

Integrating theories of international regimes

ANDREAS HASENCLEVER, PETER MAYER, AND
VOLKER RITTBERGER¹

Abstract. Several years after students of international relations started to ask questions about international regimes, there continues to be a strong scholarly interest in the principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures that govern the behaviour of states in particular issue-areas. Indeed, international regimes have been a major focus of theoretical and empirical research in International Relations for many years now. Three schools of thought have shaped the discussion thus far: neoliberalism, which bases its analyses on constellations of interests; realism, which treats power relations among states as its key variable; and cognitivism, which emphasizes actors' causal and social knowledge. Each of these schools of thought has articulated and defended a distinct view on the origins, stability, and consequences of international regimes. In this article we explore the possibilities of achieving additional explanatory power in the study of international regimes by working toward a synthesis of these schools of thought.

Introduction

For more than twenty years international regimes or 'sets of [...] principles, norms, rules, and decision making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations'² have been on the agenda of International Relations.³ International regimes are a major type of international institution.⁴ Regimes are deliberately constructed, partial international orders on either a regional or a global scale, which are intended to remove specific issue-areas of international politics from the sphere of self-help behaviour. By creating shared expectations about appropriate behaviour and by upgrading the level of transparency in the issue-area, regimes help states (and other actors) to cooperate with a view to reaping joint gains in the form of additional welfare or security. If we classify international

¹ This article further develops a couple of ideas we put forward in the concluding chapter of our book, *Theories of International Regimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Earlier versions were presented and discussed at a conference on 'International Politics and Transnational Relations', Mexico City, 1 December 1997 and in seminars at the Department of Political Science of Stanford University and the Centre for International Relations of the University of Tübingen. The authors are grateful to Helmut Breitmeier, Gary Goertz, Stephen Krasner, Petra Rotes and all the other individuals who, on these and other occasions, commented on the paper.

² Stephen D. Krasner, 'Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables', in Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 2.

³ The seminal article is John Gerard Ruggie, 'International Responses to Technology: Concepts and Trends', *International Organization*, 29 (1975), pp. 557–83.

⁴ For this typology of international institutions see Robert O. Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power: Essays in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), pp. 3–4.

issue-areas by the dominant value being at issue,⁵ we find that regimes exist in all domains of contemporary world politics: there are *security* regimes such as the nuclear non-proliferation regime;⁶ *economic* regimes such as the international trade regime;⁷ *environmental* regimes such as the international regime for the protection of the stratospheric ozone layer;⁸ and, finally, *human rights* regimes such as the one based on the European Convention on Human Rights.⁹

In the early 1980s, less than ten years after it had been launched, regime analysis had turned into something of a cottage industry within International Relations¹⁰ as scholars began to study more systematically than before the conditions under which international regimes wax and wane, in the process developing theories of regime formation and change. At the same time, they asked questions about the political significance of international regimes: How *effective* are the agreed-upon norms and rules by which we define regimes? Are they reliable predictors for actors' behaviour or does narrowly defined self-interest induce actors to ignore regime injunctions whenever they turn out to be inconvenient? And how *resilient* or robust are regimes to exogenous challenges or shocks in the issue-area or beyond? For example, is an erosion of the power structure that prevailed when the regime was created bound to lead to a collapse of the regime as well? Or do regimes assume a 'life of their own' acquiring a measure of independence of the conditions that facilitated their formation and shaped the principles and norms that were adopted in the 'constitutional contract' of the regime? And, finally, what is it that makes some regimes more effective (or more robust) than others?¹¹

Some of the early noise that accompanied the rise of regime analysis has diminished; however, this does not mean the field has ceased to exist. On the contrary, the fact that the regime concept is no longer the object of heated scholarly controversies should be taken as an indication that the study of international regimes (or, more

⁵ See Ernst-Otto Czempiel, *Internationale Politik: Ein Konfliktmodell* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1981), p. 198.

⁶ See Roger K. Smith, 'Explaining the Non-Proliferation Regime: Anomalies for Contemporary International Relations Theory', *International Organization*, 41 (1987), pp. 253–82; and Harald Müller, 'Regimeanalyse und Sicherheitspolitik: Das Beispiel Nonproliferation', in Beate Kohler-Koch (ed.), *Regime in den internationalen Beziehungen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1989), pp. 277–313.

⁷ See Jock A. Finlayson and Mark W. Zacher, 'The GATT and the Regulation of Trade Barriers: Regime Dynamics and Functions', in Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes*, pp. 273–314; and Michael J. Trebilcock and Robert Howse, *The Regulation of International Trade: Political Economy and Legal Order* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁸ See Edward A. Parson, 'Protecting the Ozone Layer', in Peter M. Haas, Robert O. Keohane, and Marc A. Levy (eds.), *Institutions for the Earth: Sources of Effective Environmental Protection* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 27–73; and Helmut Breitmeier, *Wie entstehen globale Umweltregime? Der Konfliktaustrag zum Schutz der Ozonschicht und des globalen Klimas* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1996).

⁹ See Martin List, 'Rechtstaatlichkeit in (West)Europa—Eine regimeanalytische Betrachtung', *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 33 (1992), pp. 622–42; and Andrew Moravcsik, 'Explaining International Human Rights Regimes: Liberal Theory and Western Europe', *European Journal of International Relations*, 1 (1995), pp. 157–89.

¹⁰ See Stephan Haggard and Beth A. Simmons, 'Theories of International Regimes', *International Organization*, 41 (1987), pp. 491–517; and Marc A. Levy, Oran R. Young, and Michael Zürn, 'The Study of International Regimes', *European Journal of International Relations*, 1 (1995), pp. 267–330.

¹¹ For the distinction between effectiveness and robustness as dimensions of the significance of international regimes see Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger, *Theories*, pp. 2–3. The term 'constitutional contract' is borrowed from Oran R. Young, 'Political Leadership and Regime Formation: On the Development of Institutions in International Society', *International Organization*, 45 (1991), p. 282.

broadly, the study of international institutions) has matured and become a firmly established sub-field of International Relations.¹² Nor should we conclude that regime analysis is stagnating; indeed, a good deal of interesting work has been published over the last decade.¹³ Thus, issue-areas that earlier had attracted little attention from students of regimes have become major foci of empirical research. One example is international environmental politics before and after the Rio Conference of 1992.¹⁴ And in response to the charge of state-centrism often brought against regime analysis,¹⁵ attempts have been made to consider more systematically the role of non-state actors in bringing about, implementing, and developing international regimes.¹⁶ Thus, students of regimes have addressed so-called epistemic communities, i.e. transnational networks of issue experts who share both a body of causal knowledge regarding the physical or social processes that require international action and a vision of a better public policy which they seek to help materialize. Influential epistemic communities have been identified in diverse international issue-areas, ranging from the protection of regional seas to arms control.¹⁷ What is more, scholars have begun to inquire into the theoretical possibility and empirical reality of transnational regimes, i.e. normative institutions of a transboundary scope created and maintained by private actors among themselves. Examples of such private international regimes include the rule-based cooperation of large transnational companies in sectors such as insurance, banking, or shipping.¹⁸

Basically three schools of thought have shaped the discussion of regimes:¹⁹ *neoliberalism*, which bases its analyses on constellations of interests; *realism*, which treats power relations among states as its key variable; and *cognitivism*, which emphasizes actors' causal and social knowledge.²⁰ Each of these three schools of

¹² See Robert O. Keohane, 'The Analysis of International Regimes: Towards a European-American Research Programme', in Volker Rittberger (ed.), *Regime Theory and International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 23–45; and Volker Rittberger, 'Research on International Regimes in Germany: The Adaptive Internalization of an American Social Science Concept', in Rittberger (ed.), *Regime Theory*, pp. 3–22.

¹³ For a recent collection of papers dealing with different aspects of international regimes from diverse theoretical angles see Rittberger (ed.), *Regime Theory*.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Peter M. Haas, Robert O. Keohane, and Marc A. Levy, *Institutions for the Earth: Sources of Effective International Environmental Protection* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); Karen T. Litfin, *Ozone Discourse: Science and Politics in Global Environmental Cooperation* (Irrington, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994); Ronald B. Mitchell, *International Oil Pollution at Sea: Environmental Policy and Treaty Compliance* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1994); and Oran R. Young, *Global Governance: Drawing Insights from the Environmental Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

¹⁵ See Susan Strange, 'Cave! Hic Dragones: A Critique of Regime Analysis', in Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes*, pp. 349–51; and Gerd Junne, 'Beyond Regime Theory', *Acta Politica*, 27 (1992), pp. 17–21.

¹⁶ See Bernhard Zangl, 'Politik auf zwei Ebenen: Hypothesen zur Bildung internationaler Regime', *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, 1 (1994), pp. 279–312.

¹⁷ See Peter M. Haas (ed.), *Knowledge, Power, and International Policy Coordination*, in Special Issue of *International Organization*, 46:1 (1992).

¹⁸ See Virginia Haufler, *Dangerous Commerce: Insurance and the Management of International Risk* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Charles Lipson, 'Bankers' Dilemmas: Private Cooperation in Rescheduling Sovereign Debts', in Kenneth A. Oye (ed.), *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 200–25; and Mark W. Zacher with Brent A. Sutton, *Governing Global Networks: International Regimes for Transportation and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁹ For an early observation of this pattern see Krasner, 'Structural Causes', pp. 1–2, 5–10.

²⁰ See also Oran R. Young and Gail Osherenko, 'The Formation of International Regimes: Hypotheses and Cases', in Young and Osherenko (eds.), *Polar Politics: Creating International Environmental Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 1–21.

thought has articulated and defended a distinct view on the origins, stability, and consequences of international regimes. At the same time, they have engaged one another in extended, and often fascinating, intellectual discourses.²¹ Although the competition between neoliberals, realists, and cognitivists within the study of international regimes no doubt has been a healthy one, a case can be made that it is time students of international regimes explored more systematically the possibilities of a *synthesis* or *division of labour* among the three schools of thought. The *prima facie* argument for such an endeavour is that each of the three schools offers a coherent and plausible vision of international regimes and is capable of bolstering its preferred interpretation with considerable empirical support, while none of this evidence is compelling, or strong enough to establish one school as a clear winner. This ambiguous state of affairs suggests the possibility that the variables separately emphasized by the three schools—interests, power, and knowledge—somehow *interact* in bringing about and shaping international regimes. If so, theories of international regimes that play off one variable against the other two are *ipso facto* truncated. As a result, they are likely to prove misleading in many situations, both as predictive devices and as guides for foreign policy. By the same token, the promise that a theoretical synthesis holds is that it allows for a more complete or more accurate explanation of international regimes.

This consideration justifies an attempt to combine elements of neoliberal, realist, and cognitivist approaches to international regimes to form a more complex theory. It does not guarantee its success, however. Thus, the loss of parsimony that comes with adding variables to a given theoretical framework, may not be overcompensated by the gain in explanatory power, resulting in a theory that provides *less* rather than more explanatory leverage than the original formulation.²² Furthermore, variables must not merely be lumped together, they must be *integrated*, with their mutual relationship clearly specified. Otherwise there is a significant danger of ending up with some sort of ‘grab-bag’ theorizing, where the ‘theory’ consists of a set of unrelated explanatory variables and ‘explaining’ amounts to trying out independent variables until one is found that matches the case at hand. Finally, those interested in a synthesis of concepts and assumptions originating in different schools of thought must take care that the resulting more complex theory still forms a coherent whole and remains internally consistent.

In this article we offer some ideas on what a synthesis avoiding these pitfalls might look like, or rather: how students of international regimes interested in such a synthesis might proceed. More specifically, we undertake to defend three propositions:

²¹ See David A. Baldwin (ed.), *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Friedrich V. Kratochwil and Edward D. Mansfield (eds.), *International Organization: A Reader* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994); James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995); and Charles W. Kegley, Jr. (ed.), *Controversies in International Relations Theory: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

²² For the distinction between parsimony and explanatory leverage see Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 29–30, 104.

- (1) Neoliberalism and realism not only share a commitment to *rationalism*²³ as a metatheoretical stance, but may fruitfully work together when it comes to explaining international regimes, thus offering the prospect of a more unified rationalist theory of international institutions.
- (2) There is a distinct strand within the cognitivist school, which we refer to as ‘weak cognitivism’, which can serve as an analytically necessary supplement to, and, as such, can be incorporated into, the rationalist account of international regimes.
- (3) A ‘grand synthesis’—i.e. one that includes the more radical, or ‘strong’, forms of cognitivism as well—is not on the cards. ‘Strong cognitivists’ have ontological and epistemological commitments that are strictly opposed to those of neoliberals and realists. In this case, continued intellectual competition is both more likely and more desirable than ill-fated attempts to merge two mutually exclusive paradigms of inquiry.

To provide the necessary background to our argument we begin by outlining the essence of each of the three schools of thought in regime analysis.

Schools of thought in the study of international regimes²⁴

Neoliberalism

Neoliberals emphasize the role of international regimes in helping states to realize common interests.²⁵ In so doing, they portray states as rational egoists who care only for their own (absolute) gains. International politics is not the realm of pure conflict. Often cooperation would make all participants better off, but it is hard to achieve owing to the pervasive uncertainty that characterizes international life. In particular, states are uncertain as to whether they can rely on their cooperation partners’ promises. By way of increasing mutual transparency of behaviour and linking issues through time (thus making reciprocal strategies applicable),²⁶ regimes reduce this uncertainty: they mitigate the fear of cheating or being exploited by the other parties, and thus make it easier for states to embark on collaborative ventures.

Neoliberals have drawn heavily on economic theories of institutions focusing on the role of information and transaction costs.²⁷ Regimes are likened to investments that are the more profitable to states (and hence the more likely to be made by

²³ Rationalism in international relations theory portrays states as self-interested, goal-seeking actors whose behaviour can be accounted for in terms of the maximization of individual utility.

²⁴ For a book-length study of the three schools of thought in contemporary regime analysis see Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger, *Theories*.

²⁵ See Robert O. Keohane, ‘The Demand for International Regimes’, in Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes*, pp. 141–71; Arthur A. Stein, ‘Coordination and Collaboration: Regimes in an Anarchic World’, in Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes*, pp. 115–40; and Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, ‘Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions’, in Oye (ed.), *Cooperation*, pp. 226–54.

²⁶ See Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

²⁷ Transaction costs are the costs associated with the conclusion, monitoring and enforcement of agreements.

them), the higher is the 'issue-density' in the issue-area concerned.²⁸ Game-theoretic models such as the Prisoner's Dilemma or the Battle of the Sexes²⁹ have been applied to characterize constellations of interests that underly different types of international regimes (e.g. 'collaboration regimes' based on formal contracts and 'coordination regimes' based on conventions) and also affect the likelihood of a regime being created in the first place.³⁰ Thus, the 'structure of the situation' (defined in terms of the nature of the game that is being played) is held in large part responsible for the ease and the probability of regime creation in situations of mixed motives (where common and divergent interests coexist).³¹

Deliberately appropriating essential elements of the realist approach to world politics, neoliberals have challenged the plausibility of structural realism's scepticism *vis-à-vis* international institutions. They attempt to show that this scepticism cannot in fact be based on the assumptions realists make about the nature of states and the international system. Regimes help self-interested states to coordinate their behaviour such that they may avoid collectively suboptimal outcomes, and states can be shown to have an interest in maintaining existing regimes even when the factors that brought them into being are no longer operative.

Neoliberals point out that, although states lack a sense of obligation, they think twice before they violate agreed-upon rules. States with a reputation for opportunism will find it more difficult in the future to be accepted as partners in a potentially beneficial regime. Moreover, since international institutions are difficult to construct, states will hesitate to put an existing regime at risk (e.g. by making the continuation of their cooperation conditional on fundamental changes in the regime). In other words: international regimes are resilient because they embody 'sunk costs', i.e. they are political investments which cannot easily be recovered and put to other uses.³²

Realism

Although structural realists in the Waltzian vein³³ have paid little attention to international institutions, which they see as affecting international politics only on

²⁸ See Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 79–80.

²⁹ Game theory originated in economics and employs formal models to study strategic interaction. Games are defined in terms of the preference orderings of independent, utility-maximizing actors (who, moreover, are subject to certain knowledge conditions). The Prisoner's Dilemma is a symmetrical game with two players, where each prefers mutual cooperation (CC) to mutual non-cooperation (DD), fears most that his own cooperation is unrequited (CD), and desires most that only the other player cooperates (DC). Battle of the Sexes is also a symmetrical game with the characteristic preference ordering: DC > CD > DD > CC (where '>' stands for 'is preferred over').

³⁰ See Stein, 'Coordination'; Duncan Snidal, 'Coordination Versus Prisoners' Dilemma: Implications for International Cooperation and Regimes', *American Political Science Review*, 79 (1985), pp. 923–42 and Lisa Martin, 'Interests, Power, and Multilateralism', *International Organization*, 46 (1992), pp. 765–92.

³¹ See Michael Zürn, *Interessen und Institutionen in der internationalen Politik: Grundlegung und Anwendung des situationsstrukturellen Ansatzes* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1992), ch. 2.

³² See Keohane, *After Hegemony*, pp. 98–106.

³³ See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979). See also John J. Mearsheimer, 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, 19 (1995), pp. 5–49.

the margin, other, 'post-classical' or 'modified structural', realists³⁴ acknowledge that regime-based interstate cooperation is a reality that is in need of explanation. Realist students of international regimes such as Robert Gilpin, Stephen Krasner or Joseph Grieco argue that power is no less central in cooperation than in discord among nations.³⁵ According to these authors, the distribution of capabilities among actors critically affects both the prospects for effective regimes to emerge and persist in an issue-area and the nature of the regimes that result, especially insofar as the allocation of the benefits from cooperation is concerned. An early formulation of this idea is the theory of hegemonic stability which interprets regimes as international public goods that are in short supply unless a dominant actor (or hegemon) takes the lead in their provision and enforcement. Theorists of hegemonic stability doubt that regimes can be upheld in the absence of a strong leader who has a stake in them. They admit, however, the possibility of a 'hegemonic afterglow', i.e. a limited period of time in which the uncontested superiority of the leader has vanished, but factors such as inertia, habit, or fear of instability resulting from change work in favour of the regimes the once dominant state had established at the height of its power.³⁶

We have noted that neoliberals hark back to some realist notions when making their comparatively optimistic case for the significance of international regimes, acknowledging, for example, the importance of international anarchy and the primacy of states in world politics. Realists have taken up this challenge by pointing out that their opponents' argument is flawed because it fails fully to appreciate the meaning of those realist assumptions that neoliberals claim to have incorporated into their theory. In particular, anarchy not only creates fears of being cheated by one's cooperation partners; the lack of common government involves states in a constant struggle for survival and independence denying them the luxury of being egoists who, by definition, are indifferent to how well others do. Rather, they need to take into account both absolute *and* relative gains when contemplating regime-based cooperation with others. Since today's friend may be tomorrow's foe, states are sensitive to relative gains in favour of their partners. Therefore, they may sometimes abstain from cooperation even when it would be beneficial for them in absolute terms. The overall result for realist students of international institutions is that international regimes are more difficult to create and harder to maintain than neoliberals would have us believe. The likelihood for a regime to be put in place and to be stable

³⁴ For the distinction between 'classical realists' (i.e. Morgenthau and his fellow combatants), 'neorealists' (whose leading representatives are Waltz and Mearsheimer), and 'post-classical realists' see Stephen G. Brooks, 'Dueling Realisms', *International Organization*, 51 (1997), pp. 445–77. The latter group of authors has also been referred to as 'modified structural realists'. See Randall L. Schweller and David Priess, 'A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate', *Merston International Studies Review*, 41 (1997), p. 9.

³⁵ See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Stephen D. Krasner, 'Global Communications and National Power: Life on the Pareto Frontier', *World Politics*, 43 (1991), pp. 336–66; and Joseph M. Grieco, *Cooperation among Nations: Europe, America, and Non-Tariff Barriers to Trade* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

³⁶ See Charles P. Kindleberger, 'Dominance and Leadership in the International Economy: Exploitation, Public Goods, and Free Rides', *International Studies Quarterly*, 25 (1981), pp. 242–54; and David A. Lake, 'Leadership, Hegemony, and the International Economy: Naked Emperor or Tattered Monarch with Potential?', *International Studies Quarterly*, 37 (1993), pp. 459–89.

is greatest when the expected gains are ‘balanced’ (at least for the most powerful members) such that relative losses do not accrue.³⁷

Cognitivism—weak and strong

Cognitivists, too, have been sharply critical of the neoliberal approach to international institutions. Yet the thrust of this criticism is directly opposed to that of the realist one: from the cognitivist point of view, the problem with neoliberalism is *not* that it has misconstrued some of the realist assumptions about the nature of world politics. Rather, its limits as a theory of international institutions can be traced back directly to various realist ‘heritages’ still operative in neoliberal theories. Thus, cognitivists of all shades criticize realists and neoliberals alike for treating actors’ preferences and (perceived) options as exogenous ‘givens’, i.e. as facts which are either assumed or observed, but not theorized about. By this move, according to cognitivists, realists and neoliberals ignore or trivialize a significant source of variation in international behaviour.

It is useful to distinguish two strands within the cognitivist school of thought in regime analysis: ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ cognitivism.³⁸ *Weak* (or minimalist) *cognitivists* focus on the role of causal beliefs in regime formation and change.³⁹ According to weak cognitivists, neoliberals and realists underrate both the degree of uncertainty which decision-makers face in many issue-areas today and their capacity for complex learning, which extends to both means and ends.⁴⁰ Uncertainty about causal relationships creates a demand on the part of decision-makers for reliable issue-specific knowledge, which, in turn, can become a source of political influence for those who can supply it.⁴¹ Weak cognitivists, therefore, have studied the role of epistemic communities in international policy coordination and, more generally, the conditions and mechanisms of governmental learning.

If weak cognitivists stress the intellectual underpinnings of international institutions, *strong* (or maximalist) *cognitivists*—who also go by the names ‘reflectivists’⁴² and ‘constructivists’⁴³—emphasize the social character of international relations. No less than weak cognitivists, strong cognitivists are concerned with actors’ knowledge,

³⁷ See Joseph M. Grieco, ‘Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism’, *International Organization*, 42 (1988), pp. 485–507.

³⁸ See Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger, *Theories*, pp. 136–9, 154–7.

³⁹ See Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, ‘Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework’, in Goldstein and Keohane (eds.), *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 3–30.

⁴⁰ See Joseph S. Nye, Jr., ‘Nuclear Learning and US–Soviet Security Regimes’, *International Organization*, 41 (1987), pp. 371–402. For a useful review of the literature on learning in foreign policy see Jack S. Levy, ‘Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield’, *International Organization*, 48 (1994), pp. 279–312.

⁴¹ See Peter M. Haas, ‘Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination’, in Haas (ed.), *Knowledge*, pp. 1–35.

⁴² Robert O. Keohane, ‘International Institutions: Two Approaches’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 32 (1988), pp. 379–96.

⁴³ Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989); and Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization*, 46 (1992), pp. 391–425.

but rather than causal beliefs they accentuate social knowledge (i.e. knowledge of norms and understandings of self and other). This sociological stance brings them into even sharper opposition to realists and neoliberals than their weak counterparts. Strong (but not weak) cognitivists reject the conception of states as rational actors, who are atomistic in the sense that their identities, power, and fundamental interests are prior to international society and its institutions. States are as much shaped by international institutions as they shape them.⁴⁴ Strong cognitivists argue that any durable pattern of interaction affects actors' self-understandings and their image of the others. In particular, institutionalized cooperation is likely to initiate a process in which actors' egoism is dampened and actors increasingly respect, rather than merely take into account, the legitimate interests of others.⁴⁵ In the process, cooperative norms are internalized, even when, initially, they were viewed by the actors as mere instruments to further their individual goals. As a consequence, strongly cognitivist theories tend to attribute a greater measure of effectiveness and robustness to international institutions than do either realist or neoliberal ones.

Table 1: *Schools of Thought in the Study of International Regimes*

	Realism	Neoliberalism	Cognitivism (especially 'strong cognitivism')
Central Variable	power	interests	knowledge
Metatheoretical Orientation	rationalist	rationalist	sociological
Behavioural Model	relative gains seeker	absolute gains maximizer	role player
Institutionalism	weak	medium	strong

Note: A school's 'institutionalism' is measured by the causal significance (i.e. the effectiveness and robustness) that it attributes to international regimes. This dimension reflects the fact that, although scholars of different paradigmatic orientations agree that institutions make a difference in world politics, they systematically disagree on how large that difference is.

If realists and neoliberals portray states as utility maximizers, the behavioural model that underlies strong cognitivism is that of a 'role player'.⁴⁶ Role-playing at the international level occurs when governments perceive obligations *vis-à-vis* other states and the community of states to be real and binding (although they do not

⁴⁴ See Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, 'Institutions and International Order', in Ernst-Otto Czempiel and James N. Rosenau (eds.), *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 51–73.

⁴⁵ See Alexander Wendt, 'Collective Identity Formation and the International State', *American Political Science Review*, 88 (1994), pp. 384–96.

⁴⁶ See Oran R. Young, 'International Regimes: Toward a New Theory of Institutions', *World Politics*, 39 (1986), pp. 117–21. Note that *both* models are idealizations, which, even according to their proponents, match reality only up to a point.

always honour them). In a world of role-players international norms operate as an essential yardstick in states' selecting of foreign policy goals and options.⁴⁷ A role-player making a decision asks what is *appropriate* for it to do in a given situation, rather than how it can maximize its individually defined goals.⁴⁸ The concept is not to imply that international roles are highly differentiated, although examples of specific roles which are defined by specific (informal) rights and duties do exist in the international society as well. Think of the traditional role of the balancer or even that of the 'world's policeman'.

Integrating theories of international regimes: open doors and dead ends

Contextualizing rationalist approaches to international regimes

In this section we try to lend substance to our first proposition, according to which neoliberal and realist perspectives on international regimes not only have much in common—which is generally admitted—but may well be *combined* to yield a more satisfactory theory—a possibility which tends to be ignored or downplayed by the protagonists of the debate.⁴⁹

Realists and neoliberals have recently been engaged in an intense dispute about which of the two schools is better equipped to analyse and explain international regimes and other phenomena of world politics. A remarkable feature of this dispute is that both realists and neoliberals have suggested that the members of the other camp are not altogether wrong but that their theoretical propositions can be seen as a *special case* of one's own account of international politics and regimes. Realists have argued that their approach to international regimes subsumes neoliberalism, and neoliberals have made the inverse claim. For instance, Robert Keohane, a leading neoliberal, has observed: 'In comparing neoliberal institutionalism with neorealism we must understand that neoliberal institutionalism is not simply an alternative to neorealism, but, in fact, claims to subsume it'.⁵⁰ Conversely, Joseph Grieco, a prominent 'post-classical' realist, has pointed out that, by virtue of its recognition of states' concerns with *both* absolute *and* relative gains, 'realism provides a more comprehensive theory of the problem of cooperation than does neoliberal institutionalism'.⁵¹

As claims about priority and subordination among theoretical positions these statements are in sharp opposition to one another. There is, however, a notable common denominator suggesting that students of international regimes who adhere to a rationalist mode of analysis (as do both neoliberals and realists) are likely to make more progress on their project by seeking to enlarge and exploit these

⁴⁷ See Thomas M. Franck, *The Power of Legitimacy among Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁴⁸ The alternative behavioural models implicit in this juxtaposition are spelt out in greater detail in the final section of this article.

⁴⁹ The word 'possibility' needs stressing, for our argument in this article is mainly theoretical, and cannot and will not anticipate the results of empirical testing.

⁵⁰ Keohane, *International Institutions*, p. 15.

⁵¹ Grieco, 'Anarchy', p. 503.

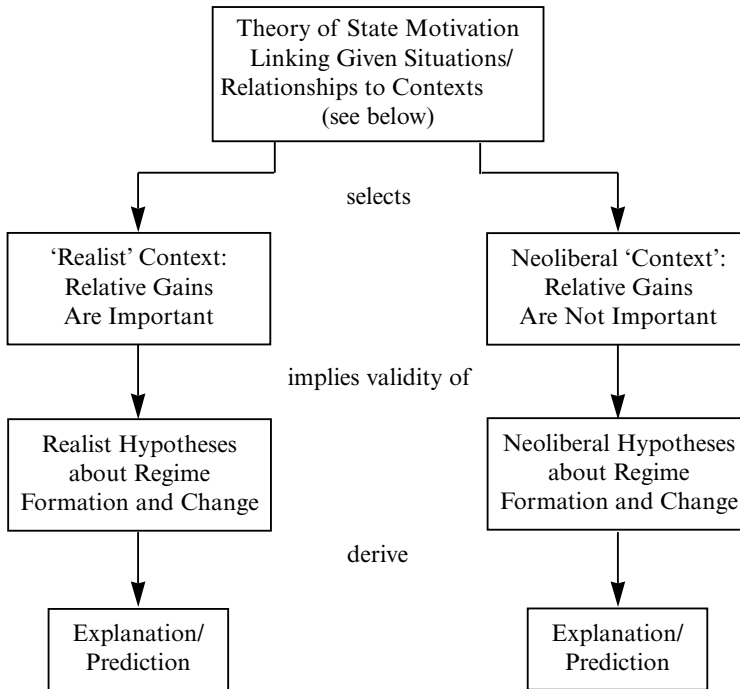


Figure 1. *Structure of a contextualized rationalist theory of international regimes.*

commonalities than by going for full victory, as it were. The crucial point is that neoliberals and realists concede to one another that the other side's arguments and predictions are valid *provided* that certain conditions hold which their opponents have failed to acknowledge and to specify so far. If agreement on these conditions could be reached, the door to a neoliberal-realist synthesis would appear to be wide open. Therefore, future theoretical and empirical work along rationalist lines should build upon this limited mutual recognition and aim at establishing the conditions or *contexts* in which 'neoliberal' (i.e. optimistic) rather than 'realist' (i.e. pessimistic) expectations about international regimes are likely to apply and *vice versa*.⁵² Serious efforts towards this end might not only further our understanding of international regimes but also reveal a broader zone of agreement between these two schools than has been perceived and acknowledged so far.

This consideration offers the prospect of a contextualized theory of international regimes the formal structure of which is given by Figure 1. As indicated by the Figure, advocating a synthesis of realist and neoliberal approaches to regimes along these lines is not tantamount to simply saying that sometimes one school will be right and sometimes the other. The specification of the contexts or conditions under

⁵² See Robert Powell, 'Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory', *American Political Science Review*, 85 (1991), pp. 1303–20. For a sophisticated book-length study of the role of contexts in shaping state behaviour, see Gary Goertz, *Contexts of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

which different propositions (i.e. realist or neoliberals ones) apply must be theoretically grounded and testable, i.e. it must, at least in principle, allow for predictions before the fact. Fortunately, the two literatures are rich with observations and arguments which can be mined in an attempt to construct such a contextualized rationalist theory of regimes.

Much of the recent debate between realists and neoliberals has centred on the significance of relative gains orientations in international politics. There are two issues here. *First*: what difference does it make whether, in a given situation, states seek absolute or relative gains? And *second*: when are states actually preoccupied with relative gains? We look at the two issues in turn because both are relevant for the rationalist synthesis we are proposing.

The *first issue* refers to the consequences of relative gains concerns. Assuming that states at least sometimes take a strong interest in doing better or, at a minimum, not less well than their cooperation partners, what difference (if any) does this motivation make for the prospects of international cooperation and for the nature and efficacy of international regimes?

Neoliberals have argued that regimes are created and maintained by states for the sake of certain *functions* they serve in mixed-motives situations.⁵³ In particular, regimes help states to cooperate for mutual benefit by reducing uncertainty and informational asymmetries. Thus, regimes that include verification rules and procedures reduce states' fears of being cheated by their partners, permitting them to focus on the benefits from cooperation. The case that comes to mind immediately is the nuclear non-proliferation regime, in which the International Atomic Energy Agency is entrusted with monitoring members' compliance with the substantive regime provisions.⁵⁴

Realists have responded that the neoliberal argument is flawed because it is based on the untenable assumption that states care only for absolute gains.⁵⁵ This assumption, according to realists, does not concur with the fact that states, even as they are cooperating peacefully, do not cease to be competitors for power and wealth. Hence, assurance that regime members live up to their promises may not be enough: states fear that others reap the lion's share of the gains from cooperation and that, over time, this relative advantage may place them in a position where they can implement a policy that hurts their less successful cooperation partners.⁵⁶ Threats to the military security of a state are an extreme form of such a policy, but other, less spectacular, dangers also exist: for instance, a state may be able to turn its relative gains into a permanent bargaining advantage, permitting it to force even better deals upon its partners in the future. Thus, an agreement between two states to liberalize an important industrial sector (say, microelectronics) may generate sizeable welfare gains for both parties; yet, at the same time, the accord may help one state's firms to increase their market shares up to a point where the other state confronts the possibility that its very industrial or technological base and hence its ability to have a decisive say in international economic deliberations may be at risk.⁵⁷

⁵³ See Keohane, 'Demand'; and 'Analysis'.

⁵⁴ See Müller, 'Regimeanalyse'.

⁵⁵ See Grieco, 'Anarchy'.

⁵⁶ See Waltz, *Theory*, p. 105.

⁵⁷ See Grieco, *Cooperation*; and Michael Mastanduno, 'Do Relative Gains Matter? America's Response to Japanese Industrial Policy', *International Security*, 16 (1991), pp. 73–113.

The realists may be quite right, but does it follow that regimes are absent or inconsequential in situations where relative performance matters? Perhaps the functional argument advanced by the neoliberals is only incomplete and can be extended in a straightforward manner to take into account *both* obstacles to international cooperation: fear of cheating and relative gains concerns.

Interestingly, realist as well as neoliberal authors have suggested that, in a situation where states are unwilling to put up with gaps in gains from cooperation in favour of their partners, international regimes need not be irrelevant, but may in fact assume additional functions the purpose of which is to mitigate members' relative gains concerns.⁵⁸ Thus, international regimes often include stipulations providing for differential treatment of weaker partners who are less well able to exploit the opportunities resulting from regime-based cooperation. A case in point is the Generalized System of Preferences by which the international trading regime sought to accommodate the developing countries who feared that full acceptance of the GATT principles might hamper rather than assist them in their efforts to catch up with the industrialized world.⁵⁹ Regimes may also serve as institutional frameworks to facilitate the arrangement of side-payments to improve the relative performance of otherwise dissatisfied actors. Thus, the regular review conferences prescribed by the procedural component of many regimes allow relatively disadvantaged states to voice their concerns about the skewed distribution of gains and to push for corrections.

Owing to the competitive approach that has dominated the scholarly discussion so far, insufficient attention has been paid to this somewhat surprising turn of the debate. Surely, empirical research has yet to establish whether (and when) regimes may indeed serve the purpose of helping states to manage relative gains concerns and how this function is reflected in their normative and procedural content. Yet, for the time being, this can be regarded as an excellent example for how realist and neoliberal arguments may be made to work together to produce interesting new hypotheses about international institutions.⁶⁰

In light of these considerations, a contextualized rationalist theory of international regimes would be concerned with three types of situations or contexts. Strategic situations would first be distinguished according to whether or not they are

⁵⁸ See Joseph M. Grieco, 'Realist Theory and the Problem of International Cooperation: Analysis with an Amended Prisoner's Dilemma', *Journal of Politics*, 50 (1988), pp. 600–24; Grieco, *Cooperation*, pp. 233–4; Otto Keck, 'The New Institutionalism and the Relative-Gains-Debate', in Frank R. Pfetsch (ed.), *International Relations and Pan-Europe: Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Findings* (Münster: Lit, 1993), pp. 35–62; and Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin, 'The Promise of Institutional Theory', *International Security*, 20 (1995), pp. 45–6.

⁵⁹ See Finlayson and Zacher, 'GATT', pp. 293–6; and Bernard Hoekman and Michel Kosteci, *The Political Economy of the Global Trading System: From GATT to WTO* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 237–8.

⁶⁰ Note that our argument for using a strategy of contextualization to combine realist and neoliberal insights into international institutions does not hinge upon the truth of this particular, 'post-classical realist', account of international regimes under conditions of significant relative gains concerns. For example, if it turned out that relative gains concerns have much more devastating effects on international cooperation than the above considerations suggest (as some more traditionally inclined realists might argue), part of the *content* of the contextualized theory, but not its *form* or structure (as given in Figure 1), would have to be altered. For an argument indicating that the cooperation-inhibiting effect of relative gains concerns is easily overrated see Duncan Snidal, 'International Cooperation Among Relative Gain Maximizers', *International Studies Quarterly*, 35 (1991), pp. 387–402.

Table 2: *Contexts and Hypotheses in a Rationalist Synthesis*

Context	Non-problematic Social Situations (Zero-Sum or Harmony)	Relative-Gains Dominated Situations ('Realist Situations')	Absolute-Gains Dominated Situations ('Neoliberal Situations')
Hypotheses			
Overall Likelihood of Regime Creation	very low	low	high
Factors Affecting Likelihood of Regime Creation	power structure (in zero-sum situations)	availability of regime formula securing balanced gains	issue-density; situation-structure (PD, Battle etc.)
Regime Features	imposed regime with skewed distribution of gains (in zero-sum situations)	balanced gains; mechanisms making gains more 'equitable'	'contract' with compliance mechanisms (PD) or 'convention' (Battle)
Regime Stability	very low (in zero-sum situations)	low	high

Note: In a situation of Harmony, a rationale for regime-building is very hard to imagine, given that each player receives its most-preferred outcome and each player's choice is not contingent on what the other does. (See Arthur A. Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate: Circumstance and Choice in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 29–30.) Therefore, the second, third, and fourth dimensions in this Table, which presuppose the contrary to be the case, do not apply to Harmony situations.

socially problematic. A problematic social (or mixed-motives) situation is one in which the uncoordinated pursuit of one's individual interest may result in a collectively suboptimal outcome.⁶¹ This is true of neither zero-sum nor Harmony situations. In such non-problematic situations the theory would expect international regimes not to be created or to be inconsequential, if they are.⁶² (Some power-theorists have challenged the assumption that common interests are a *conditio sine qua non* of regime-building, pointing out that dominant actors sometimes impose regimes on weaker ones, although with limited success.)⁶³ Conversely, if the game is one of mixed motives such that cooperation is desirable from the point of view of the actors, but may fail to come to pass nevertheless owing to various obstacles (as

⁶¹ For the concept of a problematic social situation see Zürn, *Interessen*, pp. 153–61. The term 'mixed-motives game' was coined by Thomas Schelling. See his *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 89.

⁶² Harmony is a symmetrical game defined by the preference ordering: CC>DC>CD>DD. Harmony poses no cooperation problem, because each player prefers to cooperate irrespective of what the other does. Neither are zero-sum situations problematic in this technical sense: there is no possibility for individual and collective interpretations of rationality to fall apart in a zero-sum game, because every outcome is Pareto-efficient. See Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate*, pp. 16–18, 25–6.

⁶³ See Stephen D. Krasner, 'Sovereignty, Regimes, and Human Rights', in Rittberger (ed.), *Regime Theory*, pp. 139–67. See also Oran R. Young, 'Regime Dynamics: The Rise and Fall of International Regimes', in Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes*, pp. 100–101.

specified by neoliberals and realists), international regimes would be considered possible. At this point a second distinction would be introduced: between problematic social situations in which actors are exclusively or mainly concerned with absolute gains and situations in which relative gains concerns are dominant. The theory would go on to postulate that in the first type of situation neoliberal hypotheses (regarding regime formation, stability etc.) apply, whereas in the latter type of situation those hypotheses that have been advanced by realists are appropriate. Table 2 uses familiar neoliberal and realist expectations to outline some of the resulting theoretical relationships.⁶⁴

Since the presence of relative gains concerns makes a difference for international regimes, it is worthwhile asking *when* states can be expected to care about how well others do as compared to themselves. This is where the *second issue* of the recent realist-neoliberal debate comes in: under what circumstances are states concerned with relative gains? Even realists such as Grieco readily admit that relative gains concerns are not a constant but vary considerably over relationships and across issue-areas. The implications of this observation for a contextualized rationalist theory are obvious: constructing such a theory becomes a matter of specifying the conditions under which relative gains concerns are severe and the conditions under which they are slight or completely dominated by calculations of absolute gain. Grieco has presented a list of such conditions in his discussion of the determinants of states' sensitivity to relative losses.⁶⁵

According to Grieco, states' intolerance for relative losses is influenced by both the present and the past of the relationship concerned. It makes a difference whether one's (potential) cooperation partner is a longtime ally or a longtime foe; whether the states in question are at the brink of war or are members of a Deutschean pluralistic security community.⁶⁶ Thus, it can be hypothesized that cooperation between France and Germany today is considerably less strongly inhibited by relative gains concerns than it was before 1914 or in the interwar period. Moreover, relative gains concerns tend to be suppressed when the states concerned share a common adversary⁶⁷ or when the power difference between them is so large that no conceivable gap in payoffs from cooperation is likely to affect their relative positions to a noticeable degree.⁶⁸ Both conditions were met in the transatlantic relationship during the Cold War and, thus, may help to explain the unusually high level of institutionalized cooperation in this region.⁶⁹ States whose power base is or appears to be shrinking tend to be more sensitive to relative losses than, e.g., rising hegemony. This hypothesis may be illustrated by the development of US–Japanese trade relations since World War II, where the United States, who had initially tolerated considerable asymmetries in openness, has increasingly insisted on specific

⁶⁴ For additional realist and neoliberal hypotheses regarding international regimes which are directly linked to the relative vs. absolute gains issue and therefore might be included in the proposed synthesis see Grieco, *Cooperation*, pp. 227–9.

⁶⁵ See Grieco, 'Realist Theory', pp. 610–13; and *Cooperation*, pp. 45–7.

⁶⁶ Karl W. Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

⁶⁷ See Joanne Gowa, 'Bipolarity, Multipolarity, and Free Trade', *American Political Science Review*, 83 (1989), pp. 1245–56.

⁶⁸ See Duncan Snidal, 'Relative Gains and the Pattern of International Cooperation', *American Political Science Review*, 85 (1991), p. 725, n. 33.

⁶⁹ See Schweller and Priess, 'Tale', p. 20.

reciprocity, i.e. reciprocity which is defined as balanced outcomes.⁷⁰ Moreover, the nature of the issue is important.⁷¹ Cooperation in economic issue-areas is less likely to be inhibited by relative gains concerns than security cooperation. Also, states (*ceteris paribus*) are the more strongly concerned with how well their partners do as compared to themselves, the more easily the gains at stake are transformed into relative capabilities (i.e. military strength or bargaining power).

Grieco's concise discussion of variables affecting the severity of relative gains concerns is most relevant to those interested in constructing a contextualized rationalist theory of international regimes. It provides an excellent starting point for the development of what might be called a *theory of state motivation*, i.e. a theory which specifies the kinds of situation or relationship in which absolute gains seeking dominates relative gains concerns and *vice versa*. Such a theory would be a necessary component of the desired synthesis, because it would provide the *a priori* foundation needed to infer, with respect to a given problematic social situation, as to whether realist or neoliberal hypotheses about international regimes apply.⁷²

We refer to Grieco's analysis as a starting point (if an excellent one) rather than as an accomplishment for two reasons: First, Grieco fails to explicate in detail the rationale (or rationales) that account for the items on his list, although he is clear that *perceptions of threat* are of critical importance; as a result, the mutual relationships and the relative weights of the variables he adduces are difficult to assess. Second, his discussion (not surprisingly) displays a realist bias. Thus, he expects 'every state's [sensitivity to relative losses] to be greater than zero in virtually all of its cooperative relationships'.⁷³ It is true that whether or not Grieco is correct on this count is an empirical question. But it is equally true that there is no *a priori* reason for building the desired theory of state motivation on such a narrow base. It is not even necessary to confine oneself to system-level arguments and variables.⁷⁴ Thus, the literature on the democratic peace suggests that the stable peace that exists among democracies virtually eliminates relative gains concerns as an obstacle to cooperation between states with this type of polity.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ See Robert O. Keohane, 'Reciprocity in International Relations', *International Organization*, 40 (1986), pp. 1–27; and Wayne Sandholtz and John Zysman, '1992: Recasting the European Bargain', *World Politics*, 42 (1989), p. 124.

⁷¹ See Charles Lipson, 'International Cooperation in Economic and Security Affairs', *World Politics*, 37 (1984), pp. 1–23.

⁷² Without such a foundation, not only are we unlikely to move beyond the 'grab-bag' stage of theorizing, but our synthesis is likely to be non-falsifiable.

⁷³ Grieco, *Cooperation*, pp. 46–7. This is in contrast to Robert Jervis's observation that 'when a state believes that another not only is not likely to be an adversary, but has sufficient interests in common with it to be an ally, then it will actually welcome an increase in the other's power' ('Cooperation under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, 30 [1978], p. 175). See also Gowa, 'Bipolarity', p. 1249.

⁷⁴ A systems-level argument locates the causes of state behaviour not in attributes of the states (units) themselves (e.g. their domestic institutions), but in the way they are related to one another (e.g. the anarchical structure of international politics). See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959). Both realism and neoliberalism emphasize systemic influences on state behaviour; by contrast, liberalism is a unit-level theory. See Andrew Moravcsik, 'Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics', *International Organization*, 51 (1997), pp. 513–53.

⁷⁵ See Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation Among Democracies: The European Influence on US Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 30. Valuable sources for the democratic peace proposition include Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); James Lee Ray, *Democracy and International Conflict: An Evaluation of the Democratic Peace Proposition* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); and Michael E. Brown, Sean Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (eds.), *Debating the Democratic Peace* (London: MIT Press, 1996).

To sum up, *both* perspectives, neoliberalism and realism, might offer valid insights into the nature and efficacy of international regimes once we adopt the reading that their predictions presuppose different, indeed complementary, contexts of action. To unleash the potential for synthesis dormant in this complementarity, a systematic exploration is needed of the variables (at both the systems- and unit-levels of analysis) that influence the strength of relative gains concerns and, hence, the nature of the context in which choices are made. Before we move on to an illustration of how this approach may be used to explain particular instances of regime-building, one *caveat* is in order. On the preceding pages we have spelt out the case for a structured division of labour among *specific* (postclassical) realist and neoliberal approaches to international regimes. We have not advocated an encompassing synthesis of the realist and neoliberal perspectives on world politics. Nor do we intend to imply that each and any ‘power-based’ (realist) or ‘interest-based’ (neoliberal) account of international institutions can or should become part of the synthesis we have outlined. Indeed, there is reason to suspect that attempts to come up with an all-inclusive merger of realist and neoliberal theories of international regimes are misguided, given that both neoliberalism and realism are loosely defined, and not perfectly homogeneous, ‘schools of thought’ rather than well-specified and internally consistent ‘theories’. Realism, in particular, has given rise to diverse perspectives on international institutions, the reconciliation of which in a single, coherent theory—whether or not it includes a neoliberal component—may be very difficult at the least.⁷⁶

Illustrating the theory: the case of conventional arms control in Europe

The contextualized rationalist theory of international regimes whose structure and main components we have described may be used to shed light on the history of conventional arms control in Europe since the early 1970s.⁷⁷ As we shall argue, this history breaks down in two periods: an earlier period in which intolerance for relative losses is high, and a later period in which relative gains concerns are attenuated and the parties to the conflict can focus on absolute gains. Accordingly, actors’ behaviour in the first period conforms to realist expectations. In particular, regime-based cooperation does not come about. Conversely, in the second period

⁷⁶ Even post-classical realists sometimes appear to differ in quite fundamental ways. Thus, both Krasner and Grieco emphasize the role of power in processes of regime formation, but the former seems to focus on power as a means (or ‘coordination device’), whereas the latter appears to be more interested in power as a goal of statecraft (‘positionalism’). As a result, Grieco expects regimes to produce a ‘balanced’ distribution of gains for their members (such that the pre-cooperation distribution of power is preserved), whereas Krasner expects power asymmetries to be reflected in the distribution of gains from regime-based cooperation. See Krasner, ‘Global Communications’ and Grieco, ‘Anarchy’.

⁷⁷ The following illustration should not be mistaken for an attempt to test the theory. A single case, even if it permits several independent observations over time, can hardly sustain such far-reaching conclusions as are involved in carrying out a theory test. Moreover, as we have indicated, important details of the theory have yet to be specified. Hence, a test at this stage would be premature. What we seek to provide is a ‘plausibility probe’ suggesting that the theory is promising enough to warrant the effort of working it out more fully and subjecting it to rigorous tests. For the concept of a plausibility probe see Harry Eckstein, ‘Case Study and Theory in Political Science’, in F. I. Greenstein and N. W. Polsby (eds.), *Handbook of Political Science*, vol. VII (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1975), pp. 79–138.

state behaviour assumes a more ‘neoliberal’ character and the actors finally succeed in establishing a regime regulating the deployment of conventional forces in Europe. This change in behaviour can be attributed to a (partial) change in the context in which the parties interact.

During most of the Cold War, Europe saw the highest peace-time concentration of conventional forces worldwide.⁷⁸ Both sides, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, were trapped in a security dilemma which not only produced high costs in terms of defence expenditures, but persistently defied the opponents’ unilateral efforts to secure higher levels of security for themselves by improving (or ‘modernizing’) their military capabilities. On the contrary, the situation was perceived as rather unstable, and fears of a surprise attack were widespread, particularly among Western security experts and military planners who pointed to what they perceived as a clear and threatening superiority of the Warsaw Pact with regard to both troops and tanks.

Collective efforts to stop the arms race and to reach agreement on ceilings for conventional armament and personnel in Europe began in 1973, when the Soviet Union agreed to enter into negotiations over conventional forces with the US and its European allies. These negotiations, which took place in Vienna and which, in the West, came to be known as MBFR (‘mutual balanced force reduction’) talks, came about as part of a package deal in which NATO had accepted the Warsaw Pact’s long-standing demand for a Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), in which the West was to recognize the territorial *status quo* in Europe. Early agreement on broad principles notwithstanding, the negotiations at Vienna soon bogged down on the details. The parties agreed that the security of neither side must be reduced by the regime to be created and that the goal should be parity of forces, but these areas of consensus proved inconsequential so long as NATO and the Warsaw Pact were unable to reach agreement on the characteristics of the *status quo*.

Most important, the Eastern bloc denied the very existence of the imbalance that worried decision-makers in the West. At the same time, it did not consent to on-site inspections as a means of verifying the data that it produced in support of its contention. In addition, the Eastern side was unwilling to consider extending the zone of application of a treaty to the Western part of the Soviet Union, which, as NATO feared, would allow the Warsaw Pact quickly to move large quantities of weaponry to the centre of Europe whenever it wished to. In response to this, NATO refused to talk about a reduction in armaments and wanted a treaty to obligate the parties to troops reductions only. Moreover, these cuts would have to be asymmetrical, given NATO’s analysis of the existing balance of forces. Neither demand was acceptable to the Warsaw Pact, however, as was NATO’s refusal to negotiate upper levels for air and naval forces, where the Soviet Union perceived the West to have an advantage. Thus, the negotiation stances of both sides tended to be

⁷⁸ Useful narratives and analyses of the efforts to reach a conventional arms accord for Europe include Reinhard Mutz, *Konventionelle Abrüstung in Europa: Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland und MBFR* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1984); Coit D. Blacker, ‘The MBFR Experience’, in Alexander L. George, Philip J. Farley and Alexander Dallin (eds.), *US–Soviet Security Cooperation: Achievements, Failures, Lessons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 123–43; Wolfgang Zellner, *Die Verhandlungen über konventionelle Streitkräfte in Europa: Konventionelle Rüstungskontrolle, die neue politische Lage in Europa und die Rolle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1994); and Richard A. Falkenrath, *Shaping Europe’s Military Order: The Origins and Consequences of the CFE Treaty* (London: MIT Press, 1995).

inflexible, and neither side was willing or able to offer substantial concessions in order to permit the formation of a mutually beneficial security regime.

As a result, the talks continued for more than ten years without producing any tangible results. Whatever prospects of success there were evaporated when *détente*, whose offspring the MBFR negotiations had been, gave way to the 'second Cold War' at the end of the 1970s. Although the talks were not formally abandoned until 1987, for more than half a decade a substantial treaty limiting conventional forces in Europe seemed more remote than ever. Within a few years, however, this picture changed unexpectedly and dramatically. Owing to the Gorbachev-Shevardnadze turnaround in Soviet foreign and security policy, the stalemate could be overcome, and a process was launched that culminated in the formation of a conventional arms control regime for Europe.

Soon after Gorbachev's coming to power, the Soviet Union indicated that it was prepared to take a new approach to the whole range of security issues that had overshadowed its relations with the West. What is more, Gorbachev soon began to suit the action to the words. Largely due to the new conciliatory attitude of the Soviet Union, NATO and the Warsaw Pact succeeded in creating two important security regimes within a short period of time: the regime defining 'confidence- and security-building measures', which replaced the set of vague, loosely-knit, and ineffective rules that had been agreed upon as part of the Helsinki Accord,⁷⁹ and the regime that sanctioned the 'double-zero solution' to the once highly contentious Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) issue.⁸⁰ In both cases, the Soviet Union had departed from its traditional policy of prioritizing military secrecy over the mutual confidence and enhanced sense of security that can emerge from increased transparency, and consented to intrusive verification provisions. Encouraged by these developments and by a series of Soviet concessions (including the announcement to reduce its troops by half a million and to withdraw 50,000 men and 5,000 tanks from Eastern Europe), NATO accepted the Warsaw Pact's offer to enter into new talks on a conventional arms control regime for Europe.

These new Vienna talks, labelled negotiations on 'conventional forces in Europe' (CFE), proved highly successful. The most tangible outcome was an unprecedentedly complex, far-reaching, and intrusive arms control agreement, which has become a central pillar of the new European security architecture. Moreover, given the intricate nature of the issues on the table, observers were amazed at the speed of the negotiations, which officially began in March 1989 and ended in November the following year. Finally, the agreement was not only signed but survived the turbulent ratification period during which one of the two military alliances (or 'groups' in the language of the treaty) that had negotiated the accord (the Warsaw Pact) as well as one of the key parties to the agreement (the Soviet Union) broke up.⁸¹

The CFE Treaty, which applies to the area from the Atlantic to the Urals, specifies regional numerical ceilings on both land and air forces, including tanks,

⁷⁹ See James E. Goodby, 'The Stockholm Conference: Negotiating a Cooperative Security System for Europe', in George, Farley and Dallin (eds.), *US-Soviet Security Cooperation*, pp. 144-72; and Volker Rittberger, Manfred Efinger, and Martin Mendler, 'Toward an East-West Security Regime: The Case of Confidence- and Security-Building Measures', *Journal of Peace Research*, 27 (1990), pp. 55-74.

⁸⁰ See Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Zero Option: INF, West Germany, and Arms Control* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988).

⁸¹ The treaty entered into force on July 17, 1992.

armoured combat vehicles, artillery, attack helicopters, and combat aircraft. The parties undertake to destroy (or convert) their excess weaponry within a specified period of time and subject to the results of an intra-group allocation process.⁸² The treaty establishes an intrusive verification 'regime', which enables the parties to make sure that the provisions of the treaty continue to be honoured. The treaty meets many of the long-standing Western demands such as those pertaining to the geographical scope of the regime, the obligation to accept on-site inspections and, most important, the distribution of cuts among the two 'groups', which takes account of the pre-existing asymmetries in favour of the (former) Warsaw Pact countries. The Soviet Union was not the only party to make concessions, though. NATO, too, showed greater flexibility than before, when it endorsed the inclusion of air forces into the negotiations.⁸³

What can the contextualized rationalist (realist-neoliberal) theory of international regimes offer to make sense of this important episode in the history of East-West relations? First of all, it accounts well for a general feature of this case: achieving cooperation in the issue-area of conventional arms control in Europe proved to be a difficult, protracted, and sometimes painful process, which was inhibited by mutual mistrust and an aversity to risk that, for a long time, made it impossible for the parties to compromise. From the theory's point of view this comes as no surprise. The (case-specific) values of most of the variables which, according to Grieco, determine the nature of the context of interaction suggest that realism's more pessimistic perspective on international cooperation should go a long way towards explaining the case.

Thus, the history of the mutual relationship of the two alliances was one of enmity rather than amity. Far from sharing a common adversary, each was the other's most frightening opponent. Differences in power between the two blocs were too small to permit the stronger to ignore what happened to the weaker or to make the weaker so helpless and dependent that it could hardly do anything to increase its chances of survival. Gaps in gains from cooperation, therefore, could matter for the fate of either bloc and its leader. Finally, the issue-area belonged to the realm of security, and obviously many of the potential gains from cooperation (or defection) in this field are readily converted into military capabilities, which was bound to alert the actors to the likely distributional implications of regime-based collaboration.

A second observation is even more significant, though. Reviewing the history of the issue-area since the early 1970s, we find a temporal distribution of typically 'realist' and more nearly 'neoliberal' modes of behaviour that corresponds well with a partial change in the context of interaction (as defined by our realist-neoliberal theory).⁸⁴ The narrative has brought out two periods, which are clearly set off from

⁸² This process is constrained by a rule that defines the maximum share of treaty-limited equipment that any one party is allowed to possess ('sufficiency rule'). See Falkenrath, *Europe's Military Order*, pp. xv–xvi.

⁸³ Another important concession was NATO's decision, taken at the beginning of the negotiations, to postpone its deliberations on a possible successor to the aging Lance short-range nuclear missile until 1992. See Falkenrath, *Europe's Military Order*, pp. 50–53.

⁸⁴ The change is a partial one, because many of the context-defining features of the situation did not change over time. This is not to say that the change was of minor importance. As we have noted, the theory is as yet underspecified in that it fails to attach weights to the individual variables. Hence, we cannot know in advance how much, or what kind of, change is required to tip the balance. Both theoretical and empirical work is needed to up-grade the theory's specificity.

one another in terms of the actors' ability to focus on common interests and to resist the temptation to engage in distributive bargaining. In the first period, which roughly coincides with the MBFR talks, bargaining tactics were predominant on both sides which indicate that the parties were unwilling to accept arrangements that, although beneficial to themselves, would have increased the other side's security to an even greater extent.⁸⁵

Thus, up until late in the 1980s, the Soviet Union insisted on symmetrical cuts which would have preserved the existing imbalance in its favour. While both sides would have benefited from a lower level of deployed forces both economically and in terms of national security, a more equal distribution of troops among the two alliances would have reduced the Soviet Union's ability to launch a surprise attack on Central Europe, when she believed it necessary to protect her vital interests. Conversely, NATO was not prepared to accept a deal that would not have done anything about the perceived security gap in favour of the Warsaw Pact. Even if agreement on this central object of contention had been reached it is unlikely that the negotiations would have met with success given the sharp disagreement on the verification issue. While NATO argued that, without adequate compliance mechanisms, a conventional arms reduction treaty would be useless and undesirable, the Soviet Union and its allies refused to receive on-site inspections, arguing that the West would use this opportunity to engage in espionage. Under a stringent verification scheme not only the West would have been likely to reap 'surplus' gains not sanctioned by the regime; Eastern inspectors, too, would have had the chance to obtain militarily relevant information over and above the information needed to decide whether or not NATO honoured its obligations under the treaty. Given the gap in openness and transparency that existed between the two social systems (including the military sub-systems), however, the West would have stood to gain *more* from the proposed verification 'regime'. The Soviet Union's stance on this issue, therefore, provides additional supports for our hypothesis that relative gains concerns were pronounced during this period.

If the parties' conduct in the first period is well accounted for by the—realist—hypothesis that states were anxious to avoid relative losses even where this meant foregoing opportunities for improving stability, the negotiation behaviour that prevailed in the second period, which set in soon after the new Soviet leadership came into office, could hardly have occurred had the parties, and above all the Soviet Union, not begun to up-grade the weight of absolute gains in their utility calcula-

⁸⁵ It might seem that this could not be the case. One might argue that in the security realm common gains (if any) must be equally shared by the parties, because in this field the distinction between absolute and relative gains breaks down: it makes no sense, so the argument goes, to say that country A's security has been improved in an absolute sense, although at the same time it has lost security *vis-à-vis* its adversary B. In that case country A's security will simply have *not* been improved at all. This argument, however, equates security with power. (Moreover, it presupposes a bipolar situation.) A more plausible conceptualization distinguishes between two partially independent dimensions of security: according to this definition, a state is the more secure the less likely is an attack on its territory *and* it is the more secure the better are its prospects for victory in war. On this understanding of the concept of security, a state may well increase its security in absolute terms and at the same time suffer a relative loss. This is when, due to some (bilateral) security arrangement, it wins on the first dimension but loses on the second. This conceptualization also helps to distinguish realist and neoliberal expectations in the field of security: realists, believing that states tend to base their decisions in this realm on worst-case scenarios, do not expect states to be willing to trade superiority for a decreased probability for war to break out, whereas neoliberals predict just that.

tions. The new motivation is reflected in the fact that Gorbachev was prepared to consent to NATO's long-standing demand for asymmetrical cuts, which would increase stability (a joint security gain) *and* dissipate Western fears of a Soviet surprise attack. Indeed, as we have noted, he did not eschew from enacting unilateral troops reductions in a significant order of magnitude. This spectacular move helped to convince sceptical Western decision-makers of the seriousness of his intent and increased pressure on them to make concessions of their own.

Although the East–West rapprochement mitigated the security dilemma, the situation with regard to conventional forces continued to be a socially problematic one. More specifically, the basic features of the Prisoner's Dilemma were still intact. Consequently, cheating remained a potential problem to be dealt with, even when parties no longer worried so much about relative gains.⁸⁶ Therefore—and in keeping with neoliberal expectations—the parties established extensive compliance mechanisms to assure one another of sufficient levels of rule-compliance on the part of both present and future governments.

But whence the diminishing importance of relative gains that marked the second period of the history of conventional arms control in Europe and appears to have been the immediate cause of the cooperation that could be achieved? The combined realist-neoliberal theory of regimes we have outlined in the preceding Section accounts for this process in terms of a change in the context of interaction. As Grieco notes, the severity of relative gains concerns likely to shape a given relationship at a given time is a function of this relationship's hypothetical location on a continuum between all-out war and stable peace. The closer the relationship is to a state of (actual) war, the more cooperation will be restrained by considerations of relative gains. This is because states have to be careful not to help strengthen their cooperation partners, when, and to the extent that, they perceive them to have incentives to pursue a policy that hurts their vital interests. In a cold war relationship such perceptions are pervasive, whereas *détente* involves a slackening of the adversaries' mutual fear and distrust such that the parties are encouraged to de-emphasize the expected distribution of gains in their deliberations about the desirability of a given cooperative project.

The reorientation of Soviet foreign and security policy in the mid-1980s had the effect of moving the East-West relationship from a (recently restored) cold war to a new *détente* which came much closer to the stable peace end of the continuum than had its 1970s precursor. In the language of the theory this amounted to the creation of a new context of interaction, in which rational actors could focus on absolute rather than relative gains.⁸⁷ Part of Gorbachev's famous 'new thinking' was that it broke with the Leninist doctrine of the inherent aggressiveness of capitalist states. Not only had it been increasingly difficult to deny that liberal democracies had proven politically stable and economically successful, historical experience had suggested to the new leadership that the threat they posed to the Socialist world had

⁸⁶ Relative gains concerns intensify fears of cheating, because they increase the disutility of being double-crossed by one's cooperation partners.

⁸⁷ A factor that, according to observers, contributed to the success and the speed of the CFE negotiations was that civilian leaders on both sides deliberately reduced the influence of the military on the bargaining process. This is in contrast to the MBFR talks with their much greater involvement of the military bureaucracy. Obviously, governments did no longer assume their interests to be best served by the (realist) worst-case thinking which forms part of the professional role of military planners. See Mutz, *Konventionelle Abrüstung*, p. 246 and Falkenrath, *Europe's Military Order*, p. 249.

been grossly exaggerated by the traditional Soviet theory of international relations and that capitalism was indeed compatible with peace.⁸⁸

Moreover, nuclear parity had made capabilities for launching a large-scale conventional offensive against Western Europe redundant as a deterrent. Indeed, civilian leaders in the Soviet Union began to realize that the attempt to increase national security by clinging to an offensive force posture was likely to be self-defeating and detrimental, because it caused NATO to respond by enhancing its own military preparedness and placed a heavy burden on East-West relations.⁸⁹ Traditional Soviet security policy had proven excessively costly in both economic and political terms, and both types of costs were now seen as being intimately linked. In Gorbachev's strategy, improving relations with the West was a precondition for the success of the internal reforms through which he sought to overcome the economic crisis of the Soviet Union and to arrest its relative decline as a superpower.⁹⁰ In a nutshell, reviving *détente* was both possible and necessary from the point of view of the new Soviet government.

Whether or not this (sketchy) explanation of the formation of the CFE regime is felt to be convincing in its own terms, it may be criticized for lacking 'causal depth'. Context change may have caused actors to reconsider their utility functions, making them place more weight on absolute gains than before, and this, in turn, may help to explain why they achieved regime-based cooperation in an issue-area where this hitherto had proven impossible. But then, how do we explain the change of the context? Does the above analysis not leave the most interesting part of the story unaccounted for? The factor that contributed most to the context change is that the Soviet Union began to see the world differently and to re-define its interests as a result. But what accounts for this spectacular and consequential instance of governmental learning? In the following Section we discuss two possibilities of developing the rationalist synthesis so as to accommodate certain cognitive variables and, thus, to allow for deeper explanations of international regimes.

Using weakly cognitivist variables to supplement rationalist theories of regimes

The second proposition we wish to defend in this essay is that rationalist explanations of international regimes may be supplemented and thus improved by a variant of cognitivist theorizing which we referred to above as 'weak cognitivism'. The basic idea here is that weakly cognitivist theories—i.e. theories which are concerned with phenomena such as epistemic communities or simple and complex learning—may be used to fill frequently admitted gaps in both neoliberal and realist approaches to

⁸⁸ See Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'International Sources of Soviet Change', *International Security*, 16 (1991/92), pp. 89–90.

⁸⁹ See Falkenrath, *Europe's Military Order*, pp. 37–8.

⁹⁰ This case suggests that Grieco's hypothesis that relative decline increases the sensitivity for relative losses may need to be qualified. It was rational (or, at least, not plainly irrational) for the Soviet Union to accept short-term relative losses in various security issue-areas as part of a strategy that aimed at halting and reversing an economic decline with its negative consequences for long-term national security. Both nuclear deterrence and the relatively benign security environment (see Deudney and Ikenberry, 'International Sources', pp. 82–97) can help to explain why, in the case at hand, this course of action was (or could appear to be) a rational choice for a leader committed to the national interest.

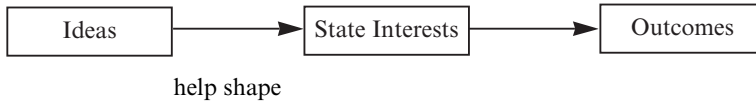
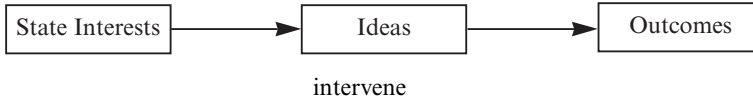
(a) Cognitive Variables Causally Preceding Rationalist Ones**(b) Cognitive Variables Causally Succeeding Rationalist Ones**

Figure 2. *Models of a rationalist-cognitivist synthesis.*

the study of international regimes without violating the rationalist core of these approaches. As a consequence, a fruitful division of labour among different schools of thought need not be confined to realism and neoliberalism, but may extend to some cognitivist approaches as well.

Integrating weakly cognitivist variables with rationalist explanations requires a different form of synthesis, though. We have seen that realist and neoliberal approaches to international regimes can be reconciled and organized into a single whole by specifying the conditions of validity of each, i.e. by theorizing the contexts in, or conditions under, which realist and neoliberal predictions apply, respectively. By contrast, rationalist and weakly cognitivist arguments appear to be working together best when they are seen as addressing *subsequent links in a single causal chain*.

As Figure 2 indicates, weakly cognitivist variables may be either causally prior or causally posterior to the rationalist ones. This opens up two possibilities for a division of labour between rationalist and (weakly) cognitivist theories of international regimes.

The *first* way in which weakly cognitivist theories may supplement rationalist accounts of international institutions is straightforward, at least in principle: cognitivists study features of a strategic (or choice) situation which are self-consciously left unexplained by the game-theoretic models that rationalists employ. Recall that a game-theoretic analysis requires answers to three basic questions: (1) who are the actors? (2) what are the options they perceive to have in the situation? (3) what are the payoffs (or utilities) that the actors attribute to each possible outcome?⁹¹ With these three pieces of information a game matrix can be constructed, which then can be analysed, using the hypotheses rationalists have developed to account for both the formation and the institutional attributes of regimes in varying decision environments (such as Prisoner's Dilemma, Battle of the Sexes, etc.). In such analyses neither actors nor their behavioural alternatives nor their preferences are problematized. Rather, these essential components of rationalist analyses are used as unexplained points of departure, which are either assumed or established *ex post*. Since actors' beliefs about cause-effect relationships have an influence on at least the

⁹¹ See Zürn, *Interessen*, p. 324.

latter two of these components, i.e. perceived options and payoffs, weakly cognitivist theories that seek to illuminate the conditions of governmental learning and to account for the careers of ideas may be adduced to fashion deeper explanations of regimes and other outcomes.

The issue-area of trade provides a classical example of how new causal beliefs may induce actors to redefine their interests:⁹² eighteenth century mercantilist thought was premised on the idea that global welfare is fixed. As a result, international trade appeared as a constant-sum game, in which incentives for cooperation or the creation of international regimes did not exist. By contrast, *laissez-faire* liberalism taught that global welfare is variable and can be enhanced by an unrestricted exchange of goods and services, which meant that international trade came to be seen as a variable-sum game (such as Prisoner's Dilemma or perhaps even Harmony) which was amenable to cooperation and regime-building.⁹³ A change in beliefs (i.e. learning in a neutral sense) helps to explain a change in the constellation of interests, which, in turn, led to a change in policy.

Weakly cognitivist variables and models can also be employed to supplement, or lend more causal depth to, explanations based on the contextualized rationalist theory of regimes we have sketched above. Again, the case of conventional arms control in Europe may help to illustrate our point. As we have seen, governmental learning on the part of the Soviet Union was an important cause of the context change that enabled NATO and the Warsaw Pact to focus on absolute rather than relative gains in the issue area of conventional forces in Europe and, eventually, to settle upon a mutually beneficial arms control agreement. Gorbachev's 'new thinking' extended to both the basic assumptions and the strategic prescriptions guiding Soviet foreign and security policy. Revisions of the former included a new image of the adversary, who was no longer regarded as inherently aggressive and imperialistic. Revisions of the latter—made possible by that new worldview and driven by a better understanding of the security dilemma—were immediately relevant to the case at hand: first, given that, within the East-West setting, national security was, to a large extent, indivisible, it should be sought primarily through cooperative efforts that included the opponent; and second, military preparedness should not exceed the level of 'reasonable sufficiency', because excessive armament was certain to breed mistrust and, by provoking counter-measures, likely to reduce security in the longer run.⁹⁴

Weakly cognitivist approaches have been used to explain the content and the timing of the learning process that was at the root of the Soviet foreign policy revolution. Thus, Thomas Risse-Kappen has argued that structural and functional models alone cannot account for the turnaround in the Soviet Union's foreign and

⁹² See Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate*, p. 120.

⁹³ Strictly speaking, the latter applies when the situation is PD, but not when it is Harmony. As we have noted above, in a situation of Harmony regime-building is unlikely, because cooperation emerges spontaneously. Harmony in the trade case corresponds to a situation where each state believes cutting down tariffs is in its interest, even when the others do not follow suit. See Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate*, pp. 29–30.

⁹⁴ See Jeff Checkel, 'Ideas, Institutions, and the Gorbachev Foreign Policy Revolution', *World Politics*, 45 (1993), pp. 281. For a fuller account of these momentous changes refer to Checkel's recent book *Ideas and International Political Change: Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

security policy (and for the West's response to it)⁹⁵ and have to be supplemented by arguments that not only take ideas seriously, but shed light on the conditions under which particular ideas begin to have an impact on the choices of policymakers. In his framework he emphasizes the role of transnational networks of experts and politicians, who develop and spread new policy-relevant ideas, and the importance of the 'domestic structure' of the target countries, which determines how difficult it is for a given set of ideas and their carriers to gain access to, and to influence, central decision-makers. More specifically, Risse-Kappen argues that

some of the ideas that informed the reconceptualization of Soviet security interests and centered around notions of 'common security' and 'reasonable sufficiency' originated in the Western liberal internationalist community comprising arms control supporters in the United States as well as peace researchers and left-of-center political parties in Western Europe. This community formed networks with 'new thinkers' in the foreign policy institutes and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.⁹⁶

According to Risse-Kappen, these transnational contacts were instrumental in transforming the new basic assumptions about the international system, the relation of class values to human values, and the nature of capitalism into a coherent set of foreign and security beliefs and maxims, which, as we have noted, downplayed competitive (relative-gains oriented) stratagems in favour of a more cooperative and inclusivist approach.

While, in this first model of a rationalist-cognitivist division of labour, interests and cognitive factors are combined such that the latter precede the former in the causal chain, in the *second* type of synthesis of rationalist and cognitivist approaches the sequence is reversed: here ideas, rather than helping to explain preferences and perceived options which, in turn, explain outcomes (see Figure 2a), *intervene* between interests (which may or may not be accounted for in cognitivist terms) and outcomes such as regime formation (see Figure 2b). In this approach to a rationalist-cognitivist synthesis, ideas operate as 'focal points', i.e. salient solutions to negotiation problems which help the parties to coordinate their behaviour in a mutually beneficial way.⁹⁷ This approach is exemplified by Geoffrey Garrett and Barry Weingast's intriguing study of the completion of the European Community's internal market in the late 1980s.⁹⁸

The problem with conventional functional explanations of cooperation, according to Garrett and Weingast, is that they fail to take into account that actors in a mixed-motives situation usually face *several* possibilities for cooperating (i.e. multiple

⁹⁵ Learning was not confined to the Soviet Union. At a minimum, the members of NATO had to learn how to interpret the new and, to many, bewildering signals that came from the Kremlin (as had, of course, the governments of the other Warsaw Pact states).

⁹⁶ Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War', *International Organization*, 48 (1994), p. 186. For a cognitivist study along similar lines which focuses on the domestic sources of Soviet 'new thinking' see Checkel, 'Ideas'. For additional insights on the impact of transnational actors on Soviet/Russian security policy see Matthew Evangelista, 'Transnational Relations, Domestic Structures, and Security Policy in the USSR and Russia', in Thomas Risse-Kappen (ed.), *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In: Non-State Actors, Domestic Structures, and International Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 146–88.

⁹⁷ See Schelling, *Strategy*, pp. 57–8 and *passim*.

⁹⁸ Geoffrey Garrett and Barry R. Weingast, 'Ideas, Interests, and Institutions: Constructing the European Community's Internal Market', in Goldstein and Keohane (eds.), *Ideas*, pp. 173–206.

Pareto-improving equilibria⁹⁹) which cannot easily be distinguished in terms of efficiency and self-interest. Therefore, most problematic social situations are under-determined from a purely interest-oriented perspective: the variables employed by rationalists (i.e. efficiency and self-interest) do not suffice to explain the outcome. It is only because of the *post-hoc* character of functional explanations¹⁰⁰ that this deficiency is often overlooked. This is where cognitive factors enter the scene: for, as Garrett and Weingast point out, it is often the case that ideas which create convergent expectations permit actors to coordinate their behaviour in a mutually beneficial way and, at the same time, explain the specific content of the resulting regime.

Consider the case of the completion of the EC's internal market. In the mid-1980s, the EC member states had strong incentives to launch a programme of trade liberalization. Not only had their dependence on trade grown significantly in the preceding years, there were also clear signs that they were losing ground *vis-à-vis* their main overseas competitors, the United States and Japan, whose economies had recovered much more quickly and vigorously from the recession triggered by the second oil crisis. Under the circumstances a removal of barriers to the free movement of goods, services, labour, and capital promised substantial economic gains for the members of the EC. But this fact at best explains why *some* institutional arrangement was agreed upon to complete (or, more accurately, make progress on) the internal market. Since a number of options existed, which were not readily distinguishable in terms of efficiency, this functional argument cannot explain which of the institutional possibilities was chosen. The explanatory gap is filled by a 'focal point' or salient solution that was provided by a decision of the European Court of Justice of the late 1970s. In the *Cassis de Dijon* case the Court had asserted that the Treaty of Rome required member states not to restrict the access of goods and services which are legally produced and sold in another member state. Thus, the idea of mutual recognition rather than, e.g., pervasive deregulation at the national level or extensive standardization at the supranational level, became the principle that the completion of the internal market relied upon.¹⁰¹

Ideas are also important when the available equilibria vary in their distributional outcomes, i.e. in situations akin to Battle of the Sexes. For example, in the issue-area of international communications states had to coordinate their use of the Geo-Stationary Orbit, but had divergent preferences regarding the coordination principle to be adopted. Whereas the technologically leading states would have maximized their gains under a first-come-first-served regime, the late-comers favoured at least a modicum of *ex ante* planning consistent with the principle of equal sovereignty in the distribution of frequencies and orbit slots.¹⁰² Under such circumstances, as Krasner has convincingly argued, relative power comes into play as an alternative coordinating mechanism. Garrett and Weingast concede this point. What is more, they come up with an interesting attempt to extend their proposed synthesis of

⁹⁹ A (Nash) equilibrium of a game is a constellation of choices such that each choice is optimal given the choices of the others. A Pareto-inferior outcome is an inefficient outcome in that at least one actor could be made better off without making any of the other actors worse off. In game-theoretic analyses of international relations, cooperation is modelled as a collective attempt to overcome Pareto-deficient situations.

¹⁰⁰ See Keohane, *After Hegemony*, p. 80.

¹⁰¹ See Garrett and Weingast, 'Ideas', pp. 187–91.

¹⁰² Krasner, 'Global Communications'; and Kai-Uwe Schrogl, *Zivile Satellitennutzung in internationaler Zusammenarbeit* (Köln: Carl Heymanns Verlag, 1993).

neoliberal and cognitivist approaches to include specifically power-based arguments. In so doing, they make use of the contextual approach to synthesis we have referred to earlier. In particular, they hypothesize that

[t]he lesser the distributional asymmetries between contending cooperative equilibria and the smaller the disparities in the power resources of actors, the more important will be ideational factors [relative to power factors]. Similarly, the effects of focal points will increase [and the importance of the distribution of power decrease] with the actors' uncertainty about the consequences of agreements or about relative capabilities. Thus, both power and ideas can be expected significantly to influence the resolution of multiple-equilibria problems, *but the relative explanatory power of each is likely to vary significantly with the context.* [our emphasis]¹⁰³

It seems to us that this approach to specifying the interrelationship between power, interests, and knowledge in the emergence and continuation of rule-based cooperation holds considerable promise and should certainly be followed up and further developed.

Limits to synthesis: rationalism and strong cognitivism

So far our presentation has displayed a great deal of optimism with regard to the possibilities for the three schools of thought to achieve synergetic effects by pooling (selected items of) their conceptual and theoretical resources. This optimism, however, comes to an end with our third proposition. We contend that, in regime analysis, a 'grand synthesis'—one that also incorporates the perspective of the more radical, or 'strong', cognitivists—is not feasible. A fruitful dialogue can be, and is already being, entertained between 'economists' (i.e. rationalists) and 'sociologists' (i.e. strong cognitivists)¹⁰⁴ in the study of international regimes; but it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to imagine at this stage a fully-fledged rationalist-sociologist synthesis which would preserve the identities (i.e. the most fundamental assumptions and concerns) of both approaches. The reason is that rationalists and strong cognitivists are committed to ultimately incompatible epistemologies and, most of all, ontologies.

As to *epistemology*, strong cognitivists such as Friedrich Kratochwil, John Gerard Ruggie or Robert Cox have made it clear that they hold the positivist theory of knowledge to which neoliberal and realist scholars adhere responsible for a flawed analysis of international norms.¹⁰⁵ Positivism with its emphasis on observable facts and objective measurement of variables directs scholars to focus on overt behaviour at the expense of intersubjective understandings, thus missing, according to strong cognitivists, the very essence of international regimes. Consequently, strong cognitivists have argued the necessity of an interpretivist treatment of this subject, where

¹⁰³ Garrett and Weingast, 'Ideas', p. 186.

¹⁰⁴ For this terminology see Brian Barry, *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy* (London: Collier-MacMillan, 1970).

¹⁰⁵ See Friedrich V. Kratochwil and John Gerard Ruggie, 'International Organization: A State of the Art on an Art of the State', *International Organization*, 40 (1986), pp. 753–75; and Robert W. Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 204–55.

the attempt to *understand* motives and actions from within replaces the quest for *explaining* behaviour from without. Rationalists, in turn, have reaffirmed their allegiance to what Keohane refers to as a ‘sophisticated positivistic’ explanation of international institutions including the formulation and empirical testing of causal hypotheses.¹⁰⁶ Of the two obstacles to a ‘grand synthesis’ epistemology is presumably the lesser one, however. This is for two reasons:

- (1) On the ‘subjective’ side (i.e. with respect to the epistemological beliefs that students of regimes hold), not all strong cognitivists identify with the rejection of empiricist methodologies that others deem necessary;¹⁰⁷ conversely, rationalists who have begun to study the role of ideas have admitted that interpretation cannot be ignored in such an endeavour.¹⁰⁸
- (2) On the ‘objective’ side (i.e. with respect to the epistemological beliefs that students of regimes *should* hold), it is not clear whether the aspirations of ‘science’ and ‘hermeneutics’ are indeed irreconcilable. Philosophers have seriously challenged the traditional opposition of explaining (the goal of science) and understanding (the goal of hermeneutics) as basic methods of social research.¹⁰⁹

Nevertheless, for all the uncertainty that surrounds this issue at the moment, there remains the claim made by some in the strongly cognitivist camp that an adequate study of those topics that sociologists in international theory are most interested in—such as the convincing force of arguments¹¹⁰ or the intersubjective knowledge that constitutes state identities¹¹¹—requires methodological procedures and suggests epistemological standards which fundamentally differ from those that are accepted as valid in mainstream rationalist analyses. And while the jury is out on the ultimate truth value of this claim (and may remain there for a long time to come), its face value is large enough to suggest that positivists will find it hard indeed to study these ‘new’ objects of research with the aid of their traditional tool-box.¹¹²

The second, presumably more formidable, obstacle inhibiting a fruitful and intellectually appealing synthesis between rationalism and strong cognitivism in the study of international regimes is *ontology*. Rationalists and strong cognitivists make fundamentally different assumptions regarding the nature of actors and their inter-relationships. Rationalists scrutinize a *system* which is composed of a group of interacting utility maximizers; strong cognitivists try to illuminate a *society* which is

¹⁰⁶ Keohane, ‘Analysis’, p. 26.

¹⁰⁷ See Wendt, ‘Anarchy’, pp. 393–4.

¹⁰⁸ See Goldstein and Keohane, ‘Ideas’, pp. 26–9.

¹⁰⁹ Others, of course, insist that there are indeed ‘two stories’ to tell—one from the outside, the other from the inside—neither of which ultimately can replace the other. See Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). For an excellent survey of the discussion see Thomas Haussmann, *Erklären und Verstehen: Zur Theorie und Pragmatik der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991).

¹¹⁰ See Friedrich V. Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹¹¹ See Wendt, ‘Collective Identity’.

¹¹² For an argument to bring home the futility of studying linguistic and other institutional facts by strictly positivist means see John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 50–3.

formed by, as much as it forms, a community of role-players.¹¹³ To put it differently, rationalists and strong cognitivists disagree with respect to the very ‘logic’ that shapes the behaviour of the actors they study: in the terminology introduced by James March and Johan Olsen, rationalists assume that states conform to a ‘logic of consequentiality’, whereas strong cognitivists reject this premise arguing that states, as other social actors, follow a ‘logic of appropriateness’. An actor who ‘operates’ according to a logic of consequentiality first examines its options and preferences and then calculates which of the possible courses of action has the best consequences in the light of these goals. By contrast, the ‘software programme’ that determines the behaviour of an actor who conforms to a logic of appropriateness can be specified by the following reasoning:

- (1) What kind of situation is this?
- (2) Who am I? What obligations have I undertaken?
- (3) Which is the most appropriate action for me in this situation?

Thus, other than actors who conform to the logic of consequentiality, these actors do not merely take norms and rules into account, their behaviour is driven by them.¹¹⁴

Again, our point may seem to be overstated and, indeed, many qualifications might be added. Thus, rationalists have maintained that their approach does not presuppose a denial of international society and admitted the context-dependence of rational choice models.¹¹⁵ At the same time, few strong cognitivists contest that the rationalist perspective is capable of providing insights into the behaviour of states in the international arena. However, neither the mutual recognition that one’s preferred mode of analysis is inherently limited, nor the mutual acknowledgement that the respective alternative has its merits too, must be confused with evidence that the approaches in question can work together productively. In fact, if our assessment of the obstacles that such a cooperation would confront is correct, evidence of this kind is not likely to be produced. This is not to say that such cautious judgments and respectful attitudes as are expressed by these scholars are insignificant. They enhance the prospects for an open and fruitful scholarly dialogue from which both sides as well as the study of international regimes as a whole can only benefit.

Conclusion

In this article we have drawn attention to some possibilities for theoretical synthesis we perceive to exist in the study of international regimes. These possibilities are

¹¹³ See Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1977); and Wendt and Duvall, ‘Institutions’.

¹¹⁴ See James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989), p. 23. Note that the notion that behaviour is rule-driven is consistent with the possibility that, in a given situation, actors have to make choices between different norms. Moreover, acting in accordance with the logic of appropriateness must not be mistaken for simple-mindedness. The specification and application of the appropriate norm is seldom a trivial, quasi-mechanical process, but one that leaves actors with considerable discretion.

¹¹⁵ See Duncan Snidal, ‘The Game Theory of International Politics’, in Oye (ed.), *Cooperation*, p. 45.

considerable and promising, but not unlimited. Nor is there a guarantee that the more complex theories that would result from integrating different perspectives are more satisfactory than the more simple approaches they are made of. Ultimately, the value of a theory cannot be judged before it is empirically tested, and we have made no attempt to conduct such a test here. But this is a necessary and trivial *caveat* (although perhaps increasingly less so in these post-positivist times), and certainly one that should not discourage students of international regimes from exploring the potential synergetic effects that could be achieved by integrating different theoretical approaches. We have suggested two such possibilities, which are not mutually exclusive:

- (1) Neoliberalism and realism (or, at least, important strands within these two schools of thought) might be joined to form a unified rationalist theory of international regimes. The form of synthesis appropriate in this case is what we have called a 'contextualized' theory, i.e. a theory which includes an *a priori* specification of the conditions under which the different theoretical perspectives that enter into it are valid.
- (2) Since both realism and neoliberalism treat actors' interests as exogenously given, they might be supplemented by a set of approaches, which focus on precisely this gap in rationalist theorizing. For these approaches we have suggested the label 'weak cognitivism'. We have argued that the incorporation into the rationalist models of the ideational factors that are studied by weak cognitivists would require a different form of synthesis, though: more specifically, we have proposed to base this synthesis on the notion that rationalist and cognitive variables represent different links in a causal chain (with cognitive variables either preceding or following rationalist ones).

Finally, we have cast doubts on the prospect for a comprehensive, or 'grand', synthesis, one which includes even the more radical variants of cognitivism that we have termed 'strong cognitivism'. Sharp disagreements with regard to both epistemology and ontology separate this group of scholars from their rationalist colleagues, loading the dice heavily against a meaningful synthesis of their perspectives. This should not be mistaken for bad news, however. As we have noted, regime analysis has benefited a great deal from the competition of different theoretical perspectives in the past, and there is no reason why this should change in the future.