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The (Perpetually) False Promise of International Institutions

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The Princeton Project on National Security's report, *Forging a World of Liberty under Law*, always struck me as a rather unsatisfying document. Others liked it. Matt Yglesias, for instance, wrote [this](#) about it:

Where liberals and realists have traditionally parted ways is how to try to take the perspectives of others into account. Rather than simply by doing less or by seeking ad hoc arrangements with other powers, liberals seek to defend liberal societies by embedding them within liberal institutions that can uphold a reasonably just world order and thereby preserve the peace. The concept, well captured by [Anne Marie] Slaughter and [John] Ikenberry's slogan of aiming at a "world of liberty under law," is an old and enduring one. **The underlying logic of rule-governed reciprocity is, however, made all the more compelling by recent developments. It is precisely the fact that contemporary conditions make it reasonable for the United States to be concerned with what goes on inside the borders of other countries to an unprecedented degree that makes the notion of expressing that concern through stable, rule-based institutions so compelling.** (emphasis mine)

What's interesting is when you juxtapose this take with Yglesias' thoughts on the international legal implications of the bin Laden killing, where he writes [this](#):

International law is made by states, powerful states have a disproportionate role in shaping it, and powerful states have obvious reasons to not be super-interested in the due process of suspected international terrorists or the sensibilities of mid-sized countries... [O]ne of the main functions of the international institutional order is precisely to legitimate the use of deadly military force by western powers.

If what we're after is a "world of liberty under law," and the law is just written by powerful states to protect their own interests, then it sure seems like it's game, set, and match for realism.

This is, of course, an old debate. Here's [Kenneth Waltz in 2000](#):

[Robert] Keohane and [Lisa] Martin, in their effort to refute [John] Mearsheimer's trenchant criticism of institutional theory, in effect agree with him. Having claimed that his realism is "not well specified," they note that "institutional theory conceptualizes institutions both as independent and dependent variables." Dependent on what?—on "the realities of power and interest." Institutions, it turns out, "make a significant difference in conjunction with power realities." Yes! Liberal institutionalism, [as Mearsheimer says](#), "is no longer a clear alternative to realism, but has, in fact, been swallowed up by it." Indeed, it never was an alternative to realism. Institutional theory, as Keohane has stressed, has as its core structural realism, which Keohane and Nye sought "to broaden." The institutional approach starts with structural theory, applies it to the origins and operations of institutions, and unsurprisingly ends with realist conclusions.

For more on this, see [Richard Betts' terrific review of John Ikenberry's new book](#) in the [current issue of TNI](#).

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