will also take place in the international system. In other words, they see the emergence of international organizations and norms as a **fundamental change** in the international system. They see the emergence of these organizations (especially the global ones) as steps towards a more rule-governed international system, in which the rule of law will eventually replace the law of the jungle that has characterized the international system for so long. The impetus for this change will be the growing number of liberal democracies in the international system that are used to norms and institutions that protect the rights of all constituents. Ultimately, therefore, Liberal IR scholars predict that the spread of liberal democracy in the world, will produce a greater interest in the development of equitable international governance structures that will provide security for all states from the few “bad apples” that can be found in any society, and that will provide dispute resolution mechanisms based on the rules of law, and not the relative military capabilities of the constituents. Liberal scholars don’t necessarily argue that this process has been completed, or that it will be completed without backsliding. They do believe, however, that it is pretty much inevitable, as they believe that human rationality drives this search for better governing institutions, and that it applies to both the domestic and the international domains.Realists have long dismissed the Liberal arguments about the importance of international institutions by pointing out (like I explained earlier) that international organizations reflect the interests of the powerful, and that powerful states frequently refuse to acknowledge the directives and rules of international organizations when they conflict with their national interests. They like to point at the failure of the League of Nations, as a prominent failure of liberal ideas about collective security organizations in the international system. Realist criticism, in turn, has produced a response from IR scholars who agreed that the original Liberal position may have been a bit too idealistic, but who also argue that Realist theory does not fully account for the important role that international organizations play in international politics. These scholars are generally known as **Neo-liberal Institutionalists**. Why is this the case? Because they offer a new spin on traditional Liberal IR theory (hence the “neo.”) and they focus their attention very explicitly on the role of institutions. Neo-liberals agree with Realists that the world can be an ugly place and that anarchy is an enduring feature of the international system. They even agree with the fact that international organizations are usually created by powerful states to promote their own interests, rather than the common good. They also point out, however, that in contrast to Realist expectations, international organizations usually tend to last well beyond their original purpose. For instance, they argue that the international organizations created after the Cold War (the UN, NATO, International Monetary Fund, the World Bank etc.) reflected the interests of the most powerful states in the world, and in particular the interests of the United States in a liberal economic world order. But, they say, America has long declined in relative power compared to other states in the world (the US was at the peak of its power in the immediate aftermath of WW II). Yet, neoliberals argue, the institutions created right after WW II still exist. For example, NATO, which was created to promote cooperation between the US and it European allies against a Soviet invasion of Europe, continues to function and exist today even though the threat that brought it to life (the Soviet Union) has been gone for more than 20 years. The US was instrumental in creating the World Bank and the IMF, and while it is still an important actor in those organizations, it is no longer as dominant as it used to be. It continues to rely on them, however, and so do other states. In short, Neoliberal institutionalists argue that Realists simply don’t keep into account that international organizations can have functions that help states accomplish their goals, and that these functions offer incentives even to the more powerful states in the world to “grant IOs substantial independence. Abbott and Snidal outline this institutional argument for the importance and independence of international institutions in their article. Rational states, in other words, are both interested in creating international institutions to facilitate cooperation in the international system, and they also have an interest in having these institutions be relatively independent. While Neoliberal Institutionalists are therefore also skeptical about the emergence of an authoritative world government, they argue that rational states will build an increasingly dense network of international organizations to help govern their mutual interactions. Not only will specific international organizations constrain the behavior of states in their issue area (for example, membership in UN should reduce the likelihood that states will unilaterally resort to the use of force in their interactions with others), but because states will become part of multiple different organizations (for instance, they might want to be members of an international security organization, but also of trade organizations), we will see the formation of linkage strategies. Thus, states that have shown themselves unwilling to be constrained in some areas of world politics, might find it difficult to gain entrance to international organizations that might help them advance their interests in others (for instance, access to the European Union, which is coveted by many, could be linked to behavior in other fields). Over time, the argument goes, even powerful states will find it more difficult to ignore international organizations, as acting outside of those organizations will bring along significant costs. As an example of this process, Neoliberal Institutionalists point out at the development of the World Trade Organization (WTO). As Chorev’s article shows, IR scholars have especially highlighted the fact that the design of the WTO includes a binding dispute resolution mechanism that applies to all states and that requires members to submit their trade dispute to a third party for resolution.Finally, the **Constructivist**approach to IR offers a newer approach to understanding the role of international institutions and organizations. Constructivists emphasize the importance of **informal** **institutions** on individual and state behavior. Institutions, in this sense, should be understood, in Mearsheimer’s words, as a “set of rules” that “prescribe acceptable forms of state behavior, and proscribe unacceptable kinds of behavior.” Institutions therefore, are social and cultural norms,that tell us what kind of behavior is acceptable or unacceptable. Prosaic examples of how such institutions can affect human behavior can be found in everyday life. For instance, anyone who has ever stood up in a bus to let an elderly person sit down has followed a social norm or institution. Any time that you wish someone “gesundheit” when they sneeze, you follow a social norm. In other words, these are behavior patterns that are driven by what we think is**socially appropriate** behavior in those situations. They are not driven by a fear of what consequences might ensue if we do not comply with those institutions (the latter pattern of behavior is called the “logic of consequences,” and is the logic favored by Realists (and scholars who work in the rational choice tradition) when talking about institutions. That is, Realists believe that states/individuals will ignore institutions that have no enforcement mechanisms). Constructivists do not claim that material capabilities do not matter at all. They also do not argue that all individuals and all states follow norms all of the time. Nor do they argue that human beings and individuals are not response to the logic of consequences. They argue, however, that much of human behavior, and hence of state behavior, can be explained by what human beings consider appropriate behavior in any particular social context. They argue, moreover, that the norms of appropriateness are reflected in the international system at any particular time in both formal and informal institutions. They argue that we have to understand the prevailing norms of any age in order to understand the behavior of, and interactions between, states in the international system. For constructivists, therefore, international institutions are essential to understanding international relations. Or in other words norms matter! How do institutions (norms) work in practice, according to constructivists? For an answer to this question, read Martha Finnemore’s article on the evolution of norms of humanitarian intervention in the 19th and 20th century.     For two different viewpoints of how international organizations/institutions work, watch these two short clips on the workings of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The first, produced by the WTO itself, examines the decision making process of the organization: <http://youtu.be/-EjvTEAnfB4>. The second, which is highly critical of the WTO offers a more Realist perspective (<http://youtu.be/NQ952ba75Yk>).**References**Abbott, Kenneth W. and Duncan Snidal.1998.”Why States Act through Formal International Organizations,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*: 5. Mearsheimer, John J. 1994/1995. The False Promise of International Institutions. *International Security*19.3: 5-49. |
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