

International Relations on State Sovereignty-example #3

Realism has dominated international relations theory since at least World War II when it replaced liberalism as the dominant paradigm. Over time, liberals resurfaced as they saw states being challenged in ways for which realists could not account. Since that time a debate has evolved between these two paradigms over the role and the strength of the state in the international system.

Differentiating between realism and neorealism, or liberalism and its multiple variants (liberal institutionalism, neoliberalism, idealism, collective security, critical thought, and neoinstitutionalism) is not necessary to understand this debate. The variants of each paradigm are in agreement about their underlying assumptions. Joseph Grieco (1988:485 cf1) notes that he “does not distinguish between realism and “neorealism,” because on crucial issues---the meaning of international anarchy, its effects on states, and the problem of cooperation---modern realists like Waltz and Gilpin are very much in accord with classical realists like Carr, Aron, and Morgenthau.”¹ For similar reasons, I refer to liberals and their variants collectively because of their core beliefs on cooperation, institutions, their effect on the state, and the significance of transnational issues².

Sovereignty

The basic tenets of these theories necessarily result in each one having a different conception of sovereignty. Realism’s first concern is on maximizing state security. In an international environment of anarchy, states vie to protect their security as they compete for resources and power. The nature of the system has driven states to acknowledge sovereignty as a way to survive. That is, “states are sovereign because there is no competing (overarching) governmental authority in the international system” (Biersteker and Weber, 1996:5) to “enforce promises *or* provide protection” (Grieco, 1988:503). Sovereignty, therefore, entails that the state “decides for itself how it will cope with its internal and external problems” (Waltz 1979:96). For

¹ Also see Mearsheimer (1994-1995:9, cf20).

² Furthermore, if Mearsheimer’s accusation is valid, then they take anti-realism as their main point of reference (Mearsheimer, 1994/1995:14, cf35).

realists, sovereignty only requires that states be responsible for what happens within their borders as the international system is defined by anarchy.

Thomson offers a traditional realist definition of sovereignty as “the state’s ability to make authoritative decisions---in the final instance, the decision to make war” (Thomson, 1995:213). In an effort to reassess sovereignty, Thomson offers a more precise definition to be “the recognition by internal and external actors that the state has the exclusive authority to intervene coercively in activities within its territory” (Thomson, 1995:219). Thomson’s stated purpose behind reevaluating sovereignty is to offer a more rigorous methodology for evaluating challenges to state sovereignty. Thomson also argues that it is within the state’s authority to determine what is political or nonpolitical. As such, states control what is political and relinquish authority to private actors over that which is nonpolitical (Thomson, 1995:214). In essence, Thomson is finding a way to get around the possibility that transnational actors and issues can affect a state’s sovereignty by limiting the scope of a state’s responsibility. As a result, far fewer cases challenge the state for a realist than for a liberal when exclusive authority is limited to activities within its territory.

Krasner also attempts to refine the realist view of sovereignty. Krasner argues that sovereignty has always been based on ‘organized hypocrisy’ insofar as states’ sovereignty has always been violated and yet is the cornerstone for defining the state and its relations. In order to demonstrate that claims of sovereignty erosion are based on false assumptions about what sovereignty encompasses (he does not allow for the possibility that institutions might actually strengthen the state), Krasner argues that as a complex concept that is constantly in flux, multiple definitions are necessary to evaluate the effects of transnationalism on state sovereignty (Krasner, 1999:24).

The underlying purpose of this exercise, however, is to support the realist claim that institutions have little effect on a state’s sovereignty. Making “interdependence sovereignty” a separate category (and less important) than “international legal sovereignty” and “Westphalian sovereignty,” facilitates Krasner’s objective by relegating the effects of transnationalism on the state into an inferior category of sovereignty. “Domestic sovereignty” is another category that receives less attention and importance than the “international legal” or “Westphalian” categories, something that is equally significant in terms of evaluating the level of sovereignty.

In order for Krasner to argue that globalization and institutions have a minimal effect on state sovereignty, it is imperative to identify two categories that emphasize the juridical (international legal) and traditional (Westphalian) interpretations of the concept over the interdependence aspect of it.

Admittedly basing its core elements on realism (Keohane and Nye, et al 1977; Keohane and Nye 1989; Keohane and Martin 1995) may be the reason for the absence of a definition of sovereignty in liberal institutionalism.³ Liberals, consequently, are criticized because “they never presented a comprehensive theoretical reevaluation of the concept of sovereignty” (Biersteker and Weber, 1995:7). Moreover, with only a few notable exceptions, “they tended to focus instead on a description of the “erosion” of state sovereignty, often confusing it with a reduction in state capabilities for independence and autonomy” (Biersteker and Weber, 1995:7).⁴

While making an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and research in international relations, but without a clear working definition of sovereignty, Thomson (a realist) presupposes liberal sovereignty to be defined in terms of “the state’s ability to control actors and activities within and across its borders” (Thomson, 1995:213). This definition is based on key elements in liberalism that assume institutions hold the potential to facilitate cooperation and eventually bring about peace by eradicating anarchy (Kegley, 1995:4). As such, sovereignty involves states being able to control not only what happens within their borders, but also what happens transnationally. The liberal agenda then, in contrast to that of the realists, is to show that states are not the only significant actors in the international system, as they are unable to manage transnational issues on their own.

³ With this term I momentarily break from using the generalization of liberal because liberal institutionalists (Keohane and Nye 1977; Nye and Keohane, et al, 1977) specifically were the first to challenge the realist tradition on the question of interdependence. The liberal variants that followed took the lead from these critics. I therefore conclude this to be the reason why the concept of sovereignty is assumed by liberals rather than debated, especially as their focus is not on how these institutions affect states per se, but instead on the evolution of these institutions as independent actors, the issues they address, and the value of institutions for cooperation.

⁴ The first is an edited volume by Keohane, Haas, and Levy (1993) when looking at environmental regimes. They find that ‘formal’ sovereignty may be reinforced, but it is because only states are deemed to be the legitimate actors in IGOs. That ‘functional’ sovereignty is reinforced is equally insignificant even if states acquire greater problem-solving capabilities. A second exception is presented when Keohane and Nye (1998) afford that information technology may strengthen states.

In sum, sovereignty holds different meanings for realists and liberals, particularly on the issue of what territorial control includes. For the realist, the state chooses how and where to cope with its problems, as it is only responsible for having control or authority over its own territory. For the liberal, maintaining sovereignty requires that the state be able to cope with not only internal problems internal, but also those externally generated.

Institutions

For realists, institutions matter only insofar as states want them to, or, to the degree that it is in the interests of the state (Waltz 1979, 1999, 2000; Krasner and Thomson 1989; Mearsheimer 1994/1995, 1995; Thomson 1995; Jervis 1999; Krasner 1999, 2001). That the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is not only still in existence after the Cold War has ended, but that it also is increasing in size and scope, is because of strong US interests (Waltz, 2000). Even Mearsheimer affords that institutions sometimes do matter (1995:86) and do not necessarily lack utility, but “they are not autonomous in the sense of being more than a tool of statecraft” (Jervis, 1999:43).

Though states may sometimes cooperate through institutions, relative gains outweigh absolute gains in determining when states will participate. Only when states foresee the possibility of making relative gains are they likely to cooperate (Grieco 1988; Krasner 1991). And, it is only when states can make relative gains toward maintaining their security that it is in their self-interest and hence that they will promote institutions. Infrequently, though, do institutions accomplish anything that states could not have managed without them (Mearsheimer, 1995:87).

Realists typically equate institutions or international organizations exclusively with IGOs⁵. This equation, along with the very infrequent mention of NGOs by realists, is indicative of their view of transnational organizations as insignificant. In one of the few instances where a realist discusses NGOs with the intention of showing how insignificant they are, Krasner ironically emphasizes the significance of other transnational actors (Krasner, 2001:26). The comparison given is that of the influence of the United Fruit

⁵ For examples of this usage, see Waltz, 2000:21; Mearsheimer, 1994/1995:4, 17; Krasner, 2001:26.

Company in Central America in the early 20th century, during which time that MNC had more influence “than any NGO could hope to have anywhere in the contemporary world” (Krasner, 2001:26). Arguably, however, NGOs have achieved some level of influence evident in the secretary general of Amnesty International having more influence and presence on the international stage than the leaders of Moldova, Namibia, or Nauru (Spiro, 1995:2). For Krasner to admit that IGOs and MNCs have the power to impact a state is an acknowledgement that institutions and transnational forces matter more than he wants to admit.

Overall, states determine the potential usefulness (and arguably effectiveness) of institutions based on possible relative gains. Institutions thus matter to the degree that states benefit from them. If cooperation in institutions led to erosion of state sovereignty, states would not choose to participate in them. Furthermore, transnational relations between states flourish because of state sovereignty---not in spite of sovereignty---as states facilitate agreements and their implementation (Gilpin 1981). If states determine how and when institutions matter, then states only relinquish sovereignty to the degree that they will receive relative gains. Realists allow that institutions matter when states see fit: herein lies the possibility of admitting that NGOs can positively impact state sovereignty---though realists do not venture here.

Absence of a definition from liberals withstanding, the claims remain the same: that institutions matter and that their activity erodes state sovereignty is clear (Keohane and Nye, et al 1977; Keohane, 1984; Soroos 1986; Keohane and Nye 1989; Hurrell 1995; Weiss and Gordenker, et al 1996; Cleaver 1997; Ronit and Schneider 2000). For liberals, institutions necessarily deplete a state’s sovereignty in order to facilitate cooperation on transnational issues. The amount of resources states invest into organizations like the EU, NATO, and GATT (to the point of creating an even stronger organization in the WTO), is evidence that organizations matter. Otherwise, “what could be the rationale behind devoting resources to structures that will make no difference?” (Keohane and Martin, 1995:48)⁶.

Liberals assert that institutions are so important to facilitating cooperation between states that without them, states would not have the extensive relations they do nor would they be as adept at problem-solving.

⁶ The realist reply is that it is in the interests of the state because they benefit, or in the words of Waltz (2000), “If the answer were not already obvious, the expansion of NATO would make it so: to serve what powerful states believe to be their interests” (21).

Institutions bring states together with the intention of addressing conflicting interests over transnational issues. The whole point of institutions, for liberals, is to reduce the possibility that conflict will result in war (Jervis, 1995:58).

In sum, realists and liberals view institutions and the effects they have on state sovereignty in contradicting ways. Realists assert that institutions are of little importance unless the states want them to be. Liberals argue that in the process of facilitating cooperate between states institutions erode state sovereignty. As each focuses on diminishing or increasing the amount of erosion occurring through institutions, neither entertains the possibility that these same institutions might reinforce state sovereignty in qualitative ways. Clearly a gap in the literature exists regarding institutions, more specifically nongovernmental institutions, and the possibility that their activities can bolster sovereignty.