**New Institutionalism and Foreign Policy Analysis**

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***Abstract***

The purpose of this chapter is to bridge the gap between the sub-discipline of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and new institutionalism (NI), providing new insights into how the former can benefit from the various strands of the latter. The second section examines NI as one of the most prominent research program in the field of public policy analysis. The third section presents an overview of how NI in its rational, sociological, historical and discursive variants have been applied to research on FPA and what their contribution is to this field. While FPA can be enriched by all four forms of NI, much of the relevant literature has taken the form of either rational institutionalism or a more sociological approach. To bring out the promise of NI in FPA, section four looks at how historical institutionalism may be able to explain the United States’ decision to impose sanctions on Russia in response to the Ukraine crisis in 2014. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the merits and pitfalls of new institutionalist approaches when applied to the domain of foreign policy.

Keywords: Rational, historical, sociological and discursive institutionalism, U.S.-Russian relations, Ukraine crisis

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**Introduction**

As scholars in the field of public policy analysis have pointed out, the new institutionalism (NI) in its rational, sociological, historical and discursive variants is arguably one of the main theoretical frameworks for analyzing domestic institutions (Radaelli et al. 2012).[[1]](#footnote-1) The claim that political institutions ‘matter’ is not only central to the identity of the discipline of political science, but has also served “as a mantra for the social sciences for almost thirty years” (Gandhi and Ruiz-Rufino 2015: 1). While it is common to use institutional factors as independent variables to explain policy variation across countries and over time, there is still an unwarranted divide between NI, applied in public policy and the field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). Despite this striking division, the chapter on ‘Foreign Policy’ in the magisterial *Handbook of Political Science* published in1975 took it for granted that foreign policy belongs within the domain of public policy rather than that of IR (Cohen and Harris 1975). More than forty years later, few foreign policy analysts would disagree that FPA is a sub-discipline of IR (Hellmann and Jørgensen 2015; Hill 2015).

However, this is not to say that public policy approaches to foreign policy such as NI enjoy an undisputed professional domicile within FPA. While foreign policy is explored from several theoretical perspectives in leading handbooks in the field, there is a notable lack of chapters on NI and foreign policy (Smith et al. 2016; Neack 2014).This is also the case if we look at the most frequently cited articles on foreign policy in leading journals. They contain, for instance, research on decision-making, bureaucratic politics, the various forms of liberalism, realism and constructivism as well as research on perceptions (Hudson 2005; Kaarbo 2015). Due to its primary actor-centered research focus, however, NI is clearly located outside of FPA’s paradigmatic debates. In a similar vein, the chapter on ‘Foreign Policy’ in the *Handbook of International Relations* touches rather casually on the NI as an FPA approach (Carlsnaes 2013: 309-315). Certainly, NI in its rational and sociological variants has been a powerful source of inspiration for IR theory. But the specific contributions of NI to the field of FPA have yet to be fully explored.

This chapter aims to show how NI can contribute for FPA. The next section briefly examines the rise of NI as the most successful paradigm in public policy analysis, scrutinizing the nature of institutions and the various streams of NI. Against this background, the third section examines the added value of NI for FPA. Section four discusses how NI in its historical variant can help to explain U.S. foreign policy towards Russian interventions in Ukraine in 2014. The concluding section provides a synthesis of the new institutionalist research agenda and considers its merits and pitfalls when applied in the realm of foreign policy.

**New institutionalism in political science**

The study of institutions was one of the wellsprings of political science in the early 20th century, although this approach was largely ousted by two theoretical schools based on more individualistic assumptions, namely behaviorism and rational choice (Binder et al. 2006). Both of these approaches, which gained prominence in the 1950s and 1960s, assume that individuals act autonomously, based on either socio-psychological characteristics or rational expectations. At the beginning of the 1980s, “a successful counter-reformation produced some return to the previous concern with formal (and informal) institutions of the public sector and the important role these structures play” (Peters 1999: 1). It was James March and Johan Olsen who coined the term ‘new institutionalism’ in an article in the *American Political Science Review* entitled “The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life” (March and Olson 1984).

‘New’ Institutionalism is often contrasted with ‘old’ or ‘classical’ institutionalism, the latter being first articulated in the pragmatist writings of Thorstein Veblen and John Dewey and rooted in law and legal institutions. Although ‘new’ institutionalism reflects many features of older studies of institutions, there are important differences between the two. According to Peters (1999: 6-12), ‘old’ institutionalism is characterized by legalism, structuralism, holism, historicism and normative analysis. The latter two elements in particular were out of sync with trends after the World War II as the emerging behavioral and rational choice approaches took a radically anti-normative and anti-historical stance. New institutionalists began to focus on the political meanings, symbols and cultures that constitute the regularity and durability underpinning the political institution and its structures. Another initiative emerging from NI was a reaction to the methodological individualism, as manifest in rational-choice approaches. Hence, NI reinstates ‘methodological collectivism’ (or ‘methodological institutionalism’) by explaining economic actions in light of social units such as firms, classes, nations, and so on rather than individuals’ preferences and choices. Nevertheless, the basic premise shared by both ‘old’ and ‘new’ forms of political thinking is that ‘institutions matter’.

*What are institutions?*

On the basic level, institutions are simply rules. As such, they can be understood as formal organizational arrangements as well as informal regulatory systems in which actors such as individuals, organizations or states are embedded, thus influencing their behavior (Thelen and Steinmo 1992: 2; Hall and Taylor 1996: 936). March and Olsen (2006: 3) assert that “an institution is a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relati­vely invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances”.

Depending on the degree of autonomy ascribed to them, the literature features a distinction between ‘thin’ (such as systems of rules, decision-making procedures or treaties) and ‘thick’ institutions such as social practices, common discourses or routine activities (Checkel 1999). On the basis of a ‘thin’ understanding of the institution, Keohane (1989: 3) defines international institutions as “persistent and connected sets of rules (formal and informal) that prescribe behavioral roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations”. This must be distinguished from a ‘thick’ understanding of the institution. On this view institutions impact on actors not just by providing incentives for and setting limits to rational action but also by influencing their fundamental objectives and values.

Crucial here is the distinction between regulative and constitutive institutions (Kratochwil 1989). While in the case of the narrow definition of institutions actors’ interests and identities are disregarded, in such a way that norms and rules play a merely regulative role, the broad definition works on the assumption that they also exercise a constitutive influence on actors’ interests and social identities. From this perspective institutions exhibit both a cognitive and action-guiding dimension (Checkel 1999: 546). The norms and rules enshrined in institutions are based on ideas that have become entrenched within them. In this way institutions link the individual with society by laying down roles, defining functions and providing collective stocks of knowledge, thus creating a framework within which political actions become meaningful and legitimate.

*The varieties of new institutionalism*

In a seminal article Hall and Taylor (1994) have distinguished between rational, historical and sociological institutionalism. Recently, Schmidt (2008, 2011) has proposed that a fourth variant, namely discursive institutionalism (or ‘constructivist institutionalism’, see Hay 2006) provides theoretical leverage and can usefully supplement the three other strands. While this list could be expanded, for the endeavor to introduce NI to FPA, I join leading scholars in the field of public policy such as Radaelli et al. (2012) and will focus on rational, sociological, historical and discursive institutionalism. Because the new institutionalist approaches are well known, I provide only brief sketches. I concentrate on the historical variant because this type of institutionalism is illustrated empirically in the final section on foreign policy.

*Rational choice institutionalism* (RI) is one of the most influential theoretical approaches in public policy. RI not only triggered the claim that “we are all institutionalists now” (Pierson and Skocpol 2002: 706) in the 1990s, but also serves as a reference point for the three other institutionalism. Although RI features some variation in outlook, it has four key characteristics (Hall and Taylor 1996: 944). First, rational choice institutionalists think of political institutions as a system of regularized behavior that reflects Pareto-optimal equilibria (Hall 2010: 204). They assume that the relevant actors have a set of fixed preferences and pursue their interests through rational calculations. This is what March and Olsen (1989: 14) refers to as the ‘logic of consequentiality’. Second, rational institutionalists see politics as a series of collective action dilemmas. When actors try to maximize the attainment of their own preferences, this is likely to produce an outcome that is collectively sub-optimal. Institutions may help to overcome such collective action dilemmas. Third, RI emphasizes the role of strategic interaction in determining political outcomes. A given actor’s behavior is not driven by impersonal historical forces but by a strategic calculus. Institutions help to structure such interactions by affecting the range of alternatives available. On the basis of this individualistic logic rational institutionalists typically assume that institutions are stable. Accordingly, institutional change happens only “when shocks exogenous to the system of institutions alter the context” (Hall 2010: 205).

In contrast to RI, *sociological institutionalism* (SI) emphasizes the structural dimension and is committed to a methodological holism (Finnemore 1996b: 333). Three features of SI render it relatively distinct from the other variants of NI. First, SI defines institutions broadly to include “not just formal rules, procedures or norms, but the symbol systems, cognitive scripts, and moral templates that provide the ‘frames of meaning’ guiding human action” (Hall and Taylor 1996: 947). Such a broad definition of institutions breaks down the conceptual divide between ‘institutions’ and ‘culture’. Second, political institutions influence behavior not simply by specifying what one should do but also by specifying what one can imagine oneself doing in a given context. Finally, SI also takes a distinctive approach to the problem of explaining how institutional practices originate and change. Scholars of SI argue that “organizations often adopt a new institutional practice, not because it advances the means-ends efficiency of the organization but because it enhances the social legitimacy of the organization or its participants” (Hall and Taylor 1996: 949). In other words, actors are guided by the ‘logic of social appropriateness’ (March and Olsen 1989: 160).

Within NI, the interplay between actors and institutions has long been regarded as either determined by actors (RI) or institutional structures (SI). Scholars of *historical institutionalism* (HI) who take temporality seriously assume a mediating position between RI and SI (Hall and Taylor 1996: 938; Steinmo 2008: 113). According to Pierson (1996: 126), HI is “*historical* because it recognizes that political development must be understood as a process that unfolds over time. It is *institutionalist* because it stresses that many of the contemporary implications of these temporary processes are embedded in institutions – whether these be formal rules, policy structures, or norms”.

HI scholars have developed powerful tools for the study of politics (see Fioretos et al. 2016). The core concept of HI is ‘path dependency’. A path begins at a point in time at which two alternative paths may be taken but just one is selected (Pierson 2000: 258). More precisely, path dependence means a three-stage process “that is triggered by a critical event leading to a critical juncture; is governed by a regime of positive, self-reinforcing feedback constituting a specific pattern of social practices, which gains more and more predominance against alternatives; and leads, at least potentially, in an organizational lock-in, understood as a corridor of limited scope of action that is strategically inefficient“ (Sydow et al. 2009: 696).

As Table 1 show, the first stage of path dependency is characterized by a broad scope for action. Non-predictability (indeterminacy of outcome) and non-ergodicity (multiple equilibria) pertain before a process becomes path dependent. According to Sydow et al. (2009: 691), only major events create context-dependent decision-making windows that can trigger a ‘critical juncture’. ‘Critical juncture’ marks a point in time “at which an institution or practice was contingent or open to alternative paths, and actors or exogenous events determined which path it would take” (Bennett and Checkel 2015: 16; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). Therefore, a ‘critical juncture’ indicates the transition from stage I to stage II. The second stage is characterized by a narrowing of the scope of action, which renders the path dependency process more and more irreversible. Although a process of self-reinforcing takes place, the path is still contingent (Sydow et al. 2009: 691). At the third stage, HI focuses on further constriction and the idea of a ‘reactive sequences’ as an event chain in which events following a trigger are a reaction to prior events. It is the transition from stage II to stage III “which eventually leads the whole setting into a lock-in” (Sydow et al. 2009: 694).

*Table 1: Path dependency as three-stage process*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Stage I* | | *Stage II* | | *Stage III* | |
| *Scope/range*  *of action*  *Path dependency* | t1 Open situation with no scope for action | | t2 Narrowing scope of action | | t3 Dominant decision pattern of action | |
|  | *→*  *‘Critical juncture’ as the transition to stage II* | | *→*  *‘Lock-in’ as the transition to stage III* | |
| Indeterminacy and multiple equilibria | | Emergence of a path but still contingent | | Reactive sequences and bound to a path | |

*Source*: Sydow et al. (2009), own compilation.

HI seems to be agnostic on the issue of the dominant mode of social action (see Table 2). From a rationalist perspective, the path chosen is then self-reinforced and leads to a ‘lock-in’ by a variety of forms of feedback such as ‘increasing returns’, that is, a situation which makes the adoption of alternatives less attractive because the costs of reversal are very high (Pierson 2000). Whereas the rational model of path dependency is associated with the ‘logic of consequentiality’, the normative path dependency is linked to the ‘logic of appropriateness’. In contrast to the rational model of path dependence, normative paths emphasize normative ‘lock-in’ effects. Consequently, “legitimation constitutes the primary mechanism of path reproduction rather than materialist ‘increasing returns’” (Sarigil 2015: 226).

*Table 2: Two models of path dependency*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Model* | *Logic of social action* | *Mechanism of path reproduction* |
| *I. Rational* | Consequentiality | Increasing returns (utilitarian ‘lock-in’) |
| *II. Normative* | Appropriateness | Legitimation (normative ‘lock-in’) |

*Sources*: Sarigil (2015), own compilation.

In addition to the three varieties of NI discussed above, *discursive institutionalism* (DI) defines institutions in light of the discourses prevailing within them (Schmidt 2008). According to the ‘logic of communication’, ideas are the currency for discursive political processes and they can be categorized into two types: cognitive and normative. While cognitive discourses revolve around solutions to problems and scientifically grounded arguments, normative discourses appeal to norms and values in an attempt to trigger responses within society (Schmidt 2008: 314). This distinguishes DI from HI, which understands change merely as the outcome of exogenous crises or shocks. While Schmidt (2011: 51) puts forward solid arguments for classifying DI as “a distinctive approach that contributes to our understanding of political action in ways that rational choice, historical, and sociological Institutionalism cannot”, other have questioned the distinctiveness of DI (see Bell 2011). Table 3 summarizes the central features of all four variants of NI.

*Table 3: Four New Institutionalisms*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *RI* | *SI* | *HI* | *DI* |
| *Object of Explanation* | Rational behavior and interest | Cultural norms and frames | Historical rules  and regularities | Ideas and discourse |
| *Logic of Explanation* | Calculation | Appropriateness | Path-dependency | Communication |
| *Problems of Explanation* | Economic determinism | Cultural determinism | Historical determinism | Ideational determinism |
| *Ability to explain Change* | Static: Continuity through fixed preferences | Static: Continuity through cultural norms | Static: Continuity through path-dependency | Dynamic: continuity/change through ideas and discourse |

*Sources*: Schmidt (2011) and Fioretos et al. (2016), own compilation.

**The Promise of New Institutionalism for Foreign Policy Analysis**

Due to its primary agent-based and psychologically-oriented research focus (Kaarbo 2015), FPA appears less capable of linking NI to foreign policy. The only exception seems to be the field of European foreign policy, which has its own institutionalist tradition (Jørgensen et al. 2015). This section begins by discussing the development of NI in FPA. In the second part I consider the promise and pitfalls of applying NI to the realm of foreign policy.

*Frontrunners and latecomers in the linkage of FPA and NI*

Similar to the field of IR, in which institutionalist research has largely taken place under the aegis of both RI and SI, reflecting the rationalist-constructivist ‘divide’ in the field (Rixen and Viola 2016: 6), the neoliberal institutionalist perspective in IR also offers an alternative account to FPA. The distinctiveness is that “neoliberal institutionalists view foreign policy-making as a process of constrained choice by purposive states” (Carlsnaes 2013: 309). Constraints are not primarily seen in terms of the configurations of power capabilities, but with reference to the provision of information and common rules in the form of international intuitions.

FPA studies that have proceeded from this rational institutionalist perspective include a broad range of literature, all of which are essentially motivated to examine continuity and change in foreign policy (see Medick-Krakau 1999; Neack 2014). While the literature on foreign economic policy have adapted well to NI, the literature on foreign security policy has largely ignored the influence of political institutions (Ripsman 2005: 302). The most popular institutional theory in the field of security studies is the ‘democratic peace theory’ (Bueno de Mesquita 1999). A fertile approach within RI uses a principal-agent (PA) approach to analyze foreign policy. Inspired by RI, the PA has been widely used to study Congress’s role in US foreign policy making (see Lindsay 1994; Hawkins et al. 2006). Other scholars have discussed how a PA can shed light on the choice between multilateral and bilateral aid (Milner and Tingley 2012). More recently, PA has also begun to flourish in EU foreign policy studies (see Delreux 2015).

Foreign policy theory from an SI perspective draws upon two research traditions (see Boekle et al. 2001:115-123). On the one hand, SI emphasizes the importance of social norms as independent variables, which are shared within domestic society, to foreign policy. Representative studies include studies on the influence of the value-based expectations of behaviour shared by experts with respect to certain issues, while other scholars ascribe norms to the whole society. On the other hand, scholars emphasize the influence of norms that are shared by international institutions (Finnemore 1996a). Recent examples are studies of how the participation of China’s foreign policy elites in international security institutions has socialized the country to accept practices and norms not congruent with their former foreign and security policy (Johnston 2008).

A SI centered research focus in FPA is often intertwined with the notion of identity to highlight the socially constructed nature of the state and its interests (Stark Urrestarazu 2015). The affinity with constructivist views in the study of IR is obvious (Risse 2000: 6) Representative studies are those on ideas and foreign policy (Keohane and Goldstein 1993) or on the culture of national security (Katzenstein 1996). Other seminal works include studies on the construction of national interests in U.S. foreign policy (Nau 2002), on Russian and Soviet foreign policy (Hopf 2002) and on the comparison of ‘cultures of antimilitarism’ in Japan and Germany (Berger 1996). Sociological (or normative) institutionalists also seek to explain the variation in the extent to which EU member states cooperate on foreign policy matters (Thomas 2011; Delreux 2015). EU member states are perceived as socialized actors whose EU foreign policy-making behaviour is shaped by norms and rules operating at the EU level.

In contrast to RI and SI, both HI and DI are latecomers in the linkage of FPA and NI. As Mabee (2011: 28) has stated, much of the work in FPA has been “in the form of either rational choice institutionalism or in the form of more constructivist-oriented work that sees institutions as shared sets of identities (or rules) that govern social relations. Work by those using historical institutionalist forms of analysis has been much less prevalent in FPA”. Major exceptions in FPA are Ikenberry (2001), Dannreuther (2010) and Mabee (2011). Ikenberry (2001) showed how rare historical junctures such as 1815, 1919 or 1945 gave powerful states extraordinary opportunities to shape world politics, whereas Dannreuther (2010) used concepts such as critical junctures, path dependence and positive feedback to analyse the policy adopted by the U.S., the Soviet Union and the EU towards the Middle East Peace Process. Mabee (2011) has examined the evolution and path dependency of the National Security Council (NSC) in the United States as a result of exogenous shocks such as Word War II. Scholars examining EU foreign policy and external relations have employed HI more self-consciously (Delreux 2015: 158-162). The same is true with regard to DI. But apart from individual studies (Diez 1999; Carta and Morin 2014), a proper DI approach in FPA has only been developed recently (see Schmidt 2016).

*Theorizing foreign policy via NI: Promise and pitfalls*

NI furnishes us with valuable insights into a number of central problems in FPA. However, we should not sweepingly import NI into the field of FPA (see Rixen and Viola 2016: 4-5). Not every institutionalist concept is transferable to FPA in the same way and some variants of NI are better suited to addressing foreign policy issues than others.

One major theoretical problem with new institutionalist approaches in FPA lies in the fact that only RI and SI include a proper theory of social action. Whereas both RI and SI are built on a rationalist and sociological theory of action, HI has largely been developed inductively from empirical observation. DI, meanwhile, is essentially an ‘umbrella concept’ that combines insights from a vast range of approaches to the study of ideas, discourses and institutions. Since no social theory that fails to include a theory of action can stand alone (Zürn 2016: 222), neither HI nor Di can be perceived as an independent institutionalist theory of foreign policy. It seems more plausible to regard HI (and perhaps DI as well) as a useful theoretical framework for analyzing foreign policies. As I will illustrate in the next section, especially HI offers pertinent tools for studying temporal processes and institutional dynamics in foreign policy.

NI can also enrich FPA in a broader empirical sense. As Haney (1995: 111) stated, NI can be especially useful to foreign policy analysts because “it focuses on both the formal and informal structures used in decision-making”. While domestic policies are highly institutionalist, much of what constitutes foreign policy is far less institutionalized. Foreign policy issues are often decided by power rather than laws and courts. But this does not mean that institutions are not important and that NI can therefore contribute nothing to FPA. What it means is that institutions tend to be less formal and hierarchical than their counterparts in the domestic realm. The premise of ‘weaker’ institutions in the realm of foreign policy (i.e. diplomacy, defense and development cooperation) might explain to some extent why the different variants of NI face challenges when it comes to the study of foreign policy.

For a long time foreign policy was mainly focused on security issues and economic relations. Today it has to deal with a much broader range of issues, while a growing number of bilateral and multilateral agreements and international institutions have risen to prominence. The external environment of foreign policy has thus reached a level of ‘thickness’ that makes it plausible to approach it through the prism of NI. However, not all the concepts generated by NI can be applied to FPA in the same way. For example, RI thinks of foreign policy as a process of decision-making in which actors pursue their interests through rational calculations, and emphasizes the role of strategic interaction in conducting relations with other countries. RI scholars focus on the effect of formal institutional structures, such as agenda-setting and voting rules, and on policy-making processes and their outcomes. The premise of a ‘thin’ understanding of institutions is one reason why RI has been widely applied to research on foreign policy.

A ‘thick’ understanding of institutions might limit the application of SI to FPA. Institutions at the domestic and foreign policy level do not have the commonality (the extent to which a norm is widely shared by actors) and specificity (how precisely the norm defines permissible or inadmissible behavior) to be ascribed the causal force of norms, a core claim of SI. International norms are seldom unambiguous or undisputed; norms in the foreign policy domain can be garnered from international law, the legal acts of international organizations and the final acts of international conferences, which are thus weaker than domestic norms derived from the constitutional and legal order of a given society. Given the more limited validity of international norms, security and defense policy might represent a special case for SI. However, under certain circumstances the domestic and international norms produce a convergent expectation about appropriate behavior in foreign policy, like Germany’s decision to keep its armed forces integrated into NATO’s military structure after the end of the Cold War (Boekle et al. 2001).

A similar argument can be made about path dependency, which depends upon certain ‘stickiness’. HI’s original object of study was the welfare state and many would argue that foreign policy is about as far away from the politics of the welfare state as it is possible to get (Zürn 2016: 203). In fact, while foreign policy as a practice might be more weakly institutionalized in terms of enforcement capacities, its path dependence and ‘lock-in’ effects should not be underestimated, especially when legislatures have to ratify international treaties or agreements or vote on participation in military interventions (Keohane et al. 2009). Nevertheless, to leave a given policy path (either because of decision makers’ expectations of utility or because the norms that constitute the path have become inappropriate) is easier in the realm of foreign policy than in public policy: the latter typically proceeds through laws, whereas a broad range of foreign policy behaviour takes place without any such legislative involvement, instead consisting of executive orders, negotiations or government responses to international crises.

While public policy and foreign policy vary in their degree of institutionalization, all four strands of NI deal with institutional stability and change – concepts that are also at the core of FPA (Hill 2015). From the perspective of RI, foreign policy change occurs only when exogenous shocks or international crises alter the specific context or situation. SI also faces problems when confronted with institutional change because it tends to regard institutions as relatively inert, that is, they resist efforts to change foreign policy. HI has also grappled with the problem of change in foreign policy, but traditionally it has stressed continuity over change. In contrast, DI offers plausible explanations of institutional change featuring interpretive agents operating in relatively fluid ideational and discursive foreign policy contexts. More recent contributions by NI scholars reject a simple dichotomy between stability and change (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). This is particularly the case with HI, which emphasizes the dynamics of institutional development and path dependency (Pierson 2015). The concern with when and how historical processes shape institutional outcomes is akin to FPA: it gives us tools of temporal analysis that enable us to assess the legacies of founding moments in foreign policy, the consequences of new foreign policy ideas, and the unintended consequences of foreign policy decisions.

Yet, attempts to bridge the gap between NI and FPA entail certain pitfalls. These are familiar from the field of public policy analysis in which NI is normally at home (Radaelli et al. 2012: 539-541). First, because institutional characteristics of an economic, historical, cultural and ideational kind are believed to determine foreign policy outcomes, all four variants of NI tend towards ‘institutional determinism’. Because foreign policy making takes place in a highly contested political arena and is surrounded by institutional dynamics that unfold uniquely for every policy area over time, fixed institutional characteristics cannot struggle to provide convincing explanations of policy decisions and non-decisions. Even HI, which focuses on the temporal dimension and unintended consequences, might be an inadequate means of explaining foreign policy, which is often ill-structured and evolves in a non-linear manner.

Second, NI is subdivided into a number of variants corresponding to different understandings of what an institution is. Radaelli et al. (2012: 540) call this pitfall “drop in the box”. The problem does not lie in using typologies, but in the assumptions made about institutional variables and policy outcomes. Radaelli et al. (2012: 541) remind us that ‘ideal types’ in the Weberian sense “are useful for classification, but do not provide causal explanations of policy outcomes”. As discussed above, the majority of FPA literature looks at one variant of NI. Only a few studies have explicitly explored the potential for combining insights from the different variants of NI as a promising way of enriching future research in FPA (see, for example, Ikenberry 2001).

‘Theoretical conjecture’ that fails to identify a foundational mechanism is the third pitfall. The insight that ‘institutions matter’ does not qualify as theory if all we get is institutional variation associated with policy variation. More often than not, new institutionalist studies “lack the mechanisms through which the institutional setting explains policy outcomes” (Radaelli et al. 2012: 543). To put it in ‘FPA’ terms, the use of NI can only cross-fertilize foreign policy analysis if NI carefully clarifies the causal or constitutive chain linking institution-level variables and foreign policy outcomes, necessarily passing through the behaviour of policy actors. This pitfall might originate in the argument put forward by NI scholars that the structure of a state’s political institutions shapes the decision-making context faced by policy-makers. Furthermore, theoretical arguments about institutions are often used in studies of foreign policy to situate it at the level of the country, and not the policy-level variables which may better explain foreign policy. This means that institutionalist analysis leads us to track down the wrong independent variables.

**The path to U.S. sanctions on Russia: A historical institutionalist perspective**

Explaining U.S. foreign policy on Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine in light of HI deserves special attention for both empirical and theoretical reasons. Empirically, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the following expansion of the conflict to the Eastern Ukraine caused the major crisis in the relations between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War. Dealing with the Ukraine crisis is also theoretically puzzling, particularly when it comes to the sanctions that the U.S. imposed on Russia. As FPA scholars have argued, U.S. foreign policy towards Russia in response to the Ukraine crisis can neither be fully explained by realism nor by liberal approaches, the main traditional FPA approaches (see Böller and Werle 2016).

Against this backdrop, new institutionalist approaches might be better suited to explaining U.S. foreign policy towards Russian interventions in Ukraine. From an RI perspective, “the basic paradox at the heart of the sanctions debate is that policy-makers continue to use sanctions with increasing frequency, while scholars continue to deny the utility of such tools of foreign policy” (Baldwin 2000: 81). Indeed, the West’s more severe restrictions have failed to force Russia to withdraw from Crimea and end its financial and military support for pro-Russian separatists in the eastern part of Ukraine (Ashford 2016: 116). SI would hypothesize that sanctions are appropriate even if they are unsuccessful. However, SI fails to explain why the Obama administration not only blamed and sanctioned Russia for violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine but sought to step up NATO’s defensive posture and relied on coercive instruments.

In assessing the explanatory power of NI, I hold that HI provides the best explanation of the assertive U.S. foreign policy response to Russia over the Ukraine crisis. HI’s strengths lie in its “mid-range causal tools concerning context, embeddedness, and temporality” (Nexon 2012: 2). A further reason why I use HI here is that a historical institutionalist framework can be based on both rational and normative accounts of social action (Hall 2010). Drawing on the theoretical insights examined in section two, this section hypothesize a three-stage process of path dependence in the U.S. sanctions policy towards Russia, starting with critical events, which themselves transform into a self-reinforcing process that leads to a critical juncture, and trigger a ‘lock-in’. To illustrate the added value of HI to FPA, I will adopt the notion of the ‘normative path’ as a distinct model of path dependency.

*The first stage: Towards path dependency in the Ukraine crisis*

More than any other bilateral relationship, U.S.-Russian relations are dependent on structural factors, which also affect the path of U.S. responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (Rudolf 2016: 9-12). First, the unique U.S.-Russian relationship is bound up with mutually assured destruction, the consequence of which is permanent nuclear rivalry. Second, economic interdependence between U.S. and Russia is far less significant than other bilateral relations, and the sanctions imposed on Russia further restrict economic cooperation and exchanges with the country. Third and finally, since the post-Soviet space is among the most challenging problems for U.S. foreign policy, U.S.-Russian relations are characterized by geopolitical competition.

These three elements of structural path dependency with respect to a former enemy are also reflected in the domestic politics of Washington’s Russia policy (Stent 2014). In the quarter century since the implosion of the former Soviet Union, interaction between the U.S and the Russian Federation has followed a familiar cycle, namely “presidents enter office believing that relations are adrift, so they seek to renew ties and enhance cooperation. But over time tensions rise, engagement ebbs, and critics declare that the initial approach was naïve” (Chollet 2016: 161). Neither President Bill Clinton nor President George W. Bush was able to escape this cycle; Obama’s experience followed the same rhythm.

Against this backdrop, the Obama administration made no secret of its frustration with Russia (Chollet 2016: 64-66). When it comes to the Ukraine crisis, even after the first Executive Order 13660 on March 6, 2014, it was by no means obviously that Washington would implement an economic sanctions regime in response to Russian aggression towards Ukraine. In the wake of the violent protests in Kiev’s Maidan Square, the U.S. government initially imposed travel restrictions on members of the former Yanukovych government. Even in reaction to the occupation of Crimea by Russian soldiers without military insignia in mid-February 2014, Washington merely implemented diplomatic measures, cancelling meetings with Russian leaders under the auspices of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission. It was only in the wake of the Russian’s annexation of Crimea at the end of the first stage that a path dependency was created, which entails a narrowing of possible outcomes.

*The transition to second stage: Russia’s annexation of Crimea as a ‘critical juncture’*

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the illicit referendum in Crimea on March 16 and the subsequent incorporation of Crimea by the Russian Federation on March 18, 2014 drastically disrupting ties between Moscow and Washington. The overwhelming majority vote by Crimea in favor of accession to Russia has not only brought the Ukrainian crisis to a ‘critical juncture’. It also indicates the beginning of a self-reinforcing process at the second stage of path dependency.

That a path was evolving becomes apparent if we consider Obama’s strategic approach to the Ukraine crisis (Chollet 2016: 164-171). In light of the ‘national emergency’ declared in the first Executive Order, the Obama administration announced on March 17 following the illicit referendum in Crimea and on March 20 following the formal annexation of Crimea two more Executive Orders (13661 and 13662), which gradually expanded the range of targets of the U.S. sanctions regime (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2016). At the same time, however, President Obama wanted to avoid confrontation with Russia since Washington has no ‘vital interests’ in Ukraine (Obama 2016). This might be one reason why the Obama administration opted to impose targeted sanctions instead of opting for a strategy of deterrence. Although the Obama administration supported the government in Kiev both politically and economically it has held off supplying lethal defensive weapons as demanded by Ukraine’s interim government and unanimously approved by the U.S. Congress to stop Russian aggression (Rudolf 2016: 19).

From a historical institutionalist perspective it is important to note that the U.S. imposed far-reaching sanctions on Russia in close coordination with the EU: ‘coordination effects’ are considered an important self-reinforcing mechanism that contributes to the development of path dependence. Normative paths are linked to the norm-based logic of appropriateness, which means that the U.S. sanctions imposed on Russia are primarily guided by rules and norms rather than by material interests or expectations. To justify the imposition of sanctions, Obama framed Russia’s action in the Ukraine as a violation of core international norms, especially the non-use of force and the principle of territorial integrity, which is embodied in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. At the same time, Russia was portrayed as an outcast within the international community. As a signatory to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the U.S. was unequivocally committed to Ukrainian territorial integrity (Böller and Werle 2016: 330).

Due to the low costs of the sanctions regime imposed on Russia – the U.S.-Russian economic relations are hardly important enough to produce negative externalities for the U.S. economy, Washington accepted new sanctions as an appropriate and legitimate reaction to Moscow’s violations in the Ukraine crisis, especially in light of Russian backing for armed separatists in Eastern Ukraine. What is more, the normative path of the U.S. sanctions policy with respect to Russia has developed increasing path inefficiency. As long as the sanctions regime was limited, the ambivalent target of early choices might be reconciled. But in a continuous self-reinforcing process, in which sanctions were increasingly institutionalized and internalized in response to Russian misbehavior, the target of early choices of sanctions is becoming more in conflict. This conflict became apparent with the downing of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH-17 over eastern Ukraine in July 17, 2014 which triggered a ‘lock-in’ effect on U.S. foreign policy towards Russia.

*The transition to third stage: The downing of MH-17 as a normative ‘lock-in’*

Prior to the downing of MH-17 over Ukraine, both the U.S. and the EU were lagging in their imposition of sanctions in the form of trade and financial restrictions on Russia. But the downing of MH-17 by a missile launched from the separatist-controlled territory, killing 298 passengers and crew, resulted in the transition to the third stage and leads to a normative ‘lock-in’ in that it raised expectations about tougher sanctions. On July 29, 2014, President Obama initiated economic sanctions targeting powerful interests in Russia’s financial, energy, and military dual-use export sectors. Given the new circumstances, the President’s decision received bipartisan support in the U.S Congress, which has been a strong advocate of assisting Ukraine and supporter of sanctions on Russia (Ashford 2016: 114). If the downing of MH-17 had been a singular event, it probably would not have been sufficient to provoke the extension of sectoral economic sanctions on Russia. But in fact such sanctions were extended in a joint effort with the EU, which made their bite far more painful.

The timing and sequencing of events play a key role in a policy process that are becoming path dependent and lead to a ‘lock-in’ effect. As President Obama (2014) stated, “if Russia continues on its current path, the cost on Russia will continue to grow”. However, the ‘lock-in’ effect rendered sanctions potentially inefficient because Putin’s Russia was very unlikely to change anytime soon. The U.S. therefore needed an approach that would endure. In addition to punishing and sanctioning Russia and condemning pro-Russian forces in Ukraine for violating the ceasefire agreed in Minsk 2015, Obama devised a strategy to reassure the U.S.’s European partners, chiefly through military power (Chollet 2016: 166-167). At the summit in Wales in September 2014, NATO agreed a ‘Readiness Action Plan’ to strengthen the defence of its members against a resurgent Russia and pledged to reverse the decline in military spending. Two years later, Obama announced at the NATO summit in Warsaw the deployment of 1,000 more U.S. troops in Poland to bolster NATO’s eastern flank. The U.S. government also called on the U.S. Congress to support a ‘European Reassurance Initiative’ of up to $1 billion. In 2016, the Pentagon put Russia at the top of its list of national security threats and decided to quadruple military spending in Europe from $789 million to $3.4 billion (Chollet 2016: 168).

Given the past sequence of events and decisions, the U.S. government is likely to deliberately leave the path of sanctions against Russia over Ukraine crisis only due to an exogenous shock or Russia’s willingness to implement the Minsk agreement. Much like rational paths, a normative path is ‘sticky’ and hypothesizes stability over change because norms tend to reinforce the *status quo* (Sarigil 2015: 233). While President Donald Trump has already said he would consider eliminating some sanctions, several members of the U.S. Congress reminded President Trump that there is bipartisan support for blocking such a move and threaten to work with colleagues to codify sanctions against Russia into law (The Washington Post 2017). To be sure, the Trump administration could remove the sanction regime because they were initiated by Obama’s Executive Orders. Given Trump’s emphasis on striking a ‘great deal’ for the U.S. with Russia, it is unlikely the Trump administration could simply lift all sanctions without securing something in return from Moscow.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that NI can contribute much to the analysis of foreign policy. While not all four NIs can stand alone in the institutionalist camp because HI and DI lack a proper theory of action, NI provides FPA with a set of conceptual mechanisms and tools for understanding and explaining foreign policy. As evident in the discussion of the potential to apply NI in general and HI in particular to foreign policy, FPA can learn from NI’s focus on dynamic processes and sources of change.

Indeed, the preceding analysis of the U.S. foreign policy reaction to Russia’s incursion into Ukraine in 2014 suggests that HI promises to provide systematic tools for the temporal analysis of foreign policy. My intention here is not to imply that HI provides the best theory for FPA, but to demonstrate that HI is helpful as it highlights the importance of path dependency, critical junctures and ‘lock-in’ effects. We have seen evidence of the normative logic of path dependency: the more assertive U.S. response to Russia’s 2014 intervention in Ukraine was influenced by the power and widely shared character of international norms, which Moscow had violated. Since legitimation constitutes the primary mechanism of path reproduction, the U.S. and EU have agreed to gradually impose and maintain sanctions against Russia as a normative appropriate reaction to Moscow’s infringements with respect to Ukraine.

However, NI as an approach to the study of foreign policy entails certain pitfalls. We found that NI’s understanding of foreign policy is hindered by pitfalls concerning a lack of mechanisms or scope conditions through which the institutional setting explains foreign policy outcomes, a prevailing institutional determinism and the tendency to operate via typologies dividing NI into a number of separate understandings of what an institution is. Having said that, in the wake of the ‘institutionalist turn’ political science has shifted away from the study of power. This might be the reason why new institutionalist scholars have recently argued for bringing the power back into politics. For example, Pierson (2015: 133) pursues the idea that the distribution of power itself may be path-dependent. Thinking about power relationships as path-dependent is not a new idea. Nevertheless, systematic arguments about power dynamics hold much promise, especially if we apply them to the realm of foreign policy, in which the degree of institutionalization is lower and power is still of prime importance.

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