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Goodbye to all that? Institutionalist theory, U.S. alliances, and Trump

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Abstract (max 150 words)

In an important and stimulating article, Stephan Frühling and Andrew O'Neil argue in favor of applying institutionalist theory to understand the alliance politics of U.S. nuclear weapons strategy. But what promise does institutionalist theory really hold in thinking about highly unequal alliances nested in their particular threat environments? I argue that much work remains to be done to determine how much better institutionalist variables explain intra-alliance dynamics over alternative arguments that emphasize power and interests. Balances of power and the nature of threat environments may already account for key aspects of extended deterrent relationships supported by the United States in Europe and Asia. Ironically, the implication of this more traditional interpretation of alliances is that more continuity than change will characterize how Donald Trump will manage U.S. security relationships as President.

Keywords (4-6)

Trump, nuclear, alliances, proliferation, institutionalism

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Biographical note (max 150 words)

Alexander Lanoszka is Lecturer in the Department of International Politics at City, University of London. His research addresses international security, alliances, US foreign policy, and East Central European defense issues. He previously has held postdoctoral fellowships at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Dartmouth College after having finished a PhD in Politics from Princeton University. He has published in *International Security*, *Security Studies*, *International Affairs*, *Survival*, and other peer-

reviewed journals. He is completing a book manuscript on alliances and nuclear proliferation.

2016 seems to have been a bad year for political institutions. Though institutions are supposedly “humanly devised constraints” that stick (North, 1990, p. 3), national constitutions and liberal democracy around the world are under increasing duress. It thus might strike some readers as odd to talk about U.S. nuclear weapons from an institutional perspective. If long-standing but apparently fragile constitutional democracies should be the most-likely cases of institutions demonstrating their robustness, then what are we to make of traditional military alliances today? Should highly unequal alliances be even more susceptible to power politics than those institutions predicated on clear checks and balances? In an important and thought-provoking piece, Stephan Frühling and Andrew O’Neil make the positive case for applying institutionalist theory to understand the alliance politics of US nuclear weapons strategy.

Frühling and O’Neil (2017) argue that states have used their treaty alliances with the United States to influence various aspects of nuclear strategy even if they do not have their own independent nuclear capabilities. These authors advance our understanding of how these alliances operate by going beyond questions regarding their deterrent value or effectiveness. In their view, scholars have missed important variation in how nuclear weapons cooperation unfolds between the United States and their allies. Consultative fora are the predominant mechanism in bilateral nuclear security relations in East Asia, whereas we observe NATO featuring joint policy and sharing. These arrangements reflect bargains struck in the Cold War and the negotiating positions of allies.

As Frühling and O’Neil (2017) contend, these Cold War legacies still shape how cooperation evolves to this day. Indeed, they offer focal points for member states to coordinate their actions despite what different threat perceptions and strategic priorities they might have. They also provide the means by which members could proceed with making adjustments to their political and military commitments while preserving the credibility of the alliance. As such, any effort to “[reduce] the role and prominence of U.S. nuclear weapons ... would remove a major avenue for United States influence, and therefore render it more difficult for current and future U.S. administrations to promote even conventional military burden sharing with non-nuclear allies” (Frühling and O’Neil, 2017, p. 17).

Yet the worry regarding disarmament that might have prompted this statement has probably given way to a very different worry. The surprise Presidential election of Donald Trump has led some observers to note that foreign policy recklessness and geopolitical instability will characterize his presidency. For one, he has spoken of he would not take nuclear weapons “off the table” even in Europe (MSNBC, 2016). For another, he appeared to suggest that he would be okay with Japan and South Korea acquiring their own nuclear weapons (CNN, 2016). Many worry that he will reduce military commitments to treaty allies, if not abandon them entirely, for the sake of making savings or appeasing other strong states like Russia. To the extent that alliances feature institutional constraints, it appears that they might be too delicate to survive his presidency.

Is an institutionalist perspective useful for illuminating the extended nuclear deterrent relationships among allies? How might a Trump presidency signal a departure from such institutional practices, to the

extent that they exist? In this response article, I address these two questions in turn. I argue that it remains uncertain how explanatory power we should grant to institutions relative to capabilities and interests. As such, I claim that the enduring quality of American power and interests could mean more continuity than change with how President Trump goes about managing US alliances.

The Utility of an Institutionalist Perspective

Alliances serve to coordinate the defense and foreign policies of major states in the face of some sort of security threat. Yet an institutionalist perspective would argue that alliances are more than the sum of their parts insofar as one cannot reduce an alliance to the distribution of power characterizing its membership. Institutions reduce uncertainty by creating information flows where none existed before, solve commitment problems by creating new costs for reneging, and lower transaction costs by offering focal points for cooperation (Keohane, 1984, p. 107). These institutional benefits exert an independent (rather than an intervening) effect on state behavior that cannot be attributed to the balance of capabilities.

Does the institutionalization of nuclear-armed alliances affect state behavior? Führling and O’Neil admittedly seem torn on this point. On the one hand, they argue that institutional arrangements matter and offer a key source of variation among U.S. alliance arrangements (2017, p. 2). On the other hand, they emphasize how nuclear weapons cooperation among allies is “best explained by their relative bargaining power within their alliance” (2017, p. 3). If it is really about bargaining power, then they inadvertently vindicate Mearsheimer’s (1994, p. 33) critique of institutionalism. Consider how structural realists like Mearsheimer “believe that those rules reflect state calculations of self-interest based primarily on the international distribution of power.”

At best, institutions constitute an intervening variable that affect how those capabilities modify behavior (see also Krasner, 1982, p. 5). Note that this realist interpretation of institutions does not deny the possibility of cooperation between states—to the contrary, it accepts that bargaining will take place among allies. It simply asserts that negotiated outcomes will largely reflect power asymmetries. In the context of alliances, these negotiated outcomes would still involve its members making voluntary contributions whatever the “significant political and financial costs” (Führling and O’Neil, 2017, p. 5).

This prediction for international cooperation seems to leave an opening for institutionalism. Can structural realism account for why we observe differences in U.S. alliance structures in East Asia and Europe?

I am no partisan of (structural) realism, but a persuasive case could be made that threat environments and bargaining power interact so as to shape the institutional form taken by alliances. During the Cold War, the underlying strategic problem facing U.S. decision-makers with regards to Europe is that their allies—largely close together on one landmass—faced a conventionally militarily superior Soviet threat. The United States was an ocean away. It thus had to resort to forward deployed forces and joint

planning mechanisms in order to reassure Western Europe. This solution was not self-evident. Accordingly, NATO bore witness to various institutional proposals like the Multilateral Force that were intended to attenuate the security concerns of its membership and to maintain a strong cohesive deterrent. It finally reached an equilibrium by establishing the Nuclear Planning Group in 1966 and enshrining nonproliferation principles through the Nonproliferation Treaty (Brands, 2007).

The strategic situation was different in East Asia. Aside from there being two strong communist adversaries that were limited in their ability to project power over large distances in the region, each U.S. ally was separated by large bodies of water from each other. The additional need to restrain South Korea and Taiwan discouraged the sort of multilateralism seen in Europe (Cha, 2010). Moreover, the recent emergence of consultative fora like the U.S.-Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue may partly be a result of China and North Korea acquiring improved capabilities to threaten political and military values held dear by the United States and its regional partners.

The institutional arrangements we observe might therefore be more explicable in terms of the extended deterrence requirements than what Führling and O'Neil (2017) claim to be the case. Indeed, it is unclear how an institutionalist perspective of the sort they advocate is at odds with an extended deterrence perspective of the sort they criticize. That is not to say that institutionalism has no explanatory value in illuminating how U.S. alliances evolve over time. The fact that the United States and its allies expend diplomatic effort and resources establishing and adjusting these arrangements indicates their importance. Nevertheless, Mearsheimer's challenge to institutionalism still stands in this case. Researchers are still left with the task of identifying what effects institutions have on state behavior beyond channeling interests and capabilities and, perhaps more importantly, determining how much weight to assign to each of those variables.

Towards a New Era?

My uncertainty over the value we should place on institutionalism might imply a concern for the durability of these alliances during a Trump administration. As mentioned, Trump has suggested that nuclear weapons "off the table" even in Europe and that he might even accept certain allies like South Korea or Japan acquiring their own nuclear weapons (MSNBC, 2016; CNN, 2016). If institutions really did have an independent effect on state behavior, then we might be optimistic that more continuity than change will characterize the next 4-8 years.

Here hardened realists can be optimists because much of what Trump has said has a strong tradition in American foreign policy since 1945. To begin with, it was U.S. policy to use nuclear weapons in Europe in the event of certain acts of Soviet aggression until at least 1989. A nuclear deterrent relies on the willingness and the ability of the defending state to use nuclear weapons, either to punish severely an attack or to deny an adversary from battlefield success. Trump's statements are consistent with recent calls for the United States to update its nuclear deterrent posture (Durkalec and Kroenig, 2016).

U.S. decision-makers have even contemplated selective nuclear proliferation in the past. President Dwight Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles entertained the possibility of a European nuclear deterrent so that the United States could reduce its military presence on the continent (Trachtenberg, 1999, p. 151-152). President Richard Nixon saw nuclear proliferation as inevitable (Gavin, 2012, p. 117). He even exploited Japan's ambiguous stance on nuclear proliferation as a bargaining chip with China (Komine, 2009, p. 504). Trump might be using the threat of East Asian proliferation as a similar source of leverage.

If U.S. alliances exhibited persistence and stability through the decades, then that very continuity may speak to the durability of American national interests rather than to institutionalism *per se*. After all, the leaders of a powerful state like the United States have incentives for limiting the spread of nuclear weapons. Nuclear proliferation “might deter them from using military interventions to pursue their interests, reduce the effectiveness of their coercive diplomacy, trigger regional instability, undermine their alliance structures, dissipate their strategic attention, and set off further nuclear proliferation within their sphere of influence” (Kroenig, 2010, p. 17). The deterrent value of these alliances—especially those in East Asia—would remain high, especially if Trump wishes to be tougher on China. Any institutional measure intended to enhance that deterrent capability will likely remain in place.

It is too early to tell what changes are afoot with regards to U.S. alliances once Trump becomes President. Though good reasons exist for believing that predictions of change are overstated, one need not resort to the institutionalism proposed by Frühling and O’Neil (2017) to explain continuity. American power and interests have an enduring quality of their own.

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