

**Can international anarchy
be overcome
to create a
“world of peace”?**

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Can international anarchy be overcome to create a world of peace? This question in itself begs us to ask other questions which are in themselves interlinked to that original enquiry. In order to reach a logical answer it must be asked what international anarchy actually is and whether international society is still in a state of anarchy and if so is it a state of anarchy more in tune with Waltz than with Hobbes? International anarchy is proposed as the condition of the international system by realist theorists who argue that the state is the primary actor on the stage of international relations. This does not automatically mean that peace cannot be achieved on an international basis because as shall be outlined anarchy can lead to states forming agreements with one another in order to preserve peace, enhance defence or advance trade. It is true that these agreements and the envisioned subsequent relative peace would only come about due to it being in each state's own national interest. As such the structure of the international system itself brings about peace for it is more convenient for an individual nation to be at peace rather than it having any actual obligation, from a higher authority, to be at peace. While this has the potential to create a world of peace, it is not one that is sustainable and is liable to breakdown at any particular point due a lack of international institutions which would have the power to ensure agreements between states are clear and open for other states to see in order to subdue, and perhaps even totally overcome international anarchy. Classical liberalists argue that human nature is mainly good and so, for the most parts, states prefer not to war with one another but neoliberal institutionalists make the point that each state sees security as essential and international institutions, such as the United Nations, can help to guarantee security, especially in the case of smaller nations. While it may be seen that this is quite close to a realist perspective on peace for a state's own interest, the difference is that it sees international institutions as being extremely important in providing a framework for peace to exist in international society. Through institutions are rules and regulations which states adhere to in order to cooperate, gain trust and build

confidence in the same ahead to the future. As such then is it possible to say that anarchy is no longer in existence? If states worldwide are very much bound by rules and regulations through so many international institutions then surely a greater power exists (although not a vertically located hierarchical hegemon) and thus anarchy is indeed no longer in existence. However even if anarchy does still exist, as realists may declare, does it really matter anymore for it has been overshadowed by rules and regulations along with the state, as a unit, declining in power relative to other actors such as transnational corporations, cultures and individuals?

Realist scholars argue that despite international institutions and the many international rules which bind nations today, the concept of anarchy is very much in existence and still matters very much. It can be argued, even acknowledging the role of international institutions in the world and their role in allowing peace to develop, that anarchy is what drives this for it is in each state's own interest to allow this to occur. "For realists, the ultimate arbiter of outcomes in international relations is power. As such, international organisations can only really succeed when backed by powerful states"¹. This classical realist stream of thought would tend to support the argument that anarchy is still what drives states, even to cooperate amongst each other. The concept of an anarchical international system is described by Helen Milner as being a "chaotic arena of war of all against all"² where states distrust other states and continually seek ways to further their own power in order to feel more secure relative to other states. "Nature, according to realists, is at its core, egoistic, and thus inalterably inclined

¹ Barkin, J.S., *International organizations: Theories and institutions* (New York, 2006), p.8.

² Milner, H., 'The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory: A Critique', *Review of International Studies* 1 (1997), pp. 67 – 85: 70.

towards immorality”³. If human beings are egotistic and immoral by nature then the international system will tend to be anarchical as no state will endeavour to submit to the power of a higher authority and as such then the risk of war among states is higher, making a sustainable peace more difficult to attain and preserve. However anarchy is not a set definition and its effects on the international system are disputed. Scholars in the realist school of thought see change in the international system as being slow to come about and difficult to implement because of the anarchical nature of it but neorealist’s see a different picture, showing just one contention on the definition and possible effects of anarchy. Neorealist’s, such as Kenneth Waltz, agree with their classical counterparts that indeed anarchy is the central tenet of the international system but that this anarchy also produces “regularized patterns of state behaviour”⁴. If this is true then anarchy can indeed bring about a form of peace although it can be questioned just how sustainable this peace actually is without a central institution to govern and assist in maintaining it because fear, along with the relative power of states, and insecurity can shape the actions of states and perhaps lead to war⁵. So is the notion of anarchy changing? While it seems to have done so already, it may change further into the future again, if it will still exist at all. After all, if anarchy, as seen through the neorealist perspective, brings about more and more cooperation amongst states then surely it can be said that anarchy, as a concept in and of itself, is weakened because it will matter less and less as regulations conducting international relations are strengthened over time and over their continued use. Some scholars argue that this is actually due to anarchy being the central tenet of an international system where states “engender stable

³ Donnelly, J., *Realism and international relations* (Cambridge, 2000), p.9.

⁴ Milner, H., ‘The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory: A Critique’, *Review of International Studies* 1 (1997), pp. 67 – 85: 71.

⁵ Doyle, M.W., *Ways of war and peace* (New York, 1997), p. 429.

expectations about behaviour”⁶. While stable expectations about behaviour might indeed support peace between states, it should be asked why stable expectations occur at all. It is easy to say of course that it is in each state’s own interest for peace to exist but this masks many growing trends which are changing our concepts of anarchy and the realist assumption that human nature is inherently immoral and bad. This realist assumption was revived by Hans Morgenthau after the Second World War but it should be kept in mind that a war on that scale has not occurred ever since and indeed since the end of that war international organisations, such as the United Nations and European Union, have become increasingly important to international relations. This institutionalist trend does not seem to be slowing down and thus it is not irrational to think that anarchy in the world system is being replaced by institutionalism and a form of complex interdependence. Due to these concepts’ rather different qualities compared to international anarchy, peace between states may be easier to find, and to sustain, on a long term basis. This liberalist stream of thought can be traced to an Aristotelian position which asserts that “as reasonable beings, people know that nature has designed them to work together for the common good”⁷. If this is the case then surely international anarchy can be overcome by states cooperating together to bring about peace through institutionalism and interdependence.

While there exists two differing strands of liberal thought; classical liberalist and neoliberal institutionalist, both agree that peace is served best through cooperation but just why cooperation occurs is a factor of debate between the two theories. Classical liberalists

⁶ Axelrod, R., and Keohane, R.O., ‘Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions’, *World Politics* 1 (1985), pp. 226 – 254: 226.

⁷ Onuf, N., ‘Institutions, Intentions and International Relations’, *Review of International Studies* 3 (2002), pp. 211 – 228: 214.

fall into line with the Aristotelian thought that human nature is essentially good while neoliberal institutionalists argue that it is not this but rather each state's own desire for security that allows cooperation to blossom. Neoliberal institutionalists share a strand of thought with realists on the subject of international anarchy because security issues and the national interest of a state are two items of major importance in realist theory. Both are also of importance in neoliberal institutionalism only that this liberal based theory extends itself by allowing for cooperation to occur between states in order to allow for security to be obtained, again in each state's own interest. The main idea that should be taken from this is that cooperation is seen as an important option because states "pursue long-term utility"⁸. For a world of peace to be feasible, cooperation must always be an option for states to pursue and while cooperation between states can occur without international institutions it is best encouraged and prolonged through institutions so that peace may exist. This should not lead us to view cooperation through institutions as a utopian idea through which peace cannot be obtained because cooperation does not mean the automatic facilitation of one state's ideas over another; rather it requires that "each party changes his or her behaviour contingent on changes in the other's behaviour"⁹ so that "states can improve their security as well as gain positive benefits if they cooperate"¹⁰. One of the great risks in international relations before the proliferation of international organisations, was a certain risk factor in agreements between states often explained as the "prisoner's dilemma". Often it was a case that each state could not guarantee that the other was keeping their side of the bargain due to the lack of a flow of free information concerning the agreement. This could then lead to insecurities, perceptions removed from reality, and perhaps war. In an anarchical world states can make

⁸ Donnelly, J., *Realism and international relations* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 134.

⁹ Keohane, R.O., 'International Institutions: Two Approaches', *International Studies Quarterly* 4 (1988), pp. 379 – 396: 380.

¹⁰ Kolodziej, E.A., *Security and international relations* (Cambridge 2005), p. 152.

bilateral agreements and cooperate with other states in order to further their own gains but this can lead to disagreements and even war but international institutions can overcome this by acting almost as a form of insurance against cheating¹¹, thus laying down regulations to how international relations are conducted, stifling anarchy and promoting peace. This includes the registration of treaties with international organisations which encourages states to keep to agreements made in order to gain further trust, and further gain, in the future. Due to treaties being publicly available through institutions, suspicion and mistrust are lesser factors between states party to an agreement and thus there is less chance of conflict breaking out due to a lack of information leading to false perceptions. It is true also that international organisations can even encourage and bring about agreements between states rather than simply acting as forums and guarantors of agreements after they have already been negotiated between states directly. International organisations then “help set the international agenda, and act as catalysts for coalition-formation and as arenas for political initiatives”¹². Anarchy certainly takes more of a back seat in the international system if we accept as true that international organisations do indeed set the global agenda, or at least direct the agenda on some scale. Realists argue against this saying that international organisations are actually quite toothless because the agendas they set tend to be dictated by the more powerful member states thus indicating that anarchy is still the dominant force and that international organisations are simply a deceiving front¹³. Keohane argues that great powers such as the USA do indeed “tend to exercise enormous influence...but the policies that emerge from these

¹¹ Donnelly, J., *Realism and international relations* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 134.

¹² Keohane, R.O., and Nye, J.S., *Power and interdependence (3rd Edition)*, (New York, 2001), p. 30.

¹³ Keohane, R.O., ‘International Institutions: Can Interdependence Work?’, *Foreign Policy* 110 (1998), pp. 82 – 96 + 194: 87.

institutions are different from those that the United States would have adopted unilaterally”¹⁴. While international institutions such as the UN are evidently not international governments with laws that supersede national laws, they do have an influence and for this alone it be argued that anarchy is now less and less central a tenet to the international system. It becomes even less so when one considers the role of international institutions in a world that is today being described by many as one of complex interdependence where decisions are made multilaterally with long term gain viewed as more important than short term gain. These two factors, multilateralism and the sustainable pursuit of long term gain can be viewed as being inseparable because multilateralism, especially for traditional great powers, takes more time but delivers a better result through that time while avoiding conflict. Without international organisations multilateralism would prove to be a much more difficult concept for states to engage in due to the lack of an intermediary agency for the monitoring of agreements and the setting of various standards upon which states can then base negotiations on. Standards and research bodies affiliated to international organisations are seen as being politically neutral by states and develop standards multilaterally thus nullifying one potential area of argument in a disagreement between states¹⁵. Beyond international organisations transnational actors such as transnational corporations, intergovernmental and non-government organisations as well as domestic regimes and actors all now play a much more significant role than they were accorded with in the past¹⁶. This greater diversity of influences means that the state, although still very important, is less important than it once was and because of this new diversity states cannot make policies without taking into account many more factors, and therefore reactions, than they would have had to previously. For example if a state was to act unilaterally in

¹⁴ Keohane, R.O., ‘International Institutions: Can Interdependence Work?’, *Foreign Policy* 110 (1998), pp. 82 – 96 + 194: 87.

¹⁵ Barkin, J.S., *International organizations: Theories and institutions* (New York, 2006), p.29.

¹⁶ Kolodziej, E.A., *Security and international relations* (Cambridge 2005), p. 150.

provoking a military exchange with a neighbouring state then transnational corporations with investments in that country may well pull out leading to less tax revenues in that state, less employment opportunities, and through this a lesser ability to strengthen its own security if it had wanted to. As such then transnational corporations “are playing a larger role than ever (and) their practices and standards often create de facto governance”¹⁷. This dense interlinkage of state, corporations and international organisations, a feature of a world in a state of complex interdependence, helps to keep the peace even when tensions run high between states because the cost of war is simply too high not just in military losses but also in economic losses. On top of this there is also, as part of globalization, “the intensification of contacts and interconnections between societies”¹⁸ and a greater movement of people around the globe, which has led to national populations becoming less homogenous. This phenomenon makes it more complicated for a state to go to war due to the inherent difficulty in persuading a more varied population about its reasons why. In an anarchical international system with relatively homogenous populations the swaying of public opinion in order to gather support for war is easier. Globalization then has the potential to bring about a sustainable peace through interdependence. However as was stated this does not mean that the state no longer has a role to play for even the formulation of policy itself is done in a different matter to previously, with high power politics, a feature of an anarchical system, giving way to more contact between state bureaucracies and a greater say for them in the negotiation of agreements thus showing that the state’s role has changed but not ended because it still, despite other factors outside of its own control, has a role to play in preventing conflict through modifying its own mechanism of control¹⁹. The delegation of

¹⁷ Keohane, R.O., and Nye, J.S., *Power and interdependence (3rd Edition)*, (New York, 2001), p. 260.

¹⁸ Hurrel, A., *On global order: Power, values and the constitution of international society* (Oxford, 2007), p.294.

¹⁹ Barkin, J.S., *International organizations: Theories and institutions* (New York, 2006), p.16.

decision making to state bureaucracies has the potential to slow this decision making and allow more people to be involved which reduces rash and egotistic choices made to further the short term interest of a state. With this not insignificant transfer of power away from the vestiges of high politics, and the ever growing interlinkage between the state, international organisations, transnational corporations and peoples it is not difficult to observe that anarchy is becoming a concept more and more alien to the international system. It also seems that these links will only continue to grow stronger thus further suffocating the concept of anarchy and promoting the proliferation of peace as states become more and more dependent on one another to the point where armed conflict becomes an almost impossible notion as it would cripple the aggressor state just as much, if not more, than the attacked state. Economic, diplomatic and indeed military penalties are high already but will likely only get higher thus helping persevering peace. A prime example of this is the growth in the importance of the European Union to the point where European nations are too dependent on one another to contemplate any conflict such as occurred from 1939 – 1945. It cannot be said that the whole world is in this position and thus conflict in some areas is still very much a reality but states involved with international organisations and with open economies and political systems that can accommodate the vast interlinkages of complex interdependence are generally wealthier than countries that do not which may lead to those countries changing their outlook in order to gain some of the wealth available through these means. This would further spread complex interdependence throughout the international system and with this, hopefully, peace.

The further entanglement of states with international organisations has the potential to make these organisations stronger while the further entanglement of the state with transnational corporations, which Keohane points out may have implications for democratic

theory²⁰, does result in an extra incentive for a state to remain stable and at peace. Realists will continue to argue that the international system is still anarchical at its core and while it is true that peace can indeed be attained through anarchy, a sustainable peace is much better served by an international system in which states are too dependent on one another in order to make war a cost-effective national instrument. It seems, from this essay's examination, that as states become more dependent on one another, and with the overarching shadow of international organisations and other transnational actors, anarchy is becoming less and less of a factor in the international system. Power, a very important concept in the realist study of international relations, is no longer the determining factor that it once was. This should be qualified by stating that powerful nations are still very influential on the global stage but now their power is reflected, to a great extent, through international organisations, which brings a degree of multilateralism to decisions which in the past would have been taken unilaterally by powerful states. It could be argued that we are witnessing an, as of yet, incomplete paradigm shift in international relations where a great many parts of the world are moving towards a system of complex interdependence and institutionalism as explained by liberal theorists. Peace is not, unfortunately, a global phenomenon as some states still operate on a principle of power as explained by realists but progress is better achieved through cooperation and dependence as shown by advanced states with central roles in international organisations. Due to the nature of the linkages within a system of complex interdependence, economic links, cultural links and diplomatic links, it is difficult to unravel a state from a stable position within this interlinked system and this smothers anarchy because power is no longer as central a tenet in international relations while mistrust and suspicion, while both still features on the global stage, are now manageable through international institutions thus helping to prevent conflict. The observed paradigm shift then, while not complete, certainly is

²⁰ Keohane, R.O., and Nye, J.S., *Power and interdependence (3rd Edition)*, (New York, 2001), p. 262.

progressing to a point where anarchy no longer has such a central role and peace is relatively widespread through interdependence.

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