

# International Institutions: Can Interdependence Work?

by Robert O. Keohane

To analyze world politics in the 1990s is to discuss international institutions: the rules that govern elements of world politics and the organizations that help implement those rules. Should NATO expand? How can the United Nations Security Council assure UN inspectors access to sites where Iraq might be conducting banned weapons activity? Under what conditions should China be admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO)? How many billions of dollars does the International Monetary Fund (IMF) need at its disposal to remain an effective “lender of last resort” for countries such as Indonesia, Korea, and Thailand that were threatened in 1997 with financial collapse? Will the tentative Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change be renegotiated, ratified, and implemented effectively? Can future United Nations peacekeeping practices—in contrast to the UN fiascoes in Bosnia and Somalia—be made more effective?

These questions help illustrate the growing importance of international institutions for maintaining world order. Twelve years ago in these pages, Joseph Nye and I gave “two cheers for multilateralism,” pointing

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ROBERT O. KEOHANE is James B. Duke professor of political science at Duke University.

out that even the administration of President Ronald Reagan, which took office ill-disposed toward international institutions, had grudgingly come to accept their value in achieving American purposes. Superpowers need general rules because they seek to influence events around the world. Even an unchallenged superpower such as the United States would be unable to achieve its goals through the bilateral exercise of influence: the costs of such massive "arm-twisting" would be too great.

International institutions are increasingly important, but they are not always successful. Ineffective institutions such as the United Nations Industrial Development Organization or the Organization of African Unity exist alongside effectual ones such as the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and the European Union. In recent years, we have gained insight into what makes some institutions more capable than others—how such institutions best promote cooperation among states and what mechanics of bargaining they use. But our knowledge is incomplete, and as the world moves toward new forms of global regulation and governance, the increasing impact of international institutions has raised new questions about how these institutions themselves are governed.

## THEORY AND REALITY, 1919–89

Academic "scribblers" did not always have to pay much attention to international institutions. The 1919 Versailles Treaty constituted an attempt to construct an institution for multilateral diplomacy—the League of Nations. But the rejection of the League Covenant by the U.S. Senate ensured that until World War II the most important negotiations in world politics—from the secret German-Russian deals of the 1920s to the 1938 Munich conference—took place on an ad hoc basis. Only after the United Nations was founded in 1945, with strong support from the United States and a multiplicity of specialized agencies performing different tasks, did international institutions begin to command substantial international attention.

Until the late 1960s, American students of international relations equated international institutions with formal international organizations, especially the United Nations. *International Organization*, the leading academic journal on the subject, carried long summaries of UN meetings until 1971. However, most observers recognized long before 1972 that the United Nations did not play a central role in world poli-

tics. Except for occasional peacekeeping missions—of which the First UN Emergency Force in the Middle East between 1956 and 1967 was the most successful—its ability to resolve hostilities was paralyzed by conflicts of interest that resulted in frequent superpower vetoes in the Security Council. Moreover, the influx of new postcolonial states helped turn the General Assembly into an arena for North-South conflict after 1960 and ensured that the major Western powers, especially the United States, would view many General Assembly resolutions as hostile to their interests and values—for example, the New International Economic Order and the Zionism is Racism resolutions of the 1970s. Analysts and policymakers in Europe, North America, and much of Asia concluded that international institutions were marginal to a game of world politics still driven by the traditional exercise of state power. The UN—called “a dangerous place” by former U.S. representative to the UN Daniel Patrick Moynihan—seemed more a forum for scoring points in the Cold War or North-South conflicts than an instrument for problem-solving cooperation.

In reality, however, even the most powerful states were relying increasingly on international institutions—not so much on the UN as other organizations and regimes that set rules and standards to govern specific sets of activities. From the late 1960s onward, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons was the chief vehicle for efforts to prevent the dangerous spread of nuclear weapons. NATO was not only the most successful multilateral alliance in history but also the most highly institutionalized, with a secretary-general, a permanent staff, and elaborate rules governing relations among members. From its founding in 1947 through the Uruguay Round that concluded in 1993, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) presided over a series of trade rounds that have reduced import tariffs among industrialized countries by up to 90 percent, boosting international trade. After a shaky start in the 1940s, the IMF had—by the 1960s—become the centerpiece of efforts by the major capitalist democracies to regulate their monetary affairs. When that function atrophied with the onset of flexible exchange rates in the 1970s, it became their leading agent for financing and promoting economic development in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The sheer number of inter-governmental organizations also rose dramatically—from about 30 in 1910 to 70 in 1940 to more than 1,000 by 1981.

The exchange rate and oil crises of the early 1970s helped bring perceptions in line with reality. Suddenly, both top policymakers and aca-

demic observers in the United States realized that global issues required systematic policy coordination and that such coordination required institutions. In 1974, then secretary of state Henry Kissinger, who had paid little attention to international institutions, helped establish the International Energy Agency to enable Western countries to deal cooperatively with the threat of future oil embargoes like the 1973 OPEC embargo of the Netherlands and United States. And the Ford administration sought to construct a new international monetary regime based on flexible rather than pegged exchange rates. Confronted with complex interdependence and the efforts of states to manage it, political scientists began to redefine the study of international institutions, broadening it to encompass what they called "international regimes"—structures of rules and norms that could be more or less informal. The international trade regime, for example, did not have strong formal rules or integrated, centralized management; rather, it provided a set of interlocking institutions, including regular meetings of the GATT contracting parties, formal dispute settlement arrangements, and delegation of technical tasks to a secretariat, which gradually developed a body of case law and practice. Some international lawyers grumbled that the political scientists were merely using other terms to discuss international law. Nevertheless, political scientists were once again discussing how international rules and norms affect state behavior, even if they avoided the "L-word."

In the 1980s, research on international regimes moved from attempts to describe the phenomena of interdependence and international regimes to closer analysis of the conditions under which countries cooperate. How does cooperation occur among sovereign states and how do international institutions affect it? From the standpoint of political realism, both the reliance placed by states on certain international institutions and the explosion in their numbers were puzzling. Why should international institutions exist at all in a world dominated by sovereign states? This question seemed unanswerable if institutions were seen as opposed to, or above, the state but not if they were viewed as devices to help states accomplish their objectives.

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The new research on international institutions broke decisively with legalism—the view that law can be effective regardless of political conditions—as well as with the idealism associated with the field's origins. Instead, scholars adopted the assumptions of realism, accepting that relative state power and competing interests were key factors in world politics, but at the same time drawing new conclusions about the influence of institutions on the process. Institutions create the capability for states to cooperate in mutually beneficial ways by reducing the costs of making and enforcing agreements—what economists refer to as “transaction costs.” They rarely engage in centralized enforcement of agreements, but they do reinforce practices of reciprocity, which provide incentives for governments to keep their own commitments to ensure that others do so as well. Even powerful states have an interest, most of the time, in following the rules of well-established international institutions, since general conformity to rules makes the behavior of other states more predictable.

This scholarship drew heavily on the twin concepts of uncertainty and credibility. Theorists increasingly recognized that the preferences of states amount to “private information”—that absent full transparency,

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states are uncertain about what their partners and rivals value at any given time. They naturally respond to uncertainty by being less willing to enter into agreements, since they are unsure how their partners will later interpret the terms of such agreements. International institutions can reduce this uncertainty by promoting negotia-

tions in which transparency is encouraged; by dealing with a series of issues over many years and under similar rules, thus encouraging honesty in order to preserve future reputation; and by systematically monitoring the compliance of governments with their commitments.

Even if a government genuinely desires an international agreement, it may be unable to persuade its partners that it will, in the future, be willing and able to implement it. Successful international negotiations may therefore require changes in domestic institutions. For instance, without “fast-track” authority on trade, the United States’ negotiating partners have no assurance that Congress will

refrain from adding new provisions to trade agreements as a condition for their ratification. Hence, other states are reluctant to enter into trade negotiations with the United States since they may be confronted, at the end of tortuous negotiations, with a redesigned agreement less favorable to them than the draft they initialed. By the same token, without fast-track authority, no promise by the U.S. government to abide by negotiated terms has much credibility, due to the president's lack of control over Congress.

In short, this new school of thought argued that, rather than imposing themselves on states, international institutions should respond to the demand by states for cooperative ways to fulfill their own purposes. By reducing uncertainty and the costs of making and enforcing agreements, international institutions help states achieve collective gains.

## **YESTERDAY'S CONTROVERSIES: 1989-95**

This new institutionalism was not without its critics, who focused their attacks on three perceived shortcomings: First, they claimed that international institutions are fundamentally insignificant since states wield the only real power in world politics. They emphasized the weakness of efforts by the UN or League of Nations to achieve collective security against aggression by great powers, and they pointed to the dominant role of major contributors in international economic organizations. Hence, any effects of these international institutions were attributed more to the efforts of their great power backers than to the institutions themselves.

This argument was overstated. Of course, great powers such as the United States exercise enormous influence within international institutions. But the policies that emerge from these institutions are different from those that the United States would have adopted unilaterally. Whether toward Iraq or recipients of IMF loans, policies for specific situations cannot be entirely ad hoc but must conform to generally applicable rules and principles to be endorsed by multilateral institutions. Where agreement by many states is necessary for policy to be effective, even the United States finds it useful to compromise on substance to obtain the institutional seal of approval. Therefore, the decision-making procedures and general rules of international institutions matter. They affect both the substance of policy and the degree to which other states accept it.

The second counterargument focused on “anarchy”: the absence of a world government or effective international legal system to which victims of injustice can appeal. As a result of anarchy, critics argued, states prefer relative gains (i.e., doing better than other states) to absolute gains. They seek to protect their power and status and will resist even mutually beneficial cooperation if their partners are likely to benefit more than they are. For instance, throughout the American-Soviet arms race, both sides focused on their relative positions—who was ahead or threatening to gain a decisive advantage—rather than on their own levels of armaments. Similar dynamics appear on certain economic issues, such as the fierce Euro-American competition (i.e., Airbus Industrie versus Boeing) in the production of large passenger jets.

Scholarly disputes about the “relative gains question” were intense but short-lived. It turned out that the question needed to be reframed: not, “do states seek relative or absolute gains?” but “under what conditions do they forego even mutually beneficial cooperation to preserve their relative power and status?” When there are only two major players, and one side’s gains may decisively change power relationships, relative gains loom large: in arms races, for example, or monopolistic competition (as between Airbus and Boeing). Most issues of potential cooperation, however, from trade liberalization to climate change, involve multilateral negotiations that make relative gains hard to calculate and entail little risk of decisive power shifts for one side over another. Therefore, states can be expected most of the time to seek to enhance their own welfare without being worried that others will also make advances. So the relative gains argument merely highlights the difficulties of cooperation where there is tough bilateral competition; it does not by any means undermine prospects for cooperation in general.

The third objection to theories of cooperation was less radical but more enduring. Theorists of cooperation had recognized that cooperation is not harmonious: it emerges out of discord and takes place through tough bargaining. Nevertheless, they claimed that the potential joint gains from such cooperation explained the dramatic increases in the number and scope of cooperative multilateral institutions. Critics pointed out, however, that bargaining problems could produce obstacles to achieving joint gains. For instance, whether the Kyoto Protocol will lead to a global agreement is questionable in part because developing countries refused to accept binding limits on their emissions and the U.S. Senate declared its unwillingness to ratify any agreement not con-

taining such commitments by developing countries. Both sides staked out tough bargaining positions, hindering efforts at credible compromise. As a result of these bargaining problems, the fact that possible deals could produce joint gains does not assure that cooperative solutions will be reached. The tactics of political actors and the information they have available about one another are both key aspects of a process that does not necessarily lead to cooperation. Institutions may help provide "focal points," on which competing actors may agree, but new issues often lack such institutions. In this case, both the pace and the extent of cooperation become more problematic.

## TODAY'S DEBATES

The general problem of bargaining raises specific issues about how institutions affect international negotiations, which always involve a mixture of discord and potential cooperation. Thinking about bargaining leads to concerns about subjectivity, since bargaining depends so heavily on the beliefs of the parties involved. And the most fundamental question scholars wish to answer concerns effectiveness: What structures, processes, and practices make international institutions more or less capable of affecting policies—and outcomes—in desired ways?

The impact of institutional arrangements on bargaining remains puzzling. We understand from observation, from game theory, and from explorations of bargaining in a variety of contexts that outcomes depend on more than the resources available to the actors or the payoffs they receive. Institutions affect bargaining patterns in complex and nuanced ways. Who, for example, has authority over the agenda? In the 1980s, Jacques Delors used his authority as head of the European Commission to structure the agenda of the European Community, thus leading to the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty. What voting or consensus arrangements are used and who interprets ambiguities? At the Kyoto Conference, agreement on a rule of "consensus" did not prevent the conference chair from ignoring objections as he gavelled through provision after provision in the final session. Can disgruntled participants block implementation of formally ratified agreements? In the GATT, until 1993, losers could prevent the findings of dispute resolution panels from being implemented; but in the WTO, panel recommendations take effect unless there is a consensus not to implement them. Asking such questions systematically about international



institutions may well yield significant new insights in future years.

Institutional maneuvers take place within a larger ideological context that helps define which purposes such institutions pursue and which practices they find acceptable. The Mandates System of the League of Nations depended in part on specific institutional arrangements, but more fundamental was the shared understanding that continued European rule over non-European peoples was acceptable. No system of rule by Europeans over non-Europeans could remain legitimate after the collapse of that consensus during the 15 years following World War II.

The end of the Cold War shattered a whole set of beliefs about world politics. Theories of international politics during the Cold War were overwhelmingly materialistic, reflecting a view of the world in which states pursued "national interests" shaped by geopolitical and economic realities. As Stalin once famously quipped about the pope: "How many divisions does he have?" Not only did an unarmed Pope John Paul II prevail in the contest for the allegiance of the Polish people, but after the failed 1991 coup against Gorbachev, the Soviet Union broke into its constituent parts on the basis of the norm of "self-determination," rather than along lines of military power or economic resources. State interests now depend in part on how people define their identities—as Serbs or Croats, Russians or Chechens. They also depend on the political and religious values to which their publics are committed.

Hence, the end of the Cold War made scholars increasingly aware of the importance of ideas, norms, and information—topics that some of them had already begun to explore. Some years earlier, such a reorientation might have faced fierce criticism from adherents of game theory and other economics-based approaches, which had traditionally focused on material interests. However, since the mid-1980s, bargaining theory has shown more and more that the beliefs of actors are crucially important for outcomes. To adapt economist Thomas Schelling's famous example, suppose that you and I want to meet for lunch in New York City, but you work on Wall Street and I work on the Upper West Side. Where will we get together? We have a mutual interest in meeting, but each of us would prefer not to waste time traveling. If you leave a message on my answering machine suggesting a restaurant on Wall Street and are then unreachable, I have to choose between skipping lunch with you or showing up at your preferred location. Asymmetrical information and our mutual belief that I know where you will be waiting for me have structured the situation.

The procedures and rules of international institutions create informational structures. They determine what principles are acceptable as the basis for reducing conflicts and whether governmental actions are legitimate or illegitimate. Consequently, they help shape actors' expectations. For instance, trade conflicts are increasingly ritualized in a process of protesting in the WTO—promising tough action on behalf of one's own industries, engaging in quasi-judicial dispute resolution procedures, claiming victory if possible, or complaining about defeat when necessary. There is much sound and fury, but regularly institutionalized processes usually relegate conflict to the realm of dramatic expression. Institutions thereby create differentiated information. "Insiders" can interpret the language directed toward "outsiders" and use their own understandings to interpret, or manipulate, others' beliefs.

Finally, students of international institutions continue to try to understand why some institutions are so much more effective than others. Variation in the coherence of institutional policy or members' conformity with institutional rules is partially accounted for by the degree of common interests and the distribution of power among members. Institutions whose members share social values and have similar political systems—such as NATO or the European Union—are likely to be stronger than those such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe or the Association of South East Asian Nations, whose more diverse membership does not necessarily have the same kind of deep common interests. Additionally, the character of domestic politics, discussed elsewhere in this issue by Helen Milner, as well as by Margaret Hermann and Joe Hagan, has a substantial impact on international institutions. The distribution of power is also important. Institutions dominated by a small number of members—for example, the IMF, with its weighted voting system—can typically take more decisive action than those where influence is more widely diffused, such as the UN General Assembly.

## OVERCOMING THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

Even as scholars pursue these areas of inquiry, they are in danger of overlooking a major normative issue: the "democratic deficit" that exists in many of the world's most important international institutions. As illustrated most recently by the far-reaching interventions of the IMF in East Asia, the globalization of the world economy and the expanding role of international institutions are creating a

powerful form of global regulation. Major international institutions are increasingly laying down rules and guidelines that governments, if they wish to attract foreign investment and generate growth, must follow. But these international institutions are managed by technocrats and supervised by high governmental officials. That is, they are run by élites. Only in the most attenuated sense is democratic control exercised over major international organizations. Key negotiations in the WTO are made in closed sessions. The IMF negotiates in secret with potential borrowers, and it has only begun in the last few months to provide the conditions it imposes on recipients.

The EU provides another case in point. Its most important decision-making body is its Council of Ministers, which is composed of government representatives who perform more important legislative functions than the members of the European Parliament. The council meets

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behind closed doors and does not publish its votes. It also appoints members to the European Commission, which acts as the EU executive, whose ties to the public are thus very indirect indeed. The European Parliament has narrowly defined powers and little status;

most national parliaments do not closely scrutinize European-level actions. How much genuine influence do German or Italian voters therefore have over the council's decisions? Very little.

The issue here is not one of state sovereignty. Economic interdependence and its regulation have altered notions of sovereignty: Few states can still demand to be completely independent of external authority over legal practices within their territories. The best most states can hope for is to be able to use their sovereign authority as a bargaining tool to assure that others also have to abide by common rules and practices. Given these changes, the issue here is who has influence over the sorts of bargains that are struck? Democratic theory gives pride of place to the public role in deciding on the distributional and value tradeoffs inherent in legislation and regulation. But the practices of international institutions place that privilege in the hands of the élites of national governments and of international organizations.

Admittedly, democracy does not always work well. American politicians regularly engage in diatribes against international institutions,

playing on the dismay of a vocal segment of their electorates at the excessive number of foreigners in the United Nations. More seriously, an argument can be made that the IMF, like central banks, can only be effective if it is insulated from direct democratic control. Ever since 1787, however, practitioners and theorists have explored how authoritative decision making can be combined with accountability to publics and indirect democratic control. The U.S. Constitution is based on such a theory—the idea that popular sovereignty, though essential, is best exercised indirectly, through rather elaborate institutions. An issue that scholars should now explore is how to devise international institutions that are not only competent and effective but also accountable, at least ultimately, to democratic publics.

One possible response is to say that all is well, since international institutions are responsible to governments—which, in turn, are accountable in democracies to their own people. International regulation simply adds another link to the chain of delegation. But long chains of delegation, in which the public affects action only at several removes, reduce actual public authority. If the terms of multilateral cooperation are to reflect the interests of broader democratic publics rather than just those of narrow élites, traditional patterns of delegation will have to be supplemented by other means of ensuring greater accountability to public opinion.

One promising approach would be to seek to invigorate transnational society in the form of networks among individuals and nongovernmental organizations. The growth of such networks—of scientists, professionals in various fields, and human rights and environmental activists—has been aided greatly by the fax machine and the Internet and by institutional arrangements that incorporate these networks into decision making. For example, natural and social scientists developed the scientific consensus underlying the Kyoto Protocol through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) whose scientific work was organized by scientists who did not have to answer to any governments. The Kyoto Protocol was negotiated, but governments opposed to effective action on climate change could not hope to renegotiate the scientific guidelines set by the IPCC.

The dramatic fall in the cost of long-distance communication will facilitate the development of many more such transnational networks. As a result, wealthy hierarchical organizations—multinational corporations as well as states—are likely to have more difficulty dominating transnational communications. Thirty years ago, engaging in prolonged

intercontinental communication required considerable resources. Now individuals do so on the Internet, virtually free.

Therefore, the future accountability of international institutions to their publics may rest only partly on delegation through formal democratic institutions. Its other pillar may be voluntary pluralism under conditions of maximum transparency. International policies may increasingly be monitored by loose groupings of scientists or other professionals, or by issue advocacy networks such as Amnesty International and Greenpeace, whose members, scattered around the world, will be linked even more closely by modern information technology. Accountability will be enhanced not only by chains of official responsibility, but by the requirement of transparency. Official actions, negotiated among state representatives in international organizations, will be subjected to scrutiny by transnational networks.

Such transparency, however, represents nongovernmental organizations and networks more than ordinary people, who may be as excluded from elite networks as they are from government circles. That is, transnational civil society may be a necessary but insufficient condition for democratic accountability. Democracies should insist that, wherever feasible, international organizations maintain sufficient transparency for transnational networks of advocacy groups, domestic legislators, and democratic publics to evaluate their actions. But proponents of democratic accountability should also seek counterparts to the mechanisms of control embedded in national democratic institutions. Governors of the Federal Reserve Board are, after all, nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate, even if they exercise great authority during their terms of office. If Madison, Hamilton, and Jay could invent indirect mechanisms of popular control in the *Federalist Papers* two centuries ago, it should not be beyond our competence to devise comparable mechanisms at the global level in the twenty-first century.

As we continue to think about the normative implications of globalization, we should focus simultaneously on the maintenance of robust democratic institutions at home, the establishment of formal structures of international delegation, and the role of transnational networks. To be effective in the twenty-first century, modern democracy requires international institutions. And to be consistent with democratic values, these institutions must be accountable to domestic civil society. Combining global governance with effective democratic accountability will be a major challenge for scholars and policymakers alike in the years ahead.

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## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The best single source for academic writings on international institutions is the quarterly journal *International Organization*, published by MIT Press. A forthcoming special issue, scheduled for Autumn 1998, will review the last 30 years of scholarship in the field.

The sophisticated realism of the 1970s, which largely ignored international institutions, is best represented by Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of World Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1979). For data on numbers of international organizations, see Cheryl Shanks, Harold Jacobson, & Jeffrey Kaplan's "**Inertia and Change in the Constellation of International Governmental Organizations, 1981–1992**" (*International Organization*, Autumn 1996). For statements of institutionalist theory, see Robert Keohane's *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984) and Kenneth Oye, ed., *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). For a reflection on this literature by an international lawyer, see Anne-Marie Slaughter [Burley], "**International Law and International Relations Theory: A Dual Agenda**" (*American Journal of International Law*, April 1993).

On the United Nations and multilateralism, see Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *A Dangerous Place* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1978); Keohane & Joseph Nye, Jr.'s "**Two Cheers for Multilateralism**" (*FOREIGN POLICY*, Fall 1985); and John Ruggie's *Winning the Peace* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press for the Twentieth Century Fund, 1996).

The "relative gains debate" is thoroughly reported in David Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: the Contemporary Debate* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993).

On bargaining and distributional issues, see Stephen Krasner's "**Global Communications and National Power: Life on the Pareto Frontier**" (*World Politics*, April 1991); James Morrow's "**Modeling the Forms of International Cooperation: Distribution versus Information**" (*International Organization*, Summer 1994); and James Fearon's "**Bargaining, Enforcement and International Cooperation**" (*International Organization*, forthcoming).

Work on the legalization of international institutions is just beginning; my comments in this article reflect an ongoing project on this

subject that I am codirecting with Judith Goldstein, Miles Kahler, and Anne-Marie Burley.

On the role of ideas, see Goldstein & Keohane, eds., ***Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*** (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) and Martha Finnemore's ***National Interests in International Society*** (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). Finally, on transnational issue networks, see Burley's "The Real New World Order" (*Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1997) and Margaret Keck & Kathryn Sikkink's ***Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*** (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

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