

Original Paper

The Theory of International Regimes and US-Soviet Cooperation during the Cold War

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Abstract

*The main question examined in this paper is whether the cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War can be explained by Robert O. Keohane's theory of international regimes, based on his analysis of international regimes and cooperation in his book *After Hegemony*. My answer is no. In order to explain the reasons, this paper is mainly divided into two parts. The first part summarizes the relationship between international regimes and international cooperation as Keohane sees it through an examination of chapters three to six of *After Hegemony*. The core task of the second part is to explain why the theory of international regimes is not consistent with U.S.-Soviet cooperation during the Cold War, and to show that realpolitik can explain U.S.-Soviet cooperation during the Cold War better than the theory of international regimes by explaining cooperation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the areas of arms control and trade and commerce, using the 1970s, the second period of *d'écate* between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, as the time frame.*

Keywords

Cooperation, International regimes, US-Soviet, The Cold War

1. Introduction

After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy links Keohane's explanation on international regimes to the question of cooperation after hegemony. The book's main research question is how states organize cooperation in the world political economy when common interests exist, and how cooperation should be carried out. Keohane's research focuses on the relationship between developed market economies because he argues that these countries have more common interests and that they are more interconnected as their economies operate in essentially the same way. Moreover, Keohane believes that the book's arguments certainly apply to some of the relationships between developed market economies and less developed countries. But U.S.-Soviet relations are neither relations between developed market economies nor between developed and developing countries, since the Soviet Union, although a developed country, had a highly centralized

planned economic system that clearly differed from the U.S.'s capitalist free-market economic system. Keohane also recognizes that, perhaps to a more limited extent, his analysis should also be relevant to those areas of East-West relations in which there are common interests. This raises the question of whether the book's theory can really be applied to U.S.-Soviet relations during the Cold War, or, more precisely, whether U.S.-Soviet cooperation can be explained by Keohane's interpretation of the relationship between international regimes and cooperation? In my opinion, the theory of international regimes does not explain the cooperation between the two great powers very well.

2. Keohane's Views on Cooperation and International Regimes

Before further analysis, we need to clarify Keohane's definition of cooperation and international regimes. For Keohane, discord is a state of affairs in which governments of each state view each other's policies as obstacles to the achievement of their goals and hold each responsible for constraints on their policy coordination. Harmony is a state in which the policies of actors automatically contribute to the achievement of the goals of other actors. Cooperation, on the other hand, is not a state of harmony, and cooperation does not mean the absence of conflict; it should be seen as a response to conflict or potential conflict, requiring a process of negotiation to bring the actions of separate individuals or organizations into harmony with each other. According to the authoritative definition, an international institution or regime is a set of implicitly explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures organized around an established field of international relations where the expectations of actors converge. Among other things, the authors view norms simply as standards of behavior, arguing that the principles of an institution define the goals that its members aspire to pursue, that rules encompass in more detail than norms the particular rights and obligations of its members, and that principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures all prescribe particular actions and prohibit others. International regimes are not equivalent to the traditional notion of an international system, nor should they be confined to utopias with truly normative content.

There is no doubt that cooperation is valuable, but the author also acknowledges that the fact of unequal development that exists in the context of a system of states makes the struggle regular and thus cooperation incomplete and fragile, and difficult to organize. At the same time, the principles of sovereignty and self-help make the principles, norms and rules in international regimes necessarily fragile. However, the authors do not argue on this basis that international regimes and cooperation are impossible, instead he believes that international regimes are in their own interest and influence the perception of national interests, and that institutions may become increasingly useful in an increasingly interdependent world political economy. With regard to the relationship between cooperation and international regimes, the author argues that cooperation without hegemony can be fostered by the role of international regimes, which can promote further efforts to harmonize policies among States. Moreover, in order to come close to reality, we also need to analyze international cooperation in the context of international regimes, in the sense of practices and expectations. International regimes can

be seen as mediating factors or intervening variables in issues of cooperation and discord. It should be noted that the authors sometimes blur the concept of and relationship between international regimes and cooperation in the course of his analysis, and cooperation sometimes seems to turn out to be synonymous with international regimes, which, by implication in this book, sometimes seem to appear automatically and simultaneously; after all, the establishment and maintenance of international regimes is itself a manifestation of cooperation. Overall, the author argues that international regimes make cooperation possible after hegemony.

Why do international regimes promote international cooperation? This can be answered by the authors' analysis of the effects and functions of international regimes. Through the model of rational egoism, the author argues that if egoists oversee mutual behaviors, and if enough of them are willing to cooperate on the condition that others will also do so, then they may adjust their behavior to reduce discord and even create and maintain international regimes, which facilitate adjusted behavior that is reached without negotiation by providing guidelines for actors' behavior. In discussing the function of international regimes, the authors argue that international regimes have the function of establishing a model of legal responsibility, presenting relatively symmetrical information, and arranging the costs of negotiation so that specific agreements can be made, and that international regimes can reduce the costs of legal transactions, increase the costs of illegal transactions, and reduce behavioral uncertainty thus facilitating cooperation. Governments tend to comply with international regimes because they affect the definition of national self-interest. How does that influence arise? The authors offer two paths to answer this question: one argumentative path is to look at an institution in isolation and examine its value. Since institutions are difficult to construct, it is only rational to follow the rules in regimes if the outcome of the choice of alternatives leads to the collapse of the established institutions. Cooperation will depend on the pattern of established institutions, in addition to the need for common or complementary interests. The creation of new international regimes may be facilitated by the sense of mutual trust fostered by the old ones. Another path of argumentation is to place institutions in the context of other institutions in world politics, and the author argues that even when their own short-sighted interests caution against implementing international regimes, self-interested governments will still abide by the rules and principles of international regimes out of reputational considerations and for fear of reprisals and setting bad precedents (Robert, 1984)).

3. Theory of International Regimes and U.S.-Soviet Cooperation

3.1 U.S.-Soviet Detente and Cooperation

Between 1947 and 1991, the United States and the Soviet Union created a bipolar pattern of confrontation between East and West throughout the world. At the same time, throughout the course of the Cold War confrontation, there were several detente situations and some cooperation between the two superpowers. From the mid-1950s to the 1960s, U.S.-Soviet relations experienced the first detente, when the Soviet Union implemented the policy of “peaceful coexistence, peaceful competition, and

peaceful transition”, replacing full-scale confrontation with detente; while the Eisenhower administration adopted the “New Look” strategy, which no longer contained the Soviet Union by mere encirclement. Against the backdrop of the fine-tuning of U.S.-Soviet strategy, the Cold War between the East and the West tended to de-escalate, and East-West summit consultations on international issues were promoted. However, although the Camp David Conference between Nikita Khrushchev and Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1959 marked the culmination of the first detente in the Cold War, the conference did not achieve substantial progress, and the U-2 incident shattered the d é t e n t e , while the First Berlin Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis pushed the Cold War to a new climax. At the beginning of the 1970s, because of a combination of international and domestic factors, U.S.-Soviet relations experienced a second detente, with the leaders of the U.S. and the Soviet Union meeting several times to reach a series of treaties limiting the use of strategic offensive nuclear weapons, and the U.S.-Soviet economic and trade relations were developed to a certain extent, with the volume of trade between the two sides increasing tenfold from 1969 to 1976 (Liu, 2018)). But by the end of the 1970s, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Ronald Reagan coming into office, U.S.-Soviet relations were strained again. In the mid-1980s, with the introduction of Gorbachev's “New Thinking” strategy and a series of reforms, U.S.-Soviet relations entered a third period of detente, which lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union. In these three situations of detente, the first detente did not fundamentally change the hostile and antagonistic relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, for they did not form a substantive cooperation; while the third detente was a new period of comprehensive reconciliation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union which was achieved at the expense of the Soviet Union's great concessions, when detente was more of an inevitable result of the Soviet Union's decadence. Therefore, in the following I will choose the cooperation during the second U.S.-Soviet d é t e n t e as the main case to test the author's theory, which was dominated by arms control and supplemented by the development of economic and trade relations, but this cooperation was not solid.

3.2 Limitations of International Regimes Theory

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States were at loggerheads over international political and economic arrangements, and socialist countries such as the Soviet Union and the Eastern European were basically taking a passively receptive attitude, even with refusal, rather than being proactive, in the building of the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and others. But in terms of international arms control regimes, spurred on by the Cuban Missile Crisis that erupted in the early 1960s, the Soviet Union, together with the United States, led the establishment of a number of arms control regimes that have had a major impact on international political and economic arrangements. If there is any area of U.S.-Soviet cooperation that is relatively more in line with international regime theory, it is in the area of arms control. Prominent U.S.-Soviet cooperation in limiting strategic nuclear weapons in the 1970s included the U.S.-Soviet Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty I (SALT I), signed in 1972, and the Strategic Offensive Arms Limitation Treaty II (SALT II), signed in 1979, which established strategic arms limits for both sides. In the process of promoting the

construction of arms control system, the international regime theory can indeed provide a certain explanation for the cooperation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Because the U.S. and the Soviet Union expected that international regimes could promote cooperation, they never gave up dialogue and negotiation in areas such as arms control and disarmament; the construction of international arms control regimes has imposed certain constraints on the behavior of the two sides and other countries, objectively preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, or at least halting the momentum of such proliferation; a series of Soviet-US arms control negotiations during the Cold War increased contacts and dialogues, which made it possible to increase the transparency of the two sides' strategic intentions and their strategic bottom lines, and enable them to understand each other's actual situation and intentions better, thus reducing the mistakes in strategic decisions and the ensuing needless economic wastage.

But beyond these aspects, the explanatory power of Keohane's theory of international regimes is very limited. As Prof. Su Changhe said, the explanation of international regimes in After Hegemony still tends to fall into the functionalist flaw of "there are regimes because there is a need for regimes", which makes it impossible to explain some of the questions. Since the United States and the Soviet Union theoretically have always needed arms control regimes to promote cooperation between them in nuclear arms control and disarmament, and since cooperation can safeguard their common interests and bring them a win-win situation, then why did the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union continue for decades since the Cuban missile crisis, and it was not until the mid-1980s and mid-1990s that the nuclear confrontation began to collapse (Sun & Ma, 2014)? Why did SALTII eventually fail to take effect? Why was it that, although the United States and the Soviet Union never terminated arms control negotiations, it was not until July 1991 that the United States and the Soviet Union signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty-I (START-I), the first arms control treaty during the Cold War that truly met the common aspirations of the international community (Qiu, 2011)? The role of international regimes, while not necessarily ineffective, is somewhat tenuous in the face of many realistic factors. The author does, of course, acknowledge that common or complementary interests are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of an institution, and that even where they exist, it is extremely difficult to overcome the problems of transaction costs and uncertainty; international regimes and cooperation are fragile and difficult to organize. At the same time, he also mentions that interstate games can be suspended due to sudden acts of violence, which is also in line with the fact that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led to the suspension of US-Soviet cooperation for a while. However, although the author adds many limiting premises to his theory, and he admits that international regimes are only one of the interfering factors in the problem of cooperation and discord without excluding the role of other realistic factors, which makes his theory logically sound, his theory still possesses the fatal flaw of not being able to predict the reality in a relatively accurate way. The author proposes factors that promote cooperation and factors that impede cooperation, but fails to predict when cooperation will be achieved, when it will break down, and to what extent does the

resistance or impetus of cooperation have to reach before cooperation is achieved or broken; nor is he able to explain when multiple realistic factors are at play, how do they interact with each other, and how their roles are prioritized. His theories are often limited to post hoc explanations. After the outcome is produced, specific factors are selected based on the outcome to explain why the collaboration failed or succeeded. One reason for this shortcoming lies in the fact that the theory, in order to focus on what happens when institutional factors play a central role in motivating cooperation, makes the assumption that in many cases cooperation in the world political economy fails not because the countries involved are themselves so selfish or resistant to cooperating, but rather because of the lack of effective institutions or flaws in the established regimes. Thus, in the course of the discussion, we are reminded of the view that the establishment and maintenance of regimes need not take much into account the willingness and views of the specific states concerned, or that, so long as there are international regimes in place, the perspectives of interests of these countries can be almost completely changed, and cooperation can become a matter of course. Therefore, we can see that Keohane's theory of international regimes implies a specific scope of application and assumptions without detailing them, and the narrowness of the theory's assumptions also determines the narrowness of its scope of interpretation. Because it does not conform to his theory's assumptions, the examples of U.S.-Soviet cooperation, including arms control cooperation, cannot be interpreted by the international regimes theory.

3.3 Reasons for the U.S.-Soviet Detente and Its Substance

The detente and cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1970s, including arms control negotiations and the development of economic and trade relations, cannot be well explained by international regime theory because, as stated above, international regimes did not play a central role in the beginning and breakdown of these cooperations, common interests did not directly lead to cooperation, and the detente of the U.S.-Soviet relationship was driven more by practical factors. Although power politics does not reflect the entirety of the real world, in the bipolar pattern of the time, the use of power theory to explain U.S.-Soviet relations could provide a more convincing argument, and the logic of realism could even be said to have dominated the changing pattern of the Cold War. In the 1970s, the failure of the Vietnam War and the Korean War caused the United States to suffer a great deal, thus it broke out in economic crisis and lost the status of the "Golden Dollar Empire", with its position of power declined dramatically. As the economic power of the United States declined, Western Europe and Japan, as its allies, wanted to reduce their dependence on the US, and thus pursued a relatively independent policy, which led to the phenomenon of alienation among the allies. These facts prompted the United States to adopt a policy of detente toward the Soviet Union. The strategy of detente was also an integral part of Soviet world strategy. Indeed, for the USSR, the detente strategy was a political stratagem in which the USSR used the climate of detente to promote reconciliation between East and West Europe and East and West Germany, also basically solved all the European problems left behind in the post-war period. The USSR also obtained large loans and advanced

technical equipment from Western Europe, which accelerated its economic development. The strategy of detente did not at all restrain the Soviet Union's foreign expansion, and was therefore righteously called by some Western observers an "offensive strategy" under the rhetoric of peace (Gu, 2008). The same logic applies to the United States. Officially, the US strategy of economic detente was openly claimed to be designed to use trade concessions as a political tool to constrain the Soviets when they are adventurous and to encourage them when they are cooperative. Indeed, the United States had used the development of economic relations as a bargaining chip to force the USSR to make concessions on issues such as North Vietnam, the limitation of strategic nuclear weapons, and Soviet domestic policy. It is thus clear that economic detente by the US was not the end of containment, but a new form and continuation of containment (Niu, 2001). In 1979, with the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and Reagan's hard-line policy towards the USSR after he came to power, the relationship between the two countries became tense again, the arms race escalated, and the United States began to impose large-scale economic sanctions on the Soviet Union. So while U.S.-Soviet cooperation in the areas of arms control as well as economy and trade was in their mutual interest, the timing of the beginning and suspension of such cooperation could not have been predicted by international regimes theory. The fragility of international institutions is even greater than the authors admits.

4. Conclusions

Through the above analysis, we can see that the second detente in U.S.-Soviet relations in the 1970s was not the end of the U.S.-Soviet contest for hegemony in the Cold War, but rather another manifestation of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. Despite the existence of common or complementary interests, the cooperation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the fields of arms control and trade and commerce is still filled with power struggles, and the beginning and suspension of cooperation cannot be explained by international regimes theory. Although negotiations in the field of arms control can be partially explained by Keohane's theory, the theory in *After Hegemony* remains a relatively limited explanatory tool. The cooperation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was shaky and subject to realpolitik, so it is difficult for international regimes theory to provide a rational and convincing explanation for U.S.-Soviet cooperation throughout the Cold War.

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