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# The Promise of Collective Security

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**J**ohn J. Mearsheimer's critique of collective security misses its mark for three main reasons. First, Mearsheimer employs so narrow a definition of collective security that he defines away the issues most central to evaluating the peace-causing effects of institutions within the collective security family. Second, he misrepresents how collective security acts to promote stability, by portraying it as based on moralistic principles that violate the logic of power balancing. But collective security is, if nothing else, all about balancing and the aggregation of military force against threats to peace. Indeed, its main advantages over balancing under anarchy are that it provides for more effective balancing against aggressors and that it promotes a more cooperative international environment, thereby making inter-state rivalry and aggression less likely. Third, Mearsheimer's general critique of institutions stems from a theoretical perspective—structural realism—that ignores the extent to which domestic politics, beliefs, and norms shape state behavior. By explaining war and peace solely in terms of power balancing in an anarchic world, Mearsheimer mounts an attack that is at once ahistorical and internally contradictory. We contend that a theoretical perspective that takes power seriously, but not to the exclusion of domestic and ideational variables, offers a richer, more accurate vision of international politics. It is within this vision that collective security has an important role to play in promoting peace and cooperation.

## *Defining Collective Security*

The case for collective security rests on the claim that regulated, institutionalized balancing predicated on the notion of all against one provides more stability than unregulated, self-help balancing predicated on the notion of each for his own. Under collective security, states agree to abide by certain norms and rules to maintain stability and, when necessary, band together to stop

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aggression. Stability—the absence of major war—is the product of cooperation. In a world of balancing under anarchy, states fend for themselves according to the dictates of a hostile international environment. Stability emerges from competition. The key question is whether regulated balancing predicated upon the notion of all against one, or unregulated balancing predicated upon the notion of each for his own, is more likely to preserve peace. Our task is to show only that collective security is preferable to balancing under anarchy, not that collective security is a panacea or the ultimate answer to preventing war.

In his critique, Mearsheimer focuses only on ideal collective security—a variant in which states make automatic and legally binding commitments to respond to aggression wherever and whenever it occurs. He explicitly excludes from consideration other institutional formulations, such as concerts, that rely on looser and more informal regulation of balancing, arguing that they do not constitute collective security. As a result of this definitional maneuver, Mearsheimer directs his critique at a straw man and fails to engage the core conceptual issue at stake: whether some form of regulated, institutionalized balancing is preferable to unregulated balancing under anarchy.

Of necessity, debate about the value of institutions must focus on generic formulations, not on the performance of a specific institutional variant. Any institution that is predicated upon the principles of regulated balancing and all against one falls into the collective security family. Concerts do retain an undercurrent of competitive, self-help balancing. But they operate in a regulated, norm-governed environment and are predicated on the logic of all against one, not each for his own. Accordingly, our original terminology, which refers to a family of collective security organizations ranging from ideal collective security to concerts, best captures the underlying conceptual issues at stake.<sup>1</sup> Mearsheimer's formulation is, simply put, analytically unsustainable. He insists that concerts are "largely consistent with realism" and logically "incompatible" with collective security, but writes that concerts entail "coordinated balancing" among "great powers that have no incentive to challenge each other militarily [and] agree on a set of rules to coordinate their actions" (p. 35). These features are fundamental attributes of collective security and stand in

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1. For further discussion, see Richard Betts, "Systems for Peace or Causes of War? Collective Security, Arms Control, and the New Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Summer 1992), pp. 5–43; George Downs and Keisuke Iida, "Assessing the Theoretical Case Against Collective Security," in George Downs, ed., *Collective Security Beyond the Cold War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 17–21; and Charles Lipson, "Is the Future of Collective Security Like the Past?" in *ibid.*, pp. 105–131.

stark contrast to the inescapable competition and self-help strategies of realist balancing under anarchy.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Advantages of Collective Security*

The advantages of collective security fall into two categories: it provides for more effective balancing against aggressors, and it promotes trust and cooperation.

#### MORE EFFECTIVE BALANCING AGAINST AGGRESSORS

Perhaps because of confusion over what collective security is, Mearsheimer misunderstands its underlying causal logic. According to Mearsheimer, collective security requires that states “ignore . . . balance-of-power considerations” (p. 33). This characterization is fundamentally mistaken. Collective security addresses head-on the central concern of realists with the competitive nature of the international environment and its propensity to trigger spirals of hostility. Fully aware of the war-causing features of the international system, collective security seeks to provide a more effective mechanism for balancing against aggressors when they emerge, as well as to make aggression less likely by ameliorating the competitive nature of international relations. The challenge for proponents of collective security is not, as Mearsheimer writes, to show that “institutions are the key to managing power successfully” (p. 27). It is to show that there is value added: that institutions are better than no institutions and offer an improvement upon the self-help world of balancing under anarchy.

Collective security provides for more effective balancing against aggressors than balancing under anarchy because, when it works, it confronts aggressors with preponderant as opposed to merely equal force.<sup>3</sup> Under anarchy, only those states directly threatened by the aggressor and states with vital interests in the threatened areas will band together to resist aggression. Under collective

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2. See John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 5–49. The conceptual muddle caused by Mearsheimer’s restrictive definition of collective security is also apparent in his discussion of the empirical record (pp. 33–34). Mearsheimer refers to the League of Nations and the United Nations as collective security organizations. Neither, however, comes close to fulfilling the standards of ideal collective security. The League Covenant and the UN Charter do not entail automatic and binding commitments to respond to aggression with force. Both organizations created inner councils to enhance the influence of the great powers. In these respects, the League and the UN resemble concerts more than they do ideal collective security organizations.

3. See Charles A. Kupchan and Clifford A. Kupchan, “Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe,” *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1991), p. 117, n. 6.

security, other states are likely to join the opposing coalition, both because they have made either explicit or implicit commitments to do so and because they have interests in protecting an international order that they see as beneficial to their individual security.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, even when it does not work, collective security at its worst (that is, when all member states other than those directly threatened renege on their commitment to resist aggression) is roughly equivalent to balancing under anarchy at its best. Should non-threatened states opt out of collective action, the remaining coalition would consist of the same directly threatened states as the alliance that would form through balancing under anarchy.

The most powerful critique of the argument that collective security at its worst is roughly equivalent to balancing under anarchy at its best is that collective security encourages member states to count on the assistance of others, thereby leaving a directly threatened coalition underprepared for war if the system unravels (p. 30). In a self-help world, the argument runs, the opposing coalition would have known that it was on its own, and prepared accordingly.

Because this critique has been dealt with elsewhere, here we only summarize the main points of rebuttal.<sup>5</sup> First, it is the specter of a collective security organization unraveling on the eve of aggression that causes concern about directly threatened states being left unprepared for war. Yet this scenario is highly improbable; the failure of collective security mechanisms is likely to occur in stages, giving directly threatened states adequate warning that the blocking coalition will not contain its full complement of members. In addition, directly threatened members of a collective security system would be well aware that some of their partners might defect; prudence would dictate the maintenance of force levels greater than those needed should all members

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4. See *ibid.*, p. 126. Collective security seeks to expand the realm of private interest so that even states whose security is not immediately threatened have a stake in preventing aggression. It does not, as Mearsheimer writes, require that states “not think in terms of narrow self-interest” (p. 29). Rather, it seeks to broaden how states define their self-interest through two different pathways. First, assuming that interests are fixed and confined to realist notions of rational egoism, collective security alters incentives so that states more often find it in their interests to cooperate as opposed to compete. Second, collective security alters the character of state interests themselves, not just the behavior that states adopt to attain those interests. Through processes of learning and socialization, states can come to define their interests in more collective terms. Through its participation in the EU and NATO, for example, Germany has come to define its interests in European rather than in purely national terms. For further discussion, see pp. 57–59 below.

5. See Charles Kupchan, “The Case for Collective Security,” in Downs, *Collective Security*, pp. 59–63.

fulfill commitments to collective action. Mearsheimer suggests that, until outright war breaks out, states in a collective security system “must trust each other” and eschew steps to balance against potential aggressors (pp. 29–30). But it is absurd to suggest that collective security—even in its ideal form—requires its members to stand by idly as one among them arms itself to its teeth. As we have argued, concerts are particularly well suited to orchestrating pre-aggression deterrence and the early formation of a preponderant blocking coalition.<sup>6</sup>

Second, states do not set force levels simply by assessing the capabilities of the enemy and determining how much of their own military power is required, given the strength of coalition partners, to achieve preponderance. The level of military capability maintained by a given state is affected by its general threat environment, but also by a complex mix of political and economic considerations. There is no one-to-one ratio between external threat and force level. Rather, as threats increase, governments and publics become generally more willing to devote increased resources to the output of defense goods. Force levels rise with the political will to support the necessary expenditures, not only as military planners calculate what it will take to defeat the enemy. When faced with an increasingly hostile adversary of growing military strength, a directly threatened state in a collective security system would devote more resources to defense, just as it would in an alliance system. Indeed, it may well maintain force levels roughly equivalent to the levels it would maintain as a member of a defensive alliance.

Third, although free riding may contribute to the underproduction of military capability, there is no compelling deductive reason why the free-rider problem should produce a weaker opposing coalition under collective security than under balancing under anarchy.<sup>7</sup> All coalitions, including defensive alliances, can fall prey to free riding. Indeed, the historical example that Mearsheimer uses to illustrate the free-rider problem is that of intra-alliance buck-passing among Britain, France, and Russia during World War I (pp. 31–32). Again, the key question is not whether collective security is flawless, but

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6. See Kupchan and Kupchan, “Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe,” pp. 138–144. Collective security institutions that do not make responses to aggression automatic and legally binding also take care of Mearsheimer’s charge that collective security “transforms every local conflict into an international conflict” by mandating that all members respond to every act of aggression (p. 32). Concerts can play as important a role in orchestrating mutual restraint as in coordinating collective action.

7. For further discussion, see Downs and Iida, “Assessing the Theoretical Case Against Collective Security,” pp. 26–29.

whether it deters and blocks aggressors more effectively than balancing under anarchy.<sup>8</sup>

#### PROMOTING TRUST AND COOPERATION

Assessment of collective security's historical performance poses particular empirical problems because it is when collective security is functioning most effectively that its benefits may be difficult to discern.<sup>9</sup> Collective security is preferable to balancing under anarchy not only because it provides better balancing against aggressors, but also because it fosters an environment in which aggression is less likely to take place. Indeed, its ability to mitigate the rivalry and hostility of a self-help world is one of its key advantages.

Mearsheimer misrepresents collective security's reliance on and promotion of trust among states as one of its chief logical flaws. "Collective security is an incomplete theory," Mearsheimer writes, "because it does not provide a satisfactory explanation for how states overcome their fears and learn to trust one another" (p. 30). We acknowledge that basic compatibility among the great powers in a system is foremost among the conditions necessary for the successful operation of collective security. And this compatibility is a function of the underlying interests and intentions of states, not of their participation in a collective security system. But collective security, through mechanisms we outline in "Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe" (pp. 130–133) builds on this basic compatibility and reinforces confidence in the inten-

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8. We acknowledge that it is conceivable that collective security could produce a weaker opposing coalition than balancing under anarchy. At least hypothetically, aggression could take place as a bolt from the blue, or directly threatened states could be dangerously overconfident about the willingness of their coalition partners to join the fray. But for the reasons just enumerated, the risks of such an outcome are low. And these risks are well worth taking in light of collective security's considerable advantages.

9. Mearsheimer incorrectly claims that the empirical record undermines the case for collective security. The Concert of Europe preserved peace in Europe for forty years, not, as Mearsheimer asserts, for eight. The Concert's handling of the Belgian Crisis of 1830–32, the Unkiar-Skelessi question in 1833–34, and the Egyptian Crisis of 1839–41 provides evidence of its successful operation after 1823. It ceased to function only after the revolutions of 1848 destroyed the conditions that enabled it to operate. See Kupchan and Kupchan, "Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe," pp. 142–143, note 81. The League of Nations enjoyed successes during the 1920s, as Mearsheimer enumerates (p. 33). Admittedly, it failed dramatically to counter Japanese and German aggression during the 1930s. But the existence of the League had virtually nothing to do with the status quo powers' underpreparation for war and their initial inability to deter or stop Germany and Japan. The UN was never seriously tested as a collective security institution because of the Cold War. With the Cold War only recently over, it is too soon to judge whether the UN's effectiveness is on the rise or to determine whether some combination of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE, formerly CSCE), NATO, and the Partnership for Peace will emerge as a functioning collective security institution for Europe.

tions of other states, thereby deepening cooperation.<sup>10</sup> It promotes a more benign international environment in which states can devote less attention and fewer resources to ensuring their survival and more to improving their welfare—unless and until an aggressor emerges.<sup>11</sup>

There are profound advantages to institutionalizing a security system that promises to deepen accord among states rather than letting a self-help system take its course and simply hoping that great power conflict does not reemerge. Collective security ameliorates the security dilemma, thereby enhancing stability and reducing the likelihood of unintended spirals of hostility.<sup>12</sup> Collective security would also enable states to focus more on absolute as opposed to relative gains, a condition that Mearsheimer admits would facilitate cooperation (pp. 19–24). A state will focus more on absolute gains when it believes that the relative gains of others will not come back to haunt it. This belief is in turn based on deep-seated assessments of the intentions of those states enjoying relative gains. By building confidence among member states about each others' intentions, collective security thus mitigates the constraints imposed on cooperation by relative-gains considerations.<sup>13</sup> Collective security would not allow its members to focus exclusively on absolute gains, but states would be less concerned about relative gains than in a self-help world.

Finally, collective security institutions would help states define their national interests in ways that contribute to international stability. Especially in post-Cold War Europe, where the strategic landscape is ill-defined and major

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10. Germany's participation in NATO provides an illustration of this institutional evolution. The Federal Republic became part of NATO because of the strategic objectives it shared with other members. But the current closeness of Germany's relations with its West European neighbors and with the United States is a function not just of shared interests but also of its steady participation in the web of Western institutions. It is hard to imagine that Germany's relations with other established democracies would be as close as they are today had these states been interacting with each other only as like-minded powers in an international environment without institutions.

11. In this sense, it is wrong to argue that collective security works only when it is not needed. On the contrary, it is self-reinforcing; as a collective security organization functions, it promotes the conditions that make it even more effective. The idea is not, as Mearsheimer insists, that states must trust each other and be confident that status quo powers "will not change their minds at a later date" (pp. 29–30). Rather, collective security affords states the opportunity to be more confident about the intentions of others until a given state's behavior proves otherwise.

12. See Kupchan and Kupchan, "Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe," pp. 133–137.

13. For example, the United States today would be relatively unconcerned should Britain acquire a new offensive weapons system or enjoy a relative gain in a trade deal, not because the United States could best Britain if war broke out or readily find allies to form a blocking coalition, but because it is virtually inconceivable that Britain and the United States would find themselves on opposing sides of a conflict. This confidence in Britain's intentions is a product of decades of close, institutionalized cooperation.



powers are in the midst of reformulating their identities and interests, institutions will shape, and not just be shaped by, the distribution of power. NATO was a response to, not the cause of, the division of Europe into two competing blocs. But the institution has taken on a life of its own despite the collapse of the balance-of-power considerations that led to its formation. NATO continues to enable and encourage Germany to define its interests in European, not national terms. It provides a justification and a vehicle for America's continued military engagement in Europe. Its integrated military structure encourages national military establishments to formulate objectives and strategies that are multinational, not national, in character and outlook.

NATO's future will affect not only how its current members interact with each other, but also how the states of the former Soviet bloc define their security needs. If NATO expands into Central Europe as a defensive military alliance and then stops, it will effectively draw a new dividing line between Europe's east and west. It would be the lines and resultant power blocs created by institutions, not by other political or ideological cleavages, that would help define for Russia what its new sphere of influence is, whether it is a European or a Eurasian power, and whether its relations with NATO will be cooperative or competitive. Instead, Russia should be gradually drawn into a European collective security system, increasing the chances that Russians will come to define themselves as members of a European community of nations, not as outsiders. For reasons of its own, Russia may well veer from the path of democratic reform and pursue foreign policies incompatible with its participation in a collective security system. But taking cautious, prudent steps toward its inclusion unless and until Russia demonstrates malign intentions offers far more promise of preserving peace in Europe than exposing a fragile Russia to the vagaries and insecurities of a self-help world.

### *The Poverty of Structural Realism*

Underlying this debate about the value of international institutions is a fundamental difference of opinion about the causes of war and peace. In the end, our assessment of the promise of collective security stems from a theoretical perspective that is incompatible with Mearsheimer's structural realism. It is therefore appropriate to end this reply by making explicit the precise areas of disagreement.

In Mearsheimer's worldview, all great powers are created equal. When they see the opportunity to do so, great powers will take advantage of one another,

fearful of being exploited later if they do not. World War I, World War II, and the Cold War were nothing more and nothing less than great powers acting as they must, given the exigencies of an anarchic, self-help world. From within this worldview, collective security, and international institutions more generally, matter at the margins, if at all. Sooner or later, balance-of-power considerations will override the rules and norms of institutional structures. Collective security organizations may be not only irrelevant, but also dangerous. States that place illusory faith in collective security will find themselves worse off than had they acted as if in a self-help, anarchic setting.

In our worldview, all great powers are not created equal. Although the behavior of major states is heavily influenced by balance-of-power considerations, domestic politics, beliefs, and norms matter too, and not just at the margins. World War I, World War II, and the Cold War came about not from the warp and woof of international competition, but as a result of the emergence of aggressor states—states that for reasons of ideology and domestic politics became predatory and sought power, not security. Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, and interwar Japan were malign great powers infected with virulent domestic pathologies, not garden-variety great powers dealing with legitimate security concerns. Each commenced an ambitious military buildup and embarked down the path of aggression during peaceful periods in which they faced no imminent security threats. Domestic politics and nationalism, not just the rivalry of a self-help world, were at play. Similarly, the United States and the Soviet Union were not equally to blame for the Cold War. The United States sought its share of wealth and power but, with some notable exceptions, conducted itself as a benign great power. Soviet Russia was the principal aggressor state in the Cold War, driven in part by vulnerability and the search for security, but also by domestic and ideological pathologies.<sup>14</sup>

Our contention that it is not only power politics but also the nature of both domestic and international societies that affects great-power behavior is the basis for our optimism about the promise of collective security. It is conceivable that Russia will emerge as a benign, democratic great power and that all of Europe's major states will share similar values and interests, the underpinnings for the successful functioning of a collective security system. Even Mearsheimer admits that ideational variables can play a role in shaping relationships among

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14. For discussion of aggressor states and their causes, see Charles Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Stephen Van Evera, "Primed for Peace: Europe After the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 7–57.

states. What, after all, does he mean when he writes that “some states are especially friendly for historical or ideological reasons” (p. 31)? We submit that he is scratching the surface of the poverty of his own theoretical framework, forced to resort to variables other than the balance of power to explain why states sometimes cooperate to the extent they do.

The case for collective security rests not on woolly-headed moralism or naivete about the demands imposed on states by power politics. It rests on a more nuanced understanding of international politics than that offered by structural realism. The post-Cold War era offers an excellent laboratory in which to pit these competing theoretical perspectives against each other. If, one or two decades from now, Russia is a full member of a pan-European collective security body, Mearsheimer will have to recant. If, on the other hand, collective security is given a try but Europe’s great powers again fall prey to national rivalries and its multilateral institutions founder, we will have to reconsider not just collective security, but the theoretical suppositions that undergird our confidence in it. Unless collective security is given a chance, however, opportunities to preserve peace in Europe will be missed and unresolved debates between structural realists and institutionalists of various stripes will continue to fill the pages of *International Security*.