

# Correspondence

Back to the Future, Part II:  
International Relations Theory and  
Post-Cold War Europe

Stanley Hoffmann  
Robert O. Keohane  
John J. Mearsheimer

**T**o the Editors:

Professor Mearsheimer's essay, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War,"<sup>1</sup> seems to me to be almost a caricature of neo-realism. One simply can't deal with international politics at the level of theoretical abstraction and dogmatism exhibited here. The paper has all the elegance of a mathematical theorem, and just about as much relevance to reality.

The flat statement that bipolarity breeds more stability than multipolarity is the orthodox structural realism of Kenneth Waltz, and is otherwise based on a mis- or non-reading of history. Had Mearsheimer been influenced by Raymond Aron instead of Kenneth Waltz, he would have stated the opposite, as Aron's ideal-type of bipolarity was derived from the Peloponnesian War, whereas Waltz's comes from the postwar system. Here's the rub: maybe the stability of that system comes (a) from nuclear weapons, (b) from the specific features of the two superpowers; for after all in a bipolar system these features are likely to affect decisively the outcome of the contest (war or peace)—which may help explain why so many bipolar contests have led to war, and only a few have not. Therefore, the remark that "when an equal bipolarity arose and nuclear weapons appeared, peace broke out. This correlation suggests that the bipolarity theory, the equality theory, and the nuclear theory of the

---

*Stanley Hoffmann is C. Douglas Dillon Professor of the Civilization of France, and Chair of the Center for European Studies at Harvard University.*

---

*Robert O. Keohane is Stanfield Professor of International Peace, and Chair of the Department of Government at Harvard University.*

---

*John J. Mearsheimer is Professor, and Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago.*

---

1. John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56. Subsequent references to this article appear in parentheses in the text.

---

*International Security*, Fall 1990 (Vol. 15, No. 2)  
© 1990 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

long peace are valid" (pp. 21–22) is a *non sequitur*. All the factors Waltz and Mearsheimer cite in order to show the advantages of bipolarity are those that at other times have led to war, as Thucydides showed so well.

It wasn't just multipolarity that led to war in 1914 and 1939—for if multipolarity breeds war, it is also multipolarity that breeds peace at other moments. Structural factors do not cause or explain outcomes themselves. In anarchy, any structure can lead either to peace or to war; it depends on the domestic characteristics of the main actors, on their preferences and goals, as well as on the relations and links among them.

This is very relevant to the future of Europe. In order to understand the risks of instability and war, one ought to look at more than the number of "poles." One ought to ask about the goals of states and the stakes that might lead to war, at a minimum. And if one does, I think that the gloom and nostalgia for the Cold War exhibited by Mearsheimer would appear quaint. Nowhere does he analyze concretely the threats to physical security that could produce the nightmarish multipolar scene he forecasts.

It is most unlikely that the neighbors of Germany and the superpowers will tolerate a nuclear Reich; nor is it easy to understand against what enemy, or for what gain, the Germans might want to go nuclear. The most likely scenario with respect to these weapons is the one Mearsheimer dismisses: nuclear status quo. I wonder what "minor power of Eastern Europe" (p. 36) will have the means or desire to go nuclear; nuclear blackmail hasn't been much of an issue, and I do not see who would try it.

Mearsheimer has an easy time criticizing the interdependence and the liberal regime theorists, but he ought to learn more about the European Community and about the way in which its existence and institutions affect the goals and expectations of its members. Prosperity is a key objective for them, and for Germany economic power is a far more attractive and useful means to influence both West and East than weapons. As for maintaining order in Eastern Europe, I suspect that regional modes of cooperation, and the European Community, will be much more significant than the Soviet Union. There may be nationalisms and localized violence in Eastern Europe, but domestic upheavals caused by economic troubles are a far bigger issue than war. We are neither in 1914 nor in 1939. Mearsheimer's view is depressingly static, like Waltz's. His thesis is also arrogant, for he assumes that the Europeans have learned nothing from their past errors, and need the superpowers to keep them at peace. Mediocre theory leads to bad analysis.

—Stanley Hoffmann  
Cambridge, Mass.

**T***o the Editors:*

In "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," John Mearsheimer makes a number of arresting and controversial arguments about nuclear proliferation, the peacefulness of democratic states, and the impact on military conflict of economic interdependence and international institutions such as the European Community. I

appreciate his willingness to make predictions while expressing humility about our theories, and I agree that the end of the Cold War allows us, within limits, to use the world “as a laboratory to decide which theories best explain international politics” (p. 9). But I think that he underestimates the impact of international institutions on world politics, particularly in contemporary Europe.

Professor Mearsheimer places great weight on the fact of “anarchy”—the absence of centralized enforcement powers on a global basis. However, on his own account, the Western European experience during the Cold War shows that anarchy does not necessarily prevent cooperation. Instead, although anarchy in this sense has been a constant throughout this century, cooperation among states has varied substantially. Thus Mearsheimer’s statement that “anarchy guarantees that security will often be scarce” (p. 45) is unsatisfying, because it does not indicate the conditions under which a scarcity of security will occur. “Anarchy” is a disappointing analytical category because it is not a variable; we must look elsewhere to explain variations in the incidence of military conflict.

In a theory of state policy based on the assumption of rationality, as assumed by Professor Mearsheimer’s form of realism, states seek to maximize expected utility. Expected utility, as the label implies, depends on expectations about the consequences of alternative courses of action: that is, on judgments of probability. The rational judgments of leaders depend not simply on the absence of a centralized international government able to enforce its injunctions, but on their expectations about other states’ likely actions.

Professor Mearsheimer agrees that expectations are important. He argues that where security is assured (as it has been among members of the European Community), states tend to seek absolute gains; but when security is scarce, they become more concerned about relative gains. Expectations, he argues, depend on domestic and international political structures. During the Cold War, bipolarity reduced the likelihood of conflict, and European states “lacked the incentive to purvey hypernationalism” (p. 29). Structural features of the European international system therefore created the conditions under which states rationally emphasized absolute gains and managed therefore to cooperate extensively with one another.

Without denying the importance of either of those variables, I suggest that the nature and strength of international institutions are also important determinants of expectations and therefore of state behavior. Insofar as states regularly follow the rules and standards of international institutions, they signal their willingness to continue patterns of cooperation, and therefore reinforce expectations of stability. Doing so does not mean eschewing either one’s own interests or the search for influence: indeed, in contemporary Europe, Germany can best acquire both wealth and influence by building European institutions, thus reassuring its partners and preventing the formation of the balancing coalitions that Professor Mearsheimer describes: insofar as they assure states about their security, institutions allow governments to emphasize absolute rather than relative gains, and therefore maintain the conditions for their own existence. Conversely, when institutions collapse, they are particularly hard to reconstruct, since insecure states, seeking relative gains, find it extremely difficult to cooperate sufficiently to build significant international institutions.

It should be clear that the institutionalist argument made in the last paragraph does not depend on the assumptions that states are altruistic, that they always seek absolute gains, or that economic interdependence necessarily leads to cooperation. On the contrary, the view I put forward assumes that states are self-interested, that they may seek relative as well as absolute gains, and that interdependence can indeed lead to conflict. What distinguishes my argument from Professor Mearsheimer's is my claim that international institutions help to shape the expectations that both of us agree are crucial determinants of state behavior.

From a policy perspective, emphasizing institutions is particularly important, since they are more responsive to human action than either fundamental political tendencies such as hyper-nationalism, or the international political structures of bipolarity or multipolarity. In my view, avoiding military conflict in Europe after the Cold War depends greatly on whether the next decade is characterized by a continuous pattern of institutionalized cooperation. Will NATO and the Warsaw Pact be gradually transformed into non-antagonistic organizations? Will a powerful European Community increasingly attain political as well as economic union? Can broader institutions, such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), be strengthened in order to give states confidence in others' peaceful intentions toward them? Students of world politics could profitably spend more of their time asking how international institutions should be structured, both within Western and Central Europe and between Europe and other powerful states, in order to prevent the recurrence of a fear-driven slide toward military conflict that would be disastrous for our generation and those to follow.

—Robert O. Keohane  
Cambridge, Mass.

### *The Author Replies:*

Professors Stanley Hoffmann and Robert Keohane challenge some of the arguments I develop in my Summer 1990 *International Security* article, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," and briefly set forth alternative theories that they believe show that post-Cold War Europe will be stable. They raise important issues and I welcome this opportunity to respond. I will deal in turn with each author's arguments.

Hoffmann starts by challenging my claim that bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity. He suggests that historical examples of warfare in bipolar systems, such as the Peloponnesian War, show that bipolarity is as likely as multipolarity to lead to war. In fact, I pointed out in "Back to the Future" (p. 18) that history does offer examples of warlike bipolar systems, including ancient Greece. However, listing examples of bipolar conflict does not prove that bipolarity is as unstable as multipolarity. A comprehensive survey of history would be needed to make that judgment on empirical grounds. Since we do not have such a survey, my argument—as I

stated—was based largely on deduction. Hoffmann neither challenges my logic nor offers deductive arguments of his own.

Hoffmann then presents his central thesis: the future course of European history will not be shaped by the particular structure of the state system on the Continent, but will be determined primarily by domestic forces. He writes, "In anarchy, any structure can lead either to peace or to war; it depends on the domestic characteristics of the main actors, on their preferences and goals, as well as on the relations and links among them."

Hoffmann's claim about the primacy of domestic politics stands in direct opposition to the thesis I presented in "Back to the Future." His general line of argument is perfectly legitimate, especially since the relative power of systemic versus domestic-level explanations for international politics has not yet been determined by empirical research. However, there are two problems with the specific case he makes.

First, the evidence Hoffmann adduces to challenge my assessment of the future prospects for stability in Europe after the Cold War comes to a complete end is not an appropriate test of the theories I employ.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, he challenges my argument, that the prospects for major crises and war are likely to increase markedly in post-Cold War Europe, by pointing to the state of affairs in the *existing* European order. For example, he sees no evidence today that Germany and the minor powers of Eastern Europe will feel so threatened in the future that they will countenance acquiring nuclear weapons. He also regards the present European Community (EC) as a powerful force for stability.

This line of argument, however, misses the central point of my analysis, which is that if the Cold War comes to a complete end, the present European system would undergo a fundamental change that would profoundly alter relations among the individual European states. If my analysis is correct, the behavior of the various European states will not be affected until the system changes. Since this systemic change is just beginning, we should not yet expect to find marked changes in patterns of state behavior. Thus, looking at the existing EC or at present German attitudes toward nuclear weapons is not going to tell us much about what the future may hold, since these factors are by-products of the bipolar order that has structured European politics for the past 45 years. It is not surprising, nor does it contradict my argument, that Hoffmann finds cause for optimism when he looks at the details of European politics today. The key question is: what will relations between the European states look like *after* the system has moved from bipolar to multipolar?

Second, Hoffmann does not specify his chosen theories for predicting events in Europe. Other than to assert that domestic forces will be determinant, Hoffmann says little else about the matter. He does not say which of the many possible "domestic characteristics of the main actors" he considers central for causing peace. Will stability in post-Cold War Europe be a function of specific kinds of political regimes, the

---

1. By "the complete end of the Cold War," I refer to the scenario in which the Soviet Union withdraws all of its forces from Eastern Europe, U.S. and British forces are withdrawn from the European continent, and NATO and the Warsaw Pact either dissolve or cease to function as alliances.

absence of class conflict, the emergence of particular ideologies, the demise of militarism, or possibly the decline of nationalism? He also does not say why he believes that domestic forces will successfully mute the pressures for conflict that are inherent in an anarchic system. Hoffmann has written extensively and wisely about anarchy and war; he undoubtedly recognizes that such pressures would exist in multipolar Europe.<sup>2</sup> But his letter fails to explain how these pressures would be controlled.

Hoffmann also fails to specify the theory that underlies his emphasis on the positive role that the EC will play in a multipolar Europe. He observes that I have an "easy time criticizing" the theories that underpin the claim that the EC will be a powerful force for peace. His solution to this problem is not to offer a better theory to buttress his claims about the EC, but instead to advise that I get to know the EC better. Sound predictions, however, cannot be based simply on one scholar's intuitions or judgments; they must instead be based on well-grounded theories.<sup>3</sup> The principal aim of social science, after all, is to free the analysis of critical social phenomena from the risks of personal prejudice and unsupported assertion.

Obviously, one cannot expect Hoffmann to address these issues in detail in a short letter. Nevertheless, if he is going to challenge me by arguing for the primacy of domestic politics, or by invoking the EC, a synopsis of his views is required. Specifically, he should outline an explanation of what is likely to transpire in post-Cold War Europe that can supplant mine. In the struggle to explain international politics, all theories have flaws. The crucial task, however, is to determine which of the competing theories is least flawed and therefore most convincing.<sup>4</sup> If Hoffmann would go beyond criticizing my argument and provide an alternative theory, then we could compare the two and determine which is superior.

Robert Keohane's principal point is that international institutions matter much more than I recognize, thus implying—but never stating clearly—that organizations like the EC will provide the basis for a stable order in post-Cold War Europe. Keohane's book, *After Hegemony*, lays out his views on the role and impact of international

---

2. See Stanley Hoffmann, *The State of War: Essays on the Theory and Practice of International Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1965). "International politics is a 'state of war'—a competition of units in the kind of state of nature that knows no restraints other than those which the changing necessities of the game and the shallow conveniences of the game impose. Obviously, there are oases of real peace and periods in which the competition is less fierce, but . . . the 'state of war' is the aspect of international relations that dominates" (pp. vii–viii).

3. Hoffmann nicely summarized this point three decades ago: "The reader will find here no plea for theory for its own sake. Theory is no more than a 'set of tools whose usefulness is tested in their ability to solve concrete problems.' But these tools are indispensable. Scholars in every social science have recognized that collecting facts is not enough and that it is not helpful to gather answers when no questions have been asked. Without theory, we will have to take whatever the other disciplines may see fit to dump into our plate. Indigestion is the only possible result. With adequate theory, we will help ourselves." Stanley Hoffmann, ed., *Contemporary Theory in International Relations* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1960), pp. 8–9.

4. Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 91–196.

institutions.<sup>5</sup> However, an examination of this book reveals four reasons to doubt his claim that institutions hold the key to peace in a multipolar Europe.

First, Keohane does not demonstrate, and in fact, does not claim in *After Hegemony* that international institutions significantly enhance the prospects for world peace. To do so, institutions must have sufficient power to force states to act against their own interests. Unfortunately, anarchy often puts states in a position where their interests conflict and they have little incentive to cooperate. Institutions would truly matter if they could step into such a fray and impose a peaceful settlement. Keohane recognizes that institutions lack such power.<sup>6</sup> In fact, he has a much more modest view of what institutions can do; specifically, he sees them as facilitating cooperation in situations where states already have strong common interests.<sup>7</sup> He acknowledges that he has little to say about the role of institutions in circumstances where there are conflicting rather than common interests between states. These more hostile situations, of course, are the most important ones for determining the likelihood of wars and major crises. Neither Keohane's theory nor the rest of his written work addresses them. Thus, although institutions might sometimes matter more than I concede, they cannot, according to Keohane's own logic, matter very much for maintaining stability in a multipolar Europe.

Second, Keohane's theory of institutions is of little relevance to post-Cold War Europe. He concedes that his theory covers only those cases where competition for

5. Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

6. I do not deny that institutions can foster cooperation among competitor states on marginal issues, provided that the rival states desire to minimize defense costs and avoid war. However, this cooperation is limited to marginal issues, and will not markedly affect the likelihood of war. The strategic arms control agreements that have emerged during the Cold War are a good example of such cooperation. They did little more than ratify the existing weapons acquisition plans of the superpowers, but in so doing they probably curbed the arms race on the margin. Specifically, the ceilings on force levels set by these agreements may have slowed the growth of both sides' arsenals by giving each side confidence that the other would not build beyond the agreed limits. The Incidents at Sea Agreement and the understanding that each superpower would tolerate surveillance of its own territory by the other side also provided marginal benefits. They prevented accidental encounters at sea, helped each side to verify the other's compliance with the strategic arms agreements, and limited each superpower's tendency to exaggerate the size of the other side's forces. The contribution of these agreements was not trivial, but they did not affect the prospect of war in a fundamental way. See Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "The Incidents at Sea Agreement," in Alexander L. George, Philip J. Farley, and Alexander Dallin, eds., *U.S.-Soviet Security Cooperation: Achievements, Failures, Lessons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 482-509; John Lewis Gaddis, "The Evolution of a Reconnaissance Satellite Regime," in *ibid.*, pp. 353-372; and Steven E. Miller, "The Limits of Mutual Restraint: Arms Control and the Strategic Balance" (PhD dissertation, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, 1988).

7. Keohane writes, "The theory that I develop takes the existence of mutual interests as given and examines the conditions under which they will lead to cooperation. . . . To illustrate and test my ideas about cooperation and discord . . . I focus first on the areas where common interests are greatest and where the benefits of international cooperation may be easiest to realize." Keohane, *After Hegemony*, pp. 6-7.

security is muted and where the focus of attention is mainly on economic issues.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, he has studied cooperation among advanced Western democracies with market economies. The Cold War order largely eliminated military threats among those states. He has not examined East-West relations, where military competition has been more intense. Thus, he has chosen cases where cooperation was most likely to be realized, and has developed a theory that says little about the control of security-driven competition, a variety of international competition that is very common. Its value for understanding issues of war and peace in post-Cold War Europe, where security concerns are likely to become increasingly salient in the politics among states, is therefore small.

Third, there is a fundamental flaw in the deductive logic of Keohane's theory, as Joseph Grieco has shown in an important article.<sup>9</sup> Keohane seeks to demonstrate that anarchy does not prevent significant cooperation among states. Grieco shows that Keohane's logic proceeds by assuming that states are concerned solely with absolute gains, not relative gains. It is much easier to achieve cooperation among states when the goal is simply to make sure that the economic pie is expanding and each state is getting at least some portion of the increase. In a system of states that must compete for security, however, all must be deeply concerned about the relative balance of power. Therefore, they cannot afford the luxury of concentrating on absolute gains, but must also pay careful attention to exactly how the expanding pie is divided.

Grieco demonstrates that Keohane missed this point when he developed his theory in *After Hegemony*. Once it is recognized, however, his theory largely collapses. The several references in Keohane's letter to differences between absolute and relative gains indicate that he is now aware of this distinction, but there is no evidence in either his letter or his subsequent published work that he has repaired the theory.<sup>10</sup>

Fourth, there is little historical evidence to support Keohane's optimism about the positive influence that institutions might have on European stability. The League of Nations and the United Nations are the two most obvious examples of international institutions that were established to facilitate stability, but ended up having little impact on the course of international politics. The International Energy Agency (IEA), which Keohane studied in *After Hegemony*, offers a third disheartening example. He concludes that the IEA was not very successful: "We see . . . that regime-oriented efforts at cooperation do not always succeed, as the fiasco of IEA actions in 1979 illustrates, but they can have a positive impact under relatively favorable conditions, as the events of 1980 suggest." (P. 16.) Keohane chose the IEA case precisely because it involved relations among advanced Western democracies with market economies, where prospects for cooperation were great. The modesty of the impact of institutions in this case is thus all the more damning.

Given the lack of support for his theories, one naturally wonders what evidence Keohane would now employ to make his case. Possibly he would point to the past

---

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–7.

9. Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 485–507.

10. See Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1989), chap. 1.

successes of the EC and argue that it will grow more powerful and influential in multipolar Europe. The difficulty is that the Cold War provided a hothouse environment in which the EC could flourish. If the Cold War ends and the stable order it produced collapses, the EC is likely to grow weaker, not stronger with time.

Students of international politics now face the challenge of assessing how momentous political changes in Europe will affect the prospects for peace and war. The only way to make sense out of what is sure to be a very complex situation is to apply social science theories to the problem. The virtue of this approach is that it allows us, looking at a complicated world, to isolate those factors that are likely to be the driving forces of history. To do so, the theory must be clearly articulated, the links between the theory and developments in Europe must be specified, and predictions must be made as explicit as possible.

I have tried to achieve those goals in "Back to the Future," however imperfect their realization. I hope others will follow suit by providing sophisticated analyses that offer different views of the future.<sup>11</sup> We will then wait and see whose analysis proves most correct. In that spirit, I invite Hoffmann and Keohane to move beyond their necessarily short letters and provide a detailed explication of their thinking about the future of Europe.

—John J. Mearsheimer  
Chicago, Illinois

---

11. Jack Snyder has also made a major effort toward these ends, and reaches less pessimistic conclusions than mine. See Snyder, "Averting Anarchy in the New Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Spring 1990), pp. 5–41.